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Medium and Meaning in Nick Cave's *Soundsuit*

Brooke Williams

Nick Cave's *Soundsuit* series uses performance and found mediums to question Western philosophical assumptions about what aesthetic choices are deemed sophisticated and, as a result, valuable. Cave's work questions these assumptions and how they affect two cultural contexts. By creating art objects that operate in both sculptural and performative contexts, the *Soundsuit* series comments on how Western aesthetic standards decontextualize African tribal artworks from their originally intended purposes. By using the medium of discarded found objects, Cave challenges how preconceived notions of cultural prestige factor into contemporary racism and classism.

The Western philosophical tradition very narrowly defines what objects can be considered aesthetically beautiful. Namely, high-art objects are meant to be appreciated based on formalistic detail, separated from any social or historical interpretation, and "distance the observer from the observed".¹ This definition of aesthetic sophistication excludes any works that require interaction between the viewer and the object. Interaction through interpretation is frowned upon, as the observers are urged "to focus on the object rather than on the social and economic considerations" that surround the object.² A work that encourages physical manipulation, rather than simply being looked at, is excluded from all traditional Western definitions of high-art. These standards create a rigid dichotomy: art is untouched, while a physically used object is a tool. Tools are relegated to a status of aesthetic inferiority, while high-art is praised as sophisticated.

This conceptualization of high-art as distant and stagnant is enforced by the design of museum spaces. Museums present works with rope and guards imposing a physical distance between the viewer and the object. "High ceilings" and "white walls" ensure that no part of the museum room distracts from the objects held within the room itself.³ Subtle lighting and ornate frames and pedestals emphasize the objects with grandeur. Tiny placards give a couple sentences of artist biography and a brief description of the work, encouraging a visual analysis of formal details by leaving little room to consider the art object in any kind of social or historical context. Museum spaces physically impose Western philosophical ideas about aesthetic sophistication, by presenting their collection as a series of distant, individual, and still objects.

When African tribal works are added to museum collections, they are presented in a way that emphasizes Western definitions of aesthetic prestige. This context carefully removes any aspect of the African works that aren't considered prestigious, even if those details are integral to the work's original purpose. The "African idea of a beautiful object" is centralized around that object's utility.⁴ Sculptural figures were also used in ceremonies, while ornate knit costumes were intended to be used in dance. African tribal artworks were almost always made with physical interaction in mind, directly defying the Western ideal of being "created as 'art for art's sake'".⁵ However, the museum space decontextualizes the African works from their intent of

¹ Paul Stroller, "Circuits of African Art/Paths of Wood: Exploring an Anthropological Trail," *Anthropological Quarterly* 76, no. 2 (2003): 207-234.

² Stroller, 207-234.

³ Stroller, 207-234.

⁴ Jean Bacquart, *The Tribal Arts of Africa* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1998), 9 – 20.

⁵ Bacquart, 9 – 20.

physical interaction, and displays them as still sculptural objects. The “mainstreaming tendency” of museum spaces removes any aspect of the African works that aren’t considered sophisticated.⁶ Any intention of performance or other physical manipulation is concealed because this would present the work as a tool rather than a high-art object.

One of Nick Cave’s *Soundsuits* in the Wadsworth Athenaeum comments on this conflict between performance and presentation as a still object. This *Soundsuit* is presented under subtle lighting, roped off, and shown as a sculptural object. It is contextualized in this gallery by other high-art sculptures and canvases; surrounded by Warhol prints, Sherman photography, and other prolific and prestigious contemporary artists. The *Soundsuit* is presented as an object for distant visual scrutiny; however, it was made as a costume for a dancer. In this sense, it mimics the presentation of African tribal works, as its intended use is forgone for presentation as a purely visual object. When subject to the distant formal scrutiny encouraged by Western aesthetic philosophy, the *Soundsuit* creates a visual tension. The patterns on the rugs that wrap around the piece create multiple linear paths, necessitating the viewer to physically walk around the *Soundsuit* in order to connect the dynamic patterns of color. The rugs cover every inch of the armature except clearly visible feet and legs. This detail, coupled with the humanoid shape of the *Soundsuit*, “invites viewers to imagine what it might feel like to inhabit one” by implying the form of the human within the suit itself.⁷ By creating a still artwork that encourages viewers to “fantasize about different modes of existence”, Cave uses the means of museum presentation to defy its ends.⁸ Scrutinizing the formal traits of the *Soundsuit* leads viewers to physically interact with the piece, as well as imagine the piece in the context of a performance. The same distant visual analysis that Western philosophical tradition celebrates leads the viewer to interact with the piece; closing the distance between observer and observed that is inherent to the definition of high-art. Through this visual tension, Cave questions definitions of aesthetic prestige, arguing for a broader definition that celebrates physical manipulation just as much as distant visual scrutiny.

Cave’s *Soundsuit* series also challenges how these definitions of aesthetic prestige dismiss certain artistic mediums. Western definitions of high-art create a dichotomy between the art object and the tool, with the former being held in higher regard than the latter. These categories are largely separated by medium as well. Oil paints and carved marble are seen as inherently more sophisticated than yarn or clay pottery. As a result of this strict classification of high-art and low-art, one can almost automatically designate an object as non-sophisticated, and therefore lesser, simply by looking at it.

Classifying something as lesser based on visual cues informed the creation of the *Soundsuit* series. Cave wanted to subvert the automatic reaction to “categorize or put something in its place” in order to define its worth.⁹ He associated this need to categorize things based on worth to both social discrimination and to artistic medium. Cave pondered “the role of identity, being racial profiled, feeling devalued, less than, dismissed” based on automatic visual categorization.¹⁰ A simple physical cue, like black skin, was the catalyst for others to automatically categorize Cave as less valuable. Cave saw the same process of judgment and dismissal in how he viewed objects around him. He saw a twig laying on the ground in the park,

⁶ Sydney Littlefield Kafir, "Museums and Contemporary African Art," *African Arts* 35, no. 4 (2002).

⁷ "The Nick Cave Experience," *Peabody Essex Museum*, February 6, 2013, http://pem.org/press/press_release/236-the_nick_cave_experience_at_pem.

⁸ Susan Taber Avila, "Imagination Activist," *Fiberarts*, (2009): 52-55.

⁹ PBS NewsHour, "Nick Cave Brings Art, Sculpture to Life With 'Soundsuits,'" *PBS Newshour* video, 5:22. April 24, 2012. http://www.pbs.org/newshour/bb/entertainment-jan-june12-nickcave_04-24/

¹⁰ *PBS NewsHour*

and realized he automatically considered it “discarded, and...sort of insignificant”.¹¹ It was this realization of how easily an object can be dismissed as insignificant due to a lack of perceived prestige that motivated the *Soundsuit* series. Cave immediately gathered more twigs and created the first suit with them. In this, he created a high-art object from materials generally considered worthless by the standards of high-art itself.

Cave's *Soundsuits* focus on using less valuable mediums to challenge preconceived notions of what constitutes worth and prestige. Every suit is made from found objects, specifically from sources like flea markets or thrift stores. In using these sources specifically, the suits repurpose objects that were considered worthless enough to discard. The objects range from used knit rugs, something often dismissed as craft, not high-art, and broken toys, something physically used and worthless as a result. By creating complex art objects with materials considered lacking prestige, Cave creates the “opportunity to subvert the values people place on” those materials.¹² When incorporated into the art pieces, viewers are forced to acknowledge that these objects have worth. By repurposing worthless objects, the *Soundsuits* further relate social discrimination to classifications of prestige. Cave, born in a low-income single parent household, often had to rely upon reusing hand-me-downs or items from thrift stores as a means of clothing. This action is often condescended to as being low class. However, by using this process as a means of creating intricate artworks, Cave both challenges preconceived notions of artistic prestige while simultaneously dispelling the classism that those notions encourage.

The *Soundsuits* confront discrimination as both sculptural pieces and performance pieces. One of the most frequent comments of those who perform wearing one of the suits is how they completely conceal “the wearer's identity, gender and class”.¹³ Specifically, that this obfuscation of physical identity is liberating, allowing for the performers to have less inhibitions about their movements. The frequency of society coming to sudden judgments about a person's inferiority based on vague visual cues would explain why concealing one's identity seems so invigorating. The suits are designed to emphasize the performers' movements by creating sound when manipulated, in addition to emphasizing the performer solely based on their large size. This emphasis suggests that, with identity obfuscated, the individual can be noticed for their actions and not for the social worth they are assigned. The wearers of the suit have their physical actions put on center stage, demanding to be noticed – not automatically disregarded due to race, class, or gender.

¹¹ *PBS NewsHour*

¹² Avila, 52-55.

¹³ *Peabody Essex Museum*

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