

APPENDIX A

The Global Issue

*When asked why he wished to be buried upside down,
Diogenes replied, "Down will soon be up. "*

"Writing before the exhibition," I remarked in the catalogue of the Centre Pompidou's *Magiciens de la terre* show in Paris last summer [1989], "I do not know (nor may I after) how well or badly it will fulfill its post-Modern agenda." Now the exhibition has happened, occasioning a hail of mostly negative criticism rather similar in premise to the attacks (including my own) on the Museum of Modern Art's *"Primitivism" in 20th Century Art* show in New York in 1984. One has to be sympathetic to the counter-hegemonic impulse behind this criticism of *Magiciens de la terre*. Still, in the end, it misses the point.

Like many viewers, I had problems with the show. There were many distressing signs of residual colonial attitudes. The title, for example, suggested a romantic tilt toward the idea of the "native artist" as not only a magician (with the term's suggestion of the pre-rational) but also as somehow close to the earth (not *magiciens du monde*, but *de la terre*), as if in some pre-civilized state of nature. The curators were understandably motivated by a desire not to use the word "artists," in deference to the ongoing anthropological debate about whether so-called "primitive" peoples have the ideology (essentially, in our terms, Kantian) that makes objects "art" in our sense of the word. Still, an aura of Rousseau and of the Noble Savage clings round their title. And the word *magicien* really does not express very precisely what Hans Haacke does, or Lawrence

Weiner, or Barbara Kruger, or Cheri Samba, or many others in the show, both Eastern and Western-or Northern or Southern.

The tilt toward the cliché of the earthy native was also visible in the selection and installation of the works. Despite the fact, for example, that a number of artists in India are currently attempting to work out a thoughtful conflation of Indian and Western styles and themes, the curators chose to exhibit primarily traditional, craftlike work from that country. Actually, most of the artists in *Magiciens* who might be described as cool, intellectual, and conceptual were Westerners (Weiner, Kruger, Haacke, Daniel Buren, and so on); and in general (though not without exception), the artists whose work seemed most earthy and ritualistic were non-Western (Esther Mahlangu of South Africa, Cyprien Tokoudagba of Benin, Nuhe Kaji Bajrocharya of Nepal, Joe Ben Jr., a Native American sand painter, and so on). It would not have been hard to reverse, or to balance, those categories, perhaps by placing more emphasis on work that attempts to bridge the gap. (But maybe that is another show, and the next stage in the post-colonialist process.) Indeed, the curators may have intended a gesture at such a balance through the huge Richard Long mud painting in the portion of the show at La Villette—the "earthiest" piece in the exhibition, literally, and by a European artist. But as many seem to have felt, the overriding presence of the Long circle, which dominated everything at La Villette, smacked of hierarchy. Even more unfortunate was the aboriginal sand painting lying on the floor beneath it, as if conquered or raped.

More could be said, and has been said by others, to indicate how the curators failed to arrive at a fully post-colonialist show. Not least would be the atrocious catalogue statements by the curators themselves, with their talk of spirituality implying universals they may not have intended, and their rather clumsy, gung-ho enthusiasms. But for all this, it nevertheless seems to me that the generally negative press reaction to *Magiciens de la terre* was mistaken. (Though I wrote what the curators called the keynote statement in the catalogue, I made no curatorial contribution to the exhibition, and have no ongoing connection with the Pompidou. My defense of the show is

based on my belief in its premises, not in the details of the curation.)

Part of the reason for the often hostile reaction to *Magiciens* may have been the fact that it was not seen in the United States and the "*Primitivism*" show was not seen in Europe. One cannot really understand *Magiciens* without thinking of what the "*Primitivism*" show meant in terms of history and society.

It was in a moment of attitudinal change that the "*Primitivism*" show appeared, like a holding action for classical Modernism. There was the Kantian doctrine of universal quality again; there was the Hegelian view that history is a story of Europeans leading dark-skinned peoples toward spiritual realization; there was the sense of mainstream and periphery. The fact that so-called "primitive" art resembled Western advanced art seemed to be attributed primarily not to the incontestable fact that the Western artists had imitated "primitive" works, but to the idea of an underlying affinity between Western artists and "primitives" that demonstrated the universality of the Modernist canon. The colonized nations were called upon to testify to the superiority of the colonizers. It was a kind of police action.

Magiciens was conceived in the midst of the widespread controversy over the "*Primitivism*" show. The hope it embodied was to find a post-colonialist way to exhibit the works of First and Third World artists together, a way that would involve no projections about hierarchy, or about mainstream and periphery, or about history having a goal. Works by 50 Western and 50 non-Western artists would be exhibited in a neutral, loose, unsystematic way that would not imply transcultural value judgments. The exhibition would be superficially similar to "*Primitivism*" in that it too would exhibit First and Third World artists side by side in a major Western museum. But where "*Primitivism*" had left the "primitive" works anonymous and undated, *Magiciens* would treat them exactly as it treated Western pieces. Where "*Primitivism*" had been Eurocentric and hierarchic, *Magiciens* would level all hierarchies, letting the artworks appear without any fixed ideological framework around them. Where "*Primitivism*" presented "primitive" works as footnotes to their Western Modernist imitations, *Magiciens* would choose each work by what ap-

peared to its curators to be its interest as itself, not by its value at illustrating something other than itself. (The curators' taste, it seemed to me, functioned in the selection process as a kind of random element.) Where "*Primitivism*" came equipped with a huge, hectoring catalogue enforcing the curators' view of virtually everything in the show, *Magiciens* just put the stuff out there unexplained, or, rather, untamed by explanation. As for the idea of a center, *Magiciens*, at least in the catalogue, would make a gesture toward dismissing it. Each artist was given two pages in the volume; on each spread was a small map that showed the artist's home as the center of the globe.

Perhaps the key fact is that the two exhibitions embodied radically different ideas of history. "*Primitivism*" was still based on the Hegelian myth of Western cultures leading the rest of the world forward; *Magiciens* was the epitaph of this view, and of the Kantian idea of the universal value judgment. If history has no goal, then there can be no basis on which to claim that one culture is more advanced toward the goal than any other. Suddenly, each culture is simply the most advanced example of its type. Each culture has an equal claim to be just where it is.

The "*Primitivism*" show was based on a belief in universally valid quality judgments, particularly those made by the curators. The *Magiciens* show hoped to be able to acknowledge that value judgments are not innate or universal but conditioned by social context, and hence that they only really fit works emerging from the same context. This thought does not mark the end of the idea of quality, only its relativization. When one walked through *Magiciens*, instead of automatically thinking this or that was good or bad, one might be provoked to attend to the limitations of one's ideas of good and bad: to confront the fact that often one was looking at objects for which one had no criteria except some taken from a completely different, and possibly completely irrelevant, arena. The absence of a scholarly catalogue left the viewer confronted simply with the works and the bewilderment they might produce.

Criticism of *Magiciens* came from both the right and the left. To rightist critics, the show seemed a destroyer of Modernism. The curators had given up the Western claim to being a more advanced civilization; they had given up our long-

claimed right to judge other cultures by our own standards, and to treat these judgments as somehow objective. This anxiety must underlie the unpublished remark of a prominent British critic that *Magiciens* marked the end of Western civilization-as if Western civilization were constituted precisely by the claim to hegemony; as if yielding that claim, one yielded all.

Critics approaching from the left expressed unhappiness at how depoliticized the show was. They questioned the motives of the institution, suspecting it of, among other things, attempting to recapture French cultural claims to global relevance. They brought up the tradition of French colonialism, sometimes implying that the show might better have transpired in Kinshasa or Djibouti-places where, unfortunately, it probably would not have affected much the way the Western art world operates. They questioned the idea of introducing these artists into the Western market system, like innocent lambs being led to the slaughter. They questioned the imposition of bourgeois individualist values on these artists from supposedly communal societies. They spoke of *Magiciens* as if it were "*Primitivism*."

The bone everyone has been picking-right, left, or centrist-is the lame curation. The show didn't add up in so many ways, despite the good sense of its underlying premises. I don't argue that point. (In fact, I feel that the show's inconsistencies saved it from the rigidity of a single framework of value.) What I am defending is an idea that I think was never really in question and that I doubt anyone wants directly to attack. All the criticism of the show that I have seen fails to confront the monumental fact that this was the first major exhibition consciously to attempt to discover a post-colonialist way to exhibit objects together. It was a major event in the social history of art, not in its esthetic history. *Magiciens* opened the door of the long-insular and hermetic Western art world to artists. The question is not really whether the people who opened the door had gravy on their jackets, or slipped and fell as they were opening it. The question is this and only this: as we enter the global village of the '90s, would any of us *really* rather that the door remain closed?

Some of the criticism of the show was honorably motivated

by a compassionate concern for the Third World artists. This concern arises understandably from a skepticism about whether the door is really open, how far it's open, and how long it will stay open. It has happened before that the Western art market, seeking new goods, has elevated a previously peripheral group to the mainstream and, when it didn't work out financially, ejected them again. (One thinks, for example, of the Mexican muralists of the '30s and of the graffiti artists of the early '80s.) But this time greater forces than those of the market seem to be mandating a reassessment of the boundaries of contemporary art. In the next few years we shall see whether down becomes up. It may be that now the deck of cards of Western art history has been thrown irrevocably into the air—that there are unknown elements in the game now, elements not yet under any particular control.

APPENDIX B

ART/artifact

What Makes Something Art?

The following remarks were delivered at a Center for African Art colloquium in New York City on April 11, 1988. Susan Vogel, director of the Center had mounted an exhibition titled ART/artifact, which was intended partly to investigate some of the issues raised by the ideological conflict between the "Primitivism" show and Magiciens de la terre. Susan Vogel, Arthur Danto, James Faris, Enid Schildkrout, and I discussed the question, "What makes something art?" My talk was made from notes and does not represent a finished text.

It has been traditional in our culture at least since Kant to assume that the category of the artwork has something to do with the category of the beautiful. Of course many artworks do; but it seems that they need not. There are things which are beautiful but which are not art—such as a sunset—and things which are art but which are not beautiful—such as Joseph Beuys' *Fat Chair*. To narrow the category of the beautiful, to limit it to things made by people, as Kant struggles to do, does not solve the problem. There still are beautiful things—such as a handsomely designed automobile hubcap or glass bottle—which are not art, and there are still non-beautiful