

in museum cases, perched atop thin rods, a universe away from the moving bodies of wearers, the audiences, music, costumes, and histories. Despite the longstanding recognition of this amputation of form from intention, institutions struggle to restore these contexts through technologies of museum display. As Savage described in a 2008 article in this journal: “Masks pose vexing questions for museum curators, not only as an uncomfortable legacy of colonial collecting practices, but because they inevitably suggest an absence” (2008: 74). McClusky, in *Disguise: Masks and Global African Art*, characterized the exhibition of masks alone as “the heads of missing bodies” (2015: 78).

As Africanist art historians, we understand masks and masquerades as expressions of artistic, spiritual, political, economic, and very broadly cultural practices. Their expressive capacities shift and change, drawing on the needs, inspirations, and expectations of audiences, markets, artists. When their intentions are disregarded or erased, they signify lack, absence, dislocation. Can these rich masking practices find relevance as we consider the cultures of COVID masking?

In his meditation on the continuities between Africa’s “two major pandemics,” COVID-19 and coloniality, archaeologist Ibrahim Thiaw (2020) points to the success of a distinctively African approach to the virus, one in which I see a culture of community that

resembles the practice of masquerade. First, Thiaw addresses the early pandemic discourse on Africa, in which global health experts predicted millions of deaths, governmental failures on apocalyptic scale—expectations “informed by colonial fantasy and fetishization” (Thiaw 2020: 477). These visions of Africa reveal more about the observers than their ostensible subjects, like masks torn from their social contexts. These predications have thus far proven unfounded—Africa appears in US press coverage as a COVID mystery, and as largely a success story, particularly when measured against the United States’ own catastrophic numbers. Going further, Thiaw credits a Senegalese cultural value, or in his phrase, a Senegalese aesthetic: *teranga*. Thiaw defines this concept as a means of “living together by creating a space where solidarity and mutual aid, exchanges and donations, gender bonding, communal sovereignty, political and religious alliances, sharing and circulation of information, and much more are deployed.” This, for me, evokes the intentions of much masquerade; these are the values that maintain masquerade’s contemporary relevance, and that make its forms evocative sources for the work of contemporary studio artists. Were we all to adopt *teranga* culture, our medical masks might take on a different meaning, even a new aesthetic: solidarity, alliance, community, all marked by the mask.

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