



# The Whole Earth Show

AN INTERVIEW WITH JEAN-HUBERT MARTIN BY BENJAMIN H.D. BUCHLOH

**T**he forthcoming exhibition, *"Magiciens de la Terre,"* was conceived in 1985 by JeanHubert Martin, then newly appointed director of the Paris Biennale. Originally intended as a replacement for the Biennale's traditional format (in which contributions were selected by cultural representatives and committees from each participating country), this show has now grown into a major exhibition of international contemporary art. Its organizers intend to explore the practices of artists in Asian, African and Latin American countries, juxtaposing a selection of work from those cultural contexts with contemporary works from the United States and Western Europe.

Scheduled to open on May 18, the exhibition has been curated by Martin (who in 1988 became director of the *Musee National d'Art Moderne* at the Centre Georges Pompidou in Paris), in collaboration with Mark Francis (formerly curator of the Fruitmarket Gallery in Edinburgh). It will include the work of approximately 50 artists from the so-called "centers" of contemporary culture and 50 artists from the cultural "margins." These works—many produced especially for the exhibition—will be displayed

*Marina Abramovic (Yugoslavia):  
Grey, Grey Is the Sky, Are You  
Riding a Jade Dragon in the  
Void, 1988, performance piece  
(walking the Great Wall Of China).*



*Opening this month in Paris, the controversial "Magiciens de la Terre" will present works by Western artists along with works by artists from numerous non-Western countries. In the following interview with the show's curator, the author challenges some of the premises of this giant international exhibition.*

*not only at the Grande Halle at the Parc de la Villette (a recently remodeled space that has previously been used as the site for the Paris Biennale), but will also occupy the entire 4th floor of the Centre Pompidou.*

*What follows is my translation of excerpts from two rather lengthy conversations between myself and Martin, the first on July 14, 1986, and the second two years later in October of 1988. Both took place in Paris and were conducted in French. While these conversations originated in the interest I share with Martin in what seems to be a long overdue and courageous attempt to depart from the hegemonic and monocentric cultural perspectives of Western European and American institutions and their exhibition projects, it was also inevitable that I would want to challenge some of the underlying assumptions of this exhibition. In particular, I raise questions about the exhibition's approach to the issue of cultural authenticity, about its treatment of the relationship between "center" and "margin," and about the possible fallacies of focusing exclusively on the "cultural" object—in short, about the exhibition's potential neo-colonialist subtext.*

—Benjamin H.D. Buchloh

Chid samba (Zaire): L'Espoir  
Fait Vivre, 1988, oil on  
canvas, 45 1/4 by 57 3/4 inches.

"Since we are dealing with visual and sensual experience, let's look at these objects from our own perspective. I intend to select them according to my own history and sensibility." -JHM

**Benjamin H.D. Buchloh:** In discussions of the last few years, the question of cultural decentralization has emerged as increasingly important. It encompasses efforts to decenter traditional conceptions of the author/subject construction, as well as challenges to the centrality of the oeuvre and to the concept of the work of art as a unified substantial object. But there are broader ramifications: the issue of decentralization is also related to an ongoing critique of the hegemony of the class culture of bourgeois modernism and to analysis of the dominance of the Western capitalist world's cultural production and its markets over cultural practices in the social and geo-political "margins." Cultural decentralization aims at a gradual recognition of the cultures of different social and ethnic groups within the societies of the so-called "First World," as much as at recognition of the specificity of cultural practices outside-that is, in the countries of the so-called "Second World" and "Third World."

Does the project "Magiciens de la Terre" originate in these critical discussions or is it just another exercise in stimulating an exhausted art world by exhibiting the same contemporary products in a different topical exhibition framework?

**Jean-Hubert Martin:** Obviously the problem of center and



*Boma Deal (India): Nahini-Women Serpents, 1988, gouache on paper, 22 by 3A inches.*

periphery has been much discussed in European-American avant-garde culture in recent years, and our exhibition, "Magiciens de la Terre," takes off from those discussions. First of all, from a geographical point of view, we want to treat contemporary art production on a global, worldwide scale. But the questions of center and periphery are also related to issues of authorship and oeuvre that concern us, especially since the artist's role and the object's functions are defined in an entirely different manner from our European way of thinking in a number of the contexts with which we will be dealing. As for the problem of marginality, it is difficult and delicate to include artists from different geo-political contexts in an exhibition of Western (Euro-American) contemporary art, the dominant art of the "centers." But we have come to recognize that in order to have a center you need margins, and the inverse is true as well. Therefore, "Magiciens de la Terre" will invite half of its approximately 100 artists from marginal contexts, and will include artists who are practically unknown in the contemporary art world.

**BB:** How will you go about this project without falling into the seemingly inevitable and worst of all traps-that is, without once again deploying ethnocentric and hegemonic criteria in the selection of participants and their works for the exhibition?

**JHM:** I agree that this is the first trap one thinks of. But I would argue that it is actually an inevitable trap. It would be worse to pretend that one could organize such an exhibition from an "objective, unacculturated" perspective, from a "decentered" point of view. How could one find a "correct" perspective? By including artists on a proportional scale? Or by having the selections made by cultural functionaries in each country, functionaries whose principles are infinitely less elaborate than ours? Or by political commissaries from UNESCO, and according to the size of the population of each country? I do not believe that any of these approaches is possible. They would throw us back to the worst mistakes we made when the Paris Biennale first began-when artists were selected by national commissaries who chose only those artists who, in their opinion, deserved the official stamp of cultural and political authority. The result was a disaster of officious and official culture.

I have therefore argued for the exact opposite: since we are dealing with objects of visual and sensual experience, let's really look at them from the perspective of our own culture. I want to play the role of someone who uses artistic intuition alone to select these



*Jeff Wall (Canada): Tran Due Van, 1988, Cibachrome transparency mounted in display case, 114 by 90 inches.*

objects which come from totally different cultures. Thus my approach will also be the opposite of what you might have suggested: I intend to select these objects from various cultures according to my own history and my own sensibility. But obviously I also want to incorporate into that process the critical thinking which contemporary anthropology provides on the problem of ethnocentrism, the relativity of culture, and intercultural relations.

**BB:** What are the self-critical and corrective elements in your method and procedure? Are you actually working with anthropologists and ethnographers on this project? Are you working with specialists from within the cultures that you approach from the outside?

**JHM:** Yes, I have collaborated with numerous anthropologists and ethnographers in the preparation of this exhibition. This collaboration has proven to be very fertile since it has helped us to assess the role of the individual artist in various societies, as well as to understand the specialized activities of those artists and the functions of their formal and visual languages. By the way, our exhibition occurs at a moment when many anthropologists have started to ask themselves why they have traditionally privileged myth and language over visual objects. The corrective critical ideas that I'm primarily thinking of are the ethnographic theories of ethnocentrism that have been developed over the last 20 or more years. I have also benefited from the advice of ethnographers and specialists in local and regional cultures, and have obtained precise information from them in order to prepare for research and travel. In some cases we

have actually conducted our exploratory travel in the company of ethnographers. For example, we went to Papua New Guinea in the company of Fran~ois Lupu.

But let's not forget that, after all, I must think of this project as an exhibition. If, for example, an ethnographer suggests to us a particular example of a cult in a society in the Pacific, but it turns out that the objects of this culture do not communicate sufficiently well in a visual-sensuous manner to a Western spectator, then I would refrain from exhibiting them. Certain cult objects may have an enormous spiritual power, but when transplanted from their context into an art exhibition they lose their qualities and at best generate misunderstandings-even when one attaches long, didactic explanatory labels to them. Similarly, I have had to exclude a number of artisanal objects, -since many of the societies we have looked at actually do not differentiate between artist and artisan.

**BB:** Another crucial problem of your project as I see it is that, on the one hand, you do not want to construct a colonialist exhibition like "L'Exposition Coloniale" in Paris in 1931, in which objects of religious and magical practices were extracted from their functions and contexts. These objects were displayed for the hegemonic eye of control, for Imperialist domination and exploitation. But neither do you want to simply estheticize these heteronomic cultural objects once again by subjecting them to the Western modernist concept of "primitivism."

**JHM:** Our exhibition has nothing to do with the one in 1931, which clearly originated from the perspective of economic and political

ARTISTS IN "EXHIBITIONS OF THE FUTURE"

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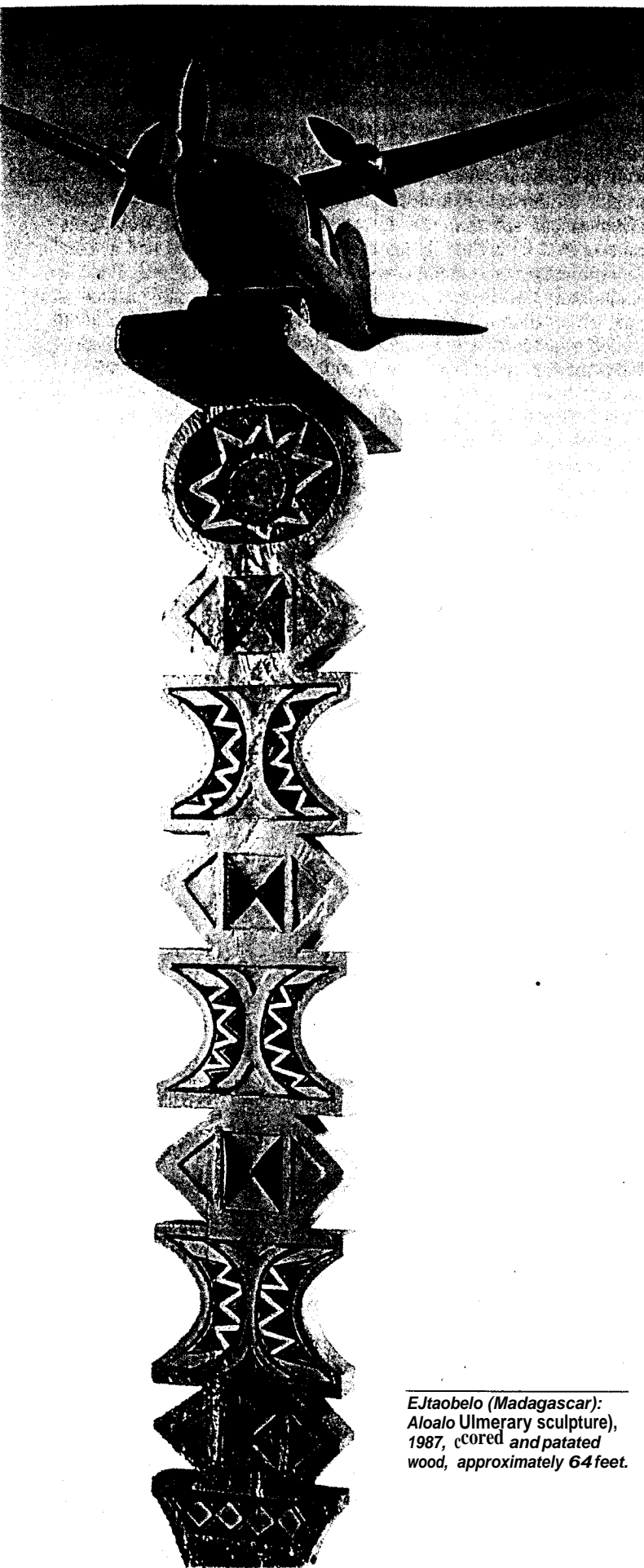
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*E.Jtaobelo (Madagascar):  
Aloalo Ulmerary sculpture),  
1987, cored and patated  
wood, approximately 64 feet.*

**"Bourgeois hegemonic culture has always used the tool of 'quality' to make other cultural practices marginal. How will you avoid this problem if you operate by visual terms alone?"-BB**

colonialism. Inevitably, however, that 1931 exhibition has served as a negative reference point for the authors of the catalogue and will be critically discussed.

Concerning the problem of the cultural object and its context, I would like to offer two arguments. First of all, when it comes to foreign literature, music and theater, nobody ever asks this type of question, and we accept translation-though we know it is most often a falsification-as a necessary form of mediation. Now, you might argue that these are temporal and aural forms of artistic experience, which are different from the spatial and visual objects that we deal with, and that different modes of reception clearly apply. A Western viewer sees in a manner altogether different from an Asian viewer, even though the moment of retinal experience is actually identical. But, nevertheless, to argue that it is therefore impossible to present visual/spatial objects outside of their cultural context seems absolutely horrible to me-especially since this type of communication has in fact occurred for centuries in, for example, the field of literature. That is my first argument ...

BB: If I may interrupt here, it seems evident that your problem is characteristic of all modernist art history, which has traditionally contemplated only objects of high culture, even though modernist avant-garde art was in fact constituted in dialectic relationship with mass culture from its very beginnings. The objects and users of mass culture-if considered at all-were at best compartmentalized into a different discipline (sociology), or more recently into the area of mass cultural studies. In the same manner that traditional art history has always excluded the plurality of cultures within "bourgeois" culture, your attempt to select only the "highest artistic quality" from the cultural practices of "The Others" runs the risk of subjecting them to a similar process of selection and hierarchization.

JHM: This is another point, and I will return to it. But let me first make my second argument. A criticism that was immediately expressed about this exhibition project concerns the supposed problem of decontextualization and the betrayal of other cultures. Yes, the objects in our exhibition will be displaced from their functional context, and they will be shown in a museum and another exhibition space in Paris. But we will display them in a manner that has never been used for objects from the Third World. That is, for the most part, the makers of these objects will be present, and I will avoid showing finished, movable objects as much as possible. I will favor "installations" (as we say in our jargon) made by the artists specifically for this particular occasion-for example, a Tibetan mandala, an Ijele "mask" from Nigeria, or a Navajo sand painting.

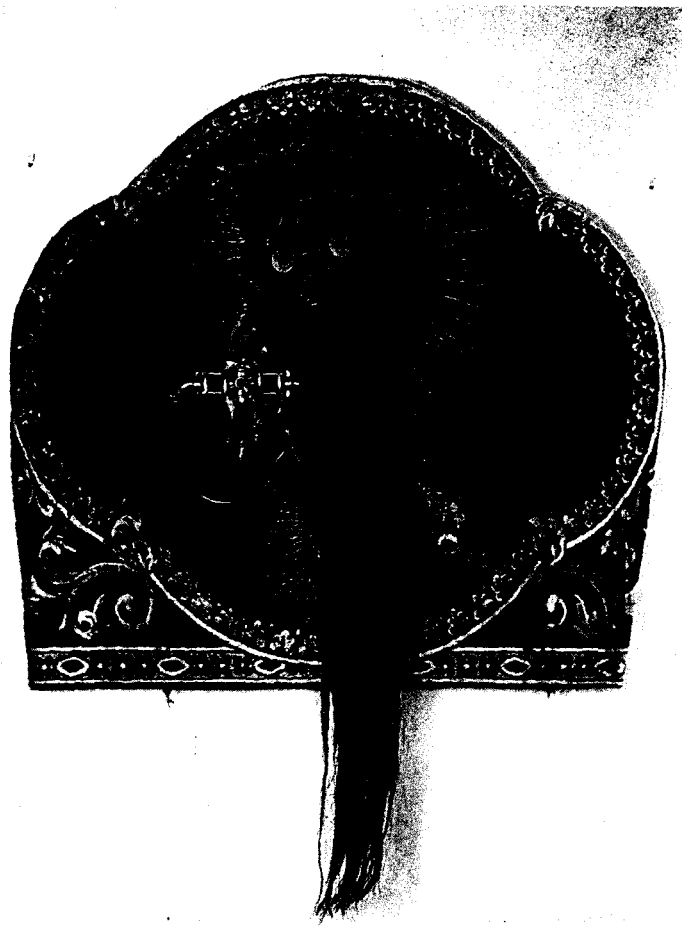
Works of art are always the result of a ritual or a ceremony, and that is just as true for a famous painting of the 19th century, where-in a manner of speaking-we are also looking at a "mere residue." One always speaks of the problem of "context" when it comes to other cultures-as though the problem did not exist for us in our confrontations with a medieval miniature, or even with a Rembrandt painting, when we visit the museum. Only a few specialists really know anything at all about the contexts of these objects, even though we would claim that, after all, they are part of our own cultural tradition. I know that it is dangerous to extricate cultural objects from other civilizations. But we can also learn from these

civilizations, which-just like ours-are engaged in a search for spirituality.

**BB:** This concept of an abstract transhistorical experience of "spirituality" seems to be at the core of your project. In that respect, it reminds me of the "'Primitivism' in 20th-Century Art" exhibition, which took place at the Museum of Modern Art in 1984. There a presumed spirituality was also placed at the center of the exhibition, and considered to be operating regardless of social and political context, and regardless of the technological development of particular social formations. Don't you think that the search for the (re-)discovery of spirituality originates in a disavowal of the politics of everyday life?

**JHM:** Not at all. As you will recall, the main criticism leveled at the "Primitivism" exhibition at the time was that it was a formalist project. To me, it seems important to emphasize the functional rather than the formal aspects of that spirituality-after all, magic practices are functional practices. Those objects which have a spiritual function for the human mentality, objects which exist in all societies, are the ones of interest for our exhibition. After all, the work of art cannot simply be reduced to a retinal experience. It possesses an aura which initiates these mental experiences. I would go even further and argue that it is precisely those artistic objects which were created 20 years ago by artists with the explicit desire to reduce the auratic nature of the work of art by emphasizing its material objectness that now appear as the most spiritual ones. In fact, if you talk to the artists of that generation, you will often hear about their own involvement with the concept of the "magic" of the work of art. We have to admit that there is a sphere of social experience which has taken over the space of religion, and while it does not fulfill religion's communal functions, it does involve large segments of our society.

**BB:** It sounds as though you were arguing that the failure of the artistic practices of the '60s to emancipate art from ritual (what Walter Benjamin called art's parasitical dependence) could now be compensated for best by ritualizing these practices themselves. To mention an example: when Lothar Baumgarten set out in the late '70s to visit the tribal societies of the Amazonas that are now threatened with destruction, he operated in the manner of an amateur ethnographer. But he also operated from within a modernist artistic tradition-that is, he searched for and discovered the values of exotic cultures in order to reconstitute the cult value of the

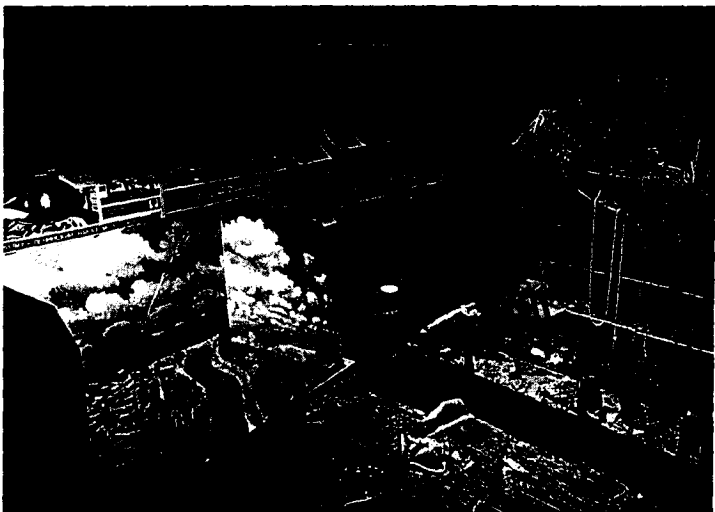


**Daniel Spoerri (Switzerland): The Hidden God, 1987, mixed mediums on rug, 47 1/4 by 49Us by 18 1/4 inches. Private collection.**

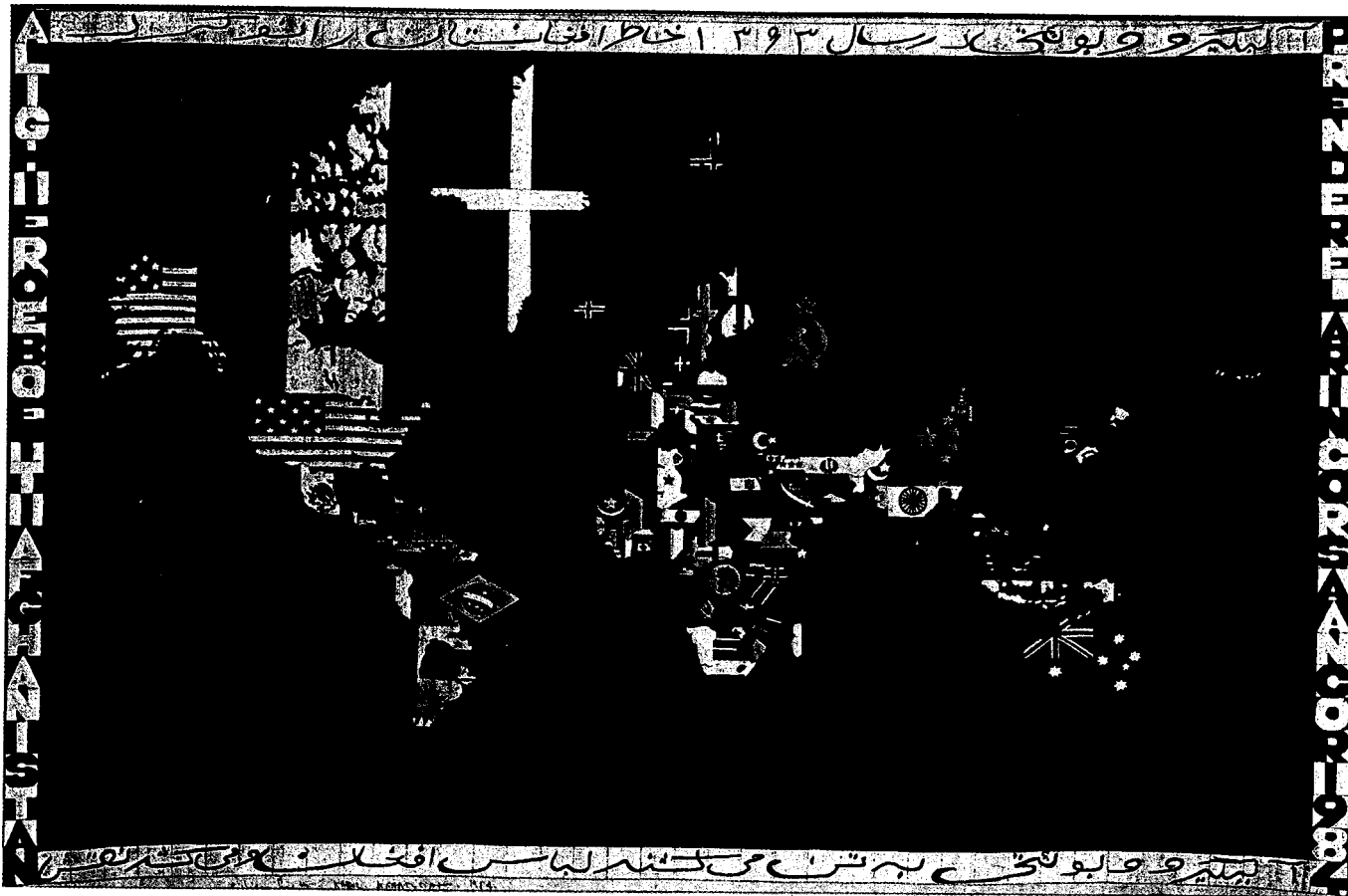
work of art, its share in the ritualistic experience. Paradoxically, in doing so, artists of that tradition in modernism have contributed to the development of a highly problematic vision of the "other," conceived of in terms of "primitivism." I wonder whether your exhibition is not also based upon this same model. Is that why you sent Lawrence Weiner to Papua New Guinea during the preparation of his contribution to your exhibition?

**JHM:** There are enormous prejudices in what you just said concerning our project. A basic idea of our exhibition is to question the relationship of our culture to other cultures of the world ("culture" here is not an abstract generality-it describes a set of relations that individuals have with each other and with which we interact). I wondered whether it would be possible to accelerate these relationships and the dialogue ensuing from them. That's why I suggested that Lawrence Weiner should go to Papua New Guinea. Let me emphasize that first of all this exhibition intends to initiate dialogues. I oppose the idea that one can only look at another culture in order to exploit it. Our first concern is with exchange and dialogue, with understanding others in order to understand what we do ourselves.

**BB:** Inevitably your project operates like an archeology of the "other" and its authenticity: you are engaged in a quest for original cultural practices (magic and the ritual), when in fact what you will most often find, I presume, are extremely hybridized cultural practices in their various stages of gradual or rapid disintegration and extinction-a condition that results from their confrontation with



**Ilya Kabakov (USSR): The Man That Flew into Space from His Apartment, 1981, mixed mediums. Courtesy Ronald Feldman Fine Arts.**



Alighiero e Boetti (Italy): *Map*, 1984, Afghan embroidery, 49 by 723' inches. Courtesy Galerie Eric Franck, Geneva.

Western industrial media and consumer culture. Are you going to "distill" the original objects for the sake of an artificial purity, or are you going to exhibit the actual degree of contamination and decay within which these forms of cultural production actually exist?

**JHM:** I think that is a real misunderstanding of my way of looking at these phenomena. I am in fact very interested in archaic practices (I would like to avoid the problematic term "primitive"). I am really against the assumption-it was also, in a way, an underlying assumption of Rubin's exhibition-that we have in fact destroyed all other cultures with Western technology. A text written by the aboriginal artists of Australia who are participating in this exhibition has clarified this issue for me. They state the problem of decontextualization perfectly well. But they go on to argue that they commit their "treason" for a particular purpose: to prove to the white world that their society is still alive and functioning. Exhibiting their cultural practices to the West is what they believe to be the best way to protect their traditions and their culture at this point in time.

**BB:** It sounds as though you are engaged in some kind of a reformist project-that you are searching for residual magic cultures in societies alien to ours and that you are in pursuit of revitalizing the magic potential of our own.

**JHM:** Obviously we live in a society in which we always speak from our own position about others, and we judge their position from ours. It is "we" who think of "them" as still involved in magic. That is an a priori upon which we naively rely, though the situation is actually infinitely more complicated, and we have no idea of how it really

functions. In the same manner, we do not know how magic thought functions in our own society, and obviously there is a lot of it.

**BB:** Is your exhibition going to address the magic rituals of our society as well? You seem to be looking for an irrational power that drives artistic production in tribal societies, and you seem to argue that there is a need for our society to rediscover this power. By contrast, the actual mechanisms in which magic rituals are practiced in our society-in the fetishization of the sign, in spectacle culture and in commodity fetishism-these mechanisms do not seem to be of interest to you?

**JHM:** But I am also not in search of an original purity, even though there are cultures which still have had very little exposure to Western civilization and whose modes of thinking are utterly different from ours. It astonishes me more and more the longer I work on this project that, even in serious studies, the ideal of an archaic and authentic production is upheld, possibly even that of a collective production, when in fact the number of objects which would truly qualify for this category is rather small. We know that, for the most part, these practices have been compromised or destroyed altogether.... But in the large cities of Asia and Africa, where shocks resulting from the encounter between local cultures and Western industrial cultures still reverberate, one finds numerous manifestations that we would have to identify as contemporary works of art-for example, those connected with the emergence of an "avant-garde" in China, or those of Cheri Samba in Zaire. And one finds examples from both spheres-that is, the objects of a traditional local high culture as much as objects of popular culture.

**"Don't you think that by excluding political and economic issues, and by focusing exclusively on cultural relationships, you will generate a neo-colonialist reading?"-BB**

BB: Don't you think you have to differentiate between the residual forms of high culture and local popular culture, on the one hand, and the emerging forms of mass cultural consumption, on the other?

JHM: No, I do not exclude the objects of mass culture, but I am interested in finding the individual artist or artists that one can really name and situate, and that have actually produced objects. I refuse to show objects which claim to be the anonymous result of a cultural community-to me, that seems to be a typically perverted Western European idea that I want to avoid at all costs. If 50 craftspeople produce more or less the same type of cult object, that does not interest me. I am looking for the one that is more original than the rest-as Esther Mahlangu is in Ndebele culture in South Africa.

BB: You don't seem to mind that this approach re-introduces the most traditional conception of the privileged subject and the original object into a cultural context that might not even know these Western concepts, and that it excludes from the beginning such notions as anonymous production and collective creation?

JHM: But I will not exclude objects of collective production. In fact, there are quite a few already in the projected exhibition. But I do like the joke which argues that the only reason we imagine Black African masks to be anonymous is that when they were first found in the various tribal communities, the people who took them or collected them did not care to record the names of their authors. It is a typical Western projection to fantasize that these communities live in a state of original collective bliss, and therefore one does not want to credit them with having original authors.

Let me give you an example-the type of mask which is identified as *Gelede*. Two ethnographers from California have studied these objects which are only worn once a year for a particular festival. They have found that the makers of these masks are specialists who make them for the various villages and communities which use



Richard Long (England): Walk Without Travelling, Sahara, 1988, photograph.

them.' Not only are there specialists in this type of mask, who identify their works with their signatures on the inside, but these specialists come from dynasties of mask-makers, and often their masks can be traced through two or more generations. Furthermore, what is peculiar about these *Gelede* masks is that they actually change over time-as opposed to our Western concept of a fixed and stable type-and over the last few decades they have incorporated more and more elements from industrial culture.

To me, this change proves the vivacity of that culture and its flexibility in responding to contact with Western civilization. Certain ethnographers were distressed by the changes because they perceived these tribal communities as having lost their original purity. But I don't think that any society ever had this purity. They are all in constant flux and exchange with other societies, and admittedly the Western world is, of course, a particularly powerful influence in these contacts.

BB: Let's use a hypothetical example to discuss your method. How would you approach a country which was once a European colony-let's say that it's now a Socialist state, which might still have rather active Beaux-Arts schools in its cities, but if you traveled through its remote villages, you would probably find residual forms of artisanal popular culture and possibly even religious practices. At the same time, I would imagine that there might be emerging forms of a new Socialist culture. Which of these three domains is of primary interest to your project?

JHM: Before I answer, I would like to address the method of our work. The particular needs of this project require that a constant exchange take place between theory and practice, and that both constantly correct each other in the course of the preparation of this exhibition. It is not that discourse on intercultural relationships has been absent from French thought-what is missing are the pragmatic forms of putting this discourse into practice. That is what I am trying to develop.

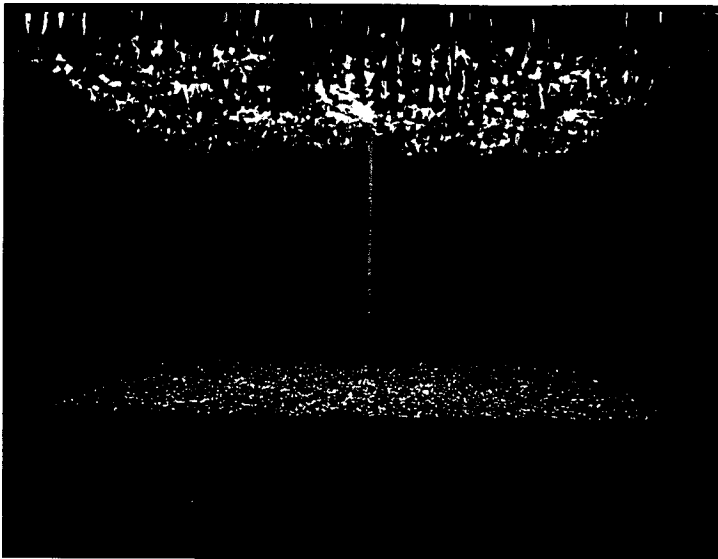
Now, to answer your question. Which of the three formations are of interest to us? Well, I want to show as much as possible, as many divergent phenomena as possible, even if "that might make the exhibition heterogeneous at times.

BB: To invert my question: Will your exhibition also present information on so-called minority cultures living inside the hegemonic Western societies? Will you, for example, show the particular forms of Black modernism that have emerged in the United States since the



Fredric Brulg-Bouabre (Ivory Coast): Drawing from the "Sacrifice Series," 1988, crayon on paper, 5f by 7 inches.





**Cildo Meireles (Brazil):** *How to Build Cathedrals*, 1987, cow bones, Brazilian currency, communion wgters, 286 square inches.

turn of the century, or the cultural practices of African and Arabic minorities living in France at this point?

**JHM:** Obviously I have thought about it, and often one is obliged to start from that point. I have, for instance, encountered a painter from the People's Republic of China who came to France about four years ago and who now lives in Paris. He is part of a Chinese artistic community in France, and he has given me a number of leads, both in approaching the phenomenon of Chinese emigrant artists and for the art of his own country as well. To return to your question about former European colonies, I will approach them in a pragmatic manner, and not a theoretical one. In these countries you find a widespread tendency to harmonize traditional calligraphy with Ecole de Paris painting, and the work is technically often quite remarkable. I have to admit, however, that this type of work does not particularly interest me. It is too fabricated, and one knows all too well how it came about.

My method will be, first of all, to proceed by visual criteria alone—my own vision and that of the colleagues with whom I am preparing and discussing this project. If we encounter visually astonishing material, we will go further and visit the artists to find out more about the history and the context of the work. I want to show *individual artists*, not movements or schools. In that sense, I am trying to do exactly the opposite of what the Biennale de Paris has traditionally done when it has relied for its exhibition selections on the information provided by the cultural functionaries of individual countries, and has presented artists who were more or less imitating the mainstream culture of the Western world—whether it was the Ecole de Paris or New York School painting.

**BB:** The central tool which bourgeois hegemonic culture (that is, white, male, Western culture) has traditionally used to exclude or marginalize all other cultural practices is the abstract concept of "quality." How will you avoid this most intricate of all problems in your selection criteria if you operate by "visual" terms alone?

**JHM:** The term "quality" has been eliminated from my vocabulary, since there is simply no convincing system to establish relative and binding criteria of quality for such a project. We know very well that even the directors of the great Western museums do not have any reliable criteria to establish a consensus on this issue. But of course one has to develop criteria, and some are more tangible and rigorous than others. There are criteria to be derived from the physicality of

**"Our basic idea is to question the relationship of our culture to other cultures of the world. I oppose the idea that one can only look at another culture to exploit it."-JHM**

the work, from the relationship between the maker of the object and the community which relates to that object, from the socio-politics and cultural context of that object.

**BB:** When exhibitions are organized in the United States from a critical perspective that challenges mainstream hegemonic culture (the standard prejudicial response one always hears is: That's very interesting work indeed, but it lacks "quality.")

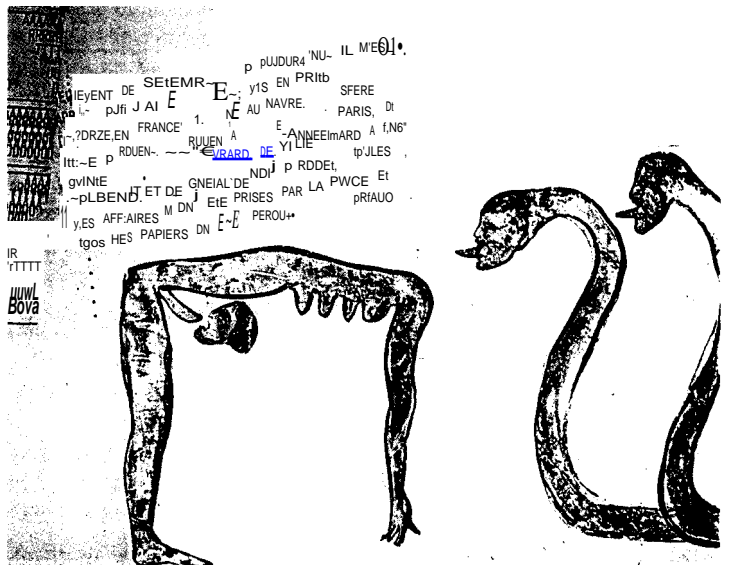
**JHM:** That's what happens when one groups artists together by country or geo-political context. But that is not my approach. We are selecting individual *artists* from a wide variety of contexts, and it is the individuality of these artists which guarantees the level of our exhibition. That brings us back to the criterion of "quality"...

**BB:** But certain works (for example, by feminist artists) distinguish themselves precisely by challenging and criticizing that very notion of abstract quality, because the term itself is, of course, already invested with interest, privilege, control and exclusion.

**JHM:** Certainly. We are going through a phase in which all these concepts are being transformed and re-evaluated, and we are gradually moving on to different concepts. This change is happening first of all on the level of theory, and meanwhile we do not yet have an unreliable means or any solid bases to articulate these changes in actual exhibition practice. But that should not deter us from trying to develop them.

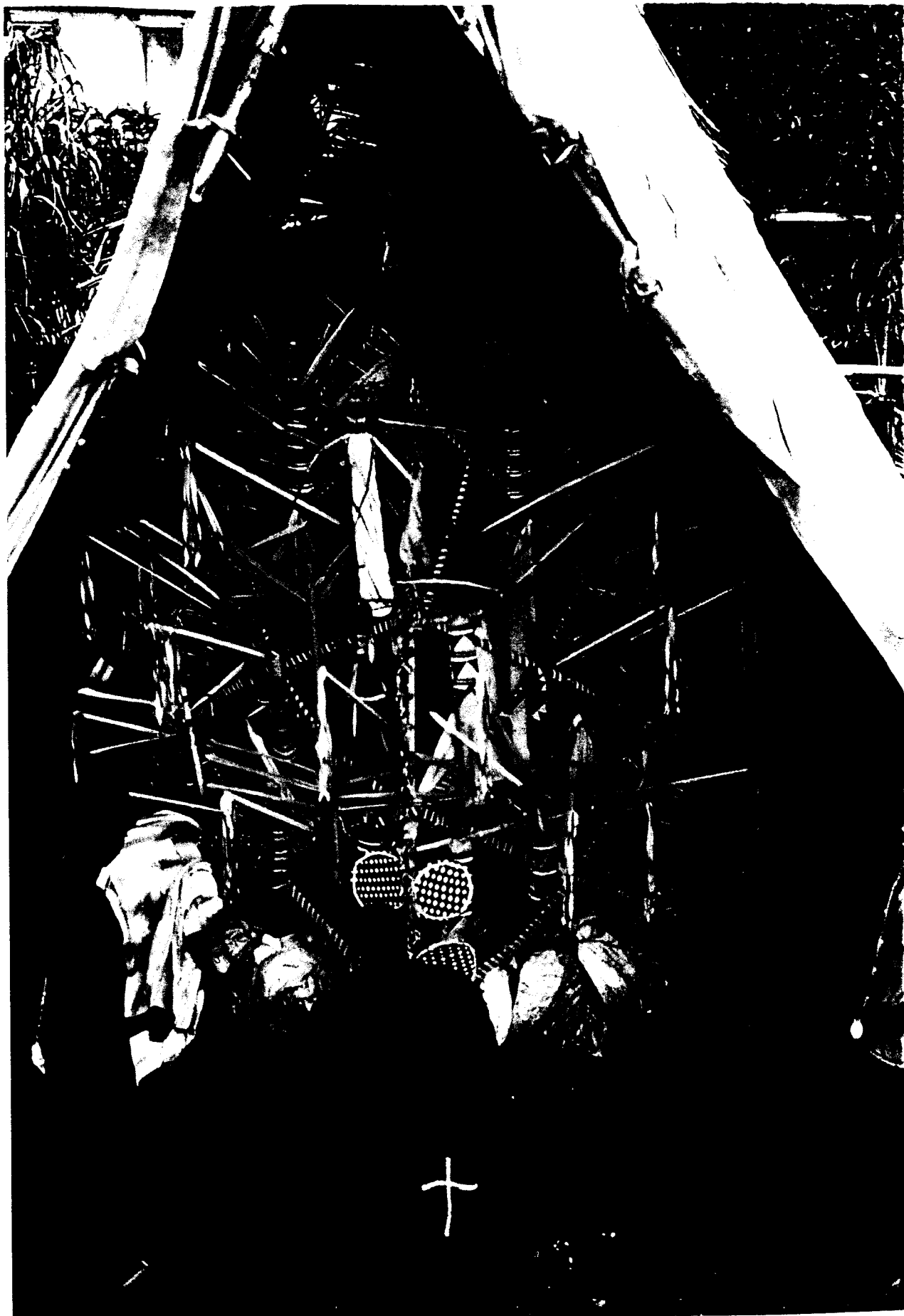
**BB:** In the course of the last ten years or so, Western modernism as a hegemonic culture has been criticized from the perspectives of other cultural practices as much as from the inside. For some time, it has no longer seemed acceptable to treat modernism as a universal international language and style, governing all countries of advanced industrial culture as well as the countries of the so-called Second and Third Worlds. This change in attitude became particu

*continued on page 21.*



**Nancy Spero (U.S.):** *Codex Artand (VI) (detail)*, 1971, paint and collage on paper, 20V2 by 124 inches. Private collection.

Mike Chukwukelu  
(Nigeria): **Ijele**  
Mask, 1989, mixed  
mediums. Except  
where noted, all  
photos this article  
courtesy Musee  
National d'Art  
Moderne.



# The Whole Earth Show

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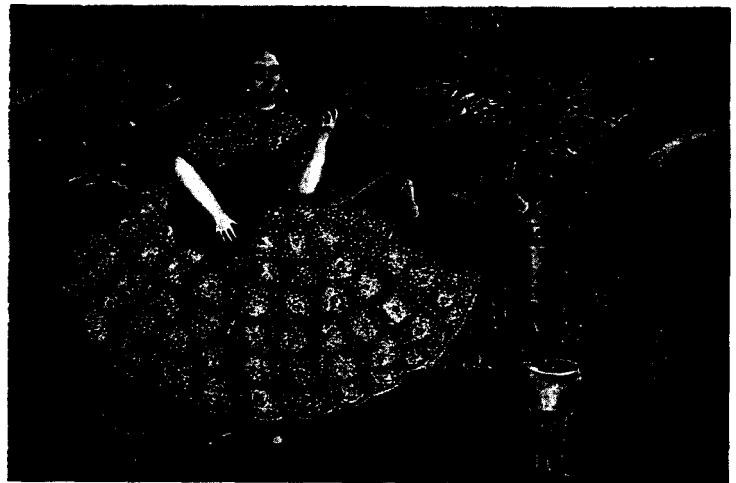
larly obvious in the increasing attacks on the International Style in architecture and in our recognition that it was necessary to take national and regional specificities and traditions much more into consideration than hegemonic modernism had allowed for. Does your exhibition project take its point of departure from similar critical perspectives?

**JHM:** Absolutely. That is precisely the reason we want to build a truly international exhibition that transcends the traditional framework of Euro-American contemporary culture. Rather than showing that abstraction is a universal language, or that the return to figuration is now happening everywhere in the world, I want to show the *real differences* and the specificity of different cultures.

**BB:** But what are the "real differences" between the different cultures at this point? Western hegemonic centers use Third World countries as providers of cheap labor (the hidden proletariat of the so-called post-industrialist societies). They devastate their ecological resources and infrastructure, and use them as dumping grounds for their industrial waste. Don't you think that by excluding these political and economic aspects, and by focusing exclusively on the cultural relationships between the Western centers and developing nations, you will inevitably generate a neo-colonialist reading?

**JHM:** Alfredo Jaar's and Dennis Adams's projects for the exhibition are in fact concerned precisely with these global problems. Your argument seems rather weak. It implies that visitors to the exhibition would be unable to recognize the relationships between Western centers and the Third World. Our generation-and we were not the first-has denounced these phenomena you refer to, and things have after all developed a little bit. One cannot say that we still live in a neo-colonialist period. Obviously, the Western world maintains dominant relationships with respect to the Third World, but that should not prohibit us from communicating with the people of these nations, nor from looking at their cultural practices.

**BB:** Let me ask you a more specific question. Concerning a possible contribution from New Zealand, for example, would you choose an artist who works with video and who produces studies that document the activities of the Maori work force in the sheep-shearing industry, the slaughterhouses and the meat-packing factories? Or would you try to find a Maori sculptor who produces traditional artisanal forms of sculptural objects that do not deal with such



**Julio Galan (Mexico):** *When the Shies Laugh, the Earth Cries*, 1986, oil on canvas, 70 by 109.44 Inches. Galerie Arte Actual Mexicano.

everyday working conditions?

**JHM:** It could be both. It would obviously be very interesting to show both individuals, as long as both of them produced work that was sufficiently strong ...

**BB:** But what are your criteria for the "strength" of a work?

**JHM:** The intensity of communication of meaning ...

**BB:** Meaning for us, or meaning for *them*?

**JHM:** For us, obviously. That is important because whatever meaning a practice has for its practitioners is not relevant to us if it cannot be communicated to us.

**BB:** But isn't this approach, once again, precisely the worst ethnocentric fallacy? A particular practice communicates to us, and therefore it is relevant for the exhibition. Worse yet, this approach smacks, once again, of cultural (and political) imperialism. We request that these cultures deliver their cultural products for our inspection and *our consumption*, instead of making an attempt to dismantle the false centrality of our own approach and attempting to develop criteria from within the needs and conventions of these cultures.

**JHM:** I understand very well what you are trying to say, but how would you actually go about developing these immanent criteria? I have determined a number of them and applied them for the definition of the participants of the exhibition, but inevitably these criteria are different from case to case, and eventually they generate a considerable number of contradictions. I do not really see how one can altogether avoid an ethnocentric vision. I have to accept it to some extent-in spite of all the self-reflexive corrections that we tried to incorporate into our method.

On the other hand, I am particularly interested in the difference between the meaning of the object in its original context and that which it has in ours. Isn't this exhibition a real opportunity to question ourselves about this vital problem? What is especially important to recognize is that this will be the first truly international exhibition of worldwide contemporary art. But I don't pretend in any way that it will be a complete survey of the planet. Rather, it is a sampling that I have chosen according to more or less accurate, yet somewhat random criteria. I cannot select objects in the manner of ethnographers, who choose them according to their importance and function inside a culture, even though such objects may "mean" or "communicate" very little-or nothing at all-to us. Inevitably there is an esthetic judgment at work in the selections for my exhibition,



**Mashe Gershant (Israel):** *Righteousness Shall Go Before Him*, 1988, Oil on canvas, 52.49 by 78.4 inches.

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## Che Whole Earth Show

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nd that includes all the inevitable arbitrariness that esthetic selection entails.

1g: The other side of the ethnocentric fallacy is the cult of resumed authenticity, whereby we try to force other cultural practices to remain within the domain of what we consider the primitive," the original "other." In fact, artists in these cultures often claim—and rightfully so—to have developed their own forms of high culture, which correspond to that of the Western world and its institutional values and linguistic conventions. They therefore insist on being looked at in terms of their own high cultural achievements, and not in terms of our projection of authentic otherness.

JHM: That's why we have conceived of the exhibition as a situation in which dialogic relationships occur between the artists from the Western centers and those from the so-called geo-political margins. But this exhibition will also establish other types of cross-cultural relationships: for example, between the manner in which the repetition of identical models functions in Tibetan Tanka painting and in the work of a contemporary painter such as Daniel Buren, who has consistently repeated the model which he established for himself in the late 1960s. After all, Tanka painting is still a living artistic practice, even though we only know it from ethnographic museums.

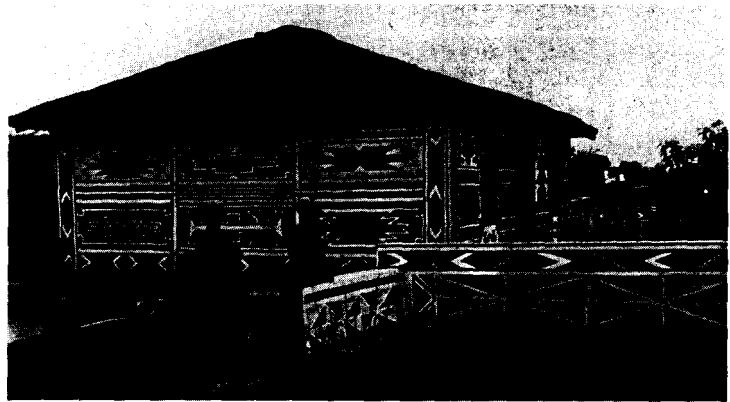
Let us not forget that many of the societies that we are looking at do not know or agree with Western divisions of culture into "high" and "low," or ancient and recent. Australian aboriginal culture, for example, does not separate high culture from popular culture at all. There is simply *one* traditional culture which they now deploy to defend their identity against the increasing onslaught of Western industrial culture. Even if they are called "Bushmen," they obviously drive cars and have guns. Nevertheless, they teach their children how to use the bow and arrow and how to pursue their cultural traditions as a form of resistance against violation by Western industrial culture. That is also the reason they were eager to accept my invitation to show their work in a museum in Paris—outside its original functional context, so to speak, but yet within its function of defending their aboriginal identity.

BB: That raises another problem. How will you avoid the total estheticization of their work and of all other exhibited forms of cultural manifestations from non-Western contexts once they enter your museum/exhibition? How can you supply your visitors with sufficient visual and textual information and yet avoid burying the actual experience of these objects in didactic apparatus?

JHM: Obviously, I do not want to construct a didactic exhibition with an overwhelming number of text panels. It is self-evident that all the artists will receive the same treatment in both the exhibition and the catalogue (and the catalogue will of course provide the crucial information and the didactic assistance needed for such an exhibition).

BB: Your decision to emphasize "esthetic" criteria is therefore a pragmatic one—a means of enabling you to construct an exhibition from this heterogeneous mass of objects?

JHM: Obviously, I will work with the architects (Jacques Lichnerowicz and Xavier Ramond), and we already have numerous ideas about various forms of installation that will convey to the viewers the complexity of the situation—that will indicate to them that they are in fact not looking at traditional museum objects, but rather that they are confronted with objects from totally different contexts. We have to keep in mind, however, that this is an exhibition, not a discourse. Yet I know that exhibitions cannot claim innocence, and



*Esther Mahlangu (South Africa). Wall painting, 1986.*

our project will be critical and visual at the same time. What interests me in particular are the visual shocks that such an exhibition can possibly produce and the thinking that it might provoke. But most of all, I would like to see it operate as a catalyst for future projects and investigations.

BB: I imagine that your project could provoke a lot of skepticism, if not anger, among those authorities in the art world whose precise role it is to defend the rigorous divisions and criteria of hegemonic culture?

JHM: In the art world, yes. But not among artists, who have generally responded with great enthusiasm and interest ...

BB: Even if this project threatens to displace them a little bit from their centrality in the reception of contemporary art?

JHM: I don't think they are worried about that—anyway, they don't have to worry. I believe that every creative individual is deeply interested in the activities of other creative individuals in the world. After all, an element of curiosity and surprise is part of artistic experience in general. But over the last few years, as far as the big international group shows were concerned, you didn't even have to see the list of participating artists in advance. You could pretty much tell beforehand who was going to be in these exhibitions. With our project, the situation is quite different. There will be many surprises, and the art world will not always like it. But they will certainly see things that they have never seen before. I am aiming at a much larger public. In fact, I have already noticed that when I discuss the project with people from outside our little museum-and-gallery world, it seems that this exhibition will really have something to offer which goes way beyond the traditional boundaries of our conception of contemporary visual culture.

BB: It sounds as though, among other things, your exhibition is also aiming at decentering the traditional social definitions of the art public as well?

JHM: Absolutely. I want to exhibit artists from all over the world, and I want to leave the ghetto of contemporary Western art within which we have found ourselves during the last few decades. Obviously, a broader public will realize that, for once, this is an exhibition that will be much more accessible to them—that it is an exhibition that operates on totally different terms. If we don't at least try to initiate this development, then we are really in trouble.

1. Henry John Drewal and Margaret Thompson Drewal, *Gelede: Art and Female Power Among the Yoruba*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1983.