

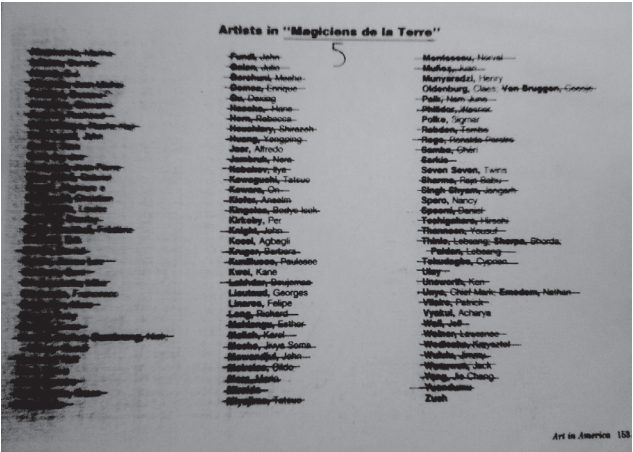
The Whole Earth Show

5

The exhibition, Magiciens de la Terre/ 5, was conceived in 2009 by Jean Fleischer. It restages the original show organized by Jean-Hubert Martin. This show halves the number of artists originally included in the exhibition, reducing the participants from 50 Western and 50 Non-Western artists, to 10 artists from “centers” of contemporary culture and 10 artists from the cultural “margins.” This show intends to restage the original show’s controversial intention, albeit in smaller scale and to commercial ends, to explore 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 Europe.

What follows is my translation of a dialogue between myself and Jean Fleischer. While this dialogue expresses our shared concern 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 the underlying assumptions of this exhibition.

-Ludwig Fischer



LUDWIG FISCHER: In discussions of the last forty 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 question of decentralization is related to the on-going critique of the hegemony of the class structure 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/5” originate in these critical discussions or is it just another exercise in stimulating an exhausted art world by exhibiting the same contemporary producers in a different topical exhibition framework?

JEAN FLEISCHER: Obviously the problem of center and periphery has been much discussed in European-American avant-garde culture in recent years, and our exhibition, and our exhibition, “Magiciens de la Terre/5,” 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/5” will invite half of its approximately 20 artists from marginal contexts, and will include artists who are practically unknown in the contemporary world.

LF: 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?

JF: 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. Where could one find a “correct” perspective? By including artists on a proportional scale? Or by basing 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 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 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.

LF: 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.

JF: 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.

LF: 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 disemboweling of the politics of everyday life?

JF: 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 object which were created 40 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.

LF: It sounds as though you were arguing that the failure of the artistic practices of the 60s to emancipate art from ritual (what Benjamin called art’s parasitical dependence) could now be compensated for best by ritualizing these practices themselves. 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 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 Western industrial media and consumer culture.

-Ludwig Fischer