

Sidney and I met in person was on the auspicious occasion of the symposium A State of the Field Convening: The Future of African Art, at Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art in March 2018. Her health had vastly improved from when we saw each other in Kampala. She was in such great spirit and was working hard on several projects, including the second edition of her influential *Contemporary African Art* (I was fortunate to be part of the process) that came out posthumously in 2020.

Sidney will be remembered as a towering figure in African art history who pushed the traditional boundaries of the field, embracing ideas and arguments that were not initially popular but caught on later. In that sense she was a trailblazer and an iconoclast. Although she may not have been the first scholar to espouse the line of argument in her often-cited classic article “One Tribe: One Style,” she was the first to make it forcefully and with scholarly rigor and so much conviction. For one who was not yet a senior scholar at that time, it was a tremendous act of bravery, something she expected of her academic children. Her longstanding study of the Idoma and related peoples of middle Nigeria and Samburu people of north-central Kenya melded seamlessly in *African Art and the Colonial Encounter: Inventing a Global Commodity*. In this incredible work, Sidney’s strength as a social art historian shine through effortlessly. Her pioneering contributions in bridging historical and contemporary arts of Africa are well documented. As such, it was pure joy for us, her former students, to gather together in Accra on the historic occasion of the first Arts Council of the African Studies Association (ACASA) Triennale on African soil to celebrate her Lifetime Achievement Award in August 2017.

My penultimate email to her in February 2019 was to intimate to her my impending move to the Museum of Modern Art, New York, before it was formally announced. She was proud but also sad. I realized that her sadness was because she felt that in moving to MoMA, I was leaving the field that thirsts for more African presence. I fully understand that anxiety but believe that MoMA offers a different platform to continue with the much-needed work that she did or encouraged throughout her exceptional career. The exhibition *Second Careers: Two Tributaries in African Art* that opened on November 1, 2020, at the Cleveland Museum of Art, is dedicated to her memory. My Acknowledgment in the exhibition’s accompanying publication, written in March 2019, read as a tribute to her without any hint that she would be joining the ancestors by the close of the year. I am deeply saddened that she never got to see the exhibition or read the publication that fleshed out some of the arguments she shared in her graduate seminars. Among the Igbo, an ancestor is a saint, to use a Christian analogy. You



Sidney Kasfir in Uganda, 2011
Photo: courtesy Emory University Art History

are deified and ushered into the pantheon of ancestors if you lived a life worthy of emulation and celebration. Now an ancestor, Sidney has molded scholars who will continue where she left. She will forever live in my memory and the memories of all her former students and many others whose lives she impacted. She took a chance on an artist with no art history and for that I will be eternally grateful. I will miss her greatly.

UGOCHUKWU-SMOOTH C. NZEWI is the Steven and Lisa Tannenbaum Curator of the Department of Painting and Sculpture at the Museum of Modern Art, New York. smooth_nzewi@moma.org

A VOICE OF RADICAL CRITIQUE AND DECOLONIZING PERSPECTIVES by Till Förster

Unlike many of us scholars who absorb current trends to weave them into a new fabric, Sidney Kasfir had a clear idea of how African art studies should explore its subject. Her agenda grew out of her life trajectory. Having been the director of Uganda’s only art gallery in the late 1960s, she became familiar with contemporary African artists before conducting research for her PhD in a setting that was, at the time, labelled as “purely traditional”: the Idoma in the Benue Valley, Nigeria. Her passage from contemporary to so-called traditional and back to present-day arts made her aware of the outstanding importance of social and cultural change for the arts of the continent, but also of the profound inconsistencies and contradictions in the field of African art studies. She began to question many of the presumptions and central concepts that informed the study of the arts of the continent at the time.

In her acceptance speech for the ACASA Lifetime Achievement Award, which she received in 2017 in Ghana, she summarized

her main interest as one question: What happens to art on the cusp of social change? Her book *African Art and the Colonial Encounter*, published ten years earlier, began with: “Where does the new come from in an artist’s practice?” (Kasfir 2007: 1) Within this broad field, Sidney Kasfir’s interest had fallen into two streams, which surfaced in many publications and at different moments of her academic work, but eventually converged into a general, overarching agenda that she pursued throughout her life.

The first stream was, obviously, a rigorous critique of conventional, seemingly self-evident concepts and patterns of interpretation. The “one tribe–one style” paradigm became one of the first subjects of her critique. It had dominated African art studies since its very beginning in the early twentieth century and implicitly reproduced many colonial presumptions about African societies and their cultures. Taking the Idoma as an example, she challenged the colonial assumption that ethnic groups always have one homogenous culture and thus only one style with very few variations. The “one tribe–one style” model allowed early anthropology to inscribe each ethnic group into the colonial archive and to make it visible as a cultural entity in ethnographic collections and museums. However, it said very little about how creativity unfolded within a social setting. The presumption that societies limit the creative freedom of individual artists

had to give way to a much more nuanced understanding of collective and individual creativity, she argued. The formation of style is too complex to be reducible to only one model.

Although her article had appeared in a journal somewhat marginal for art historians, this move marked a turn in African art studies. However, outside the academy, it yielded only limited effects. On the one hand, the art market continues to label styles in African art as ethnic and still replaces artists by ethnic groups as creators. Most collectors and connoisseurs do the same. On the other hand, some museums and curators have sought for individual artists and their style to replace the older paradigm by a new one, the primacy of the person in art production. They thus replaced a colonial by another one-sided, now profoundly modern presumption about artistic creativity.

Sidney looked at the workshop as an exemplary case where scholars can observe directly how individual and collective intentions interact and sometimes merge in the formation of style. Working together in a workshop is widespread in Africa but not universal. There were other themes where flows and interactions elucidated the tension between individual and collective intentions.

In another radical critique, she deconstructed the idea of authenticity. The article with the subtitle “A Text with a Shadow” was first published in 1992 in *African Arts*. It became one of her most-cited publications and was reprinted several times in anthologies of postcolonial art theory. Sidney’s introductory question was clear and simple: “Who or what determines ... cultural authenticity?” Her answers were trenchant. There are no

positive criteria to define and assess authentic African art. Depending on how art is framed, the very same object can be seen as authentic or inauthentic, as the examples of pastoralists and their beadwork in her article illustrate so convincingly. Authenticity is discursively constructed—it is, as Sidney wrote in her article, rhetorical. Years later, she told me that the editors did not like the paper when she submitted it. She was very much aware of the many possible misunderstandings of her plea to recognize the complexity of the formation of style in African art and how the arts of the continent are conceived by Western outsiders.

The second stream of her work was the articulation of a truly decolonial perspective on the arts of others, in her case African art. In *African Art and the Colonial Encounter* (2007) she juxtaposed the Idoma with the Samburu, a pastoralist people in northern Kenya where she began to conduct research in the early 1990s. Both people see themselves as warriors, and both were discursively constructed as such throughout colonial times. However, the aesthetic answers were different. As “cultural scripts,” the two people and their arts were undergoing different trajectories that redefined the meaning of objects and also of men as warriors. The multilayered meanings that emerged in the encounters between members of the two societies and outsiders—first colonial officers, travelers, and writers, then tourists, expats, and others coming from the Global North—transformed the objects of their warriorhood into specimen of a distant past, artworks or weapons. Eventually, the objects were embedded in the transformation of their culture and the bodies of the people. The Samburu warriors became noble men, not much different from

the noble savages that Jean-Jacques Rousseau once had in mind. The Idoma, however, were representing the “primitive” and their masquerades became examples of the first arts of mankind. The book is an exceptional example of where African art studies were heading to in the early twenty-first century and how a decolonial perspective on African art could look like in our time.

There was a subtext in Sidney’s work that is rarely mentioned. Beside searching for a decolonial perspectives, she also sought to reconcile the methodologies of art history and anthropology. While she came from art history and always claimed that she would first engage with an object-centered perspective, she recognized the achievements of a practice-centered, anthropological approach. She regretted that art historians very rarely publish methodological papers, but she saw a need to overcome this disciplinary legacy, she told me in 2017 at the Triennial Symposium on African Art in Ghana. It is sad that she had no chance to complete her work. I am convinced, it would have been another seminal contribution to African art studies.

TILL FÖRSTER is Chair of Anthropology at the University of Basel. till.foerster@unibas.ch

References cited

- Kasfir, Sidney Littlefield. 1984. “One Tribe, One Style? Paradigms in the Historiography of African Art.” *History in Africa* 11: 63–93.
- Kasfir, Sidney Littlefield. 1992. “African Art and Authenticity: A Text with a Shadow.” *African Arts* 25 (2): 41–53, 96–97.
- Kasfir, Sidney Littlefield. 2007. *African Art and the Colonial Encounter: Inventing a Global Commodity*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.