Contemporary Art and Anthropology: Shared Experiences

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REFERENCES

Jimmie Durham: At the Center of the World, Los Angeles : Hammer Museum ; Munich : Prestel, 2017. Sous la dir. d'Anne Ellegood

Leiris unlimited, Paris : CNRS éd., 2017. Sous la dir. de Denis Hollier, Jean Jamin

Persona : étrangeté humaine, Arles : Actes Sud ; Paris : Musée du quai Branly, 2016. Sous la dir. de Thierry Dufrêne, Emmanuelle Grimaud, Anne-Christine Taylor, Denis Vidal

Dioramas, Paris : Palais de Tokyo : Flammarion, 2017. Sous la dir. de Katharina Dohm, Claire Garnier, Laurent Le Bon, Florence Ostende

- 1 Over 20 years ago, in his essay *The Artist as Ethnographer?*¹, American critic and art historian Hal Foster, identified an “ethnographic turn” in art. Drawing on the work of anthropologist James Clifford, particularly his concept of “ethnographic surrealism”², the author confirmed and even amplified what would become a commonplace theme in the art world. Anti-colonial and anti-imperialist struggles, along with the critical works initiated in the field of social science and humanities in the 1980s (cultural and postcolonial studies) and their circulation widely contributed to this phenomenon. It gradually became the *modus operandi* of numerous artists, as shown by the different art forms stemming from a taste for archives, reflections on problems of the subject, a distrust for ethnocentrism and its consequences, and a strong interest in the identity complex in these times of subaltern studies. Documenta 14, curated by Adam Szymczyk in Athens and Kassel during the summer of 2017 confirms their permanence through the reuse of museographical devices including showcases, the massive use of documents, documentary films, etc. Simultaneously, for the past few years, anthropology exhibitions curated by anthropologists pay considerable attention to contemporary art. This new

sensibility – the sensory turn³ – is interpreted as supplanting a certain distrust of images that had long haunted the discipline. World-famous anthropologist and art-world celebrity Tim Ingold challenges the division between erudition and poetry, which according to him puts a strain on the very production of knowledge. He supports the idea of a “shift from science to art”, of blurring the lines in order to deeply renew knowledge.⁴ According to Ingold, the practice of “doing” is linked to art and architecture but it is also crucial in the fields of archaeology and anthropology. This seems like an implicit recognition of the substantial input from contemporary art, in the context of the ontological turn in the field of anthropology. Could this sustained attention for contemporary forms on the part of anthropologists possibly renew critical approaches and art history? Paying attention to both these kinds of exhibition – contemporary art exhibitions that refer to anthropology and anthropology exhibitions that call on contemporary art – emphasises the fact that sharing these experiences can be productive.

- 2 Some recent events among others can help theorise these hybridisations. The critical apparatuses that accompany them help address the different historical moments when anthropology and art worked hand in hand if not symmetrically. Although the analogies between some artistic practices initiated in the 1980s and the uses of ethnography are obvious and partly reinforce the critical function of certain works, those who study them must nonetheless avoid certain pitfalls. First of all, they should avoid totally assimilating the figure of the ethnographer or anthropologist with that of the artist, at the risk of creating confusion. Jean Jamin made this clear on the subject of the model of ethnographic Surrealism, on the one hand by accusing James Clifford of slovenliness, because he defined the contributors to *Documents* magazine, who gravitated around Georges Bataille, as surrealists; on the other by defending the disciplinarian specificity of ethnography and its scientific requirements.⁵ Secondly, they should not stay limited to a reflection that, by focusing only on the dichotomy between the Self and the Other and its sterile denunciation, risks endlessly reproducing the play between exclusive and stigmatising differences. Finally, they should paradoxically guard themselves from giving in to anthropological tropism. In this respect, the exhibition *Dioramas* and its catalogue may prove a disappointment to the upholders of the “ethnographic turn” theory and its political aspect, in the sense that the show, in “the tradition of impossible exhibitions” (p. 8), only partly explores the strictly ethnographic aspect of dioramas. However, the genealogy of its uses helpfully reminds the reader that since their invention in the middle of the nineteenth century, dioramas exist at the junction between popular entertainment and a representative function with educational aims. There is no question that they are also connected to logics of power and domination in the colonial context. But on the whole, the texts that are republished or translated for the first time in the catalogue remind the reader that the diorama’s role lay at the intersection between art, entertainment industry, natural history, history, ethnography and imagination. This is what makes its study so rich but also problematic, as it questions disciplinary boundaries and categories of understanding, bringing to mind Georges Bataille and Georges-Henri Rivière, who sought to conceptualise the world’s heterogeneity, indicating, on the cover of *Documents* that the journal explored archaeology, fine art, ethnography and popular entertainment [*variétés*].
- 3 The conference proceedings organised by Denis Hollier and Jean Jamin, in the continuity of the remarkable 2015 exhibition at the Centre Pompidou-Metz, *Leiris & co*, is an ambitious take on one of the seminal figures of this debate, Michel Leiris, whom they

describe as unlimited. The articles in this book try and encompass his unique thought in which the writer, the ethnographer, the analyst and the art lover coexist *all at the same time*.

- 4 The inextricability of these different roles doubtlessly conditions Leiris' deeply topical character, which is recognisable in the works of many artists today, at the risk of mythifying him and congealing his legacy into a vulgate or even a brand. Julien Bondaz describes a figure that "oscillates between two poles" (p. 89), whose tools for thinking are the objectified document *and* the private event. Leiris offers a politics of decentering to White men of the XXth century, that situates the subject and relativises him by moving him "outside himself". Leiris replaces the shared hope of the 1920s — that the overthrow of Western values would originate in the imagined and unknown habits of supposedly primitive women and men — with his doubts concerning his own presence in the world, his writing and his culture, through the conscious practice of introspection and self-criticism, honed by his ethnographic experiences. By offering the possibility of freedom from the primitivist fantasy, his works in their entirety are an invitation to recognising the Other as a political subject.

- 5 The catalogue for the American retrospective of Jimmie Durham's work broadens this reflection by considering a later generation. The essays in this comprehensive iconographic collection evoke the context in which this practice emerged within the art of the 1980s, revisiting the representation of subalterns, one of the pillars of the ethnographic turn, in which Durham at once played the role of precursor and killjoy. Even though the artist draws inspiration from the coyote trickster figure, this has nothing to do with an identitarian reclaiming of his Native-American origins, as one might imagine after a quick overview of his work.⁶ Instead, for the most part, his work focuses on the processes of identification, showing how the question of identity, treated in a literal way, undermines all possibilities of emancipation. The actual creation of the work, which involves assembling materials, objects and texts, offers a salutary critical distance in which the diversity of objects recombined with each other in multiple ways encourages a ceaseless rereading of the world. The title of the exhibition is a reiteration of one of the recurring themes of his art: escaping all essentialist or absolutist approaches, by considering the numerous possible centres of the world. In the manner of Leiris, Durham engages in a praxis of decentring. The authors of the catalogue emphasise the fact that his voluntary exile from the United States made words and action coincide, in opposition to an aestheticised and depoliticised critic. The artist knowingly creates a balance between seriousness and humour, irony and casualness. Anne Elgood also refers to this, by evoking some of his first installations, such as *On loan from the Museum of the American Indian* (1985), in which Durham diverts the representation systems of anthropology museums and the stereotypes they can convey, clichés of alterity as fantasy. Durham chooses a game-like stance in the hopes it will best grasp the order of the world in order to rethink it. When, poet-style, he "animates" stones — his "collaborators" as Jessica L. Horton pleasantly puts it — he is attacking ontological divisions, by refusing naturalised categories.

- 6 Unveiling the lability of the boundaries between things and beings is a poetic affirmation of art's heuristic capacity. It is precisely this capacity that anthropologists apply in their exhibitions. When Philippe Descola curated *La Fabrique des images* in 2010 at the Quai Branly museum, contemporary works were paradoxically absent from the show, as though they resisted the distribution of regimes of Descola's theory (animism,

naturalism, totemism and analogy). However, at the same time, and following problems raised by anthropology's ontological turn, Anselm Franke, a curator with an extensive knowledge of the contemporary art scene, invited Bruno Latour and Eduardo Viveiros de Castro to contribute to the catalogue for *Animism*⁷, an exhibition that was initially shown at Extra City in Antwerp, and that based its approach on the question of the art work as an exploration of boundaries beyond nature and culture. This kind of collaboration is ongoing, for example with the recent *Persona* exhibition, in which Anne-Christine Taylor, an anthropologist, declares, along with Thierry Dufrêne, an art historian, that this function of art helps consolidate the creation of anthropological knowledge, or even orient it. This exhibition's subject was to attribute personalities, in different degrees of animation, to artefacts from different societies and cultures, art works and robotic "beings", thus acknowledging the redistribution of what constituted until then the understanding of one's surroundings. Taylor emphasises how contemporary artworks and exhibitions, such as Mike Kelley's *The Uncanny* exhibition in 2004, can open new paths for research. Beyond the ethnographic turn and the overly-systematic dimension of the artworks it refers to, and the all-encompassing ontological turn, the major trend in contemporary anthropology; artists reveal these presences, playing around borders, clearing new paths and opening the eyes of researchers, in a space where interdisciplinarity exceeds the mere collaboration between the agents of the art world and anthropology, and where the production of knowledge takes place through sharing rather than confusion. Although, as Julien Bondaz wrote of Leiris, "The ethnographer's eye is also the dreamer's eye" (p. 69).

NOTES

1. Foster, Hal, "The Artist as Ethnographer?", *The Traffic in Culture: Refiguring Art and Anthropology*, Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1995, p. 302-309
2. Clifford, James, "On Ethnographic Surrealism", *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, vol. 23, no.4, October 1981, p. 539-564
3. Rutten, Kris. Van, An. Soetaert, Dienderen & Ronald, "Revisiting the ethnographic turn in contemporary art", *Critical Arts*, vol. 27, no.5, p. 460-461
4. Ingold, Tim. *Marcher avec les dragons*, Bruxelles: Zones sensibles, 2013, p. 11-12
5. Jean Jamin encouraged cautiousness by criticising James Clifford, "L'ethnographie mode d'emploi. De quelques rapports de l'ethnologie avec le malaise dans la civilisation", in Hainard, Jacques. Kaehr, Roland. *Le Mal et la douleur*, Neuchâtel: Musée d'ethnographie de Neuchâtel, 1986, p. 48
6. Jimmie Durham is now a victim of this ethnicism. At the time of the opening of his exhibition at the Walker Art Center, three Cherokee nations officially did not recognise Durham's Cherokee citizenship. See <https://walkerart.org/calendar/2017/jimmie-durham-center-world>
7. *Animism*, Berlin ; New York : Sternberg Press, 2010. Ed. by Anselm Franke

AUTHORS

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Baptiste Brun is a lecturer and researcher at Rennes 2 university. His work mostly focuses on the interactions between different art worlds, psychiatry and ethnography since the end of World War II. He co-edited the edition of the unpublished manuscript of *L'Almanach de l'Art brut* (5 Continents, 2016) and is the author of *Jean Dubuffet et la besogne de l'Art brut: critique du primitivisme*, which will be published by Les Presses du réel. He is also the co-curator of the exhibition *Jean Dubuffet, un Barbare en Europe* (Mucem, 2019).