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 transrational 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 aural nature of the work of art by emphasizing its material objectness. 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 covered 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 by ritualizing these practices themselves. Inevitably your project operates like an archeology of the “other” and its authenticity: you are engaged in tasks 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

Like a Nightmare on the Brain of the Living

With Back to Earth, Oct. 13-Dec. 5, 2009, Fleisher Ollman Gallery has assumed the surprisingly 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 an accident. Magiciens of the Earth has become an important historical reference point, being the first truly international exhibition of contemporary art.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, appeared to have ushered in with Western and Eastern 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 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 controversy. On the one hand 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 encompass the 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 covered the space of religion, and while it does not fulfill religion’s communal functions, it does involve large segments of our society.

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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 and refined connoisseur 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 urgent, almost ominous 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 right more beneficial 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.

ALEX KUKULJEVIC

The symbolic importance of electing a mixed-race candidate to office and the substantial changes he has or has not introduced. Obama’s election surely introduced important symbolic shifts in American politics (it is essential to recall, at the same time, that George W. Bush’s administration was arguably the most multicultural in American history). Moreover, Obama is clearly a more intense candidate than John McCain, and in comparison to the man ironically marketed as the quintessential maverick, the election results need to be applauded.

At the same time—this is the necessary dual position—the substance of Obama’s actions need to be submitted to severe scrutiny rather than allowing ourselves to be blinded by the pop-psychological “positive thinking” that dominates so many well-meaning liberals. Let us consider a few key features of his presidency to date. Economic: Obama is not only a longstanding supporter of neo-liberal economics, but his economic team is composed of Friedmanites from the Clinton administration, many of whom are directly responsible for the current economic crisis due to their stalwart support of the deregulation of the banking industry. The repeal of the Glass-Steagall Act in 1999, which had prevented co-ownership of commercial banks and investment banks, was one of the key moments. Then Treasury Secretary Lawrence Summers rejoiced over the bill repealing glass-Steagall. “With this bill the American financial system takes a major step forward toward the 21st Century—one that will benefit American consumers, business and the national economy” (NYT, Nov. 13, 1999). In spite of the fact that

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With Back to Earth, Oct. 13-Dec. 5, 2009, Fleisher Ollman Gallery has assumed the beautifully 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 an unusual occurrence. 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, appeared 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 Magicians de la Terre's 20th anniversary, to reflect on the exhibition's legacy. For the gallery no doubt identifies with 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 one hand 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 art of the marginalized (Western and Non-Western) were equally represented and thus 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 aesthetic. Like Clement Greenberg, Martin shared the confidence in aesthetic judgment to discern ethnic and regional barries 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 interest through their capacity to communicate 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 pertinent, 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 installation, which both fetishized and romanticized the shamanesque, archaic aesthetic 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 aesthetic’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.

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 urban, cultural consumer armed with the comforting notions of multi-culturalism and democratic capitalism. In short, Magicians 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 disturbs 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