Aesthetica Preprint, n. 130, settembre-dicembre 2025 ISSN 0393-8522 DOI: 10.7413/0393-85221507

"Primitive" to whom? And for whom? Fictional similarities and the politics of pseudomorphism

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Abstract
This article offers a philosophical interpretation of primitivism in Western art as a form of pseudomorphism, i.e. a false resemblance that emerges through comparative visual strategies. Drawing on the aesthetic tradition of analogy and montage, the paper frames primitivism not merely as a stylistic trend but as an aesthetic dispositive in the Foucauldian sense: a structure of relations that produces meaning through juxtaposition. The analysis foregrounds how primitivism relies on the constructed opposition between modern and so-called "primitive" forms, revealing the latter as a product of the comparison itself. While primitivism has been critiqued for its colonialist and ethnocentric underpinnings, this study also examines its appropriation within feminist and activist practices. Through American case studies, the article explores how primitivism has operated both as an instrument of domination and as a means of resistance, recasting it as a politically ambivalent phenomenon shaped by pseudomorphic logic.

Keywords
Primitivism; Pseudomorphism; Feminist Art; Performance; Shamanism

1. *Primitivism and the theories of similarity*

This contribution aims to investigate primitivism as a form of pseudomorphism, addressing this artistic issue by examining it within the broader context of the theory of similarity. This approach reveals primitivism not only as a style[1], but also as an aesthetic device expressing different political standpoints through the com-

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[1] Among the many definitions of style, a concept with a long and well-studied tradition, I refer here to style as that which can be identified through a specific historical and geographical context and associated with a precise artistic movement. By stating this, however, I intend to set aside these contextual elements and interpret primitivism instead as a structure of thought, a transversal matrix, in line with Danto's (1964) understanding of style.

parative arrangement of elements. To sketch this framework, a hybridisation of the tools of anthropology, art history, and aesthetics will be crucial to shed light on this complex phenomenon. In fact, primitive art originally emerged as a central object of inquiry within the anthropology of art, the branch of the study of human beings that deals with artefacts. Here, following in the footsteps of the anthropology of images, which instead belongs to the field of study of visual culture, the same anthropological gaze will be cast upon Western art that is intended to be primitive. Thus, to discover how the primitive is in fact "invented", not unlike a ritual scheme or a magical practice: that is, as an expressive technique of aesthetic and political values that aspire to have efficacy over the world.

Going back to our initial hypothesis, pseudomorphism refers to a relationship of "false similarity" established between objects or experiences that have nothing in common from a genetic point of view. To be clearer, a pseudomorphic relationship is, for example, one that binds two people who are so similar that they could be considered twins, even though they are not even related. Primitivism is therefore inherently pseudomorphic because it postulates the existence of an affinity based on an outward or performative similarity between two entities, one primitive and one "civilized", even though the latter do not originate from the same context, nor do they *per se* share an ideology or meaning. From this point of view, primitivism arises from a "seeing double": it is always in the eyes of the beholder and never in the objects being looked at.

The term "pseudomorphosis" originated in mineralogy to describe a particular process of minerogenesis: the "false form" is that of the crystal that develops in the mould left empty by the "original" mineral. Or, that which gradually substitutes its own molecules for another that leaves room for it, taking its shape, or that which develops on top of another mineral, until it completely hides it. The final configuration is false, hence pseudomorphic, because the mineral's outward appearance does not match its internal structure. It is through *The Decline of the West* (1918-1923) that Spengler popularized the phrase into the discourse of the humanities[2]. In the chapter devoted to *Problems of the Arabian Culture*, Spengler introduces the idea of *Historic Pseudomorphoses.* This typically occurs at the end of a conflict: the victor, as in the case of Octavian over Antony at Actium in 31 BC, imposes on a now Eastern society the mould of a Hellenistic "Apollonian" remnant that will influence

[2] The cultural history of the concept of "pseudomorphosis" has been retraced by Andrea Pinotti (2016).

and slow down subsequent developments. Although Spengler is aware of the pseudomorphic phenomenon in mineralogy, which has nothing violent about it, he colours the corresponding historical dynamic with dark, regressive hues. What in the case of mineralogy was an empty mould subsequently filled by a new crystal is transformed into a heavy cast that causes a coercive distortion, which prevents the new from emerging. Pseudomorphism was later taken up by scholars such as Erwin Panofsky (1992), who explored its various meanings before ultimately crystallising certain apodictic principles in his work on funerary sculpture.

In fact, the reflection on the pseudomorph is part of a complex and stratified philosophical tradition that in the 20th century made use of the device of *montage* to create similarities and give rise to new meanings: I am of course referring to the Warburgian intellectual enterprise, to Walter Benjamin, who made of it not only an object of study, but a form of thought that remained embedded in his idea of the "dialectical image", up to Georges Didi-Huberman.

The concept of pseudomorphism can be likened to "errors" of judgment that unsettle linear conceptions of causality and historical time. Within this framework, anachronism becomes particularly pertinent to the question of the primitive: far from constituting a mere methodological flaw, it functions as a disruptive force that challenges the presumed continuity of temporal progression. Primitivism is, in this sense, doubly anachronistic: on the one hand, it is effaced from the present as a residue of a disavowed colonial past; on the other, it draws its imaginative power from a vision of timelessness that reconfigures the past according to present desires.

It is no coincidence that the philosopher who placed the perception of similarity at the core of aesthetic experience also attributed a strong cognitive value to anachronism. In his spiritual and political testament, Walter Benjamin weaves the theme of anachronism and of the relationship between past, future, and above all the present into the fabric of history. The dialectical image of the "tiger's leap into the past", that appears in the XIV thesis on the concept of history (Benjamin 2003 [1942], p. 395), reflects the violent yet revolutionary nature of anachronism, sharing many of the traits of the "primitive". For Benjamin, dialectical imagery is encountered in language, which is perhaps a modern manifestation of magic, with the power to create lightning-fast associations of ideas from which new, authentic meaning emerges. At the heart of this generative power, Benjamin identifies a "mimetic faculty", which is fundamental to the ontogenetic and phylogenetic development of

human beings. The philosopher had addressed the issue of mimesis in two essays, *Doctrine of the Similar* and *On the Mimetic Faculty*, both from 1933. In these short texts, Benjamin formulates a theory of similarity, characterised by a certain primitivism. The mimicry theorised by Benjamin is the capacity to both perceive similarities and to produce them through one's own body. According to "the primitivist" Benjamin, "For clearly the perceptual world [*Merkwelt*] of modern man contains only minimal residues of the magical correspondences and analogies that were familiar to ancient peoples". The ability to activate similarities and associations between things in the world, both at the level of the micro- and macrocosm, would have gradually weakened, or rather crystallised in what Benjamin calls "the most complete archive of nonsensuous similarity" (1999, p. 721), namely language, which has dethroned magic of its cognitive power. Thus, the mimetic faculty of contemporaries is not defunct, but rather, forgotten.

The Australian anthropologist Michael Taussig has offered a deep reflection on Walter Benjamin's conception of the mimetic faculty, placing it at the core of his anthropological practice. In *Mimesis and Alterity: A Particular History of the Senses*, Taussig shows how the mimetic faculty takes the form of an imitation of the Other. Imitating the Other is therefore not an infantile or merely "primitive" mimicry, but a cognitive mode human beings have never ceased to exercise.

According to Taussig, Benjamin's fascination with mimesis is intertwined with an interest in otherness, primitivism, and the reawakening of the mimetic faculty in modernity, an era in which the inherently reproductive nature of media such as photography and cinema has "ushered in a veritable rebirth, a recharging and retooling of the mimetic faculty" (Taussig 2018, p. xvii). The capability to mime well expresses a desire for fusion and mirroring the Other: imitation is thus not the exclusive domain of the colonising gaze, but a shared practice of encounter. As recalled by Taussig, on 18 December 1832 Charles Darwin describes in the Beagle's logbook what was almost the first contact with the natives of Tierra del Fuego, dwelling on their ability to faithfully imitate the movements of the "civilised". The first encounter between natives and colonists thus sees Fuegians and Englishmen engaged in a game of imitation. It is not, however, the "primitives" who find in imitation the only possible channel of communication: as Taussig notes, in Captain Fitzroy's account, there is a detail omitted by Darwin, namely a member of the Beagle's crew caught in the act of mimic the natives, dancing in an ungainly and funny way. This anecdote stands for

the anthropological complexity of imitation, reflected in Benjamin's theory of mimesis, which, according to Taussig, implies at least two levels of interpretation: firstly, the act of "simple" copying, and secondly, that "the visceral quality of the percept uniting viewer with the viewed" (Taussig 2018, p. 19). In this process, copy and original no longer exist, since it is not easy to tell who is imitating whom: if we follow this track, primitivism could therefore be seen as a form of imitation, an empathic fusion that does not end in colonising appropriation, but in a dialectical encounter with otherness. Montage seems to be a device endowed with this power, precisely because it is constitutively based on a similarity constructed from the proximity between different fragments. In this sense, echoing Benjamin through Taussig, it is precisely technological devices that shape contemporary life, the age of global disruption, to a "mimetic excess"[3]. In mimesis, the opposites meet, the magician and the shaman recognise each other in the atomic scientist, until the completion of a deflagration that culminates in what Taussig calls "mastery of non-mastery": a critical and anarchic awareness of this human *continuum*, "the possibility for mutuality in place of the colonization of nature and ourselves" (Taussig 2020, p. 3).

Similarities and short-circuits generated by contact with the other, informed by the *Atlas* author's interest in anthropology, find evident expression in the lecture on the serpent ritual among the Native American Pueblo, which Aby Warburg gave at the Bellevue Sanatorium in Kreuzlingen on 21 April 1923. Within this framework, I would like to return to certain elements that bring similarity and anachronism into play on the fertile ground of anthropology – elements that, as Taussig has shown, are fundamental to contemporary reinterpretations of the *dispositif* of montage. The serpent ritual triggers in Warburg a chain of analogies with the West, revealing a primitivist desire that functions as an exercise in analogy, an attempt to explore how the primitive might be used in unorthodox, non-conservative ways. The primitive barbarity that seemingly emerges in Pueblo rites is, in reality, anything but unknown to Europe. The serpent materialises in its power as a symbol of magical synthesis in the ecstasy of Greek Maenads and in myth, as well as in the sculptural group of Laocoön, where it represents the

[3] The fear of excess mimicry, ranging from androids to clones and cyborgs, is a defining feature of 20th and 21st century Western culture, being the subject of renowned science fiction adaptations and philosophical considerations. Following the wave of clone-related phobias in the early 2000s (Mitchell 2011), the proliferation of digital replication technologies (Klein 2023), enhanced by artificial intelligence, has given rise to new concerns about duplication and replication (Lee et al. 2023; Floridi 2021).

annihilating force of chthonic power. It is also an attribute of Asclepius, the god of health. However, the serpent symbol has an intrinsic characteristic that distinguishes it from any other anachronism: it possesses an impenetrable core that defies religious doctrine, making it an idolatrous survival. This is evident in the Bible, where the serpent reappears as an attribute of Moses, who seems to have reintroduced the bronze serpent idol to protect the people of Israel from the desert serpents. So is the serpent not the primitive *par excellence*? It is an inescapable symbolism that keeps returning and cannot be extinguished by the rationality of modernity and institutions because it is rooted in the existential structures of humanity itself (Warburg 1995, pp. 49-50). Contemporaneity, however, seems to have replaced the mimetic magic of the "primitives" with a technique capable of definitively anaesthetising the humanity's relationship with the natural elements. The serpent as lightning, symbolising the natives' mythological and ritual relationship with atmospheric forces, is replaced by the power grid cable, a material emblem of humanity's totalising control over those same forces.

Ulrich Raulff's (2011) reading of Warburg's journey among the Hopi, presented in the afterword to the Wagenbach edition of the text, offers a valuable perspective on the subject. The author emphasises Warburg's profound engagement with the anthropological discourses of his era, ranging from his familiarity with E.B. Tylor to his interactions with Franz Boas[4], juxtaposed with his interest in contemporary art, which was then moulding the aesthetics of modernist primitivism. Raulff draws attention to Warburg's association with artists such as Franz Marc, whose work he owned, as well as with German Expressionists such as August Macke, Emil Nolde, and Max Ernst, who themselves were captivated by American imagery. While Warburg did not assign a privileged role to the artist in the creation of symbols, Raulff suggests that the Kreuzlingen lecture, whether intentionally or not, resonates closely with the primitivist currents of modern art.

Among Warburg's interpreters and a refined theorist of resemblance, Georges Didi-Huberman has devoted numerous reflections to the cognitive value of anachronism and the fascination exerted by resemblance, setting out on primitivist paths.

Notoriously, Didi-Huberman has long been concerned with the theme of resemblance (Pinotti 2015), which, particularly in its forms of

[4] The complete correspondence between Aby Warburg and Franz Boas has recently been translated into English (Wedepohl & Penaloza-Patzak 2023).

anachronism and recurrence, runs through the core of his philosophical inquiry. Among his many explorations of this theme, one episode stands out as a striking example of pseudomorphic, primitivist analogy. *Phasmes: Essais sur l'apparition* (1998) opens with the unsettling dissimilarity of phasmids, insects that perfectly mimic the plants they inhabit, prompting a reflection on the paradoxes of likeness and unlikeness, figure and disfiguration, form and formlessness. In the section titled *The Return of a Form* [*Revenance d'une forme*], Didi-Huberman recounts a moment of pseudomorphic recognition: a comparison between a strange figurine from a Neapolitan nativity scene, found at the bustling Epiphany market in Piazza Navona in Rome, and an Etruscan votive offering from the 3rd century BCE.

> The similarities are striking: identical material (rose-coloured clay or terracotta), polychromy, mass production, and above all that amorphous form that, one might say, could not have come from invention or reinvention. The similarities are so striking that, between the votive deposits of twenty-three centuries ago and the figurine market [mercato di figurine] of today, it seems as if it is the same form that has transited, persisted, "returned" before my astonished eyes. But how to consider the same of this form? How to consider the time of this return? To ask oneself this is to invoke, in the history of images, unconscious, destinal, anadyomene processes (i.e. which, from time to time, disappear and resurrect), processes in which après-coups, "missing links" abound and non-knowledge dominates. (Didi-Huberman 1998, p. 41, my translation)

This "demon of analogy" that moves Didi-Huberman toward a universal paradigm of recurring forms here takes a distinctly primitivist tone. A contemporary Catholic figurine is traced back to the archaic body of an Etruscan votive, an embodiment of bodily religiosity and of that mimetic faculty which, for Benjamin, defined archaic human communities. The sudden, anti-positivist force of resemblance operates through pseudomorphism, but not therefore with less meaning. This is an analogy born not of lineage but of juxtaposition: two idols, both in essence "pagan." And it is through the reproduction of their images, placed side by side in the book, that Didi-Huberman visually demonstrates the "family resemblance" of the two forms. As this excursus has demonstrated, it is possible to describe an intellectual trajectory that illustrates the heuristic and primitivist potential of false similarity. What I would now like to attempt is to demonstrate how deeply rooted pseudomorphism is in the politics of primitivism, through some fundamental stages of the US-based historical art debate.

2. *Pseudomorphic primitivism*

Let's start with a provisional definition of primitivism. According to American modernist art historian Robert Goldwater (1907-1973), who offered the first comprehensive analysis of this phenomenon in relation to modernism in his 1938 doctoral thesis, later published in 1968, primitivism can be understood as a psychological, aesthetic and political orientation. In his words:

> We think it is possible to say (without being guilty of any more primitivism of analysis than comes from an adaptation to our subject), that it [primitivism] lies in a common assumption that pervades the works and their apologetics. This is the assumption that externals, whether those of a social or cultural group, of individual psychology, or of the physical world, are intricate and complicated and as such not desirable. It is the assumption that any reaching under the surface, if only it is carried far enough and proceeds according to the proper method, will reveal something "simple" and basic which, because of its very fundamentality and simplicity, will be more emotionally compelling than the superficial variations of the surface; and finally that the qualities of simplicity and basicness are things to be valued in and for themselves: In other words, it is the assumption that the further one goes back – historically, psychologically, or aesthetically – the simpler things become; and that because they are simpler they are more profound, more important, and more valuable. (Goldwater 1986, p. 281)

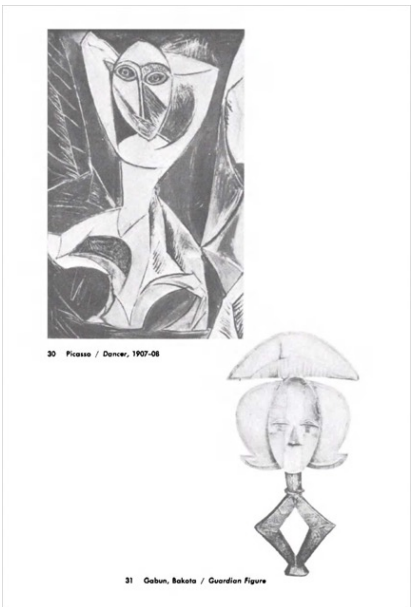

Figure 1 Illustration reproduced from the 1986 edition of *Primitivism in Modern Art* (1938) by Robert Goldwater, p. 149.

The most compelling aspect of Goldwater's thesis lies in his assertion that, although the existence of the "primitive" is a necessary precondition for primitivism, one can never speak of a direct influence of the former upon the latter. However, it is noteworthy that Goldwater himself does not entirely elude the allure of deceptive resemblance: his text includes comparative montages that, despite his theoretical reservations, evoke precisely the kind of analogical associations he seeks to problematise. One of the most explicit comparisons appears in the chapter dedicated to Picasso's primitivism (Fig. 1). Although he acknowledges that the date of the artist's encounter with primitive art is uncertain, Goldwater explicitly draws a visual comparison between *Nude with Raised Arms* (also known as the *Avignon Dancer*) from 1907 and a Bakota figure, illustrating it by a side-by-side image of the two works. Although the author does not use this term, we are dealing with a pseudomorphic arrangement: the formal similarities between the two objects identified by Goldwater are undeniable, yet they do not correspond to their subject or "content", which is hieratic and ritualistic in the case of the Bakota statuette and dynamic and explosive in the case of Picasso's painting. Therefore, the similarity exists, but it cannot be explained by a conscious reference or even a decisive influence. For Goldwater, pseudomorphism is a threat to primitivism, which must be motivated entirely by the sensibility of the modernist artist who can express total novelty without being influenced.

William Rubin, key figure of modernism and curator of the controversial 1984 exhibition *"Primitivism" in 20th Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern* at MoMA, adopts a markedly different position. The show, which is considered a milestone in 20th century exhibition history, was conceived as a fundamentally pseudomorphic dispositive, structured around the visual comparison of "tribal" artefacts and modernist artworks, with the explicit aim of rendering their affinities seemingly self-evident. Commenting on the numerous juxtapositions of objects from disparate historical, artistic, and cultural contexts, and somehow reacting to Goldwater's theses, Rubin writes:

> When such ahistorical juxtapositions are visually convincing, they illustrate affinities rather than influences. Affinities are far from unimportant, however, and in the long run, the multiplicity of them may tell us something more essential about twentieth-century art than do the far rarer instances of direct influence (which might be thought of as confirming the propinquity involved). (Rubin 1984, p. 24)

In the case of primitivism, as with other historical moments that looked to the past such as the Renaissance or Neoclassicism, *influ-*

ence presupposes direct knowledge of the earlier object. It involves explicit citation and the conscious adoption of aesthetic solutions. *Affinity*, by contrast, refers to formal similarities between modern and so-called primitive works that are not the result of direct contact, but of shared conceptual frameworks. These parallels are neither random nor derivative but emerge from analogous mental structures rather than common knowledge. This notion of affinity constitutes the most assertive and contentious claim of Rubin's exhibition. As is well known, the exhibition curated by Rubin became the focus of intense debate, criticised for embodying a colonialist and appropriative ideology through its pseudomorphic structure, that is, the comparison between "tribal" and modern art. From McEvilley (1984) to Clifford ([1985] 2003), and including Danto ([1984] 2006), critics have contested Rubin's visual parallels and their supposed self-evidence, which in fact emerges from a carefully constructed curatorial narrative. In this context, the similarity appears not only false, but also intentionally "fake" (Bois 2015). Among these ferocious critics, anthropologist Sally Price, in her renowned work *Primitive Art in Civilized Places* ([1989] 2009), contested the exhibition's pseudomorphic core, demonstrating that the comparative arrangement of artworks is modelled on commercial logic, which ultimately undermines the "tribal" in favour of the modern counterpart.

3. *Unsettling similarities*

Just one year before Rubin's exhibition opened, feminist art critic Lucy Lippard published *Overlay: Contemporary Art and the Art of Prehistory* (1983), a stratified iconotext that intertwines a dense visual apparatus with critical commentary, and which may itself be read as a pseudomorphic enterprise. Lippard's project is grounded in the identification of striking formal and conceptual similarities between prehistoric megalithic art and postmodern artistic practices of the 1960s and 1970s. The result is a layered constellation of affinities that outlines an alternative primitivism: still pseudomorphic, but not-commodified and politically engaged. To explore the alternative politics of pseudomorphism proposed by Lippard, I turn to one of the key cases she discusses: the work of performer and eco-artist Betsy Damon. Her practice exemplifies what Lippard defines as "feminist primitivism", a concept rooted in cultural feminism and its mythopoeietic dimension, describing the search for an ancestral vocabulary through which feminist artists

attempt to rewrite women's histories and identities. Feminist ritual, in this context, becomes a retrospective gesture that intervenes in both lived experience and its historical representation, offering a form of symbolic healing. Damon's *7,000-Year-Old Woman* (1977), a public art performance conceived as a collective ritual, enacts this logic by allowing the artist's body to become a vessel for an ancestral presence, sparking spontaneous interactions with the audience.

Figure 2 Left: Betsy Damon, 7000 Year Old Woman, New York 1977. Photograph by Su Friedrich. Right: Artemis of Ephesus, Selçuk, Turkey. Photograph by Guillaume Angleraud.

Performed twice – in March at the Cayman Gallery and in May on Prince Street near West Broadway – the work shifts from institutional space to the public realm, underlining its political urgency and relational dimension. Here is the evocation of the 7000-year-old woman by the artist herself, as reported in the issue of the independent magazine "Heresies" devoted to Lesbian art and artists:

> Who is she? I will tell you what I know about her which is very little. She is my sister, mother, my grandmothers, my great grandmothers, friends and lovers. She is my woman line of 7000 years and she is me, the me that I know very little about. She found me in Los Angeles in spring, 1975. I began imagining myself covered with small bags filled with flour. For the next two years I constantly saw the image with one change. She became a clown and I decided to paint my body and face white.

Only after completing the first Sacred Grove, did I identify her as a 7000-year-old woman. While I was more and more in awe of her and did not know very much about her, naming her was the first step towards performing her. What has become clear is that I am a facilitator for her. I have some skills and discipline but she has her own magic. I learn about her through the performances, that is, through her existence. (Damon 1977, p. 11)

As emerges from the artist's impassioned account and from Su Friedrich's shots documenting the performances, it is precisely by drawing a boundary, a sacred enclosure, that the artist constructs a stage permeable to relations with the public. In the liberating exercise of the performance, which actively involves certain figures designated by the "celebrant", Damon alters the timeline, transforming what is witnessed into a kind of anachronism, acting as a "magical operator". Again, in a play of pseudomorphic mirroring, the artist's bodily transformation by means of the flour sacks echoes the goddess Artemis of Ephesus, represented with many breasts encircling her bust, and linked to a Neolithic site in Turkey where the artist had lived as a child (Klein 2009, p. 592). The pseudomorphic comparisons are not limited to the performative fusion, but reach the museological realm. The two performances were in fact re-mediated the following year in the installation *Ancestors*, exhibited on the occasion of *A Lesbian Show*, a pioneering group show curated by Harmony Hammond in the space of 112 Greene Street/Workshop. Here Damon captures the liveliness of the performance by using sculptural mannequins: we see the *7,000-Year-Old Woman* appear again, covered with her little pigmented flour sacks, together with an unseen ritual group, which seems to evoke the anthropological dioramas of Franz Boas[5]. The performance traces become a sort of quotation of the museum display, effectively alluding to the musealisation of the primitive.

Although Damon does not call herself a shaman, her aesthetics seem perfectly to give substance to the political ambition of feminist primitivism to take up the weapon of the "primitive" in order to operate a subversion of the present, through an anachronistic *montage* that creates a fracture through which to glimpse unexpected possibilities. Perhaps it is therefore no coincidence that Michael

[5] I refer to the well-known debate surrounding Boas's 1894 documentation of the Hamat'sa, colonially described as *cannibal dance*, among the Kwakwaka'wakw. Seeking to move beyond the constraints of traditional morphological museum displays (Jacknis 1985), Boas used the diorama to convey the cultural significance of rituals to a wider audience. Notably, he posed for photographs to help the sculptors recreate the correct postures, an example of embodied mimesis which demonstrates how imitation is indeed a way of engaging with cultural alterity (Hinsley & Holm 1976).

Taussig, whom we have already met when reflecting on similarity and mimesis in the encounter with the Other, roots precisely in montage – for us, pseudomorphic similarity – his postcolonial reading of shamanism. In his capital *Shamanism, Colonialism and The Wild Man: A Study in Terror and Healing*, the result of five years of research in southwest Colombia, Taussig writes

> As for the shaman, despite his solidity and caring he is also a strategic zone of vacuity, a palette of imageric possibility. Where he does predominantly swim into focus, however, at least in the eyes of the civilized, is as the alternating, composite, colonially created image of the wild man, bestial and superhuman, devil and god – thus reinforcing the montage technique and in a way its very fount. Just as history creates this fabulous image of the shaman, so the montaged nature of that image allows history to breathe in the spaces pried open between signs and meanings. (Taussig 1987, p. 444)

As these examples suggest, primitivism, whether in its colonialist or feminist articulation, is rooted in the idea of false similarity. Through various forms of montage, primitivist artists create connections across temporal, cultural and epistemological divides. While it is important to avoid reductive dualisms that distinguish between "good" and "bad" primitivisms, the question of their aesthetic and political differentiation remains crucial nonetheless. What, then, distinguishes then the revolution promoted by modernist primitivism from that advocated, especially after 1968, by postmodern and feminist artists? The answer lies in how pseudomorphism operates within each framework. In the former, false resemblance serves to consolidate morphological hierarchies and reinforce the values of modernist formalism. In the latter, resemblance becomes a disruptive force, challenging the very premises of modernist aesthetics and gesturing toward alternative possibilities. This critical horizon is notably opened up by Lippard in her deliberately anachronistic text *Overlay*, where she proposes analogies fundamentally different from those of earlier primitivist discourse. For Lippard, the recourse to "primitive" visual languages reflects artists' desire to dismantle hierarchies – artistic, social, and economic – that structure their relationship to the art world and society at large. This is particularly evident in feminist artists' engagement with the myth of matriarchal prehistory, often enriched by situated cultural references, as in the case of Betsy Damon. Primitivism thus ceases to be merely a style and emerges as a dispositive (Foucault 1977), an arrangement of elements capable of generating new meaning beyond the sum of its parts. In this framework, pseudomorphism not only reveals the modernist and colonial foundations of primitivism, but also creates the conditions for its critical reconfiguration.

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