

Ann Goerdts, Donna Page, Herbert M. Cole, Peter E. Udo Umoh, Leonard Kahan, and Faustino Quintanilla, *Deformity Masks and Their Role in African Cultures: The Ann Goerdts Collection*, (Bayside, New York: QCC Art Gallery Press, 2018). pp. 116.

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The monographic study of *Deformity Masks and Their Role in African Cultures* within the collection of Ann Goerdts is an interesting exploration into the problem-spaces of beauty, disease, innovation, and the philosophy of representation in African visual and material culture. For a hardcover catalog that is attached to an exhibition, the book is relatively thin: only 113 pages. Its cover is completely black, with a red and white title, *Deformity Masks and Their Role in African Cultures: the Ann Goerdts Collection*. I note the aesthetics of the book itself because the book's graphic design signifies the risks and possibilities of particular analyses of African aesthetics and material culture. The cover of the book is completely black with red and white writing and a floating mask in the upper right-hand corner—an Ekpo Society mask, without a nose and an Idiong headband, from Ibibio, Nigeria. The dark cover decorated with the floating mask bears an alarming formal similarity to the Darkest Africa trope. And one wonders, does the apparent epidemiological strain of the book further reproduce this trope?

The most promising analyses within the book are those that grapple with what art historian Herbert M. Cole identified as the “imagination and invention on the part of the mask carvers and their patrons.”<sup>1</sup> Cole's exploration of the beauty/ugly and wellness/disease binaries, as well as various other binaries that frame his argument, are exciting, as he interrogates African spiritual, epistemological, and creative frameworks through which these so-called deformity masks are created and utilized. The reality that there are formal liberties taken in these masks that are unidentifiable as particular diseases or disabilities to Western science and medicine contributes to the ways in which visual innovation is as crucial, if not more so, to the task of representing existing maladies. Therefore, considering deformity masks outside the realm of sickness alone makes possible an analysis which takes seriously experiments with form. Cole writes, “It would seem that such imagined qualities encourage artists to experiment radically with form, to

distort and exaggerate, to unleash fantasies, in short, to imagine creatively, to dream up forms and features never seen before.”<sup>2</sup>

Curator and collector Ann Goerdts’s contribution, “Influence of Disease in African Carving,” begins with a focus on various diseases: smallpox, yaws, leprosy, polio, and leishmaniasis. The inclusion of modern Nigerian artist Gabriel Ojo’s drawing, *God of Smallpox Attacking a Village*, is a wonderful selection on the part of Goerdts, as it places the masks in dialogue with other visual media. What resonates far less, for anyone with specific political commitments to the African continent and its ongoing battles against neocolonialism and neoliberal globalization, is Goerdts’s process of identifying each disease and its representation within the masks along with photographs of actual African people with these various diseases, illnesses, and disabilities. One must ask, does the epidemiological focus, particularly the portrayals of African peoples with these conditions, further reproduce the notion of Africans as disease-ridden, pathologized, and in need of saving from Western medicine?

African art conservator Donna Page’s “Mask, Malady, and Metaphor” moves the book again toward an iconographic analysis grounded in African art histories. Framing Page’s exploration are several key questions on the masks, “. . . [H]ow were they performed and why? Do they represent certain individuals or societal constructs? What was the artist’s role? What was the cultural context? What was the purpose of the malformed figures?”<sup>3</sup> Page’s findings from West, Central, and East African cultures represented in the exhibition reveal the aesthetics and practice of masquerade. Masquerades function as communal celebrations and rituals to honor the dead and summon their spirits among the living. The form of the masks, as well as how they are utilized in dance practices, are important to the success of a masquerade. Philosopher and educator Peter E. Udo Umoh engages similar themes within the specific context of Ekpo masks for the final essay in the book. These questions of societal function, aesthetics, spirituality, performance, and historical legacy are the most compelling inquiries in the text. The most enlightening aspects of this project are the ways in which scholars are given space to move past epidemiological frameworks in naming specific diseases present within deformity masks and instead toward aesthetic philosophies and cultural contexts. That is not to say that there is no

place for interdisciplinarity—especially between public health and the history of art and material culture—but instead, that a focus on deformity masks can illuminate key moments of aesthetic experimentation and sociocultural context among African arts, as opposed to a focus on Western medicine that classifies disease and makes explicit connections between existing African people with these conditions, further pathologizing them and reproducing voyeuristic photography of African suffering.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Herbert M. Cole, “Disease or Invention? Riffs on Beauty and the Beast,” *Deformity Masks and their Role in African Cultures: The Ann Goerdts Collection*, (Bayside, New York: QCC Art Gallery Press, 2018), 13.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

<sup>3</sup> Donna Page, “Mask, Malady and Metaphor,” *Deformity Masks and their Role in African Cultures*, 57.

