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From *Magiciens de la Terre* to the Globalization of the Art World: Going Back to a Historic Exhibition

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REFERENCES

Jean-Hubert Martin, *L'Art au large*, Paris : Flammarion, 2012, (Ecrire l'art)
Making Art Global (Part 2): 'Magiciens de la terre' 1989, Londres : Afterall, 2013, (Exhibition Histories). Sous la dir. de Lucy Steeds

EDITOR'S NOTE

Translated from the French by Simon Pleasance

- ¹ In 1989, *Magiciens de la terre* was introduced as the “first truly international exhibition, bringing together artists from all over the world.”¹ In 2013, the Musée National d'Art Moderne (MNAM) in Paris will unveil its permanent collections to the public for the first time from the angle of “plural modernities”, giving pride of place to art scenes developed beyond the West. As if through an interplay of echoes and connotations, the museum is linking back up with its initial experiments, the better to adapt them to a radically altered international art scene. The binary clash of the two East-West blocs typical of the Cold War years, which placed a non-aligned “Third” World in the shadow of their rivalry, was followed by a varied host of dynamic emerging scenes, underwritten by a booming art market. For more than twenty years, publications discussing *Magiciens de la terre*, as well as exhibitions devoted to contemporary art beyond the West, have grown in number in the wake of the debates to which postmodern and post-colonial theories have given

rise. Most of these initiatives have been undertaken in the Anglo-Saxon countries. In France, these debates do not really seem to have borne fruit, at least at the institutional level.² It is now more necessary than ever to go back over the history of the way *Magiciens de la terre* was devised, the debates stirred up by the show, and its long-term impact, if we are to understand the issues raised by the current state of French institutions in the light of these international discussions. Two books beckon: one, *L'Art au large*, consists of Jean-Hubert Martin's writings, published and otherwise; the other is the second volume of the work dealing with the history of exhibitions, titled *Making Art Global*, devoted exclusively to *Magiciens de la terre*.

- 2 For Lucy Steeds, author of an excellent analysis of the exhibition, well informed by archival research and hitherto unpublished interviews, *Magiciens de la terre* ushers in a far-reaching international exhibition style, which really came into its own in the context of the neo-liberal globalization of capitalism. Prior to 1989, "an 'international exhibition' meant US artists and a handful of Germans".³ Paris was probably keen to take up the torch of modern art, "stolen" as it had been by New York after the Second World War, and so decided to invest in an ambitious exhibition divided between two venues: the Halle de la Villette, and the Centre Pompidou. Lucy Steeds tells us how the exhibition was funded, with one of its major patrons being the television channel Canal Plus. As surprising as this may seem, the channel's involvement was not limited just to money: it also helped in the acquisition of some of the works on view, after the show--because where France's national institutions were concerned, their reception of the works was muted, not to say non-existent. Not only did the MNAM acquire just a very few works, but it also made a permanent loan of them to the National Museum of African and Western Arts (Musée National des Arts d'Afrique et d'Océanie, the MNAO) when Jean-Hubert Martin became its director in 1994. As if the breach opened up by the exhibition had no good reason to be at the Museum of Modern Art, and the works should be returned to their colonial origins, in the grand edifice built for them in 1931.⁴ This aspect of the history of collections, as underscored by Lucy Steeds, is little known, but it says a whole lot about the relation between French institutions and non-western contemporary art.
- 3 The event gave rise to much discussion abroad, but in France the issues raised by it remained in mid-air, just like the hesitancy accompanying the consideration of issues associated with the colonial heritage. Because if you refer to openness to the non-western world, you are perforce implying a consideration of that antagonistic and painful past.⁵ At the very moment when the postmodern and post-colonial theories aimed at breaking with the predominance of the "white, male, western" way of seeing things were being developed, the method adopted by Jean-Hubert Martin for choosing artists earned him much stern rebuke. If his approach may, in many respects, seem to reveal the relation maintained by France with regard to colonial issues, it is still quite unusual, and linked to the man's career: as a heritage curator, Jean-Hubert Martin was appointed director of the MNAM (Musée National d'Art Moderne, Centre Pompidou) in 1987. Throughout his career, he would ceaselessly push back the boundaries of the contemporary art world, question its limits and categories, and have an influence on the predominant taste by showing a preference for the emotions, sensibility and even the wondrous (cf. for example, *Altäre: Kunst zum Niederknien*, 2001). The anthology of writings in *L'Art au large* attests at once to this eclecticism, to the different milestones in Jean-Hubert Martin's itinerary, and to his determined desire to reply to the criticisms that were levelled at him at the time of *Magiciens de la terre*. To the reproach that he had not let the artists have

enough say, he replied with the *Rencontres africaines* at the Institut du Monde Arabe (1994); with regard to the de-contextualization of works, he organized the *Galerie des 5 continents* at the MNAO (1995 and 2000); he also re-asserted the decisions represented by *Magiciens* with the Lyon Biennale, *Partage d'exotismes* (2000). In a post-May '68 vein, what he had to say was often critical and challenging. Jean-Hubert Martin also expressed nostalgia for the approach of someone like André Breton, and the poetry emerging from the affinities woven in Renaissance cabinets of curiosities. *Magiciens de la terre* would thus almost bear some relation to *L'Exposition surréaliste d'objets* (1936), give or take a couple of details: "Out of a collector's fetishism attaching to the "loaded content" of the object, and fearful of the difficulties of communicating with the other, Breton and his entourage never invited a "savage" to exhibit in Paris. Half a century later, it was possible to take that step, thanks to the shrinkage of the planet caused by the intensification of communication and transportation."⁶ This absence of critical and historical remove in relation to the eye cast by the artist on "savages" calls to mind the distance adopted in 1984 in New York for the exhibition *Primitivism*. Attacked for its formalism, as well as for the modernist re-appropriation it undertook with regard to the arts of Africa and Oceania,⁷ the exhibition came in for harsh trans-Atlantic criticism, which had little impact in France, and does not seem to have been taken into account by Jean-Hubert Martin, who put *Magiciens de la terre* in a complementary relationship with *Primitivism*, but without fundamentally calling its principles into question. So western contemporary artworks were shown beside religious objects, and popular art, as if the better to rekindle the minds of modern artists who, in their day, were interested in masks and reliquary figures hailing from faraway lands. But in 1989 Jean-Hubert Martin chose living artists, and got them to come to Paris to produce *in situ* works. At the time, this attention paid to the present state of religious and popular art beyond the West was—and still is to this day—marginal and often overlooked in museums devoted to non-western arts, which tend to favour a vision of those dead or vanishing cultures. If Jean-Hubert Martin had clung to that dimension, the exhibition would have posed no problems. But by juxtaposing those works with pieces by western artists working in western contemporary art circles, Jean-Hubert Martin established a manner of implicit and problematic comparison.

- 4 One of the purposes of the show was aimed at contradicting "the commonly accepted ideas that there is only any creation in the visual arts in the western or markedly westernized world", a belief which, according to Jean-Hubert Martin, is "due to the survival of our culture's arrogance."⁸ Behind the militant import of this assertion, a question looms: it involves the choice of works considered as well as the selection method used. For any old object might be described as artistic if the conditions of its status as "artwork" in the making were met. Marcel Duchamp's urinal is a perfect example of this, and has lost nothing of its ironical punch. Far from inviting us to contemplate its forms, the work challenges the conditions for transforming the object into a work of art, to wit: the existence of an author claiming authorship of the work, the institution ratifying the artist's approach, and the presence and action of the "onlookers". If one of these factors were to disappear, like the presence of the author not situating his work in the arena of western contemporary art, what would happen? The object would become the medium for projecting the curator's desires, and it would fuel a discourse of no concern to him. This is not what came about in 1989, when the "primitive"/"modern" pairing was re-introduced for *Magiciens de la terre*.

- 5 In 1989, the occasion seemed ripe for writing a “history in equal parts”.⁹ But what to choose? And what to show in relation to the wealth of things existing? This is a pivotal question, but one rarely broached in discussions about non-western contemporary art. The unpublished travel logs, now published in *L’Art au large*, help us to a greater awareness of Jean-Hubert Martin’s precise knowledge about art beyond the West, and thus enable us to appraise the selective process at work for *Magiciens de la terre*. When, for example, Jean-Hubert Martin went to Nigeria, Togo and Benin, he actually saw local artistic production, the presence of schools, painting workshops, and artists’ associations connected explicitly with western modernist trends. But this is not what caught his eye. In the preface to *Magiciens de la terre*, he wrote that he had not encountered any “expert in the Third World”.¹⁰ Not that there were no experts, but rather that they did not share the same vision of what, in his view, art in Africa should be. He thus wrote that the director of the Museum in Benin City, Mr. Omoruyi, “[...] receives us amicably, but has a little trouble understanding that we are interested in the “shrines” of the Olokun cult. He is an artist himself, and explains to us that they are statues made by uneducated people, which, as a result, have no artistic value.”¹¹ We could quote other examples. The fact remains that a “history in equal parts” was therefore possible, even if the works in question were not necessarily of the same level as those produced in the great centres of New York and Berlin. Jean-Hubert Martin was happier choosing objects coming from the popular and the religious spheres, preferring the idea of otherness and difference so dear to the West, keen to conserve an “elsewhere”, and a share of regenerative otherness. It is worth noting that his bedside reading in Africa was Michel Leiris’s *L’Afrique fantôme*, written in the early 1930s.
- 6 More than twenty years later, *Magiciens de la terre* is still stirring up as many extremely interesting questions and debates, because its impact is not limited to the year of its inauguration, or to its institutional perimeter. In a lasting way, the show influenced people’s perception of non-western contemporary art, by ushering in, in its wake, an art market which perpetuated the decisions taken. To take just the example of Africa, let us mention Jean Pigozzi’s collection, started by André Magnin, first the continent’s envoy for *Magiciens de la terre*, then consultant for it. Through its international dissemination and its many publications, the Pigozzi collection helped to construct a canon of “contemporary African art” by favouring painters of signs, sculptors of funerary posts, creators in the service of a religious cult, and studio photographers. To contradict and, above all, complicate this selective and primitive vision, many were the essentially Anglo-Saxon authors who did their utmost to promote works in tune with the modernist aesthetic, critical works connected with the artistic and political debates, local and international alike.¹² Between these two dialectic poles, the artistic dynamic in Africa remains rich but fragile, because of the dearth of support from local institutions for artists, and the lack of visibility of local experts on an international scale. This imbalance peculiar to the present-day globalized world explains the predominance afforded the West, free to invent artist figures tallying with desires for the exotic forever being rekindled, even as the surface of the known world is shrinking.

NOTES

1. Martin, Jean-Hubert. *L'Art au large*, Paris : Flammarion, p. 42
2. The desire to lend visibility to non-western art by conducting an acquisitions policy favouring art was only developed in concrete terms two years ago at the MNAM, thanks to the work of Catherine Grenier.
3. Godoy Vega, Francisco. "Interview with Alfredo Jaar", *Making Art Global (Part 2): 'Magiciens de la terre' 1989*, London : Afterall, (Exhibition Histories), p. 277-278.
4. The Musée des arts d'Afrique et d'Océanie was housed in a large centre built to mark the colonial exhibition of 1931. Today, this building houses the Cité nationale de l'histoire de l'immigration.
5. See Poinot, Jean-Marc. "Review of the Paradigms and Interpretative Machine, or, The Critical Development of 'Magiciens de la terre'", in *Making Art Global (Part 2)*, op. cit., p. 106
6. Martin, Jean-Hubert. "Est-Ouest, Nord-Sud : nouveaux venus, nouveaux continents", *L'Art du XXème siècle 1939-2002 : de l'art moderne à l'art contemporain*, edited by Daniel Soutif, Paris : Citadelles & Mazenod, p. 459-478
7. On the subject of the debates stirred up by the exhibition *Primitivism in 20th Century Art*, see the Triennial antholog : *Intense proximité : une anthologie du proche et du lointain*, Paris : Palais de Tokyo : La Triennale ; Cnap, 2012, which has a selection of important writings. On the subject of the critical studies published about primitivism in the 1990s, see, for example : Torgovnick, Marriana. *Gone Primitive: Savage Intellectuals, Modern Lives*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990, and Blake, Jody. *Le Tumulte noir. Modernist Art and Popular Entertainment in Jazz Art Paris, 1900-1930*, Pennsylvania : The Pennsylvania State University, 1999.
8. J. H. Martin, preface to the *Magiciens de la terre* (Paris : Centre Pompidou, 1989), re-printed in *L'Art au large*, op. cit., p. 16
9. Bertrand, Romain. *L'Histoire à parts égales : récits d'une rencontre, Orient-Occident (XVI-XVIIe siècles)*, Paris : Seuil, 2011
10. Martin, Jean-Hubert. *L'Art au large*, op. cit., p. 17
11. Martin, Jean-Hubert. "Journal de voyage : Nigéria, Bénin, Togo et Ghana : 23 juillet – 8 août 1987", *L'Art au large*, op. cit., p. 100-101
12. See the publications of *La Revue noire*, founded by Jean-Loup Pivin in 1991 and the magazine *NKA*, founded in 1994 by Okwui Enwesor. In response (direct or indirect) to *Magiciens de la terre*, see, *inter alia*, the following exhibitions: *Seven Stories About Modern Art in Africa* (Clémentine Deliss. London, 1995), *The Short Century: Independence and Liberation Movement in Africa 1945-1994* (Okwui Enwesor. Munich, Berlin, New York, 2001) and *Authentic/Excentric: Africa In and Out* (Olu Oguibe. Venice, 2001).