

## Lost in translation. ‘Unprovenanced objects’ and the opacity/transparency agenda of museums’ policies

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**ABSTRACT:** Starting from the case of ancient Malian terracotta in this article I propose an epistemological reflection on the relationship between hidden practices of circulation of unprovenanced objects and official discourses and policies driven by museums. In particular I develop a critique of the Kantian association of Truth, Beauty and Goodness involved in cultural heritage policies and art circulation. Through this perspective I refer to Luhmann’s theory on trust and power as well as to Handler’s theory on authenticity in order to show how the erasing of the social life of the Malian terracotta (overlapping legal/illegal, individual trajectories of the art traders, investment strategies, acquisition policies) by museums finally produces social inequality because of the lack of information through the production of trust toward their public. In this sense I endorse a consequentiality principle linking beauty and properness through which the value of a given final art product is directly proportional to the degree of opacity of its multiple production stages: the more the local context of the grey market remains vague, the more the world-wide homogenization of deontological and aesthetical official criteria is effective and firm.

**KEYWORDS:** ARTWORK, AUTHENTICITY, MALIAN ANTIQUITIES, DEONTOLOGY, TRUST.

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### *Introduction*

The circulation of material culture in contexts of exchange, and the impact of the market economy on value systems have constituted special fields of social anthropology (see Simmel, 1978; Appadurai, 1988; Godelier, 1996; Berking, 1999). Marcel Mauss's *The Gift* (1925) opened the way for crucial reflection not only on the function of objects in social organization and the production of difference but also, in the Durkheimian wake, on the role of the symbolic and imaginary in the production of value. One aspect of the gift theory seems to be pertinent to the conceptual approach proposed in this article, namely the ethical implications of exchange in the confrontation between heterogeneous value systems.

In *Art and Agency*, Alfred Gell theorized, from a Maussian perspective, the equivalence between art objects and persons as 'social agents' (Gell, 1998). This principle of interaction between things and humans stresses the 'shaping of objects and performance – indeed in seeing object as 'performative' (Myers, 2004; 2008) following a principle of selective integration and exclusion, within which objects are conceived to exert influence on individuals (Gell, 1998; Miller, Parrott, 2009).

The production of performance seems to me particularly cogent with regard to the main topic of this article: the display of objects issued by clandestine networks and the confrontation between heterogeneous regimes of value underlying the interdependence between shadow practices and transparent rhetorics. In the last fifteen years social sciences developed a growing interest in 'art crime' (see O'Keefe, 1997; Brodie, Doole, Renfrew, 2001; Brodie, Renfrew, 2005; Mackenzie, 2005; Tjihuis, 2006; Mackenzie, Green, 2009; Charney, 2009; Ulph, Smith, 2012; Campbell, 2013). Nevertheless, the displaying of the clandestine social life of 'unprovenanced' objects still represents a Gordian knot of museums' policies. Market interest in 'traditional' art with fixed and classifiable ethnic and cultural borders diverted attention away from ongoing changes in non-Western contexts determining a progressive separation of form from effect (d'Azevedo, 1958). The commercial biography of African objects, which was already developing through international exhibitions in the 1930s (see Corbey, 1993; 2000; Gaugue, 1997; Hodeir, 2002; Flam, Deutch, 2003; Geary, Xatart, 2007; de l'Estoile, 2007), had thus been obscured by the art market itself to the advantage of an aesthetic formal identity that fueled higher market bidding. Moreover, the strong link between stylistic studies and market overvaluation in the making of African art and the 'laundering' of stolen objects implied that art history and the study of African material culture had long been connected to commer-

cial interests that envisioned stylistic fixity as an integral part of market value (Hardin, 1993).

In the early Nineties the display of antiquities has been accompanied by the deontological turn driven by the so-called 'looting question' (Tubb, 1995; Vitelli, 2000; Brodie, Doole, Watson, 2000). In this trend, African studies found its flagship issue in the debate over Malian ancient terracotta (McIntosh, Keech-McIntosh, 1986; Togola, Raimbault, 1989; Polet, Bessaguet, 1993; McIntosh, Keech-McIntosh, Togola, 1995; Schmidt, McIntosh, 1996; Bedaux, 1998; Bedaux, Rowlands, 2001). Paradoxically, such an overexposure of the global fight against clandestine digs has been directly proportional, with a few exceptions such as the itinerant exhibition *Vallées du Niger* (1993), to the silence surrounding the display of 'looted' objects in temporary exhibitions or, as shown below, to the creation of moral fictions in order to justify circulation of 'looted' objects while asserting the good faith of acquisition and display museums' policies.

Considering such a state of the art, in this article<sup>1</sup> I propose an epistemological reflection on the processes of deontological legitimization driven by museums as well as on the relationship between opacity and transparency in circulation and display of unprovenanced archaeological objects. Starting from the case of the so-called 'Djenne terracotta', my reflection orients on the epistemological break due to the erasure of the traceability of the unprovenanced objects (*objets trouvés*) (rural and urban networks of the transnational trade chain) in the production of knowledge and confidence-building policies towards their public by museums, in order to create an 'aesthetic truth'.

I will thus attempt to show that 'aesthetic truth' entails an automatic association between beauty and properness/goodness based on the erasure of the temporalities of social practices imbricated into circulation and display of unprovenanced objects. Such an overlapping finally determines a contradictory good faith pact between museums and their public due to lack of full information on the biography of the objects.

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1. This article is a revised version of a previous publication in French language (Panella, 2011). I truly thank the two anonymous referees for their suggestions and comments. My aim is not to come back to the literature on the musealization of the objects and ontology of African art (e.g. Weber, Vogel, 1987; De L'Estoile, 2007; MacGaffey, 1998), nor to refer specifically to repatriation issues (see Tythacott, Arvanitis, 2014). I rather describe the debate over the clandestine trade in antiquities developed in the early Nineties in the wake of the global deontology driven by the World Heritage Centre and by ICOM. In this framework I have extensively analyzed the social organization of Malian farmers-diggers (temporalities of digging, hierarchical clusters, supply dynamics) (Panella, 2010; 2014a), ethical and aesthetical concerns over circulation of terracotta, and the interdependence between the production of 'masterpieces' by the art market and national integration policies (Panella, 2012).

*Moral fictions, authenticity, and 'aesthetic truth': the good faith pact of museums*

The presence of ancient Malian terracotta in private European collections was already regretted in the Fifties (Szumowsky, 1955). Official denunciation of clandestine digs however emerged in the Seventies (Parigi, 1973; Bedaux in Evrard, 1977: 63-64) in parallel with the growing outflow and circulation of Djenne terracotta in art galleries, temporary exhibitions and museums' collections. The international debate on 'looting' strongly developed in the Eighties (UNESCO, 1981, McIntosh, McIntosh, 1986; McIntosh, 1986; Togola, Raimbault, 1989) before reaching its peak in the following decade (Berns in McIntosh, 1990: 15; Polet, Bessaguet, 1993; Brent, 1994; 2001). In the mid-Seventies undergraduate student Jacqueline Evrard made the first typological research on a corpus of Djenne terracotta, only reproduced by drawings, owing to three major collectors at this time: Baudouin de Grunne, Emile Deletaille and Marie Kiriloff. Among the forty-three statuettes taken into consideration in this study, three (31, 32, 33) have been acquired respectively 'in an art gallery in Paris in 1970'; in Bamako before 1972; 'en 1972'. A fourth one (60) has been 'seen in Segou in July 1975 at the antiquarian Dembélé' (Panella, 2014b: 110). With a few exceptions, these statuettes are the only ones for which the 'collection site' is mentioned. For two of them (31-33) the collecting site is respectively 'unknown' or 'undetermined'. For thirty-six of forty-three objects it is mentioned as 'Bani/Niger'<sup>2</sup>. In four cases (27-28-29-38) there is a questioning point<sup>3</sup>. Definitely in most cases, the collection sites of these objects remained silent.

The Gordian knot within museums' communicational strategies with regard to the clandestine trade of the terracotta has produced over time three competing, parallel exhibition policies which are as follows: mimics of morality, denunciation

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2. In 1993 in Paris a French painter asked me if I could give an expertise on a Djenne terracotta head which he just acquired at Drouot. He told me that the object had a certificate of 'authenticity' (thermoluminescence dating) but its former owner, Marie Kiriloff, has not been able to determine the very provenance of the head. She was leaning towards an attribution to the Djenne style but some 'strange' details made her doubtful. The only certain information concerned its origin from 'Bani/Niger'. I replied him that as academic milieu already knew at this time the TL certification was not a guarantee of authenticity. The painter was dismayed and told me that in any case he was not interested in authenticity of the head but in its form, which he considered as a source of inspiration for him even if the head were a 'fake'. This case is not rare indeed. The catalogue of the Blanchard-Dignac collection stated: 'Thermoluminescence dating gives variable and not really precise results; it indicates however that objects are ancient, which is enough for collectors who are not archaeologists' (Paris/Drouot, December 8-10 1990). The translation from French is by the author.

3. Bernard De Grunne massively exploited his father's collection for his contested (McIntosh, 1992) stylistic analyses (see De Grunne 1980, 1987, 1988). The former De Grunne collection of Djenne terracotta as well as that of his son-in-law, Philippe Guimiot, are dispersed among private owners.

of clandestine digs and minimization. One can recall the debate over whether or not to study and exhibit the Djenne terracotta that accompanied the De Grunne collection exhibit at Rome in 1990, *Terra d'Africa, Terra d'Archeologia. La grande scultura in terracotta del Mali, Djenné, VIII-XVI sec.*<sup>4</sup> (Bernardi, De Grunne, 1990) as well as a similar debate that took place during the exhibition *The Art of a Continent* in London in 1995 (Coombes, 1999; Brodie, 2005). In actual fact, these opposing stances followed a decade during which museum policy generally trivialized or suppressed the clandestine entity of Malian terracotta. The disconnection between the presentation of these objects and their social context through Western markets reached its peak during the 1980s, when Djenne terracotta appeared to a large extent in both museums and private collections. Between 1980 and 1995, the rapid expansion of illegal digs thus paralleled a rise in market value for the Niger Inland Delta's terracotta as well as their circulation through temporary exhibitions. Nevertheless assertions of the market pedigree were directly proportional to the malaise recurring around presentations. Farmers-diggers are called 'record takers' (Anati, 1991)<sup>5</sup>, or, more recently, 'workers' (De Grunne, 2014: 21). Expressions such as 'found' or 'discovered' are preferred to terms like 'looted' or 'excavated'<sup>6</sup> revealing ambiguity, discomfort and surrealistic fictions of avoidance that have accompanied the display of Djenne terracotta from the Eighties to the mid-Nineties.

I will limit myself to citing one case, the exhibition *Perspectives, Angles on African Art*, organized by Susan Vogel at the Center for African Art in New York in 1987. This exhibition intended to reconstruct ten key cultural personalities against a series of photos of African objects. The writer James Baldwin (1927-1987) responded to one of the exhibited Djenne terracotta comprised of a hippopotamus and two people. Dolo, one of my best informants, along with Satimbé, during my PhD fieldwork on the clandestine trade in Djenne terracotta (1996-2001)<sup>7</sup>, unearthed this anthro-zoomorphological group at Debena, near the village of Pondori, in the Niger Inland Delta<sup>8</sup>. The Pondori zone is known for its hippopotami in the river Bani, as seen in a large amount of ancient terracotta representing hippopotami.

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4. 'Some thirty ancient Djenne terracotta coming from a private collection (kept anonymous!). An exhibition jointly organized by the City Council of Rome and by the Centre Culturel Français of Rome, hosted by the Centre Culturel Français. Did the Centre Culturel Français (under the French government) consider juridical and ethical issues of displaying objects issued by illicit digs and plunder of archaeological sites?' (WAMP Bulletin, 1991).

5. In 1991 Emmanuel Anati and Ivan Bargna presented a collection of Djenne terracotta coming from private collections exhibited at Pinacoteca Civica at Como (Italy).

6. See *Art ancien du Mali*, 1983.

7. I undertook a few very last interviews in February 2001.

8. I acquired this information in 1997 through the oral description of the piece. Dolo confirmed it in 2001 on the basis of some photos.

Dolo was satisfied of this discovery as the piece was almost whole and complete while usually most of the terracotta discovered nearby Debena were shattered. In 1984 an identical piece illustrated the advertising of the Craft Caravan Gallery (New York) in the review *African Arts* (1984: 18), announcing an exhibition sale of 'Bronzes and terracotta from Mali'. Between 1978 and 1984, Satimbé discovered the most famous terracotta which were acquired into the major collections during the Eighties. He identified twelve of the thirty-two terracotta published in the exhibition's catalogue *Terra d'Africa, Terra d'Archeologia* (Rome, 1990) (Bernardi, De Grunne, 1990), entirely composed by pieces of the Baudouin De Grunne's former collection, for which he established the provenance site as well as discovery details. Just a few examples; the horseman represented on the cover was found by Satimbé at Sebera, nearby Pondori. The famous trunk of a woman keeping her hands on her cheeks and sticking out her tongue has been excavated by his team at Soum (San region) (Panella, 2002).

The construction of the archaic past is linked to the trope of authenticity and it has been deeply imbricated into the post-excavation biography of Djenné terracotta. The art dealer Chantal Dandrieu, curator of the exhibition *Terra d'Africa, Terra d'Archeologia* with Christian Depuyper, explained to me that their goal was to stress the evocative ancientness (*arcaicità* in Italian) of the objects. They wanted the objects to speak for themselves. They didn't want to show only their aesthetic side but also a set of 'ancestral values' emerging from the emotions that would arise in the public when seeing the objects.

Richard Handler brilliantly analyzed the construction of authenticity in the West. In the wake of Lionel Trilling (1972), Handler considers authenticity as that which concerns individual existence outside the social rule that each individual plays in his own society. A main step of such individualization processes is the link between authenticity and sincerity (Handler, 1986). Handler thus conceives the museum as a place where visitors [...] can appropriate the authenticity of the object 'incorporating that magical proof of existence into what we call our 'personal experience [...]' (Handler, 1986: 4). Nevertheless, objects convey in their own an 'aesthetic truth' which, as being 'truth' also does incorporate an ethical dimension carried out by the evocative force of their material nature. I stress the fact that the erasing of the out-flowing steps of unprovenanced objects doesn't concern specifically ethical issues of acquisition by museums but rather it stems from an epistemological question concerning the display of the objects and the nature of their reception. After raising cosmopolitan approaches in the debate on repatriation of cultural heritage (Appiah 2005; 2009), occultation of the clandestine side of the objects has been replaced by the reestablishing of the aesthetic experience of art with a variant: considering sensible experience as an universal tool of deontological agreement. This approach re-

flects a connotation of cultural heritage based on a perspective of transmissibility and perennization (Bindé, 2001) in the wake of the creation of the 'immaterial heritages' (Smith, Akagawa, 2009) and of 'living human treasures' by Unesco .

In *Trust and Power*, Niklas Luhmann cogently analyzes collective and individual implications of confidence building and perceived authority, in this specific case, of perceived authority of beauty. This authority always undergirds a representation of complexity which is nevertheless not represented in detail where the factual experience is linked to other, unrealized, possibilities: 'the world gains unity solely from the boundaries of this 'et cetera'' (Luhmann, 1973: 52), rendered 'real' by emotions. In the case of the sensory experience of the object, hiding the clandestine origin of that objects thus constitutes the 'et cetera' of this sensory experience. Such an 'et cetera' finally overlaps the 'aesthetics of indeterminacy' of the objects, a condition of 'unfinishedness' intentionally constructed by the artist whose sense is given by perceptions of the beholder. These perceptions give sense to the object (work of art or daily life things) and constitute its meanings (Kemp, 1998). Similarly the 'blanks' of a text can be seen as 'an elementary matrix for the interaction between text and reader' (Iser, 1978 in Kemp, 1998: 188). Due to their 'fixed', 'inelastic', and 'non-transferable' nature, human emotions attempt, according to Luhmann, to immunize themselves from refutation, and thus become tools that simplify reality. As a result, any disturbance of the individual emotional relationship with the exhibited object restores the crushing complexity of the world (Luhmann, 1973: 81). Erasing of details of the real underlying the archaization of the past thus entails the temporal gap between the acts of production of objects and their musealization. The production of the aesthetic value of the objects thus implies a process of objectification underlying a lack of concern about practices of use value which Kant calls 'aesthetical indifference' (Simmel, 1990: 74).

### *Aesthetic truth as confidence*

James Cuno's book *Whose Culture? The promise of museums and the debate over antiquities* (Cuno, 2009)<sup>9</sup> seems to me to represent a striking example of the value gap imbricated in circulation of art works while showing the crucial role of the objects within the opacity/transparency arenas of the museums' display policies. In this book, Cuno, at that time President and Director of the Institute of Arts of Chicago<sup>10</sup>, proposes a series of essays about antiquities acquisition by advocating a universalist vision of beauty in which the emotion created by aesthetic interaction with an

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9. I truly thank Charlotte Joy for having drawn my attention on this book.

10. In 2011 James Cuno was appointed as President and Executive Director of the J. Paul Getty Trust.



object suffices in and of itself to render that object's prior history largely irrelevant. Furthermore, this theory provides an example of museums' good faith, as they are required to select beautiful and (thus) good objects, a requirement which goes back to the idea of sensory experience as a tool of deontological agreement. According to this logic, the public's reception of objects responds to their implicit faith in the museums' acquisition methods: "[...] The responsible acquisition of antiquities is something the public has entrusted our museum to do. It's part of the public's trust in our museum [...]" (Cuno, 2009: 12).

The erasing of the clandestine-origin objects' path in museums does not only raise the deontological problem of the best means of object acquisition but it also highlights, in my sense, an epistemological problem concerning the exhibited object and the nature of its reception. In one of the contributions of the Cuno's book *To shape the citizens of 'That Great City, the World'*, Neil MacGregor, director of the British Museum, affirms that the museum context allows its public to think about and imagine different stories than that which they initially imagined (MacGregor, 2009). In order to demonstrate his statement, MacGregor presents the case of the 'throne of weapons', which the British Museum bought in 2002<sup>11</sup>. This work was commissioned by the Bishop Dinis Sengulane of the Christian Council of Mozambique with the support of Christian Aid in the context of the TAE project - *Transformação de Armas em Enxadas* (Transforming Arms into Tools). The throne was made by the Mozambican artist Cristovao Canhavato from decommissioned AK47 automatic weapons collected since the end of the civil war in 1992. According to MacGregor, through this social rehabilitation project (weapons for farming implements), Sengulane not only wanted to take these weapons out of commission but also to make this disarmament process *visible*.

With regard to the red line of the book, the legitimacy of circulation of *objets trouvés* in the name of universalism of beauty, MacGregor's choice lends itself to some considerations. The international traffic in arms which underlines the materiality of the throne and its social life doesn't concern directly the deontology of the British Museum's collection policy. The British Museum did not buy the arms that make up the throne as weapons but as objects of reification of the war. In other words, there is no direct link between these weapons' presence in the British Museum and the clandestine or illegal nature of their previous social life. Even though it is the result of a clear context of illicitness, this example demonstrates an inverted sense of the public confidence-building which the article promotes inasmuch as one notes an ontological gap: trafficking, but not art trafficking. As one considers the public reception of the work, one realizes that this inverted sense is made richer due to

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11. The 'throne of weapons' was part of the British Museum's multimedia initiative 'A History of the World in 100 Objects' (MacGregor, 2010).



a contrary, mirrored factor. The power of the throne as an 'art' work emerges from the difference between its components' original function as weapons that belong to a sphere of ethical and economic values. Nevertheless, these values are only perceptible to the general public due to the over-mediatization of war imagery that gives these weapons a new identity as Signs, carriers of an ethical sensibility linked to their function as anti-war signifiers<sup>12</sup>.

The elements that I have illustrated call into question confidence-building mechanisms within a contradictory epistemological context. Contrary to trust, which is constrained by interpersonal relations or contracts, the experience of 'aesthetic truth' entails a free choice. Such a choice in turn implies relative certitude about the legitimacy of confidence-building based on the information and the value assessment which are the habitus of cultural production. However, applying these value judgment criteria, it can be assumed that the aesthetic habitus does not consider the acts of production that accompany the object's staging (*mise en scène*). As Diego Gambetta states, the trust act acquires 'a special significance in instances of ignorance or incertitude concerning unknown or unknowable actions' (Gambetta, 1988: 218). As a result, unlike interpersonal trust, which implies a certain, albeit sometimes very incomplete, familiarity between actors, the musealization of the *objets trouvés* implies that the principle of aesthetic truth is sufficient in order to bestow on the public an adequate knowledge of the goodness/properness of the displaying process even though that process may exclude several stages of the staging (*donner à voir*) of these objects. This assessment demonstrates Luhmann's affirmation according to which 'confidence is possible as long as truth is possible'. The proof of truth thus proves to be the product of a relational dynamic based on a collectively unconscious epistemological dimension, a cultural substrate that underpins aesthetic or moral value judgment (Engelke, 2009). Thus, when individualizing the aesthetic experience, the object is considered a proof" of truth, and thus of trust, due to an intrinsic relational power. Similarly, perception of truthiness during the sensory museum experience stems from an intimate, exclusive and self-referential approach to knowledge deriving from the synergy between staging policies acted by museums and assessment values of the public. Consequently the individual processes of aesthetic experience considers the objects as a proof of evidence, and thus of trust, because of a taken-for-granted intrinsic relational power. The aesthetic truth as rhetoric of the past and authentication techniques considers culture as an objective discovery and not as a construction of social acting (Handler, 2003). On the contrary it is interesting to note that following a specular and opposite approach, proof of evidence of plunder does not originate from a sensorial individual experience but from a collective habi-

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12. With regard to the display of the 'throne of weapons' in a prison and emotions of touch, see Samuels, 2008.

tus to ‘visualize’ official iconographies of illegality driven by the press and rhetoric of cultural heritage policies alike.

### *The gaze of materiality for global properness*

The link between authenticity, truth, and confidence firmly fixed by the sensory experience of objects can constitute a means by which one can understand why the public would question the origin of weapons or blood diamonds and would not, by contrast, question the origins and acquisitions of works of art. Djenne terracotta and the ‘throne of weapons’ show that knowledge of the objects underlies a process of authentication created by the function of museums as agreement tools of aesthetical qualities of the objects grafted onto the art market pedigree processes. The public’s habitus to give an ethical aura to displayed objects thus constitutes a taken-for-granted element for establishing the pact of trust between museums and their public, without considering the official or clandestine nature of acts of production which underlie the display of the objects. The repeated question that the public asked throughout the throne’s touring exhibit – ‘how did these weapons get here?’ (MacGregor, 2009) seems to me to prove the discriminatory habitus between objects and art objects due in part to the fact that a contemporary work does not transmit the same discrepancy between acts of production, function, and aesthetic experience which is interwoven in the antiquation process of ancient objects. In this case, Richard Handler is right to affirm that aesthetic truth, the rhetoric of the past, and authentication techniques all respond to the idea of culture as an objective discovery and not as a construction of acts of social interpretation (Handler, 2003). In other words, following Simmel’s perspective, the strength of the object’s pedigree, particularly that of archaeological objects, is directly proportional to the gap between its biography (sculpture or production workshops, trade circuits) and the time of its pedigree (see also Dilley, 2005). Objects of cultural heritage thus shift from a material dimension to an immaterial one before being re-materialized through classification through ongoing dynamics of ethical and aesthetical agreement.

The case of the Houston-based Menil Foundation’s digitalization of the Djenne terracotta is very representative of such a shift. John and Dominique de Menil’s collection, begun in the 1930s, includes 16,000 objects, of which about one thousand come from Africa. Among these objects are several works of Djenne terracotta acquired between the Sixties and the Eighties. Like most of the Djenne terracotta items held by North American and European museums, the Djenne of the de Menil collection came from clandestine networks. According to Kristina van Dyke, former curator of the de Menil Foundation’s African collections<sup>13</sup>, the digitalization pro-

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13. Kristina van Dyke is the current President of the Pulitzer Foundation for the Arts.

ject's goal was to establish regional iconographic styles (van Dyke, 2007, 2008) which have been missing until now due to the anonymity of local actors and the obscurity of the original sites of the objects. The project included three-dimensional scanner analysis of the earthenware, presented alongside Kristina van Dicke and the radiologist Marc Ghysels as part of large-scale international media coverage at the Mande Studies Association conference in Lisbon in June 2008<sup>14</sup>. Most of this coverage focused on the benefits of three-dimensional scanning and analysis, a tool with which one could select 'good' objects (i.e., those which are authentic and beautiful) and could exclude 'bad' objects (i.e., those which are 'inauthentic' and not 'beautiful'). In this case, the polarization of the discourse on cultural heritage between ethical values/legality, and non-ethical values/illegality, is reflected in the techniques by which one can detect 'authentic' and 'fake' objects using a deontological approach to the material management of terracotta based on normatization.

Authentication is thus expressed via a contradictory approach that, despite its intentions, promotes the individual, sensory experience of objects (aesthetic truth) while promoting the rationalization of this experience by establishing standardized authenticity criteria (age of the object, textural and mineralogical characteristics, residual traces of the object's construction, patina). No need to say that the pumped presentation of this new technique of analysis of 'unprovenanced' terracotta openly constituted an additional source of the market value of the de Menil collection. And yet, except for my own comments, this panel didn't raise any reaction by the floor. Remembering the academic outcry generated by the exhibition of the De Grunne collection in Rome or by the screening of the Dutch documentary-film *The African King. An investigation* (1990) at the Museum of Mankind in Paris, I would argue that the restyling of the de Menil collection finally demonstrates that the survival of heritage as a concept is achieved through the maintaining of its visibility and this in spite of the market social life of the objects.

The de Menil case thus shows that the binomial association deontology=legality had shifted in intensity over time following market assessment of terracotta as well as evolution of an ethical and aesthetical 'global hierarchy of value' (Schramm, 2000; Herzfeld, 2004) through the tool of normatization.

It is worth reminding the fact that normatization underlies a reciprocal nourishment between legal and illegal practices as well as opaque transactions (Panella, Thomas, 2015). The diplomatic embarrassment due to the purchase of two Nok terracotta by the Musée du Quai Branly in 1998 resulted in a bilateral agreement (2000) establishing the property of the artwork to the Nigerian State which allowed the MQB to keep them for 25 years in spite of its illegal circulation. In other words,

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14. The aim of this communication was ambiguous. It was evident that its aim was to endorse the de Menil pieces vis-à-vis statuettes coming from other collections.

a sort of *condono* (amnesty) apt to legalize illegal items or practices<sup>15</sup>.

*Satimbé and the others: the missing links of the museums' trust agreement*

Richard Handler has brilliantly analyzed the relationship between materiality and semiotics. Real semiotic processes - he states - need a spatial emplacement that manifests itself in language through physical metaphors. In the discourse on cultural heritage such metaphors are represented by the objectifying approach of the preservation principles aimed at material culture (description, circumscription, classification). Nevertheless, while this approach is simple for physical entities, it becomes problematic for 'non-spatial' and 'semiotic' cultural activities (Handler, 2003: 357) such as survival strategies or power relationships; alias cultural agents driven by the contradictory nature of human actions and hazards of contingency. The contradictory nature of the social lives of objects is the mirror image of the normatization process. The binary character of normatization is apt to underplay the contradictions that are embedded in the objects' biography by erasing their traceability. In the case of the Djenne terracotta, their representation required both the exclusion of the market interactions, but also entailed the physical presence of farmers-diggers, stereotyped as 'looters' in the press accounts (see Brent, 1994). The collaboration with Satimbé enabled me to locate over 200 sites of the upper Niger Delta where he excavated between the end of the 1960s and the beginning of the 2000s. Satimbé drew up a mental geography of terracotta based upon the recollection of his personal experiences and process of discovery of the various sites. For example, he remembered his excavations near the village of Sahona due to the fact that while working there he was quite destitute and thus had to eat old skins, letting them marinate and then cook for hours. In fact, digger's deaths due to hunger, thirst, and accidents are quite frequent. The famous 'Khun Ram' sold by Sotheby's for \$275,000 in 1991, is known above all for the quarrel concerning its authenticity (Brent, 2001). However, very few people are aware of the fact that, while this zoomorphic terracotta was being transported to Bamako, the vehicle carrying it flipped over, causing the death of the driver (Panella, 2002).

These trajectories of heroization (or lack thereof) reveal the inequality balance embedded in national policies regarding the creation and preservation of cultural heritage. These inequalities imply broader dynamics of reification and commodification of objects and human beings (Vandenberghe, 2002) as they partake in a neo-liberal and media-oriented vision of 'Culture' built upon visibility. In this sense,

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15. Nok terracotta are included in the ICOM's Red List Database of archaeological objects at risk of looting: <http://icom.museum/resources/red-lists-database/category/nok/>

teams of diggers could be considered 'shadow groups'. On the one hand this is the consequence of their economic and symbolic non-visibility *vis-à-vis* the mechanisms of cultural heritage production and circulation. On the other, this may be related to their collective identification with resistance to the state through their mastery of digging, outflowing and selling steps. Farmers who were required to abandon excavation due to their age or due to repeated arrests or seizures of their objects, had a prolonged perception of the actual time of the excavation because of the powerful auto-representations interwoven in excavation's acts of production. One can furthermore extend this identity power to the temporalities of nostalgia. In his well-known book *Cultural Intimacy: Social Poetics in the Nation-State*, Michael Herzfeld applies the concept of "structural nostalgia" to the rhetorics of intergenerational transmission of an alleged moral harmony that is inherited from the Past but, at the same time, atemporal and engaged in national integration politics (Herzfeld, 2005). In the case of the official discourse over *looting*, such a discourse entails the reification of the human actions involved in the excavations in favor of the 'material rhetoric' (Joyce, 2002) of images of the results of looting. On the other hand, in the case of farmer-diggers, the nostalgic dimension does not entail the transmissibility of a collective ethic. This nostalgia can more properly be summarized as an individual feeling of loss of the moral harmony created by the acceptance of a shared dimension of risk, and by the spirit of endurance, which one could, in the final analysis, interpret as emic ethics of honor.

### *Museums, the anomaly of social sciences?*

Comparison between the Djenne terracotta and the 'throne of weapons' shows that the epistemological contradiction of 'unprovenanced objects' display stems from the erasing of the acts of production which underlie circulation of the objects and production of knowledge. The unease of staging derives from the fact that the recognition of ancient objects as consumer goods implies the consciousness (and the visualization) of the acts of market production (excavation, outflow and exportation dynamics) which fill the temporal gap between the time of creation and use and their discovery by contemporary public. However such an approach is opposed to the antiquation of the past performed by displaying Djenne terracotta in order to produce aesthetic truth. The lack of reconstitution and of representation of practices of production and circulation questions the selective criteria applied by museums in deciding which objects and knowledge to display and, ultimately, the sense of museums in social sciences. This is not just an epistemological issue. The taken-for-granted ethics of unprovenanced objects based on the deontological and aesthetical labeling crafted by museums reveals an anomaly of museology in respect to the methodological principles of the social sciences to which it belongs - namely the com-

munication of the production and collection history of the social object<sup>16</sup>. In nomothetic sciences, the construction of the object is based on a deductive process which finally constitutes the object in its own right. On the contrary social sciences do not cease to question themselves about the modalities of data collecting and how this impacts the production of knowledge. If an object is the result of a selection, appropriation and cultural mutation policy, the process of display also implies a production process. The question arises as to how museums' objects have been collected when we see that progressive formalization of collecting policies have had a minor impact on the volume of acquisitions, issued by remote choices and driven by shadow assessment policies (Fleming, 2002). In the same time, as the other social sciences, museology needs to take into account the temporal dimension of the objects and their contingent nature. Consequently museology's credibility and trustworthiness will be commensurate to its ability to reveal, like a Russian matrioshka puppet, the various levels of agency connected to the 'real' encounters occurred during the collecting steps. Such a transparency of collecting trajectories, which complies with the "ethnographic pact" of the fieldwork (Olivier de Sardan, 2008), validates the restitution of the real as it has been selected by the fieldwork and authenticates it.

### *Conclusion*

Following a guiding principle that connects subjectification, policy and material culture (Bayart, Warnier 2004), I have tried to show, through the example of deontological authentication policies, that the circulation histories of 'Djenne' terracotta could be considered as 'critical sites' of negotiation of social, political and economic values (Graburn, Glass, 2004). In particular I showed that authentication is the result of a peculiar exhibitionary encounter between the opacity of objects' circulation practices and the transparency of museums' exhibition discourse with regard to social memory, acts of production, and subsistence strategies. This approach emphasizes an empirical perspective of culture that views the body as both possessing 'occupational social relations' capital (Jackson, Palmer-Jones, 1999) and as an individual, ontologically independent entity. It also restores a synergy between the various actors and motivations found in clandestine archaeological sites, the public's expectations, and the museum's exhibition strategies by using a polyphonic approach to ob-

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16. I refer here to the definition of 'social sciences' proposed by Jean-Claude Passeron. Passeron considers social sciences as being deictic ones because they define an object within a temporal contingency. In this frame, he considers all social sciences, among which human sciences, as historical sciences (Passeron, 2005).



ject construction. The *mise en scène* of these contradictions justifies the museum's role as revealer of heterogeneous spheres of agency and of attribution of material cultural value. It would perhaps be imaginable to abandon the old game of authenticity in favor of a concept of empathy, vectoring the hidden resonances of the contradictory nature of these objects' world and the anonymous acts of production that govern it. Today, the display of contradictions – implied in exhibiting objects and their social effects - constitutes an important challenge for a social turn of museums as advocated by the Manifesto of Social Work (Silverman, 2010) and on new 'frictions' and cultural contamination in museums studies (Karp *et al.*, 2006). The question of social stigma and of its misrepresentation and the representation of social groups which are discriminated through the exhibition of 'hidden histories' could constitute a first step toward a revision of public representation of society in museums (Sandell, 2002) by the link of acts of production instead of by the gaze of representation. This new approach could constitute an alternative reading to the perspective following which the strength of the object's pedigree, particularly that of archaeological objects, is directly proportional to the gap between its biography (sculpture or production workshops, trade circuits) and the time of its pedigree. The uneasiness of staging steps comes, ultimately, from the fact that ancient objects' function as consumable objects entails the consideration of a series of bodily acts of market production (dynamics of unearthing, of distribution and sale, of export). The unmasking of the trade mechanism for plundered objects within a commodity chain thus includes defetishization of the objects through the revealing of the chain's acts of production. Such a perspective contrasts both with museums' objectification processes which imply the archaization of the past and the production of aesthetic truth, as well as with the principle of materiality which has been, since the end of World War II, the *raison d'être* of cultural heritage. Finally the alternating of overexposure of official liturgies on looting and of silence on museum policies of purchasing and displaying led to an inversion of the sense with regard to the diffusion of knowledge aims imbricated into the trust pact declared by museums. Because they are owners and arbitrators of the aesthetic value and juridical condition of the objects, museums exploit the ethical connotation linked to the sensorial experience of the objects as a major element for constructing trust toward their visitors. If we agree that museology is a part of social sciences, the absence of reconstitution and finally of representativity of acts of production of the market life of objects without traceability in museums poses the question about criteria of selection of messages before questions on the objects themselves and finally on the scope of museology in social sciences.



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*Lost in translation: 'Unprovenanced objects' and the opacity/transparency agenda of museums' policies*

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