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Steven Nelson

On July 13, 1996, the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* published "Catch That Moment," a "First Person Essay" by Lisa Levenson, then a college student at the University of Pennsylvania. Visiting the blockbuster exhibition *Africa: The Art of a Continent*, on view at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, that summer, the author worries that our increasingly digital world will leave nothing of note behind. Levenson begins by placing herself at the center of a four-thousand-year-old trajectory.

> I could have spent the better part of the day wandering through gallery after gallery, amazed at the primitive beauty of exquisitely preserved sculptures, woven and beaded shawls, clay statues and wooden walking staffs, most 2,000 years old.
>
> Unfortunately, I had only an hour to marvel at the remnants of dozens of ancient tribes.

Seeing all of these gifts from the past, Levenson turns the lens onto herself. "What," she asks, "might future generations find, 2,000 years from now, should they attempt to reconstruct life in 1990s America?"[1]

I stumbled on this essay while writing a review of the Guggenheim show, and I was struck by the importance of time in the text. In fact, Levenson's essay is a simple and elegant example of the use of time understood, in the words of the anthropologist Johannes Fabian, as "a carrier of signification, a form through which we define the content of relations between self and other."[2] Fabian's radical critique of the anthropological enterprise and its engagement with time

1 Model of a Mousgoum domed house (*teleuk*), Cameroon Pavilion, Expo 2005, Aichi Province, Japan (photograph by the author)

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rigorously analyzes how his discipline uses time to define and differentiate other people. On the ground, myriad terms are often used—in academia and in culture at large—that point to such processes. These include, among others: primitive, authentic, timeless, earthy, exotic.

Seeing African art from across a wide chasm, Levenson, after only an hour, easily forms personal bonds with the African objects at the Guggenheim, and in the process, she imagines herself walking among the potsherds of antiquity, identified through objects she interprets as tangible, permanent records of important life events such as birth, coming of age, marriage, and death. With this understanding, she uses the objects to address her anxieties about a digital world that is, for her, increasingly ephemeral and in danger of loss. Levenson fears that posterity will not know that she wrote this essay, she worries that posterity will not know that she was an inquisitive student, she dreads that posterity will not know that her boyfriend loved her. To ensure that such things will not happen, she urges her readers to commemorate their personal moments in tangible ways: to write a poem, to print a love letter or essay, to make a collage. Within this scenario, African art stands as an object lesson, for in the perceived role of these objects as things that commemorate events, they show the author how she can avoid being relegated to oblivion.

Yet this "First Person Essay" is also about Levenson's present. In the way she talks about the digital and its ephemeral nature, it is clear that the kinds of very personal things she fears the future will never know about her or her society are the very things that are already slipping away. Her present, always incomplete, is in danger of becoming impersonal and, by extension, inauthentic. In stark contrast, African art, for her, is resoundingly authentic and romantic, rooted in basic human contact. Like the so-called documentary photography that constitutes Edward Steichen's 1955 Museum of Modern Art exhibition *The Family of Man* or David Elliot Cohen and Lee Liberman's gorgeous 2002 coffee-table book *A Day in the Life of Africa*, the objects before the author allow her to articulate an acute longing for a present that is somehow more "real" and somehow more emotionally satisfying than it currently is. While Levenson greatly admires the objects she saw that day, in relegating African art to a past that alludes more to the birth of Jesus Christ than it does to the actual age of the objects on view (the vast majority of which were far younger than two thousand years of age), Levenson's engagement with the Guggenheim objects posits African art as a tabula rasa that serves as the screen for her own projections. It bears noting that much of the art in *Africa: The Art of a Continent* was the product of powerful chiefs and royal courts. In Levenson's projection, however, their histories have been rewritten as simple, communitarian articulations of cultures too often assumed to be less intellectually complex and complicated than our own.

Moreover, these objects not only serve as signs of simpler times, they also represent the labor of the hand, something that for nearly a century has been nostalgically regarded as the work of the past. In this way, Levenson's essay finds potent analogies with the representations of Africa and the performances of Africans at world's fairs. For example, in the Equatorial Africa Pavilion in the Paris 1931 Colonial Exposition, a group of African artists was transported to the Bois de Vincennes, where they carved objects on a daily basis. Relegated to this pavilion, these men were understood to be part of the past. In the Ghana Pavilion at the Expo 2005 in Aichi, Japan, visitors could be dressed up and photographed as a "historic" Asante ruler. In the Cameroon Pavilion at the same world's fair, which featured a "timeless" Mousgoum domed house, entering through the structure's door was tantamount to stepping back in time (Fig. 1). In these cases and many more, organizers of both historic and contemporary world's fairs construct Africa as a primordial, timeless, authentic thing that allows us to imagine a precapitalist, immediate system of exchange. And it is the conception of time and its use, as "a carrier of signification, a form through which we define the content of relations between self and other," that offers the possibility of such a designation, one that, at the end of the day, allows our own agendas to be forwarded.

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Notes

1. Lisa Levenson, "Catch That Moment," *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, July 13, 1996, A-7.
2. Johannes Fabian, *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes Its Object* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983), ix.

Ajay Sinha

The zeitgeist of 2012 is that we have a lot of *zeit* but not much *geist*.—Douglas Coupland, "Convergences," 2012[1]

One of the most striking features of contemporaneity is the coexistence of very different senses of time, of what it is to exist now, to be in place, and to act, in relation to imagined histories and possible futures.—Terry Smith, Okwui Enwezor, and Nancy Condee, *Antinomies of Art and Culture*, 2008[2]

Hidden in these two quotations from contemporary art and literary practice is a desire for multiplicity in the imaginings of time. Here, time is imagined not in time lines or in chronological order but as an explosion created by the speed of modernity, producing in different parts of the planet what Douglas Coupland describes in his review of Hari Kunzru's novel *Gods without Men* (2011) as "extreme present." In those

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