

Like a Nightmare on the Brain of the Living

With *Back to Earth*, Oct. 15-Dec. 5, 2009, Fleisher Ollman Gallery has assumed the cripplingly ambitious task of revisiting the infamous exhibition *Magicians of the Earth* (*Magiciens de la Terre*), which opened at the Centre Georges Pompidou in Paris in 1989 (the same year fall of the Berlin Wall). That such a show demands revisitation is by no means in dispute. *Magicians of the Earth* has become an important historical reference point, being the first truly international exhibition of contemporary art. Situated within the context of the fall of the Berlin Wall, the exhibition, like that symbolic event, appears to have ushered in within the art world the era of globalization now familiar.

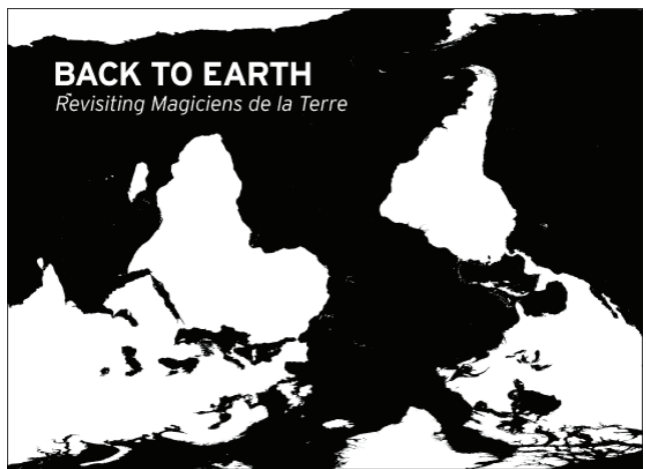
Since Fleisher Ollman Gallery situates its own artistic concerns quite explicitly within the set of problems that Jean-Hubert Martin intended to raise with his initial curatorial effort, it makes perfect sense for the gallery, upon *Magiciens de la Terre*'s 20th anniversary, to reflect on the exhibition's legacy. For the gallery no doubt identifies with Jean-Hubert Martin's vision to establish a cultural dialogue that transgresses the geo-political borders between east and west, north and south and the economic and racial divisions between the 1st, 2nd and 3rd worlds.

Yet, its legacy is by no means without contestation. On the surface the exhibition appeared to challenge the cultural hegemony of the West—the latter's near total neglect of “80% of the earth”—by trying to establish a non-hierarchical exhibition space in which the dominant and the marginal (Western and Non-Western) were equally represented and thus equalized by the sheer fact of their co-habitation. The spectator as she moved throughout the exhibition would encounter unlikely juxtapositions that occasioned, at least in theory, a reflection on the shared aims of these radically divergent practices. Rather than emphasizing divisions and conflicts, Martin envisioned the exhibition as a space in which the shared animus of the artists and their objects could be contemplated—an animus that Martin posited in magic and ritual. All the artists in

the show were thus cast as magicians, embarking through their creative labours upon a kind of transcultural spiritual quest. Yet, the principle of selection that guided the decision as to what objects to include and what to exclude unapologetically assumed aesthetic criteria commensurable to the tastes of a Western aesthete. The exhibition thus seemed to romanticize the shamanesque, archaic spiritual forces purportedly discernible in cultural regions yet untouched by the ravages of modernity, while establishing a safe, contemplative space that would not challenge in principle the Western aesthete's sensibilities. It both fetishized art objects and their producers. It was for these reasons that the show was viewed as utterly reactionary, despite its apparent progressiveness.

Martin, and now Ollman, quite explicitly wager on the strength of non-Western cultural objects to hold up to the intuition of the Western aesthete. Like Clement Greenberg, Martin shared the confidence in aesthetic judgment to discern across ethnic and regional barriers the good from the bad. As he put it in an interview with Benjamin Buchloh in *Art in America* (May 1989), "I want to play the role of someone who uses artistic intuition alone to select these objects." Yet these objects only "hold up" through their capacity to communicate in a "visual-sensuous" manner to a Western spectator. Such a spectator provides the social criteria of their selection. As a result, precisely the structural relations (chiefly social) of those who are called upon to mediate through their judgment the differences between these art objects remain unquestioned.

Even though these assumptions now more than ever need to be questioned with renewed vigilance, Fleisher Ollman's revisitation appears strangely indifferent, almost oblivious to the controversy that has wracked the exhibition's effective history. The only effort at contextualization is a wall installation of images cut and rearranged from the catalogue for *Magiciens de la Terre*. The catalogue itself is set upon a wall mount whose height more befits an object of contemplation than a book to be read and studied. This serves to underscore that what we are seeing is an homage, a fetish, not a site for historical reflection. If the failings of the original were tragic, those of its revisitation verge on farce.



For *Back to Earth* cultivates the same kind of spectator that *Magiciens de la Terre* played a hand in engendering. It is hard to not see in retrospect that the spectator that Martin's exhibition helped to produce is the globetrotting aesthete, the urbane cultural consumer armed with the comforting notions of multi-culturalism and democratic capitalism. In short, *Magiciens of the Earth* foreshadowed the new breed of 21st century flaneur whose tastes are engendered less by museums and more by the international circuit of Biennials and art-fairs. A flaneur whose tastes echo the sentiments—rather than disturb the agenda—of a good neo-liberal who identifies freedom, equality and above all democracy, with "equal" access to new markets.

In short, although the show is framed as a historical reflection, as a return to earth, it seems rather to be oddly suspended in time, strangely abstracted from the history that it attempts to make more concrete. The image of an inverted world that accompanies the press release thus appears to be strangely apt.

-Alexi Kukuljevic