

Review of Julia Kelly, *Art, Ethnography and the Life
of Objects: Paris, c. 1925-35*
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A timely addition to art historical scholarship on the interwar period in Paris, Julia Kelly's *Art, Ethnography and the Life of Objects: Paris, c. 1925-35* articulately constructs a compelling narrative centered on an interdisciplinary discussion of the slippery status of the object at the intersection of art history and ethnography. Reflecting a current interest in these overlapping boundaries as witnessed by the recent international conference "Art History and Anthropology," held jointly at the Musée du quai Branly and the Institut national d'histoire de l'art in June 2007, this meticulously-documented study provides breadth and depth to the corpus of art historical scholarship while addressing to some degree surrealism's fascination with non-western cultures. Aimed at a wider audience, Louise Tythacott's informative *Surrealism and the Exotic* (Routledge, 2003) is the most exhaustive publication in English to date that covers the scope of the movement's engagement with the non-western "other." Kelly's book stands alongside recent publications on surrealism for a specialist audience which share a common focus on the surrealist object, albeit from a more explicitly political perspective in Steven Harris' *Surrealist Art and Thought in the 1930s: Art, Politics, and the Psyche* (Cambridge University Press, 2004) and Joanna Malt's *Obscure Objects of Desire: Surrealism, Fetishism, and Politics*, (Oxford, 2004).

Emblematic of the multiple crisscrossing itineraries Kelly teases out, the encounters between French writer and ethnographer Michel Leiris and Swiss sculptor Alberto Giacometti in dissident surrealism frame this finely-spun expository tale, which unfolds against an elaborate backdrop of disparate connections. In five dense, well-paced chapters, Kelly elegantly articulates an original genealogy of the object by tracing its discipline-determined typologies. The reader is taken upon a circuitous course leading from the removal of material culture (in the case of ethnographic collecting undertaken during the 1933 Dakar-Djibouti expedition), to display in

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Parisian museums and galleries and dissemination in both artistic and scientific journals—a series of displacements that culminate in Kelly’s compelling discussion of the surrealist object. The narrative balances nuanced analysis of diverse primary sources against sustained critical engagement with an impressive range of scholarship on issues from avant-garde primitivism and surrealism (both dissident and Bretonian) to recent anthropological theory.¹ Kelly provides insightful readings of both visual and textual material. *Art, Ethnography and the Life of Objects: Paris, c. 1925-35* makes a significant contribution to the abundant scholarly literature devoted to the interwar period in 1920s Paris by problematizing the porous borders of established disciplines and classificatory categories at crucial if untidy points of convergence.

In chapter 1, Kelly lays the groundwork for the following chapters by examining the reception of ethnographic material in Paris. From an examination of the Trocadero Ethnographic Museum, the mythical site of “primitive” encounters for interwar artists and intellectuals, to the 1931 Colonial Exhibition, the reader follows the non-western object along its winding trajectory through the shifting landscapes of art and ethnography. The chapter documents the Trocadero’s gradual transformation – from the chaotic accumulation of artifacts in the dark, dusty exhibits of the 1920s to the slick, luxurious allure of Jacques Lipchitz’ displays for the ‘Treasury’ in the early 1930s and finally renovation leading to the new Musée de l’Homme in 1938—that bore witness to and served as a backdrop for early-twentieth century debates in France over the status of non-western objects. Kelly considers these debates, both in relation to the nascent field of ethnography and to concurrent avant-garde challenges to aesthetic categories, and carefully examines the tension between primitivist appropriation and anti-modernist critique in Giacometti’s sculptures of the late 1920s. In a nuanced reading of Michel Leiris’ evocative essay on the sculptor’s work, published in *Documents* in 1929, Kelly shows how Leiris displaces Giacometti’s sculptures to the ethnographic realm of ritual fetishes in a reversal of the modernist perception of the autonomous work of art and the presumed context-bound ethnographic object. Kelly’s focus on this encounter appears all the more relevant today in view of the current controversy over the omission of Leiris’ 1929 text from the recent re-edition of the “expanded, revised and corrected” version of an anthology of critical writings on Giacometti, gathered together in 1958 but only published in 1990.² The ambiguous, even contradictory, positions of both ethnography and the surrealist avant-garde were further played out on the stage of the 1931 Colonial Exhibition, where non-western objects were displayed in the service of conflicting ideologies, a high-profile showcase that ultimately served to boost their commodity status.

In Chapter 2, Kelly extends the discussion of the unstable, fluctuating status of non-western objects to selected contributions from the contemporary journals *Cahiers d'Art* and *Documents*. She explores how critical approaches from the field of ethnography challenged the classificatory systems in the disciplines of art history and traditional archeology. Leading in with Georges Henri Rivière's 1926 *Cahiers d'art* article "Archéologismes," Kelly juxtaposes the universalizing embrace of art forms from world cultures in *Cahiers d'art* with the coverage of material culture from non-western and archaic cultures in *Documents*. Subjecting both journals disinterested stances to scrutiny by closely reading reviews of the 1930 Galerie Pigalle exhibition of African and Oceanic objects, she elucidates the collision of avant-garde intellectual concerns and art market interests. Whereas the interdisciplinary scope of *Documents* functioned to interrupt established hierarchies in line with Bataille's agenda for the journal, its eclectic array of scholarly approaches also vexed any notion of a unified vision of the "irritating" object, as Kelly convincingly argues in her comparative analyses of writings by Viennese art historian Josef Strzygowski, French ethnographers Paul Rivet and Marcel Griaule, and ethno-musicologist André Schaeffner.

The debates surrounding the classification of ethnographic material and the models provided in *Documents* that traveled afield with the 1931 Dakar-Djibouti expedition, are the subjects of Chapter 3. Weaving together threads from previous chapters, Kelly investigates the innovative collecting practices adopted by the expedition's leader Marcel Griaule as well as the conditions of its colonialist framework. In contrast to the choice of unusual objects featured in *Documents*, which Bataille favored for their disruptive potential, Griaule's "Summary Instructions" called for the collection of ordinary items, representative of all categories of object—from discarded to aesthetic. Kelly interrogates ethnography's purported objectivity in collecting by comparison with the subjectivity of the surrealist encounter with the "found object." Moreover, she establishes a parallel between the surrealist and ethnographic finds in their common rejection of commodity value as a determining factor in selection. Unlike surrealist "found objects," the objects collected under the aegis of the Dakar-Djibouti expedition would require extensive documentation in order for the displaced materials to resume their status as "living witnesses," a task to which Leiris was assigned as the expedition's archivist. Kelly describes the conflicted nature of Leiris' field journal, published in 1934 as *L'Afrique Phantôme (Phantom Africa)*, a highly personal account contesting the veracity of ethnographic evidence and attesting to the questionable methods used to remove ritual objects, the former rather than the latter being at odds with Griaule's scientific

directives.

The ethnographic objects gathered during the Dakar-Djibouti expedition were witness to different degrees of removal, ranging from physical displacement during fieldwork to the interpretive mediation of display in the vitrines at the subsequent Trocadero exhibition and in the pages of the Dakar-Djibouti special issue of *Minotaure*. In Chapter 4, Kelly focuses on these issues, which marked both the convergence and subsequent distancing of ethnography from the artistic avant-garde. The mechanical and indexical nature of photography would seem an ideal means of recording ethnographic evidence; yet as Ian Walker has recently demonstrated, when examined in the context of surrealist interest in “straight” photography, the camera’s objectivity in capturing reality was also ideally suited to the surrealist use of the medium that conflated the real and the surreal.³ If the authority of photography was already suspect in documentary practice, then enlisting it to provide contextual evidence to augment and authenticate the photographic images of the de-contextualized objects in the Dakar-Djibouti issue of *Minotaure* further undermines ethnography’s claim to scientific objectivity. Meanwhile, French museum director Georges Henri Rivière’s installation of the “Treasury” at the Trocadero only reinforced the fine arts associations that Lipchitz’ modernist display design added to the museum’s ethnographic “masterpieces.” Sensationalized in the press, elevated in the luxurious pages of *Minotaure* and didactically exhibited alongside photographic “proof” of their “living” status in Rivière’s state-of-the-art museography, the “human documents” from the Dakar-Djibouti expedition again bore witness to the lability of the non-western objects, whose successive displacements Kelly carefully traces.

From the Trocadero’s stark, orderly, modernized displays reinforcing the effect of scientific rigor, Kelly boldly returns in the final chapter to the glossy, art journal aesthetic of *Minotaure* to consider how ethnographic approaches carried over to the production and reception of surrealist objects and sculpture. Published concurrently with the Dakar-Djibouti issue, *Minotaure*’s first issue featured Breton’s article “Picasso in his element.”⁴ Building upon Christopher Green’s scholarship on Picasso,⁵ Kelly analyzes the photographic reproductions of Picasso’s process-oriented assemblages of ephemeral materials suggestive of ritual objects. At this point anthropologist Alfred Gell’s theorization of agency in relation to both western and non-western art objects allows Kelly to read Picasso’s “living” (now lost) creation as an embodiment of techniques whose effect was to activate the viewer, or even act upon him—a concept that resonates with anthropologists Mauss and Hubert’s *General Theory of Magic*.⁶ Aligning the Marxist “use value” of the subversive

surrealist “found object” with the magical efficacy of early twentieth-century British and French ethnographic theories, Kelly reads the *objet surréaliste* in relation to the creative process, conceived of as on-going “practice.” Cast in this light, Giacometti’s sculptures of the late 1920s and Leiris’ poetic interpretation of them provide novel ways of thinking about a heterogeneous corpus of objects—from non-western material to “found” objects, both natural and human-made, and surrealist assemblages. Countering art historical scholarship that proclaims the failure of the radical surrealist project to achieve the supercession of artistic categories, Kelly wraps up her elaborately-woven argument in support of the surrealist object’s ability to disturb the status of the artwork, a legacy that one might argue still has relevance today.

Throughout *Art, Ethnography and the Life of Objects: Paris, c. 1925-35*, Kelly resolutely endeavors to loosen knotty interstices in order to more effectively scrutinize the richly textured fabric of this particular episode in twentieth-century cultural history. Engaging with an extensive cast of figures (artists, poets, ethnographers, museum directors, art historians, critics, publishers) and studying a wide array of objects (sculpture, assemblage, non-western material culture, photography) in their diverse locations (publications, exhibitions, collections, expeditions), she undertakes an ambitious task and succeeds at unraveling some of the “unruly” instances in the history of surrealism and French ethnography. She demonstrates how the movement and migration of concepts and practices across disciplinary boundaries can shed light on the ‘entangled’ nature of the objects and their contingent meanings circulating within complex networks of production, reception and interpretation.

1 To mention but a few: James Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature and Art* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988); Hal Foster, *Compulsive Beauty* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1997); Alfred Gell, *Art and Agency: An Anthropological Theory* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998); Christopher Green, “Zervos, Picasso and Brassai, Ethnographers in the Field: A Critical Collaboration,” in Malcolm Gee, *Art Criticism Since 1900* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1993), and “Humanisms: Picasso, Waldemar George and the Politics of ‘Man’ in the 1930s,” *Comparative Criticism*, no. 23 (2001); Denis Hollier, “La valeur d’usage de l’impossible,” *Documents* [1929-1930] (Paris, Jean-Michel Place, 1991); Jean Jamin, “Objets trouvés des paradis perdus. A propos de la Mission Dakar-Djibouti,” in Hainard and Kaehr (eds.), *Collections passion* (Neuchâtel: Musée d’ethnographie, 1982); and “Aux origines du musée de l’homme: La mission ethnographique et linguistique Dakar-Djibouti,” *Cahiers ethnologiques*, no. 5 (1984).

2 *Ecrits/ Alberto Giacometti* (Paris, Editions Hermann, 1990).

3 Ian Walker, *City Gorged with Dreams, Surrealism and Documentary Photography in Interwar Paris* (Manchester:

Manchester University Press, 2002), 11.

4 André Breton, "Picasso dans son element," *Minotaure*, no. 1 (1933): 10-22.

5 Green, "Zervos, Picasso and Brassai," and "Humanisms."

6 Marcel Mauss, *A General Theory of Magic* [1902-1903], trans. Robert Brain (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1972).