

To cite this book chapter:

- 4 Z. S. Strother. "The Politics of Face in the African Art Photography of Vladimir Markov." In *Vladimir Markov and Russian Primitivism: A Charter for the Avant-Garde* (by Jeremy Howard, Irēna Bužinska, and Z. S. Strother). Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2015, pp. 85-128.

The Politics of Face in the African Art Photography of Vladimir Markov

Z.S. Strother

If I had a camera ...

Vladimir Markov, writing to the patron of the Union of Youth, 1912

In 1912, as a budding critic, Vladimir Markov recognised that the experience of viewing works of art was changing as dramatically as the practice of art-making itself:¹

Means of communication which destroy space, such as the press and archaeological excavations, give us the chance of collecting together the achievements of all epochs, countries and peoples. The sphere of our observations has become remarkably enlarged and broadened All this leads us, whether we like it or not, to make comparisons and to the desire to compare separate religions of beauty, to establish the characteristics of their development, merits and relative advantages.²

Markov realised that a global heritage of art was developing that could not fail to change how Europeans thought about their own history. An explosion of new collections and publications brought objects from diverse temporal and geographic realms into promiscuous intimacy such that cultivated viewers engaged in a calculus of similarity and difference that would lead them – *like it or not* – to judge the relative merits of each tradition. Markov threw himself into research on diverse world traditions and conceived the goal of writing the first 'serious publication' on African art, *Iskusstvo Negrov*. Fearless about the consequences, he accepted that European art would sometimes appear less developed whatever Europe's achievements in the fields of science and technology.³

Markov's ideas were still iconoclastic 35 years later when André Malraux, the man destined to serve for a decade as France's Minister of Culture, declared

that European works of art must now compete with those from around the globe. Like Markov, Malraux embraced decontextualisation – a ‘wholly new attitude towards the work of art’ initiated by museums when they began to remove works from their settings ‘to a place where the work of art has no longer any function other than that of being a work of art’. Objects drawn from around the world would all be treated the same even though, as he wrote, neither the Gothic statue nor the classical picture had been ‘expected to consort with works of different mood and outlook’. There is an uncanny echo of Markov when he wrote that the ‘practice of pitting works of art against each other’ made everyone into a critic who interacts with the work of art by comparing and contrasting it to other works on the basis of formal traits, thereby privileging style over setting, materiality or cultural content (Malraux 1953, 14–15).

Photography was instrumental in forging a new ‘intellectualisation’ for art, in completing what the museum began (Malraux 1953, 14–21). In particular, Malraux described how photography in the vehicle of the ‘modern art-book’ was bringing into existence a ‘museum without walls’ (*musée imaginaire*), which included ‘archaic arts, Indian, Chinese and Pre-Columbian sculpture, of the best periods, Romanesque frescoes, Negro and “folk” art, a fair quantity of Byzantine art’ (16).⁴

Markov embodies the phenomenon that Malraux was describing. It was the art book format that allowed a Latvian painter based in St Petersburg to bring collections from Western Europe to the Russian avant-garde. Markov realised instantly that he could not write his book without creating an archive of images – the first archive, so far as he knew, of African sculptures selected for their formal qualities. As it turned out, he had a rival. The German critic Carl Einstein also aspired to publish the first treatise on African sculpture. Although Einstein began in late 1913, he was able to publish his book first due to Markov’s untimely death in May 1914. Because of the texts’ simultaneity, Einstein’s *Negerplastik* will serve as a productive point of comparison to *Iskusstvo Negrov* throughout the essay.

Markov took his own photographs, and his technique was remarkable, indeed unique, in the history of African art. *Iskusstvo Negrov* was published with 123 black-and-white photographs illustrating 70 different sculptures. The camera moves in and out, up and down, and offers multiple views, as many as six, for 57 per cent of the objects. By contrast, most of the works in *Negerplastik* were presented full figure from a consistent vantage point, as is the norm today. Only 20 per cent were reproduced with two or more views.⁵ In the beginning, Markov’s camera served as a recording instrument, but it increasingly took on a more robust presence, not just illustrating the author’s cool theorems but also subverting them: 23 per cent of the plates in *Iskusstvo Negrov* are close-ups, another unprecedented statistic for any book on sculpture from this era. With one exception, Markov focuses on the face,



4.1 Vladimir Markov. Luba female figure (detail), 46 cm. Photographed in the British Museum, London, 1913 (Inv. No. Af1910,-.441). From *Iskusstvo Negrov* (1919), pl. 38.

and 16 of his plates are true 'head shots' (Figure 4.1). In Markov's 'museum without walls', the faces of the sculptures testify to the subjectivity of their makers.

The Close-Up in the Art Book

Iřena Buřinska (2002a, 36) has established the following chronology.⁶ Markov met the painter Wassily Kandinsky in Germany in 1912, travelling on a mission for the Union of Youth to prepare the ground for a museum of contemporary art. They appear to have discussed African art because later, when Markov settled in Paris for five months, Kandinsky wrote him a letter, dated 29 July, hypothesising that he would find good material on "Africa" in the libraries there. However, Markov was already in the thick of it. On 26 July, a few days before Kandinsky's letter arrived, Markov dashed off an appeal to Levkiy Zheverzheev, the patron for the Union of Youth, begging for money to buy a camera and extolling the 'marvellous African and Polynesian sculptures' on view in Paris. He tried again in a second letter from July to Zheverzheev, reporting that he and Nikolay Zaretskiy had encouraged Sergey Shchukin to purchase several sculptures for his collection of modern art but: 'What could I do with my 120 roubles? If I had a camera, I could have taken photos of these marvels'.⁷

Markov's passion for the camera comes as a surprise since he had depicted it as the enemy of art only two years earlier. In 'Russian Secession', he accused the art academies at three reprises for demeaning art 'to the level of photography'.⁸ In his early work, he was adamant that photography was only good for making copies, the very antithesis of 'creative work'.⁹

By 1913, Markov had convinced the Union of Youth to give him a camera so that artists in Russia could learn from African art. He threw himself into serious research, travelling across Europe to visit 12 ethnographic museums. Surviving archival negatives show that he worked in museum storerooms under difficult conditions, usually draping a sheet of paper behind the works photographed, and relying on natural light provided by a window (see Figure 10.1).

Why take his own images? The cost of hiring a professional photographer was out of the question. Einstein also struggled but, in a similar situation, turned to the dealer Josef Brummer and various collectors (after failing to interest the Museum für Völkerkunde in Berlin).¹⁰ Markov had met Brummer and a few collectors.¹¹ However, he was unhappy with the images circulating, complaining how few sculptures had been photographed in sufficient 'detail' to permit study of their 'creative principles'.¹²

When Markov was writing there was no established term for a photograph taken at extremely close range. In 1913 the pioneering filmmaker D.W. Griffith hesitated about what to emphasise: 'The large or close-up figures'.¹³

Americans quickly came to settle on 'close-up', a term stressing proximity (Eisenstein 1949, 238). Overwhelmingly, film critics have argued that the experience of closeness facilitates a sense of identification between the viewer and the camera (Doane 2003, 92–3). In contrast, Sergei Eisenstein preferred the Russian term *krupnyi plan*, which highlighted the 'large scale' (or intense magnification) of the subjects on the screen (1949, 237–8).¹⁴ Eisenstein believed that 'incongruities' of scale acted like bold font in print to focus the viewer's concentration on the significance of certain passages. He maintained that American filmmakers were overly wedded to 'representational naturalism' (242) and had not yet discovered the 'particularly astonishing feature' of the close-up 'to create a new quality of the whole from a juxtaposition of the separate parts' (238; Eisenstein's italics). In other words, the 'large-scale' photo was able to change the viewer's understanding of the subject as a whole by generating new and metaphorical meanings through skilful montage (242).

Eisenstein hoped that artful clashes of scale would foil the process of identification between spectators and the camera so that they might become self-aware of their potential to become interpreters in their own right (Doane 2003, 107). Mary Ann Doane situates the power of the close-up in the unresolved ambiguity of its role, 'both microcosm and macrocosm, detail and whole' (ibid., 93). In terms of a film's narrative, it is always a detail or fragment, but in the theatre it is (for a brief passage) whole and complete, all that there is to be seen (108–9).

When photos taken at extremely close range enter the art book, they are conceptualised differently – as 'details' (in English, French, Russian). This was Markov's term. He articulated precisely what information he sought from photographs in his study of the art of Easter Island where he reported that his research had been handicapped by the fact that there were no 'good photographs with precise details [*tochnymi detal'yami*] from which it would have been possible to appreciate questions of technique, facture, modelling, etc.' (Markov 1914b, 33). Markov had a theoretical interest in how works of art called attention to the materiality of their own manufacture (*faktura*) and he sought to put together an archive that would allow specialists to study the working process of various artistic traditions. By using the term 'detail', the art book insists on interpreting the photo taken at close range as a fragment from a larger whole, whose meaning is entirely subordinated to the material work – to the *original*.

Nonetheless, a surprising number of the same issues spill over from the screen onto the pages of the art book. Close-ups appear in a congress of images where juxtapositions make arguments about formal and historical relationships. Books often present several images simultaneously and create the possibility for cinematic-style montage in the turning of the pages. Furthermore, although photographs never attain the grandiose scale of the projected image, the experience of perusing a book enacts a drama of

proximity and identification. In intimate spaces, readers hold the book near and may raise compelling images even closer to the eyes. Close-ups have the power to make one stop and linger over certain images, even to trace them with one's fingers. The art book permits everyone to become the owner of the image.

The close-up prods the reader to ponder the significance of what is represented: 'Look at this! It's important!' As in film, its autonomy is cause for anxiety (Gaborit 1993, 27–8). In fact, problems of scale are particularly fraught in art books because of the haunting presence of an 'original'. Some books cite dimensions in discrete labels. Scientific publications have tried to calibrate the size of the reproduction to the size of the object (Figure 4.2). Nothing ever satisfies.

The montage of images in art books is essential; yet, we do not know who was responsible for the final selection of photos or the layout for either *Iskusstvo Negrov* or *Negerplastik*. Markov's opening sentence claims ownership of the photos, the pride of which suggests that he may have readied them for publication before his death, as does the fact that he discusses a number of the illustrated images in the text. However, Levkiy Zheverzhev states clearly that Varvara Bubnova, Markov's close colleague and companion, had 'sorted out, given order' to the surviving manuscript.¹⁵ Bubnova travelled with Markov in 1913, assisting his photography, and was therefore unusually knowledgeable about his intentions. The actual layout was likely her work or that of the designer Nathan Altman.

As remarked, *Iskusstvo Negrov* offers an unprecedented number of multiple views and the book's layout experiments with a range of techniques for integrating them. In total, 40 objects (or 57 per cent) were presented from different vantage points: 22 (from 2 angles); nine (3); two (4); six objects (5); and one (6). Many series were organised by moving from whole and distant shots to close-ups (Markov 1919, pls. 34–8, 40–44). However, there are variations, including the 'lean-out' (moving from close-up to distant view (pl. 18–20) and the classic cinematic montage of long/medium/close-up (pls. 29–33). Reflecting the diversity of Markov's photographs, the juxtapositions of different views may elicit quiet identification with the cold eye of the camera – or recoil from the 'monstrous incongruities' advocated by Eisenstein (Figure 4.3).

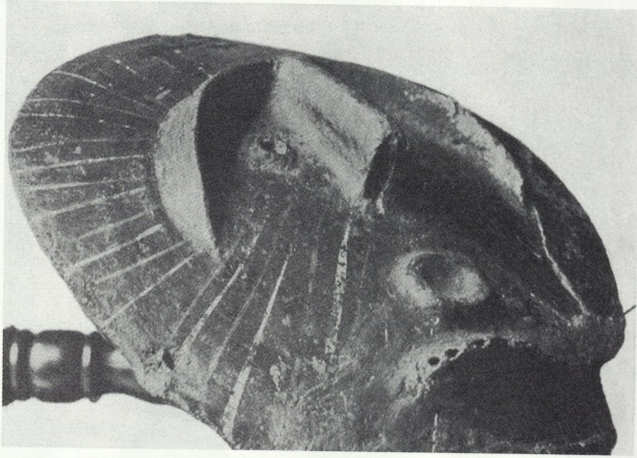
Both styles of juxtaposition have become familiar. In the 2010s, photographs of sculpture deploy cinematic techniques to circle around life-size statues; to move in and out in distance and up and down in vantage point; to crescendo with dramatic close-ups of views otherwise invisible to spectators.¹⁶ Such dynamic models had never been tried for African sculpture before *Iskusstvo Negrov*. The proto-cinematic quality is what makes it so satisfying to assemble the images in montages (Paudrat 1976, 28; 1984, 150) (Figure 4.4).



FÉTICHES
(FIGURES)
Réd. au 1/4
Sauf le N° 526 réd. au 1/5.

Établ. Jean Mitré et sc.

4.2 Unidentified photographers. *Notes analytiques sur les Collections ethnographiques*, Annales du Musée du Congo, Tervuren, Belgium (1906), pl. 40. The exact size was calibrated from one figure to the next, according to the legend on the bottom of the page, inviting scientific appraisal of identity and difference. Markov (or Bubnova) reproduced a number of images from this source, including figures 526–527, in *Iskusstvo Negrov* (1919), pl. 92.



4.3 Vladimir Markov. Asante terracotta grave sculpture, 18 cm, Okwao village, Ghana.
Photographed in the Museum für Völkerkunde zu Leipzig, 1913 (Inv. No. MAf 1773).
From *Iskusstvo Negrov* (1919), pls. 120 and 121.



4.4 Montage of photographs, by Vladimir Markov, of a figure from a reliquary ensemble, 62 cm, Fang peoples, Gabon. Photographed in the Musée d'Ethnographie du Trocadéro, Paris, 1913 (Musée Quai Branly No. 71.1898.1.1). From *Iskusstvo Negrov* (1919), pls. 62–7.

Given Markov's interest in structure, materials and working processes, it is perplexing that the 'details' he composed overwhelmingly focused on the face. Out of a total of 28, there are 16 headshots and 11 bust shots (Figure 4.5). In addition, there are six photos depicting four cups, which take the form of a human head (see Figure 4.20). Other photos taken at extremely close range at eye level produce the same effect of intensifying the viewer's engagement with the face of the object.



4.5 Vladimir Markov. Female figure attributed to northeast Democratic Republic of the Congo. Photographed in the Musée d'Ethnographie du Trocadéro, Paris, 1913. From *Iskusstvo Negrov* (1919), pl. 69. Current location unknown.

The significance of Markov's corpus should not be overlooked. There are few close-ups of faces in the history of the photography of African sculpture (apart from masks). In one of the earliest studies devoted to art-making in Africa, Paul Germann claimed that the human face was of little interest to carvers (Germann 1911, 19). The photographer Jerry Thompson justified the small number of faces in his own portfolio out of a quest for authenticity: 'Looking at the face of an African figure apart from the rest of it is probably not very African' (Thompson and Vogel 1990, 63).¹⁷

Whence derives the notion that faces are not important to African viewers? In Congo-Kinshasa, I was able to document a complex theory of physiognomy marshalled to interpret the faces of both people and works of art among the Pende (Strother 1998, ch. 5). Furthermore, the attribution of a schematic face is all that is necessary to transform a tree branch (*mutshi*) into a sculpture (*kisongo*). In many Congolese societies, prayers were once directed to the face of anthropomorphic carvings (which served as altars) during rituals addressing deceased forebears. The Yoruba describe the altar as a 'face' towards which one directs one's prayers and sacrificial offerings.

Some explanation for the modernist erasure of faces from African sculpture can be found in the literature on cinema, where the face is interpreted as an 'attribute' of the free subject in a market economy (Doane 2003, 93–4; Aumont 1992, 60). For Béla Balázs, the close-up is synonymous with the face in film because it conjures what cannot be seen, the 'invisible face' or subjectivity of the bourgeois individual (in Aumont 1992, 85–6). Theorists build on the work of Deleuze and Guattari, who argued that 'the face is a politics' produced by certain 'assemblages of power that require that social production' (1987, 181).

Deleuze and Guattari were right to query who can claim a face in asymmetrical power relationships even though they personally descend into the worst kind of modernist primitivism, claiming that 'there is very little that operates through the face' in 'primitive societies' which rely on the body and its cavities for 'nonsignifying, nonsubjective, essentially collective, polyvocal, and corporeal' expression (1987, 175). To be modern is to have face, the privileged site of individualisation, and Deleuze and Guattari push on to assert that the face belongs to the 'White Man himself': "'Primitives" may have the most human of heads, the most beautiful and most spiritual, but they have no face and need none' (176). Instead, the writers attribute masks to so-called primitive peoples, which depersonalise the face and 'ensure the head's belonging to the body, rather than making it a face' (176–7).

If we turn Deleuze and Guattari against themselves, we can observe how they have hijacked the face to secure a modern, individualised, signifying and racialised identity. Blocking the faces of others serves a politics of censorship and silence. Deleuze and Guattari's pronouncements have their roots in early modernism. Carl Einstein praised Africans for their 'self-objectifying' capacity, especially in masquerades where (he imagined) 'all individuality is

annihilated' (2004 [1915], 193). While his book includes an unusual number of portraits of figures, he is far more interested in masks (22 per cent of the total). The contrast of body and face, of primal and modern subjectivity, from Einstein to Deleuze and Guattari, renders ever more singular Markov's mission to reveal the faces of African sculpture.

On the Subject of Politics: Editing Frobenius

'Africa is a land rich in art'. Thus opens the first book on African sculpture. Contrast Markov's fresh and exuberant tone to one of his sources – 'Africa is a land primarily of dark-skinned peoples' (Foy 1910, 178) – or to his rival, Einstein: 'There is scarcely any art that the European approaches as warily as that of Africa' (2004, 124). Although Einstein rails against prejudice, it is far easier for a reader to identify with Africans in Markov's text. Unexpectedly, it has proved important to recover Markov's status as a Latvian in the Russian empire – whose national identity was shaped by successive waves of German, Swedish and Russian colonisation – to appreciate the distinctive tenor of his response to African sculpture.

Markov began writing during a period of cultural 'awakening'. The goal of the first generation of nationalists was to instil a sense of pride in Latvian cultural history, which they wished to use as a springboard to develop a Latvian dialect of modernism. Certain intellectuals even tried to resuscitate Latvian religion, which had been polytheistic. At this period, Markov courted a good Latvian girl and wrote to her that '[I want] to return to the old days of Latvia, when all Latvians were pagans' (Bužinska 2002c, 133). In his letter, Markov engages in a poignant gesture of self-primitivism as he expressed his perceived loss of authenticity. Marriage seemed the best short cut to solidifying his cultural identity. Not unlike many European-educated Africans at this period, Markov conceptualised his recovery of identity as a voyage back in time, both pre-modern and pre-Christian.

During the 1910s, Latvian nationalism was more a social than a political platform, directed against the Germans as a 'foreign' elite rather than the Russian state (Kappeler 2001, 215, 291–2). Germans founded the port of Riga on the Baltic Sea c. 1200 in order to gain overland access to lucrative Russian markets. Over the centuries, colonising power shifted hands several times, but German landowners remained in control on a local level until the mid-nineteenth century, when the Russians freed the serfs (and allowed Latvians to live freely in Riga for the first time). Because of this long history of domination, the 1897 census listed 95 per cent of Latvians as peasants, with virtually no aristocratic classes (Kappeler 2001, 402). However, they were also predominantly Lutheran in 1897 and enjoyed the second or third highest literacy rates in the Russian empire: over 92 per cent by 1900

(Kappeler 2001, 310, 407). Once the serfs were emancipated, they flocked to the cities and Latvia quickly attained one of the highest rates of urbanisation and industrialisation in the empire (287, 307). Nevertheless, Baltic Germans blocked their access to higher education and the professions until 1900 (316). Some 700 years of oppression weigh heavily even today when one may hear Latvians remark bitterly: 'To be Latvian was to be a German serf' or 'Christian history is German history. *Our* history is pagan history'.

In short, Markov was writing from the position of a colonised subject. He was raised speaking German as his first language and experienced a sense of bereavement over the denigration of Latvian language, religion and culture. In St Petersburg, Voldemārs Matvejs renamed himself 'Vladimir Markov'. He wrote in Russian to further his career. Although he was jilted by the good Latvian girl and embraced the scintillating artistic life of St Petersburg, he remained sensitive to cultural imperialism. In *Iskusstvo Negrov*, he rejects a suggestion that European art teachers should be sent to Africa, writing that it would be worse than the missionaries' iconoclasm because they would 'poison national talents, the intuitive innermost recesses of the heart, the mind and the language'.¹⁸ Only someone who has suffered loss himself could write with such tender intuition.

It is this empathy that inspires Markov's novel approach. He decided that he could not launch into analysis of African 'creative work' without first changing his readers' preconceptions about Africans themselves and their creative potential. He judged this duty important enough to postpone most of his 'artistic appreciation' for a future book.¹⁹ Because art-making was intellectual for Markov (Paudrat 1976, 26), he had to convince his readers that Africans could *think*. To accomplish this, he opens *Iskusstvo Negrov* with a long synthesis of field reports by Leo Frobenius, believing that it was imperative for Russian-speaking artists to have access to cutting-edge research. For scholars today, Frobenius is a mixed bag, to say the least.²⁰ However, his publication in 1910–13 of Nigerian antiquities demonstrably different in style and medium from contemporary art proved for Markov in one fell swoop that Africans had a history (*and a history of art*) like anyone else. In particular, Frobenius' book, *The Voice of Africa*, looms large in *Iskusstvo Negrov*.²¹ Although he consulted other sources, Markov closely paraphrased or quoted large sections from *The Voice of Africa*, from which he also drew eight of his nine sketches and plans.²²

Given the progressive uses Markov made of *The Voice of Africa*, it can come as quite a shock to read the original. Frobenius had the will to champion Africa, to the point of proclaiming: 'I am an African' (1913, 349). However, he devoted six substantial chapters to defending himself against allegations of unlawful plundering of antiquities which had reached the European press (139, 654). To Frobenius' fury, the Yoruba were able to reclaim in court many works of art that he had purchased or excavated at Ilé-Ifè.

Tafel: Archäologische Funde VI.



Der Terrakottakopf „Mia“
ausgegraben in Ife von der D. Z. A. F. E. 1910
(Nach Angaben von Carl Ariens photographiert von S. Voll.)

Bilddruck von Albert Frisch, Berlin W.

4.6 Heliogravure illustration of the terracotta head called 'Mia' excavated at Ilé-Ifé in 1910. From Leo Frobenius, *Und Afrika Sprach* (1912–13), vol. 1, after p. 342. Markov (or Bubnova) made a sketch to illustrate 'Mia' in *Iskusstvo Negrov* (see Figure 9.7).

The Yoruba bested Frobenius, and he took his revenge as an author by depicting them as liars, perjurers, thieves and murderers (1913, 106). Literally! Although he liked to present himself as an advocate for Africa, Frobenius always wrote as a *Herrenmensch*, a man 'destined to rule' by right of his European birth (Fabian 1992, 60).

Given the poison that Frobenius spews against the Yoruba, it is galling to admit that, from the perspective of contemporary scholarship, the chapters that he composed on Yoruba religion are full of insights, probably the best that he ever wrote. Despite himself, Frobenius fell in love with contemporary Yoruba culture, and wrote in raptures about their educational philosophy and statecraft (1913, 319–20). Most of all, he fell in love with their religion, which recalled the Roman pantheon (320–26). The parallels with antiquity were enhanced when he began to unearth nearly life-size heads in terracotta and brass quite different in style from contemporary Yoruba art. He wrote that in the 'holy city' of Ilé-Ifé he had discovered 'genuine art' (89, 320). He celebrated

the terracotta head named 'Mia' as the 'finest work of art so far discovered outside the narrow Nile valley' (313) (Figure 4.6). Unlike Matisse, Picasso or Markov, Frobenius' bourgeois education led him to value naturalism in the classical tradition as the epitome of art. All of it recalled Rome or, as he came to argue, their common ancestor: the Etruscans.

For Frobenius, the Yoruba were fundamentally 'un-African' (1913, 319) and yet 'essentially African' (322). He resolved his frustration as a spurned lover by seizing authorship of their heritage. On the basis of a series of feeble formal analogies, he argued that the Yoruba preserved the last remnants of sea-faring Etruscan civilisation (327–42, 348). In other words, what he admired in the Yoruba were purported cultural relics from ancient Mediterranean civilisation. He wrote that when the priest of Olokun brought out a 'head of marvellous beauty, wonderfully cast in antique bronze, true to the life, incrustated with a patina of glorious dark, green', the crowd fell silent. He continues, casting an eye over the crowd: 'I was moved to silent melancholy at the thought that this assembly of degenerate and feeble-minded posterity should be the legitimate guardians of so much classic loveliness' (98). Needless to say, Frobenius was ready to step forward to take on the responsibility of guardianship over the antique head. Whatever African accomplishment Frobenius admires is always subject to degeneracy in the modern day (32, 98, 318, 324).

It is fascinating how Markov edits Frobenius. He reports Frobenius' argument about Etruscan origins for the Nigerian antiquities, recommending scepticism.²³ Nonetheless, he accepts as proven that Africa has a long, complex history shaped in part by interactions with other parts of the world, including the Mediterranean, Byzantium and Asia.²⁴ Frobenius' quest to identify foreign influences reinforced his own mission to isolate an 'essential' corpus of African art. He agrees with Frobenius that naturalism is fundamentally un-African.²⁵ After all, he was seeking to escape the illusionism forwarded by the Russian art academies. Markov even rejects masks as foreign imports from shamans in Northern Asia.²⁶ He only reproduced four, of which two were chosen to propose cultural exchange with Malaysia (Markov 1919, pls. 93–4).²⁷

On the other hand, Markov absolutely rejects the 'degeneracy' hypothesis and the violence of the colonial project. Somehow he remains inoculated from Frobenius' toxic cultural suprematism. He wrote in the present tense, 'Africa is a land rich in art', and commends Africans for preserving their unique vision despite four centuries of exposure to European realism.²⁸

Markov profited from Frobenius' research to depict 'Africa' as Yoruba – urban, sophisticated, rich in history and wilily resistant to colonisation.²⁹ Markov needed the Yoruba to humanise and intellectualise Africa, even though he was profoundly uninterested in their art, past or present.³⁰ Although he acknowledges diversity, his primary model for African religion is Yoruba polytheism, which he describes as having a 'plethora of gods' organised in a

'harmonious system, united around one god'. Yoruba religion would have seemed familiar, since Latvians once honoured 37 gods, both male and female, with lively biographies. As a Latvian, Markov was angered to learn that one religion should destroy another and the arts associated with it in the modern period.

Nowhere are Markov's politics clearer than in his editing of *The Voice of Africa*. He cherry picks sonorous adjectives from Frobenius, which resound throughout the text: Africa has 'majesty', 'charm', 'mystery', 'magnificent ceremonies'. Africa has cities, monuments, architecture, burial mounds, antiquities in stone and bronze. Markov takes care to make these revelations concrete by providing sketches drawn from photographs and statistics where available (population figures, dimensions). Hear the excitement: 'It turns out that there is a rich, powerful, and fabulous past'.³¹

Most extraordinary of all, Markov provides two exemplars of African voices from texts that he extracted from *The Voice of Africa* and rewrote to improve their poetry. He cited the oral histories to demonstrate that African 'memory is remarkable' and, by extension, that such 'firmness of tradition is also to be found in plastic creativity'.³²

Everlyn Nicodemus once defined primitivism as the 'creative power of the black man inoculated into the white man' (1993, 33). Similarly, Simon Gikandi has argued that Picasso proved such an influential model because of his success at separating African art from Africa: 'The fact that Picasso had an intimate relationship with African objects is not in doubt; but there is little evidence of an interest in Africans as human beings and producers of culture' (Gikandi 2006, 33). Perhaps the slide of *Iskusstvo Negrov* into oblivion proves their point. Markov was a bookish individual, and we do not know whether or not he ever actually met someone from Africa (perhaps in Paris?); but his double-pronged strategy of rendering Africans less exotic as people even as he sought to establish the parameters of their 'unique' tradition was strikingly different from Einstein or any other early writer on African art.

In some ways, the academy only caught up with Markov in the 1960s thanks to the transformative experiences of African independence and the US Civil Rights movement. Scholars fought to legitimate the presence of African art in sometimes hostile American art history departments in the 1970s and 1980s by emphasising cities, states, monuments, antiquities and architecture. They also strove to incorporate African voices (Thompson 1971, 1981). Readers have learned from this literature to distance themselves from the homogenous 'Negro' that Markov invokes. Ironically, it is the adoption by later scholarship of his methods that makes Markov's lengthy prologue seem fusty and out of date.

Through his analysis of African sculpture, Markov represents Africans as 'inventive' and 'independent' thinkers.³³ Given the images of African brutality circulating in European newspapers, he believed that his arguments about the

complexity of African art would not be credible without first documenting their 'rich, powerful, and fabulous past'.³⁴

Theory in Play³⁵

Fortified by Frobenius, Markov was ready to launch a daring interpretation of African art as play. Nina Gurianova has highlighted the importance of card games in the imagery of Russian artists and writers before the Revolution (2012, 87–111). Explaining that the Russian word *igra* signifies both 'play' and 'game', she argues that artists wished to infuse a playful quality into their work – to '[make] art as if it were a game' – experiencing 'joy' in the surprises and unpredictability of the result (92). And yet, games and play are not identical. A game requires rules and usually stages a drama of winning or losing. A game usually comes to an end.

Markov refers to 'play' on eight separate occasions in *Iskusstvo Negrov*, and the concept is crucial to his interpretation of African art. However, Markov begins with Kant and shares the philosopher's disdain for 'games of chance', which 'require' self-interest – 'whether it be of vanity or of selfishness' (Kant 2000, 208). Kant argued that art could only be produced through 'freedom, i.e., through a capacity for choice that grounds its actions in reason' (182). He further qualified art-making as a form of play, opposed to dictates of labour or law (183–4, 151). Whereas 'nature grounds its lawfulness' on the cognitive faculties, art is created towards the ends of pleasure (45). The interrelationship of imagination and cognitive reasoning is described repeatedly as one of 'free play' (103).

Markov accepts Kant's model that art-making was 'playful' in being non-functional, open-ended and subject to pleasure, explaining: 'Play forces us to forget about the strict utilitarian purpose of things'. Let fish scales serve as flower petals. Markov insists on the artist's 'right to play with all the worlds that are accessible to him ... And he has the right to play with them as freely as a child plays with pebbles, mixing them up and distributing them over the ground'.³⁶ It is this quality that Markov wishes to emphasise in African art – the freedom to substitute a shell for an eye or to redefine the proportions of the body. Markov frames naturalism as a form of functionalism, where the artist is inhibited by his knowledge of nature's laws. Markov's 'play' is also open-ended, the implications of which were outlined by Shevchenko, who wrote that the new artists sought to remain 'young forever' by refusing to live according to a theory or a 'recipe'. To be 'defined' was to accept 'stagnation' and 'death' (Shevchenko 1913b, 47).

Kant never associated play with children, and this marks a major point of divergence for Markov,³⁷ who invokes an idealised model of children's play where there are no rules, or where one makes up one's own.³⁸ The joy

in question results precisely from escaping all rules: 'How good it is to be wild and primitive, to feel like a naïve child who rejoices equally at precious pearls and shining pebbles'.³⁹ The so-called primitive and the child share a capacity for pleasure, which is related to the ability to create in disregard for established hierarchies of value, whether material, moral or social. In his essay *Faktura*, Markov strove to reawaken a child's wonder in the creative potential of every possible material, including human hair and butterfly wings.

Markov's notion of play was also informed by a diffused psychoanalysis. Most importantly, he saw play as the vehicle for unleashing the artist's individuality: 'We express our "I" more vividly and unconstrainedly when we play'.⁴⁰ In its safe cocoon, the player relaxes and allows unconscious instincts to emerge, which are central to defining the personalities of both individual and national arts.

Kant believed both artist and viewer participated in 'free play' of imagination and understanding.⁴¹ By invoking 'play', Markov hoped to relax the viewers of his photographs and to make them receptive to perceiving alternative systems of representation as something other than 'deformations' (the most common descriptive term used at this period) or, worse, sadistic assaults on the human body with knife or axe. The associations of 'play' could not be more different from the 'very savage, brutal, and violent law' invoked by seemingly sympathetic critics such as André Warnod to explain the arresting beauty of a Fang head.⁴²

Nonetheless, there were dangers in evoking play, even in connection with European artists.⁴³ Markov ends 'Principles' by placing limits on his metaphor, warning that 'free creativity' is 'neither a game nor mischief-making'. Although he equates children and 'primitives' in his early texts, he is at pains to undo this relationship in his mature studies on the art of Easter Island and Africa. In fact, he only refers to children once in *Iskusstvo Negrov* – in order to dismiss their relevance. He states in his conclusion that the 'most cursory review of the photographs' should convince us that 'Negro art is *not some childish babble* but a serious, independent art with its strict laws and traditions'.⁴⁴ The abrupt appeal to 'laws' feels like a contradiction. After all, Markov had proclaimed in his manifesto: 'In nature everything is subordinate to laws. But in art everything should be permitted'.⁴⁵ Nonetheless, I do not believe that he was here falling back into the reactionary position of imagining that Africans were automatons of tradition. Instead, he was caught in a bind. He realised that the appeal to childhood, so liberating for the *European* artist, held the danger of undervaluing the intellectual prowess of the *African* sculptor. The single most widespread description of Africans in the colonial literature was that they were children requiring benevolent oversight and discipline from Europe (e.g. Frobenius 1913, 130). How could Markov invoke 'play' and yet emphasise Africans as 'a profoundly thoughtful people'?⁴⁶

Play of Masses⁴⁷

It is the model of architecture that permits Markov to wrest play away from children. Le Corbusier will argue that architecture 'appeals to the highest of the faculties' because it is able to abstract from and reinterpret brute materiality (2007 [1924], 101–2). Markov draws on these associations, applying the vocabulary of architectural theory – 'mass' and 'weightiness' – to argue for a philosophical, non-representational model of African sculpture. He came to believe that African art was 'essentially about thinking and playing with masses'.⁴⁸ As he explained:

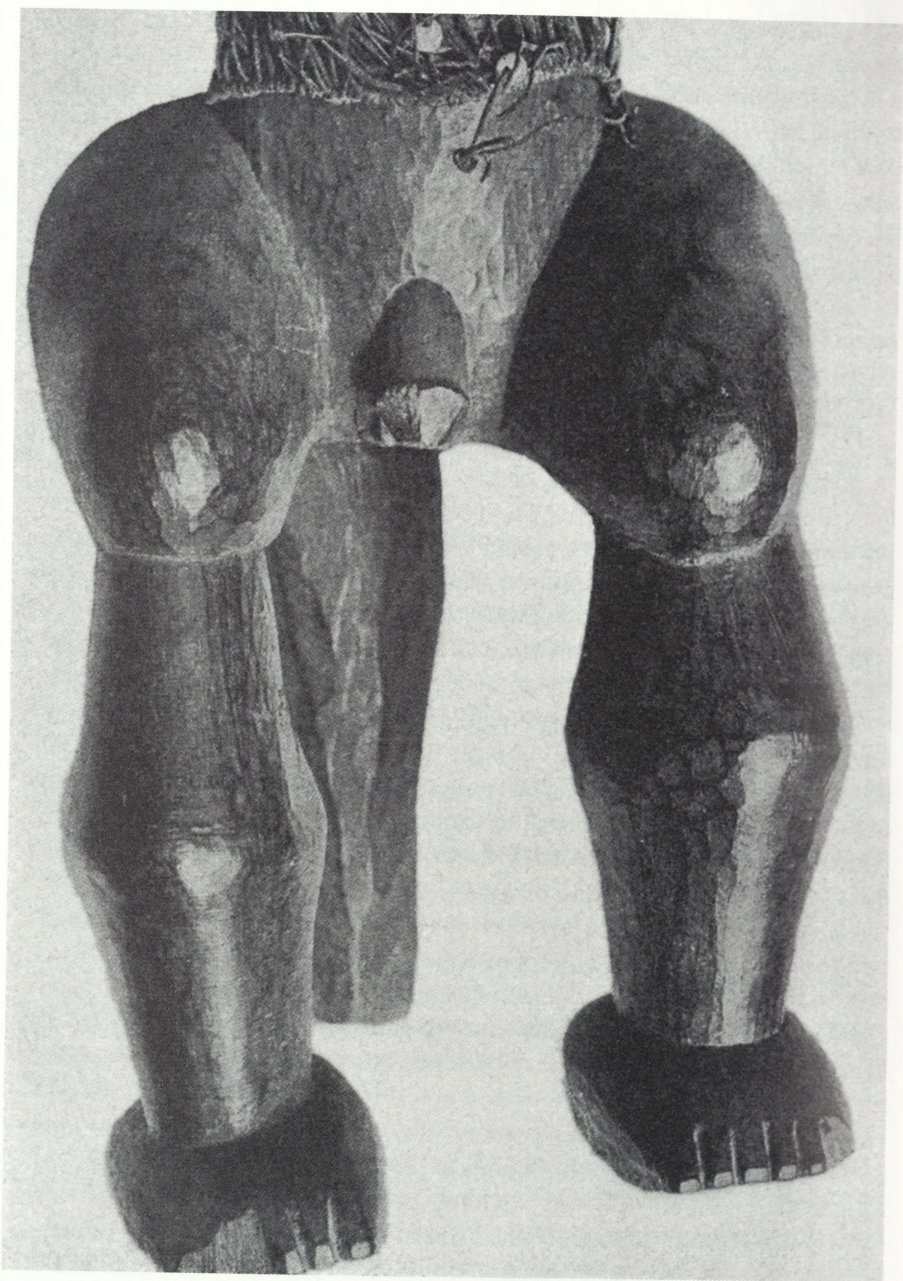
There is a sense of architectural construction and that of the linkage between parts is purely mechanical [E]very mass preserves its autonomy. We do not find echoes of organic life, organic connections or directed muscles and bones in these masses.

He went on to explain that the masses were 'elemental', often geometricising in form, and that the artist could vary their relationships in order to build up 'impressive weight' in small sculptures.

Markov's photographs were intended to allow the viewer to perceive these revelations. For example, in one of the close-ups of a Fang reliquary figure, the viewer's eye is directed to the hinges of the body – i.e. the artist's emphasis on the 'mechanical' relationship of masses, between hip and torso, knee and calf, leg and foot (see Figure 4.4). Although recognisable as a leg, the artist has treated each sub-division as an autonomous element. The photographer has pulled aside the figure's beaded wrapper to unveil the penis, pictured as a cylinder finished by a four-sided pyramid (Figure 4.7).

Markov underscores the abstraction employed by this system through reference to the ultimate non-representational system: music. 'The Negro artist's play of weights and masses is truly diverse, infinitely rich with ideas and, like music, self-sufficient'.⁴⁹ Organised according to rhythm or harmony, the masses create their own compositions, which are complete unto themselves.⁵⁰

By invoking architecture, Markov was laying the groundwork for an interpretation of African sculpture as construction (rather than as representation or as presence). Architecture was a favourite metaphor for other artists, including Matisse, who liked to tell his students that the human body was like 'a building for which all the different parts play their role in the whole; if one of the elements is not in its place, everything collapses' (Laude 2006, 176). Laude hypothesises that Matisse admired African sculpture for the 'stability' of its 'architecture ... [which] is not threatened in the least despite the use of radical deformations' (ibid.). Markov emphasised the phenomenological experience of 'weightiness' over equilibrium, but shared



4.7 Vladimir Markov. Figure from a reliquary ensemble, Fang peoples, Gabon (detail). Photographed in the Musée d'Ethnographie du Trocadéro, Paris, 1913 (Musée du Quai Branly No. 71.1898.1.1). From *Iskusstvo Negrov* (1919), pl. 65.

Matisse's vision that a work of sculpture should be freed from the laws of nature (Laude 2006, 185).

The third non-representational system that Markov evokes is language itself, i.e. 'plastic language'. Yve-Alain Bois (1987, 47–52) situates this discussion in a proto-semiotic interest in Russian modernist circles on the unmotivated relationships among linguistic elements. First, Markov analyses how the masses of the body are 'combined arbitrarily' in African figural sculpture. Bois likens this to linguistic *syntax*, which is "'arbitrary" in that it no longer relies on anatomical knowledge' (Bois 1987, 47). Second, Markov admires the 'inventiveness' of 'plastic symbols' in African sculpture, to which he intends to dedicate a future study. He gives the example of how a shell can substitute for the eye: 'Nowhere are there any real forms. The forms are completely arbitrary' (Figure 4.8).⁵¹ In this case, the morphological 'vocabulary is arbitrary and, in consequence, extends to infinity because the sculptural elements no longer have need of any direct resemblance to their referent' (Bois 1987, 47). However, Markov does not stop with form. He also comments on the diversity of materials in classical African sculpture, with the consequence that a shell or a nail may also communicate the 'shine, and life of the eye'. Bois builds on Eisenstein's model of montage to argue that 'naked juxtaposition' of materials generates new meanings for Markov through 'metaphoric displacements' (Eisenstein 1995, 245–6; Bois 1987, 47). If the cowry can depict an eye, navel or mouth, it may also suggest that the eye is a kind of mouth or navel (Bois 1987, 47). Linguistic analogies enable Markov to formulate his most compelling argument for the intellectualism of African art. Conversant in a 'plastic language', Africans 'stagger us' with their 'talent and inventiveness'.

Markov avoids all models of mimetic representation to analyse African sculpture as architecture, as music, as language. The degree to which he eschews models of sculptural presence is equally striking. When Johann Gottfried Herder published his treatise on sculpture in Riga (Markov's home town) in 1778, he argued that we project life onto this three-dimensional medium through vision schooled by years of tactile experience: 'Sculpture creates in depth. It creates one living thing, an animate work that stands there and endures' (Herder 2002, 44). Only the development of a concept of 'art' can rescue this phenomenological experience from idolatry: 'A sculpture before which I kneel can embrace me, it can become my friend and companion: it is *present*, it is *there*' (45). Herder believed that children and 'savages' were particularly sensitive to animating sculptures in the quiet of twilight (91–2).

Although his methodology is different, Einstein is not so far from Herder in imagining how people might animate sculpture. In *Negerplastik*, he fantasises that the African 'beholder often worships the images in darkness, and in prayer he is wholly devoted to and consumed by the god' (2004 [1915], 130). Whereas Herder focused on the spectator's experience, Einstein gave priority to the artist who created his work 'in dread of the god' (Einstein 2004, 129). Einstein wed an anachronistic model of the fetish, with its emphasis



4.8 Vladimir Markov. Figure from a reliquary ensemble, Fang peoples, Gabon (detail). Photographed in the Musée d'Ethnographie du Trocadéro, Paris, 1913 (Musée du Quai Branly No. 71.1898.1.1). From *Iskusstvo Negrov* (1919), pl. 63.

on the over-valuation of things, to the burgeoning literature on the psychology of totemism. He wrote that the African sculpture 'signifies nothing, it does not symbolize; it is the god, who preserves his hermetic mythic reality into which he draws the worshiper, transforming him, too, into a mythic being and dissolving his human existence' (130–31).⁵² The 'annihilation' of the beholder's personality through worship leads to spiritual metamorphosis.

Markov's insistence on materiality could not be more different. When Markov quotes Yakov Tugendkhol'd, he is really justifying his own views: 'I asked [Picasso] if he was interested in the mystical aspect of these sculptures. He replied "Not at all. What interests me is their geometric simplicity."' One might even argue that Markov's emphasis on the Africans' 'play of masses and weights' was a secularisation of anthropomorphic presence, looking to phenomenological experience to explain the sensation of 'weightiness'⁵³ without recourse to animating spirit. Instead, the 'play of masses' simulates the abstract pleasure of music.

It is interesting to observe at this point that although Markov uses the term 'idol', it signifies no more in his text than a carving loosely associated with religious practices.⁵⁴ Whereas worship was central to Einstein's interpretation, Markov rarely mentions it, and then always in relation to gods rather than objects.⁵⁵ He attributes neither comfort nor 'dread' to the work of art.

In the Storerooms, Higgledy-Piggledy⁵⁶

I have ignored many of the realistic sculptures ...

It is vital to remember that there was no established canon for 'African art' when Markov entered chaotic museum storerooms in 1913. He states that he purposely 'ignored many of the realistic sculptures', including the 'rich bronze work' of Benin, which had already been reproduced in 'lavish editions' (e.g. Marquart 1913). In fact, he omits bronze work altogether from his photographs, as well as ivory and stone, acting on his principle not to be swayed by conventional regimes of value, whether economic or aesthetic. In his selection he was drawn to works that seemed to defy the rules of 'proportions, anatomy, modelling and movement' as taught by the art schools.

Because of his emphasis on the non-functionality of play, Markov avoids weapons, bowstands, musical instruments, jewellery, textiles and most ceramics and masks (although all of these were illustrated in museum guidebooks). When he did depict undeniably 'functional' objects, he frequently cropped them to disguise their role. As diminutive objects shot at extremely close range at the eye level of the viewer, few will recognise a pipe bowl (Figure 4.9) or a head-rest (Figure 4.10). The closeness heightens a sense of intimacy, but also serves as a tool of estrangement, directing the viewer to look only where directed.

Ultimately, however, Markov emphasises the freedom of 'arbitrary' combinations of forms, a non-mimetic mode of representation, where the



4.9 Vladimir Markov. Ceramic pipe bowl, Cameroon grassfields, 24 cm. Photographed in the Royal Ethnographic Museum, Leiden, 1913 (Rijksmuseum Volkenkunde, Leiden No. 1393-31). From *Iskusstvo Negrov* (1919), pl. 113.



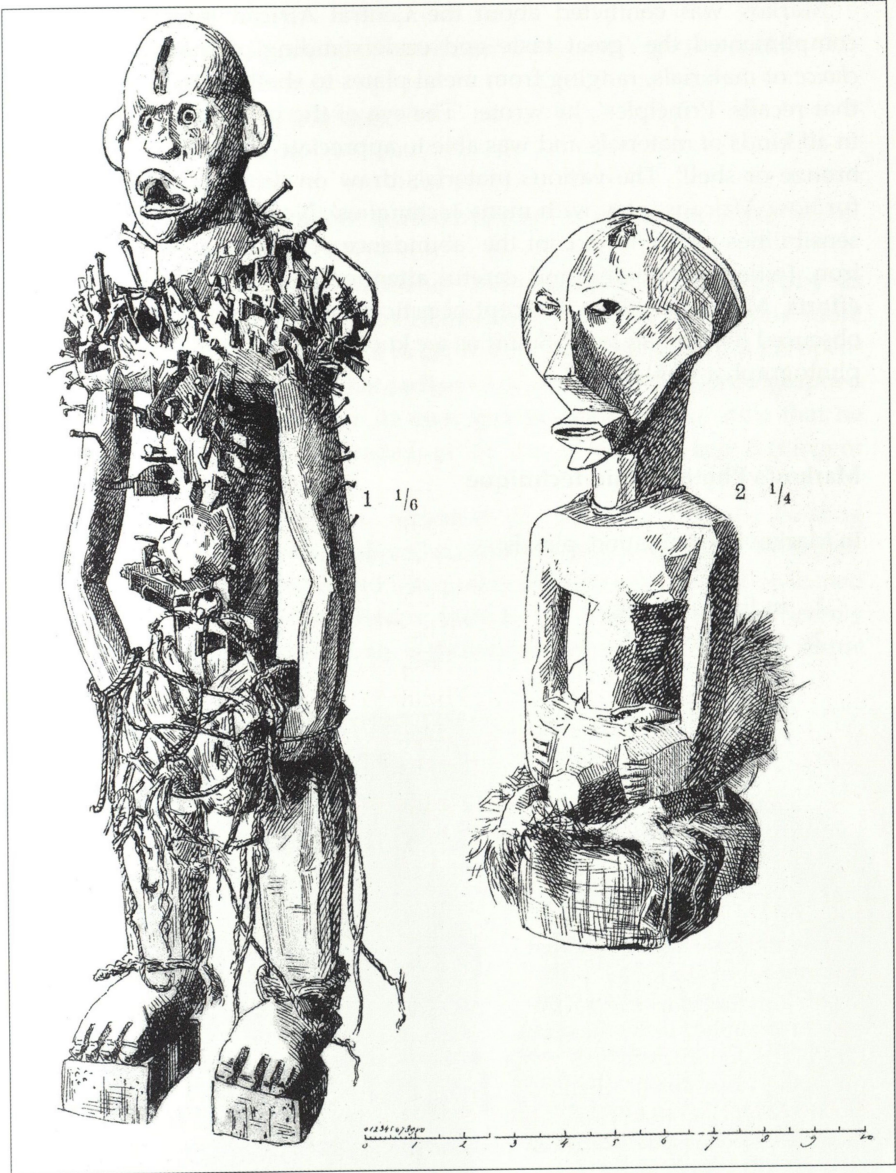
4.10 Vladimir Markov. Songye head-rest, Democratic Republic of the Congo, 14 cm. Photographed in the Musée d'Ethnographie du Trocadéro, Paris, 1913. From *Iskusstvo Negrov* (1919), pl. 55. It appears that Markov admired this work enough to photograph it as a black-painted plaster cast (Musée Quai Branly No. 71.1892.31.2). The original sculpture only entered the museum collection years later (No. 73.1986.1.3) and was selected for the inaugural exhibition of African art at the Musée du Louvre in 2006.

artist does not have to respect, for example, how muscle attaches to bone to permit locomotion. The body may be reinvented as a series of plastic symbols once the *functionality* of the parts is set aside. The author of 'Weightiness' writes that a word becomes musical when it loses its 'meaning and becomes an abstract sound'. In the same way, sculptural forms freed from their referents become 'abstract weights' related to one another through juxtaposition, scale and rhythmic placement.⁵⁷

Markov was writing in the brief window before the representation of African art congealed around concepts of authenticity in the 1920s–1930s, defined through criteria of use and age as measured by patina (Monroe 2012). It was not that he was unconcerned with issues of authenticity; however, he set the criteria differently. For example, he makes the perverse (and 'free') gesture of illustrating Benin through fine woodcarving (rather than bronze work) and selecting objects that had never been used (Markov 1919, figs. 47, 110–11). In fact, he goes so far as to avoid patina, selecting fresh carvings, some of which were actually created as art objects for the international market. For example, Markov recognised that Figure 4.5 was responding to European models, but marvelled: 'Even the most recent work seems inviolable in its preservation of old traditions, old sensitivities, and understandings of beauty'. He judged authenticity through application of African techniques and design principles rather than age or use.

The process of transforming African sculpture began in the hands of collectors and gallerists. It is hard to reconcile Dogon sculpture from Mali, as viewed today in museums, with the description by a French colonial officer who wrote that a statue reminiscent of the one illustrated in *Iskusstvo Negrov* was exhibited 'oiled with shea butter and covered with cowries, bracelets, necklaces, and large rings on festival days'.⁵⁸ Most figures were ruthlessly stripped of jewellery and dress in order to isolate sculptural form. The carving selected by Markov was rare in preserving its brass eyes (see Figure 4.18). Often tell-tale pinpricks were all that was left from eye attachments. The substitution of shells, buttons or beads for eyes fascinated Markov and served as his best examples for 'plastic symbols'. They also intensified the gaze, which became a major preoccupation for his photography.

Yet shells and brass discs were as far as Markov was prepared to go. It is mystifying that the author of *Faktura* should have elected not to illustrate a single Central African power object with accumulations. Both Berlin and the British Museum had published knock-out examples in their guidebooks. Leiden had amassed one of the largest and most dramatic collections in the world. By-passing figures in Leiden that were dressed, oiled, painted and festooned with metal attachments, Markov instead chose to photograph two unfinished figures, e.g. a Songye statuette that was exceptionally well carved but lacked the attachments provided by the patron (Figure 4.11).



4.11 Unidentified artist. Power objects from the collection of the Royal Ethnographical Museum, Leiden. From Joseph Marquart et al., *Ethnographisch Album van het Stroomgebied van den Congo* (1904–16), vol. 2, pl. 205. Markov will choose to photograph the unfinished Songye figure on the right ignoring other power objects, such as the *nkisi nkondi* from Kongo (left), bristling with nails.

Markov was conflicted about the Central African power objects. He complimented the 'great taste and understanding' demonstrated in the *choice* of materials, ranging from metal plates to shells to hair. In a passage that recalls 'Principles', he wrote: 'The eye of the primitive man delighted in all kinds of materials and was able to appreciate any material, be it iron, bronze or shell'. The various materials draw on different skills, evidence for how Africans 'play with many techniques'. Nonetheless, his modernist sensibilities could not accept the 'abundance of material, as in the case of iron, [when] the loving and careful attention gets lost'. Despite his best efforts, Markov could not accept eclectic accumulations of materials that obscured the human form. So far as we know, he could not bring himself to photograph a single one.⁵⁹

Markov's Photographic Technique

In Markov's formulation, play is:

1. individualising;
2. non-functional;

4.12 (*right*) Vladimir Markov. Female and male figures collected in northeastern Democratic Republic of the Congo, 59 and 60 cm. Photographed in the Museum für Völkerkunde, Berlin, 1913 (Ethnologisches Museum, Berlin No. III C26773 and III C26772). From *Iskusstvo Negrov* (1919), pl. 5.

4.13 (*far right*) Vladimir Markov. Female and male figures collected in northeastern Democratic Republic of the Congo (detail). Photographed in the Museum für Völkerkunde, Berlin, in 1913 (Ethnologisches Museum, Berlin, No. III C26773 and III C26772). From *Iskusstvo Negrov* (1919), pl. 9.

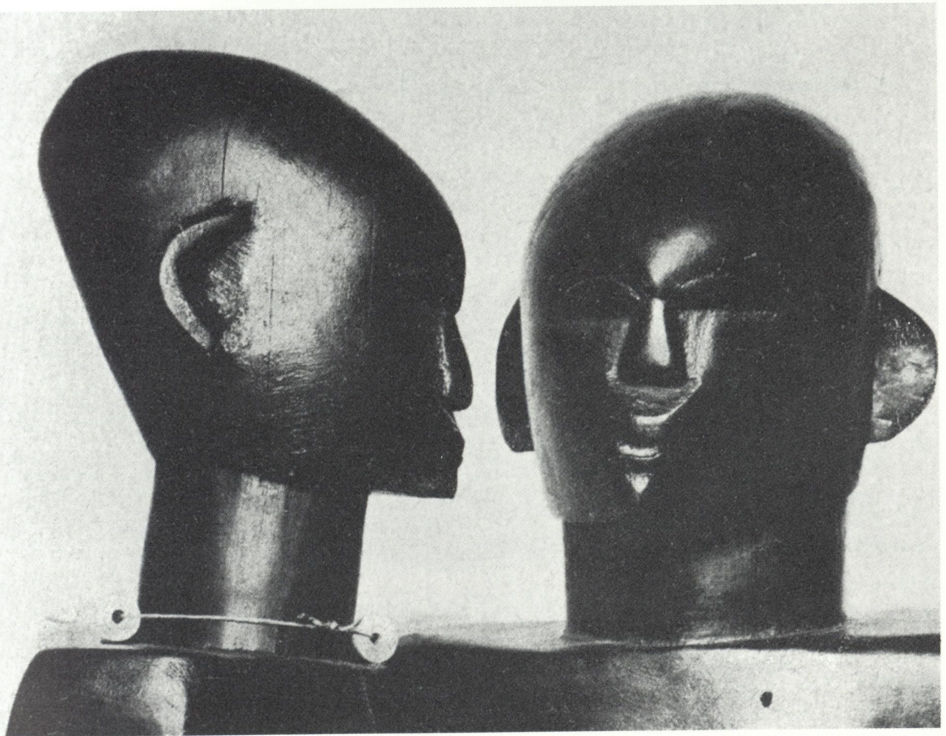


3. open-ended;
4. 'free' from predetermined regimes of economic, moral or social value;
5. focused on the present; and
6. imbued by pleasure.

What would it mean to allow these principles to shape one's practice of photography?

Markov began with a conventional understanding of photography as a scientific recording tool, but his technique quickly began to grow more interpretive. Believing each work of art to be individualised through open-ended play, he came to believe that each work of art needed to be photographed differently in order to enhance its own special qualities. The style that he developed for these ends depended on the use of multiple and contingent views as well as close-ups.

In *Iskusstvo Negrov*, Markov reviewed the limitations of the existing photographic literature, which offered nonetheless several different strategies. Many museums had begun to publish quality photographs printed on coated paper in their guidebooks. Markov includes in his collection an evenly lit, full-frontal photograph of an eighteenth-century Kuba portrait statue





4.14 Vladimir Markov. Luba figure with bowl, Democratic Republic of the Congo, 42.5 cm. Photographed in the Museum für Völkerkunde, Berlin, 1913 (Ethnologisches Museum, Berlin No. III C16998b). From *Iskusstvo Negrov* (1919), pl. 12.



4.15 Vladimir Markov. Luba figure with bowl, Democratic Republic of the Congo, 42.5 cm. Photographed in the Museum für Völkerkunde, Berlin, 1913 (Ethnologisches Museum, Berlin No. III C16998b). From *Iskusstvo Negrov* (1919), pl. 13.



4.16 Vladimir Markov. Dagon female figure. Photographed in the Musée d'Ethnographie du Trocadéro, Paris, 1913. From *Iskusstvo Negrov* (1919), pl. 56. Current location unknown.



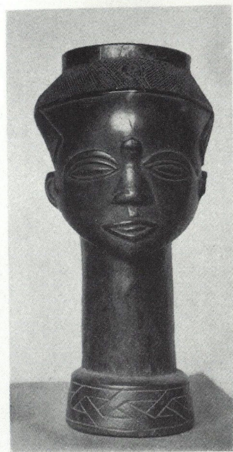
4.17 Vladimir Markov. Female figure attributed to Baga peoples, Guinea, 47.5 cm. Photographed in the Musée d'Ethnographie du Trocadéro, Paris, 1913 (Musée Quai Branly No. 71.1880.71.2). From *Iskusstvo Negrov* (1919), pl. 57.



4.18 Vladimir Markov. Dagon female figure. Photographed in the Musée d'Ethnographie du Trocadéro, Paris, 1913. From *Iskusstvo Negrov* (1919), pls. 56, 58, 60. Current location unknown. Moving between images on different pages can evoke the experience of a 'flip book'.

drawn from the *Handbook of the British Museum* (1910, pl. xi; Markov 1919, pl. 21). Frobenius sought out a radically different style to signal the artistic quality of his favourite sculpture from Ilé-Ifè, which was posed both frontally and in three-quarters (see Figure 4.6). The soft focus developed for classical statuary increases the sense of naturalism by making the hard surface seem more like flesh. The delicate shadows heighten the intimacy of the viewing experience (Bergstein 1992, 485, 487).

In a number of cases, Markov experimented with the scientific mode of presentation employed in *Notes analytiques* (see Figure 4.2). In one series, he compared a slim female and more robust male figure in Mangbetu style from five views. Whereas the norm was to compare the frontal and profile view for a single figure, Markov instead paired *two different figures* shown from the same angle (Figure 4.12). Their close similarity stimulates pleasure in differentiating them (e.g. through the relative breadth of the male shoulders). On the next page there are two close-ups showing the same figures – now profile to frontal (Figure 4.13). Suddenly, the experience is very different. The figures touch one another. The female engages the male, while he looks out of the page. There is an intensification of tactile sensation – one can feel the spherical heads, the smooth patina and the slice of the adze across the shoulders. In 'Weightiness', the writer describes how African artists heighten the sensation of gravity by cutting planes into masses⁶⁰ and by emphasising the geometricity of heads, necks and torsos.⁶¹ The photograph illustrates Markov's formal



74



75

4.19 Unidentified photographers. Kuba drinking vessels. From Carl Einstein, *Negerplastik* (1915), pls. 74 and 75.

argument, but it also strangely supplements the text by generating a social life for the objects.

Markov illustrated a Luba figure with bowl from four views, several of which are calculated to demonstrate formal principles that he admired (Figures 4.14 and 4.15). He commented on the cohabitation of line and mass,⁶² which are usually deemed antithetical in the European sculptural tradition. Through the unconventional choice of viewing angles, he draws attention to the clean contours as well as the interrelationship of engraved line, flat plane and weighty mass. He likes cavities, which testify to the material density of the medium.

Extraordinarily, sometimes the photos read like a flipbook, where one can move between images on different pages, creating a sensation of cinematic continuity. For example, on one page a medium close-up of a Dogon statue in three-quarter view is contrasted to the frontal view of another work (Figures 4.16 and 4.17). Here the designer contrasts the architectural purity of a Dogon statue with its extreme opposite, a figure in which the torso is fused into one bulbous mass.⁶³ However, as viewers turn the pages, they experience a radically shifting relationship to the Dogon statue. At first, the eye is drawn to the architectonic treatment of both head and breasts as rounded cones, which



4.20 Vladimir Markov. Kuba drinking vessel, Democratic Republic of the Congo. Photographed in the Royal Ethnographical Museum, Leiden, 1913 (Rijksmuseum Volkenkunde No. 1177-3). From *Iskusstvo Negrov* (1919), pl. 95.



4.21 Vladimir Markov. Figure from Fiji (detail), 82.5 cm (full figure). Photographed in the Royal Ethnographical Museum, Leiden, 1913 (Rijksmuseum Volkenkunde No. 335-32). From *Iskusstvo Negrov* (1919), pl. 96, where it was erroneously attributed to the Congo.

are turned perpendicular to one another, connected by a continuous cylinder formed by neck and torso.

In the second photo, the experience of a face overwhelms any formal analysis of how cone is fitted to cylinder (see Frontispiece). Both eyes and mouth gape open. The fact that the face is askew and shot slightly from below animates the carving. It is hard to resist paraphrasing Jean Epstein's paean to the Hollywood close-up: the photographer points a face at us like a revolver. We have no right to look away, no right to be distracted. The close-up is an 'intensifying agent' (1977, 13).

The third photo switches to rare three-quarter profile close-up (Figure 4.18). The statue regains its object nature and is tamed. We are better able to concentrate on composition or on the use of metal attachments as 'plastic symbols'. Each view renders the statue more extraordinary and, yes, more bizarre than the next. Significantly, the full view of the carving is withheld till the end of the book, where one may not even recognise it. Conventionally, in cinema the camera moves from long shot to medium to close-up in order to maximise the viewer's intellectual grasp of the scene. This is one of several places where the book disrupts the viewer's expectations for control and possession.

Epstein counselled filmmakers never to overdo the close-up (1977, 9–10). Part of its appeal lies in its power to disrupt diegesis. In the case of the art book, by punctuating the reading or viewing process, the judicious use of the detail has the power to suggest that works of art are complex entities that require close attention, not just the particular work under examination.

Viewing angles in *Iskusstvo Negrov* are often tailored to the individual work. As a consequence, we do not need to see multiple views for every sculpture in order to believe in their individuality. Contrast the handling of comparisons in *Negerplastik* and *Iskusstvo Negrov*. In the former, the precision of the frontal composition and the alignment of the eyes of the two Kuba drinking cups facilitate an 'algebraic' equation of similarity and difference: protruding or level forehead; open or closed mouth; long, bare or short, ringed neck, etc. (Figure 4.19). The comparison is disciplined, the lighting uniform, the scale carefully calibrated. The result is a cool intellectual exercise.

By contrast, Markov's representation of two heads is dynamic, off-kilter. He has cropped the image of the Kuba cup on the left so that one might easily mistake it for a detail of a full figural sculpture (Figure 4.20). The head is paired with a striking close-up of a sculpture from Fiji, which Markov attributed to the Congo.⁶⁴ Nothing like this representation exists in the history of African sculpture – the sculpture's face engages the viewer directly with eyes and mouth open, as if he might speak to us (Figure 4.21).

As in *Negerplastik*, the tight comparison allows for formal differentiation. One figure has engraved hair, the other is bald; the eyes are convex and

semi-closed; the eyes are engraved and open; the mouth is small, the mouth is large; the cheeks are cicatrised, the cheeks are smooth, etc. The photos capture principles enunciated by Markov. For example, both sculptors have emphasised the spherical shape of the head by allowing the features to float on the surface in shallow relief.⁶⁵ There is just enough similarity to make it seem as though the face with half-closed eyes on the left has woken up to our presence and swivelled to look out at us with furrowed brow, opened eyes and mouth.

Markov withholds the body of the figure from Fiji and concocts the illusion of doing so in the case of the head cup. Eisenstein related the strategy of using the close-up to stand in for a missing entity 'to that psychological phenomenon of *pars pro toto* i.e. the ability of one's perception to reproduce mentally the whole object after having seen only a fragment of it' (1995, 175). Jean-René Gaborit has commented on the phenomenon of the mind 'completing' anthropomorphic figures from carefully crafted close-ups (1993, 27). In his search to convey 'gravity', Markov's most effective strategy may have been the headshot, which trades on the viewer's craving to produce a body beyond the frame. When the figures seem to engage the viewer directly, they stimulate memories of standing in conversation with a living being, during which the body of the other is experienced as a vague but earthbound presence.⁶⁶ Ironically, the phantom body is a stronger signifier for the 'play of weights and masses' than any literal representation could be.

Conclusion

In his review of the history of the photography of sculpture, Gaborit begins by reiterating the position of André Malraux – that the scholar is dependent on the vision of the photographer (1993, 27–8). Then he admits that the art historian sometimes influences how the photographer works (29), and weakly concludes that it would be best for them to work together, if they are not one and the same person (30). Markov is that rare case where the budding art historian and art photographer merge. His work demonstrates that photography and art history do not always produce compatible discourses. He may have stepped into the storerooms intending to illustrate his formal arguments for his colleagues, but something happened. The multiple and contingent views produce a corpus that outstrips cool analysis, particularly in his focus on the gaze of the sculptures.

Ethnologist Paul Germann (one of Markov's sources) had argued that the faces of African figures were not sufficiently individualised to be interesting (1911, 19), but Markov proved him wrong. 'Individualised' need not serve as a synonym for 'naturalistic'. Markov selected expressionistic sculptures where the figure could be photographed as if reacting to the presence of the viewer.

Alternatively, he grouped objects so that they interact with one another. The variety of faces underscored the 'inventiveness' of African sculptors, but also sought to establish the individual expressions of what he still understood as a strikingly different subjectivity. As Balázs argued for cinema, close-ups conjure up an 'invisible face'. In this sense, they served Markov's liberal humanist agenda in arguing (in present tense) that Africans 'are a profoundly thoughtful people'.⁶⁷

Notes

- 1 All quotations from Markov are taken from the translations provided in the second half of this volume. They will be cited by chapter number and subheading. I thank Jeremy Howard for making it all possible and Irēna Bužinska for her sense of adventure and for her tutelage on Markov and Latvian history. All errors remain my own.
- 2 See Chapter 7, Part I.
- 3 See Chapter 9, in his introduction ('From the Author').
- 4 Malraux's axiom that photography has served as a critical agent in the creation of 'works of art' has taken on the allure of hard-edged theoretical realism (Preziosi 1989, 72; Bergstein 1992; Gaborit 1993; Zerner 1998; Bohrer 2002, 249). Less appreciated has been his recognition of the transformative impact of increasing knowledge about world art on European conceptions. See Kelly 2007 for an exceptional study of how avant-garde definitions of art were changed through artists' study of ethnographic collections.
- 5 The first edition of *Negerplastik* appeared in 1915 with 119 black-and-white photographs illustrating 94 different sculptures. For an analysis of photography in *Negerplastik*, see Grossman 2006; 2007; 2009, 64–7; Strother 2013, 14–17.
- 6 See also Irina Arskaya, Irēna Bužinska and Tatyana Lyuboslavskaya, 'Matvejs in St. Petersburg', in Bužinska 2004, 37–9. For full copies of the letters discussed below, see Bužinska 2002c, 136–7.
- 7 Letter from Voldemārs Matvejs to Levkiy Ivanovich Zheverzheev, Russian State Archive of Literature and Art, Moscow (RGALI), f. 769, op. 1, d. 438, 1. 1–2.
- 8 See Chapter 6.
- 9 See also Chapter 8, under 'Machine Techniques'.
- 10 For full discussion of the complicated genesis of the photographs in *Negerplastik*, see Paudrat 1984, 144, 151; Strother 2013, 17. For Einstein's continuing struggle to acquire photographs of African sculptures, see Neumeister 2012.
- 11 Markov may have given Shchukin advice on his acquisition of African objects (Bužinska 2002a, 32, 36). Therefore, it is significant that it is Einstein who illustrates four objects from Shchukin's collection, not Markov (Bassani 1998, figs. 25–7, 66–7).
- 12 See Chapter 9, in his introduction.

- 13 Eisenstein 1949, 238, quoting *The New York Dramatic Mirror* of 3 December 1913.
- 14 French is similar to Russian, *gros plan*.
- 15 Zheverzheev in Chapter 9, 'From the Editor'.
- 16 This quasi-cinematic presentation is prominent, for example, in the presentation of Neo-Classical sculpture on the website of New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art. Available at: www.metmuseum.org/collections [accessed 2 August 2012]. See Antonio Canova, *Perseus with the Head of Medusa* (1804–06, Accession No. 67.110.1) or Jean-Baptiste Carpeaux, *Ugolino and His Sons* (1865–67, Accession No. 67.250).
- 17 In 1990, Susan Vogel commissioned Thompson to photograph sculptures 'close up' for an exhibition on the 'Art of Seeing African Sculpture' at The Center for African Art, New York. The catalogue illustrated 42 sumptuous close-ups (or 24 per cent of the total number of images reproduced in the volume), the greatest number since Markov. Visually, Thompson emphasised how 'unbalanced, asymmetrical masses cooperate to create a whole that is dynamic, rather than static' (Thompson and Vogel 1990, 15). It is intriguing that, despite the similarity of his interpretation, Thompson avoided faces and focused on medium close-ups of torso and back.
- 18 See Chapter 9, Part V.
- 19 See Chapter 9, in his introduction.
- 20 Fabian 1992; Jahn 1974; Marchand 1997; Zwernemann 1967.
- 21 The original text was published under the title *Und Afrika Sprach* (Frobenius 1912–13). I will be citing Rudolf Blind's translation (Frobenius 1913), published as two volumes. However, as the pages are numbered consecutively (with volume 2 beginning on page 353), individual volume numbers are not cited.
- 22 See Chapter 9. It is possible that Bubnova made or at least selected the sketches. Whatever the case, illustrations of a massive tumulus and antiquities in stone, bronze and terracotta made African history more credible.
- 23 See Chapter 9, Part IV.
- 24 See Chapter 9, Part V.
- 25 See Chapter 9, Parts III, IV.
- 26 See Chapter 9, Parts III, V. By contrast, Einstein illustrates 21 masks in *Negerplastik*. In *Voice*, Frobenius claimed that African shamanism had diffused from 'Asiatic Ural-Altaic' roots (1913, 562). Markov – like Kandinsky, Larionov and many other Russian artists at this period – was fascinated by North Asian shamanism (Parton 1993; Weiss 1995; Bowlt et al. 2013).
- 27 The two masks in question are Ijo and were published by Frobenius as 'Calabar' (1996 [1898], pl. 6, figs. 69–70). (He should have written 'New Calabar'.) Markov accepted Frobenius' speculation about influence from 'Malayo-Nigritics' in Oceania (see Chapter 9, Part V; Frobenius 1996, 346).
- 28 See Chapter 9, Part IV.
- 29 See Chapter 9, Part III.

- 30 There are four sketches of antiquities from Ilé-Ifè and a copy of a drawing depicting the altar for the orisa Shango in Ibadan (see Chapter 9, Parts II–III). Markov did not take a single photograph of a Yoruba sculpture.
- 31 See Chapter 9, Part I.
- 32 See Chapter 9, Parts II–III; from Frobenius 1913, 25, 368–71. In Part IV, Markov expresses the hope that one day ‘the primitives ... [will] evaluate this art’.
- 33 See Chapter 9, Parts IV–V.
- 34 See Leighten (1990) for images of Africa in the colonialist French press of the early twentieth century. Both Frobenius (1913, xiii–xiv) and Einstein mocked the view that Africans were a people of an eternal prehistory, and Einstein’s reviewers, 1915–20, demanded a more historical orientation. However, this view lost out in the art community after World War I. In influential texts like Munro and Guillaume’s *Primitive Negro Sculpture*, ‘the negroes are a people without history’ and ‘their past can be described only in terms of general racial intermixtures’ (1926, 94).
- 35 Unless otherwise noted, all quotations from Markov in this section are taken from Chapter 7.
- 36 See Chapter 7, ‘Free Creativity’.
- 37 Many artists invoked the child as a model for artistic vision during this period (Flam 1995, 213, 218; Fineberg 1998). Markov is unusual in the precision that he brings to the analogy, inspired by Kant.
- 38 Markov once refers to chess, but invokes its ‘principles’ rather than its rules (see Chapter 7, Part I). The distinction lies in separating ideals from earthbound instructions.
- 39 See Chapter 7, ‘Free Creativity’.
- 40 See Chapter 7, ‘Free Creativity’.
- 41 Guyer 2007, 365. Many artists associated with the Union of Youth – e.g. Nikolay Kul’bin and Vladimir Burlyuk – sought to stimulate the interpretative powers of their viewers (Howard 1992, 14, 20).
- 42 André Warnod, *Comoedia*, 2 January 1912 (in LaGamma 2007, 196–8, no. 43).
- 43 See Guyer on Herder, who was roused to fury by Kant’s association of art with play: ‘Nothing harms immature taste more than if one makes everything into play’ (Guyer 2007, 353).
- 44 See Chapter 9, Part V (my emphasis).
- 45 See Chapter 6.
- 46 See Chapter 9, Part IV.
- 47 Unless otherwise noted, all quotations from Markov in this section are drawn from Chapter 9, *Iskusstvo Negrov*, Part IV.
- 48 Markov’s oft-repeated phrase, ‘the play of masses’, anticipates Le Corbusier’s manifesto by nearly a decade: ‘Architecture is the masterful, correct and magnificent play of volumes brought together in light’ (2007 [1924], 102).

- 49 The essay 'Weightiness' develops the analogy to music further (see Chapter 10, Part I).
- 50 Markov merely alludes to rhythm, which will dominate African art criticism beginning in the mid-1920s. See Diagne 2007 for differences in the conception of rhythm as formulated by Léopold Senghor and the text that inspired him, *Primitive Negro Sculpture* by Paul Guillaume and Thomas Munro (1926).
- 51 See Chapter 9, Part IV. Markov's interpretation for this practice was strikingly different from that of the authors of *Notes analytiques sur les collections ethnographiques*, who also commented on the 'ingenious' substitution of reflective materials for eyes. Although they believed that the carvers were motivated by a lack of skill, they could not help but admire the lifelike effect (1906, 241–2).
- 52 See Strother 2013 for a full discussion of Einstein's sources on Africa.
- 53 See Chapter 10, Part I.
- 54 The term 'idol' was current among the Russian avant-garde. Markov largely avoids the term 'fetish', which was peppered throughout many of his more popular sources. Frobenius himself had discredited the fetish as a religious concept (1913, xiii–xiv), as did another of Markov's most important sources, which stated categorically that African carvings were not worshipped (*Notes analytiques* 1906, 149, 151, 160).
- 55 See Chapter 9, Part III.
- 56 Unless otherwise stated, all quotations from Markov in this section stem from Chapter 9, Part IV or his introduction.
- 57 See Chapter 10, Part I.
- 58 Lieutenant Louis Desplanges sketched the seated female figure in 1905 and tried to purchase it, but the work's guardian refused to part with it (Fagnola 2009, 65, 209, fig. 269). Bernard de Grunne argues that the sketch depicts the same sculpture photographed by Markov (2011, 20–21) but Desplanges' drawing is not sufficiently skilled to be certain. In any case, it is fortunate that Markov illustrated this outstanding work of art with five views because its present location is unknown.
- 59 Markov was not alone. African accumulative sculpture remained too difficult to assimilate until western artists themselves began to incorporate installation techniques in the mid-twentieth century. Relief sculpture comprises another striking omission that underscores Markov's interest in three-dimensional mass. He illustrates a single example in *Iskusstvo Negrov* (1919, pl. 54). Many painters were attracted to masks as forms of low-relief carving (Laude 2006, 174), but the reverse may have happened in Markov's case. His aversion to relief may have fed his aversion to masks.
- 60 See Chapter 10, under 'Mass and Plane'.
- 61 See Chapter 10, under 'Formation of Mass'.
- 62 See Chapter 9, Part IV.
- 63 See Chapter 10, under 'Formation of Mass'.
- 64 Rijksmuseum Volkenkunde, Leiden, No. 335–32. The museum originally assigned the figure to the Caroline Islands in 1893 and only changed the

attribution to Fiji in the 1940s–1950s. Markov's error was understandable given the state of knowledge. Bassani attributes 10 of the 94 illustrated works in the first edition of *Negerplastik* to sources in the Pacific or the Philippines (1998).

65 See Chapter 10, Part II.

66 Giacometti argued that the proportions of African sculptures simulate the experience of face-to-face interactions during which the head of the interlocutor is perceived to be disproportionately large due to its proximity, while the legs are foreshortened (in Ravenhill 2000, 62).

67 See Chapter 9, Part IV.