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She Wears the Mask

Victoria Graciaa

The emergence of the so-called "primitive" masking its way into the art world of the twentieth century brought with it an alluring mystique which intrigued numerous artists and consequently provoked its appropriation. Specifically, the tribal can be seen in the works of Pablo Picasso as he imbues the geometric facades of Afro-Iberian masks, with shamanistic powers. Upon comparison, the primal found in Picasso's work adds an interesting twist to the work of the female Dadaist Hannah Höch, who puzzles her audience both aesthetically and intellectually through her use of dense iconography.

Turn of the century ethnographic museums throughout Europe inspired artists to take their art to new levels of representative identities. Picasso was one of the first twentieth century artists to find a mystic refuge in tribal art as he closely studied and reproduced numerous African and Iberian masks, focusing on not only their aesthetic appeal but also their psychological, shamanistic qualities. Picasso was drawn to the mask's communicative significance brought to life by the rhythmic incisions found in the surface of the tribal facades, as their disproportionate angles significantly occulted the object behind the mask. Its ritualistic tribal symbolism transforms the mask's potential as a fetish icon into a spiritualistic medium for its wearer. In Picasso's *Head of a Sleeping Woman* (1907), we are able to see the first glimpses of Picasso's interest in the tribal, as he depicts the jutting, angular form of an Iberian mask, richly colored in a limited palette, disorderly yet perplexing features, and alluring almond-shaped eyes that unconsciously hypnotize its viewer (Karmel 46).

In 1907, within the same year that he created *Head of a Sleeping Woman*, Picasso produced one of his greatest and yet most controversial pieces, entitled *Les Femmes d'Alger*. In this painting, Picasso depicts a masochistic image of the traditional, Western icon of the female nude rendered on a fragmented plane. Picasso poses five nude models in rather disturbing eroticized positions, some standing with their arms painfully twisted behind their heads, while one awkwardly crouches in the foreground, lending a devastating air of suffering

to the composition as a whole. The female nudes communicate an increasingly dark approach to the female character, for Picasso systematically leaves behind the narrative development in the work as he moves from the attraction of the female body to "the horror" of its form (Rubin 252). In *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon*, Picasso abandons all narrative impulses as he startlingly transforms the image into an iconic picture, that is incredibly shocking. The slashing angular drapery, creates a disjointed fragmentation, thus adding to the heightened anguish the viewer experiences upon confrontation.

To increase this uneasiness, Picasso has masked his disjointed nudes with ornate Afro-Iberian masks, evoking a sense of the primal. The masked figures of the female nudes symbolized for Picasso a shamanistic rite that he managed to experience through the art of painting, which he saw as an exorcism. Picasso found a magical significance in the masks, whereby he was able to psychologically exorcise his sexual frustrations by using the medium of the mask as a liberating force. Picasso felt a yearning and euphoric idolization of the female body, however, at the same time he experienced an intense fear and loathing towards it, which formed a tumultuous psychic battle. The masks depicted on the demoiselles can be seen as ritualistic fetish objects used by Picasso as tools, as a means of alleviating his psychological tension, whereby his inner turbulent sexual energies are released in a sensuous exorcism (Rubin 253-254).

With the masks' shamanistic purposes in mind, the facades' visual significance is developed for we are able to see the demoiselles as violent figures symbolizing the woman as destroyer or "barbaric" character imbued with intense eroticism, transcending civilized experiences, taking on the role as a monstrous femme fatale. For the viewer, Picasso's nude women in *Les Desmoiselles d'Avignon* are painful and uncomfortable; he confronts us with his own fetishism, stylistically ruptured into an icon (Rubin 254).

While Picasso used the so called primitive as a shamanistic tool or mediator to combat his inner psychosexual turmoil, the woman Dadaist, Hannah Hoch employed the use of ethnographic artifacts as a satirical, social commentary, empowering the feminine form. By allowing the shamanistic powers of the mask to regeneratively transform the figures into confrontational and subversive women, Hoch redefines her "New Women" as progressively strong figures, instead of monstrous femme fatales, as seen in Picasso's work. Hoch conceptually stuns her

audience by satirizing conventional European standards of beauty through the juxtaposition of African masks and figureheads with painted and drawn portions of the human body (Stein 539).

Gender roles and identity play an increasingly interesting function in Hoch's work as her photomontages present distorted androgynous images that question conventional gender distinctions, seeping into the private and public of politics and sexuality. In her extended photomontage series entitled *From an Ethnographic Museum*, Hoch presents a rather spiritually meditative survey focusing upon the alienation of the female, who is subsequently marginalized and isolated from all social conventions, raised on a pedestal, and obscurely masked, concealing her psychic discomfort. Hoch interestingly depicts beauty in a peculiar, twisted way by rendering the idea of beauty as a formulaic cultural construction, rather than a natural given. By conceptually juxtaposing beauty with the grotesque, Hoch surpasses the boundaries between contrasting aesthetic representations of the body and enters a realm of blurred sexual insignificance. Hoch once said, "I want to blur the firm boundaries that we as people tend self-assuredly to draw around all that we can achieve." This telling statement reaffirms the aesthetic truths Hoch achieves by questioning social constructions of beauty and ideal form (Lavin 341).

By appropriating tribal artifacts and placing them on the heads of nude, female bodies and, furthermore exhibiting her hybrid forms in the format employed by ethnographic museums, Hoch explicitly comments upon contemporary European gender definitions subscribed to women of the time. In an attempt to openly criticize various facets of the representation and social status of Weimar women, Hoch created allegorical montages representative of modern femininity, which in fact directly attacked the works of her contemporaries as well as that of Picasso in his *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon*.

In 1930, as part of her *Ethnographic Museum Series*, Hoch produced a photomontage entitled, *Indian Female Dancer*. Here, Hoch takes a copy of a publicity photo of the actress Marie Falconetti and montages an Indian statue over the left portion and mouth of the actress's face. Crowning her head is a tiara made out of knives and spoons, stereotypical emblems of a domestic housewife. The silverware tiara becomes a commentary on the oppressive nature of the woman's role as domestic caretaker. Hoch presents us with a multi-faceted representation of women's identity here, for she gives us a modern woman, a

valiant woman warrior, and a film star, all of whom are enveloped in the reign of domesticity (Lavin 337).

Hoch continues to question contemporary ideals of the feminine in her photomontage, *Strange Beauty*, created in 1929 also as part of her Ethnographic Museum Series. In this work, Hoch has taken a photograph of a nude woman reclining in a "traditionally alluring" pose, on her side resting her head upon her arm. The woman's head, however, is replaced by a grotesquely wrinkled mask-like head that seems to be deformed and shrunken, which creates a shocking combination of idealized beauty with the bizarre. Hoch adds a unique twist to the composition for she heightens its disturbing nature by placing a pair of skewed eyes, which have been magnified by eyeglasses, in the eye sockets of the disfigured head, thus causing a symbolic mirror effect. The hybrid figure's gaze is purposefully distorted so that it will mirror the spectator's own act of looking at the figure's body, distorted head, and eyes (Lavin 341).

Through the use of montage, Hoch creates a chillingly alienating effect, which leads us to see the shrunken tribal head montaged onto a nude female body as an exceptionally strange hybridization. By creating various androgynous collaborative works through photomontage, specifically in *Indian Female Dancer* and *Strange Beauty*, Hoch subsequently ruptures the iconic image of "woman as a sexual object of desire," conceptually questions her role as a woman in society, and finally re-interprets it by assembling the image into a newly fragmented whole (Lavin 341).

A reading of Hoch's tribal/western fused montages is often linked to a humanistic tradition, whereby she ironically displaces allegorical significances through the union of the two differing subjects. Hoch makes her work appear to be a link to humanistic tradition of Western and tribal art, yet, it is also an internal exploration of the self through an aesthetic representation of the "Other." Distance is a required element for interpreting montages, such as *Strange Beauty*, for a "close" reading develops a disturbing sensation. Psychological distance thereby provides for an allegorical narrative development to occur, allowing a multi-layered meaning for the work itself (Lavin 341).

Commodity fetishism linked to tribal art cannot be easily reduced to a formulaic cultural construction in the work of Hannah Hoch, for she goes beyond this reductionary formula by portraying a montage of fragments of tribal art, strategically placed upon pedestals as

seen in museums, mixed with portions of female bodies, which are viewed as "mannequins on display," in order to comment upon the representation of women as a model or fetish object and as an object of ethnographic analysis (Lavin 343). In Hoch's work *Monument II: Vanity*, an androgynous figure is placed on top of a pedestal facing the audience in a classical, contrapposto pose of self-display. Upon seeing the figure, from the waist down it appears to be a seminude female, however its masculine chest and dwarfed arms are tellingly male. This particular piece, which combines male and female forms is typical of Hoch's oeuvre for she conceptually utilizes androgyny as a means of presenting an interesting sexual dichotomy, that preserves ambiguity and challenges gender roles. Hoch places an African mask over the androgynous figure's body and proceeds to place the composition on a pedestal, which is a commentary on the classification and exhibition of people as objects. The pedestal, which is conventionally seen as a device used to display something that is perfect and complete, becomes the bearer of the fragmentary and grotesque, and the "vanity" that comes with objects on display becomes distorted and strangely parodied (Lavin 122).

Perhaps one of the most interesting pieces included in Hoch's *Ethnographic Museum* is the *Mother: From an Ethnographic Museum*, 1930, which is a charged politicized photomontage of a proletarian woman. Hoch uses a photograph of a pregnant woman previously taken her Dada contemporary, John Heartfield, and has covered the woman's face with a tribal mask, allegorically paralleling the stereotypical concept of "exhausted maternity" with ethnic art. By comparing maternity with the tribal, Hoch symbolically elevates the proletarian woman to the status of a kind of "Ur-mother," who is a regenerative primordial life-source. In adding a modern, "New Woman's" eye to the left side of the woman's face, Hoch brings forth ideas of a "universal femininity." Interestingly enough, the pregnant proletarian can be seen as a political outcry against the government act entitled, Paragraph 218, which outlawed abortion in Germany at that time. Because working-class women were in a state of undesirable poverty, their unwanted pregnancies and births were seen as problematic and unfortunate acts, therefore, the pregnant proletarian was seen as an icon to legalize abortion. Hoch participated valiantly in the campaign to legalize abortion and overturn Paragraph 218, and so her pregnant woman can be seen as an artistic politicized reconfiguration that confronts social stereotypes (Lavin 331).

Hoch's wonderfully twisted, hybrid, androgynous montages can still be seen as a strong and radical political outcry that questions numerous societal and cultural ideologies that have become so entrenched in our world today. Hoch, working twenty-two years after Picasso's creation of *Les Femmes d'Alger (O. J. R. M.)*, created her *Ethnographic Museum Series*, with a focus on the primal as a means of subverting gender roles and critiquing how culture is displayed in museums. *Les Femmes d'Alger (O. J. R. M.)*, an image which was known throughout the art world of the time, served as a basis for the study and appropriation of the earliest use of the tribal in Modern art. Aesthetically, the image became a model for many who looked to the primal as an innovative art form, such as Hoch; however, she subverts the primal and employs it as a social critique, instead of a mystical shaman. She wears the mask that empowers and transforms her figures, she wears the mask that makes the world wonder, who and why?

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