

"Les Magiciens de la terre," a selection of art from several continents, opens in Paris: postcolonial discourse and multicultural debates affect the production as well as the presentation of contemporary art.

In the eighties two exhibitions at major museums in New York and Paris served as lightning rods for postcolonial debates about art, and also focused new attention on the old problem of the Western collection and exhibition of art from other cultures. The first show, "Primitivism" in 20th Century Art: Affinities of the Modern and the Tribal" directed by William Rubin and Kirk Varnedoe at the Museum of Modern Art in 1984, consisted of brilliant juxtapositions of modern and tribal works that resembled one another in formal ways. For critics of the show, however, these juxtapositions only rehearsed the mostly abstract understanding of tribal art by European and American modernists, a noncontextual appropriation which the curators did not adequately question. To an extent the second exhibition, "Les Magiciens de la terre" (Magicians of the Earth), directed by Jean-Hubert Martin at the Centre Georges Pompidou in 1989, took such critiques into consideration. It included only contemporary practitioners, fifty from the West, fifty from elsewhere, many of whom made work specifically for the show. In this way "Magiciens" struggled against some of the formalist appropriations and museological abstractions of non-Western art that were replayed in "Primitivism." Yet for its critics "Magiciens" went too far in the opposite direction in its implicit claim of a special authenticity for non-Western art, a special aura of ritual or magic.

- "Who are the magicians of the earth?" Barbara Kruger countered in her skeptical contribution to the show. "Doctors? Politicians? Plumbers? Writers? Arms Merchants? Farmers? Movie Stars?"

The nomadic and the hybrid

The year 1989 was a time for reappraisal of rhetoric on several fronts. Not only had the opposition between the First and Third Worlds already fallen apart, along with the dichotomy between metropolitan centers and colonial peripheries that had structured the relation between modern and tribal art. But so, too, had the opposition between the First and Second Worlds broken down, as signaled by the fall of the Berlin Wall in November. A "new world order," as George Bush would dub it triumphally after the Gulf War in 1991, was emerging—a mostly American order of released multinational flows of capital, culture, and information for privileged people, but of reinforced local borders for many more others.

This mixed development affected many artists profoundly. "Hybridity" became a catchword for some, as postmodernist critiques of modernist values of artistic originality were extended by postcolonial critiques of Western notions of cultural purity. These postcolonial artists sought a third way between what the critic Peter Wollen has called "archaism and assimilation," or what the artist Rasheed Araeen has termed "academicism and modernism." Content to be neither illustrators of folklorish pasts nor imitators of international styles, they attempted to work out a reflexive dialogue between global trends and local traditions. Sometimes this postcolonial dialogue demanded an additional negotiation between the often nomadic life of the artist and the often site-specific positioning of the project that he or she was asked to produce. Indeed, in this new time of cosmopolitanism, artists were on the move as much as artifacts were in earlier moments of primitivism.

The search for a third way had precedents in art of the eighties. Some artists involved in political groups had already rejected institutions of art, while others involved, say, in graffiti art like Jean-Michel Basquiat (1960–88) had already played with signs of hybridity. This search was also supported by developments in theory, the most important of which were the critiques of Western self-fashioning and discipline-building in postcolonial discourse, which, after the Palestinian-American critic Edward Said (1935–2003) published his epochal study *Orientalism* in 1978, flourished in the work of theorists Gayatri Spivak, Homi Bhabha, and many others. Of course, postcolonial art and theory has assumed diverse forms depending on context and agenda; between the United States and the United Kingdom alone, for example, there is a difference of focus on the subject of racism, inflected historically by slavery in the States, and by colonialism in Britain. There are also conflictual demands on artists and critics alike, who are often torn between the call for positive images of given identities long subjected to negative stereotypes on the one hand, and the need for critical representations of what the critic Stuart Hall has called "new ethnicities" complicated by sexual and social differences on the other. Sometimes this very conflict between notions of identity—as given naturally or as constructed culturally—is foregrounded, as in some work by black British artists such as the filmmaker Isaac Julien (born 1960), the photographers ■ Keith Piper (born 1960) and Yinka Shonibare (born 1962), and the

Aboriginal art

The most renowned form of Aboriginal art in Australia are the "Dreamtime" paintings produced in the northern and central regions (six Dreamtime artists from the Yuendumu community near Alice Springs were represented in "Les Magiciens de la terre"). In Aboriginal belief, Dreamtime was the period of Creation when ancestral beings shaped the land and its inhabitants, and Dreamtime paintings evoke these activities; the imaging of the creator-figures, which assume different forms (human, animal, and plant), tends to be more representational in the northern country, and more abstract, structured around vivid dots and lines, in the central area.

Dreamtime art is a good example of the third way between "archaism" and "assimilation" in contemporary global culture. On the one hand, its designs derive from motifs and patterns used in sacred ceremonies from archaic times (some paintings in rock shelters date back as far 20,000 years). On the other hand, the efflorescence of Dreamtime paintings on canvas is little more than three decades old, spurred technically by the assimilation of acrylic paints in the early seventies and commercially by the market for exotic images among Western collectors whose own culture appears ever more homogeneous. (The market for Maori art also boomed in the eighties, as did the demand for the arts of Africa, the Arctic, Bali, and so on.) Thus, even as Aboriginal art is still based in the ceremonial practices of specific communities—each painting is in part a reenactment of a cosmology passed on from generation to generation—it is also shot through with global forces of touristic taste, cultural commerce, and identity politics.

However, like similar forms of hybrid art in Africa and elsewhere, Dreamtime painting has seemed to thrive on its

contradictions. Although it is often dismissed as a pidgin language, its mixing of indigenous idioms and foreign materials is part of its creativity. While its abstraction is attractive to elite tastes schooled in modern art, it also remains true to its own old traditions; and while it borrows such modern techniques as acrylic on canvas, it continues to elaborate ancient motifs otherwise applied to human bodies, tree bark, or the earth. In short, Dreamtime painting is an art that has remained authentic in its own terms even as it plays on the desire for "the authentic" on the part of outsiders. This use of forms is also not one-way: modern Australian artists have drawn on Aboriginal motifs too, and Qantas Airlines once painted one of its fleet in Aboriginal style. At work here then is a kind of exchange that, though hardly equal, must still be distinguished from prior episodes of exoticism in modern art, such as the use of African sculpture in the primitivist work of Picasso, Matisse, and others in the first decades of the century, as well as the projection of Native American art as primordial by some Abstract Expressionists, and the positing of an absolute *art brut*, or uncivilized "outsider art," by Jean Dubuffet and others, both at mid-century. In the case of Dreamtime painting and other forms like it, there is a borrowing from the West by "the other" as well.

"There is a very strong connection between the use of symmetry in Aboriginal art and the powerful commitment to the balance of reciprocity, exchange and equality in Aboriginal art," Peter Sutton, curator of the South Australian Museum, has remarked. At the same time we do well to remember that Aboriginal peoples of Australia, like other indigenous peoples on other continents, were long subject to forced resettlement and worse. To quote Frantz Fanon again: "The zone where the natives live is not complementary to the zone inhabited by the settlers."

painter Chris Ofili (born 1968). More often this conflict has led to divergent conceptions of the role of postcolonial art—to express and reinforce identity, or to complicate and critique its construction.

For Homi Bhabha the search for a third way in postcolonial art suggests a repositioning of the avant-garde—away from the pursuit of a utopian "beyond," a vision of a unitary social future, and toward an articulation of a hybrid "in-between," a negotiation between diverse cultural space-times. This theoretical notion has found its parallel development in the art of such diverse figures as Jimmie Durham (born 1940), David Hammons (born 1943), ▲ Gabriel Orozco (born 1962), and Rirkrit Tiravanija (born 1961).

Although different in generation and background, these artists have several things in common. All work with objects and in sites that are somehow hybrid and interstitial, not readily placed within the given discourses of sculpture or the commodity, or in the given spaces of museums or the street, but usually located somewhere in transit between these categories. To an extent photographs figure in this art, but like the other objects they are often residues of performative activities, or what Orozco calls "leftovers of specific situations." This work thus extends across performance and instal-

lation too, without resting easily in either. To be sure, such an idiom of found objects, reclaimed debris, and documentary leftovers has precedents, especially in the sixties: one is reminded of the performance props of such artists as Piero Manzoni and Claes Oldenburg, ● the "social sculpture" of Joseph Beuys, the assemblages of archaic and technological materials in Arte Povera, and so on. (Importantly, Durham and Hammons, who were active by the early seventies, witnessed some of these practices, while Orozco and Tiravanija encountered them later in museum shows.) Nevertheless, all four contemporary artists are suspicious of the aestheticizing tendencies of such precursors. Although often lyrical as well, their aesthetic is even more provisional and ephemeral, in opposition not only to the old idea of timeless art but also to the new fixities of identity politics.

Subversive play

To different degrees all four artists work with what the critic Kobena Mercer has called "the stereotypical grotesque," and here they are joined by such African-American artists as Adrian Piper, ■ Carrie Mae Weems, Lorna Simpson, Renée Green, and Kara

Walker. Essentially this means that they play with ethnic clichés, sometimes with light, acerbic wit, sometimes with exaggerated, explosive absurdity. Thus Durham has fabricated “fake Indian artifacts,” and Orozco, stereotypically Mexican skulls; Hammons has used loaded black symbols, and Tiravanija, stereotypically Thai cuisine. They have also engaged different models of the primitive object, such as the fetish and the gift, which they often juxtapose with “modern” products or debris. In some sense these subversively hybrid things are symbolic portraits of a similarly disruptive kind of complex identity.

Like the Performance artist James Luna (born 1950), who has acted out such stereotypes of the Indian as the warrior, the shaman, and the drunk, Jimmie Durham pressures primitivist clichés to the point of critical ridicule. This is most evident in *Self-Portrait* (1988), in which he summons up the smokeshop chief of American lore, only to tag this wooden figure with absurdist responses to racist projections about Native-American men. Durham first produced his fake Indian artifacts from old car parts and animal skulls; then he mixed in other kinds of commodity debris to produce “artifacts from the future” whose “physical histories ... didn’t want to go together.” One such artifact juxtaposes, on a craggy board, a portable phone and an animal pelt, on top of which is inscribed this quotation from the anticolonial revolutionary and theorist

Frantz Fanon: “The zone where the natives live is not complementary to the zone inhabited by the settlers” [1]. Such hybrid art, which reworks the Surrealist object to postcolonial ends, is wryly anticategorical in a way that resists any further “settlement” into separate “zones.”

David Hammons also puts ethnic associations into subversive play. In the early seventies he did a series of images and objects with spades, at once a tool of manual labor and a slang word for African-American. One such object, *Spade with Chains* (1973), is especially provocative in its simultaneous suggestion of slavery and strength, bondage and resistance [2]. Hammons has since made many sculptures out of discarded or abject things that are culturally fraught, such as barbecue bones in bags, African-American hair wound into balls on wires and woven onto screens, chicken parts, elephant dung, and found bottles of cheap wine stuck on stripped branches or hung from trees. For some viewers these objects and installations evoke the desperation of the black urban underclass. Hammons, however, sees a sacred aspect in these profane things, a ritualistic power. “Outrageously magical things happen when you mess around with a symbol,” he has remarked. “You’ve got tons of people’s spirits in your hands when you work with that stuff.” His contradictory contemporary fetishes return art to the street, and at once demystify and re ritualize it there.



1 • Jimmie Durham, *Often Durham Employs ...*, 1988

Mixed media, wood, squirrel skin, paint, and plastic, 30.5 x 40.6 x 12.7 (12 x 16 x 5)

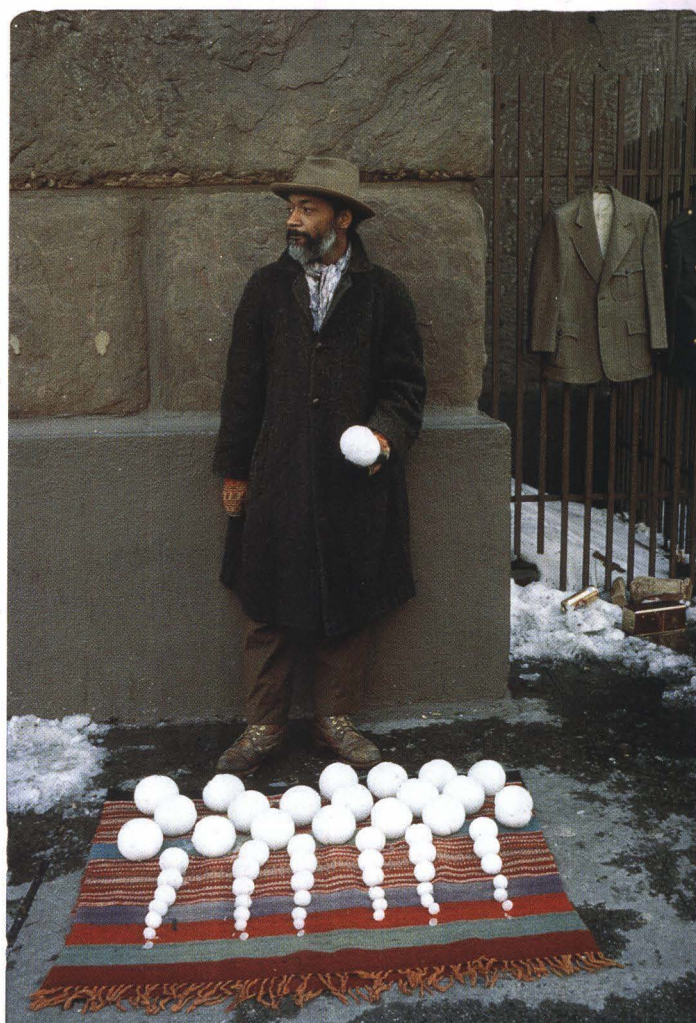


2 • David Hammons, *Spade with Chains*, 1973

Spade, chains, 61 x 25.4 x 12.7 (24 x 10 x 5)

Often indirect, the work of Hammons and Durham nonetheless possesses the edge of political commitment—Hammon's to the civil rights and Black Power movements, Durham's to the American Indian movement, in which he was an activist. Born of less confrontational times, the work of Orozco and Tiravanija is more lyrical. A 1983 performance piece by Hammons can help us track the directions that they take. In *Bliz-aard Ball Sale* Hammons presented several rows of different-sized snowballs for sale, next to other vendors of disused things on the street, in front of Cooper Union in downtown Manhattan [3]. This piece cut across private and public spaces, and confounded valued and valueless things, in a way that suggested that these distinctions are often artificial and only afforded by the privileged—a demonstration made by Orozco as well. At the same time, the snowballs, like the rubber-doll shoes that Hammons has also offered on the street, exist in a pathetic and parodic relation to commodity exchange, and point to a system of resale, barter, and gifts that Tiravanija has also explored as a critical alternative to the capitalist network of art.

One instance of each practice must suffice here. In a 1993 project for the Museum of Modern Art, Orozco invited neighbors in the apartment building north of MoMA to place an orange in each



3 • David Hammons, *Bliz-aard Ball Sale*, 1983

Installation in Cooper Square, New York

window sill that fronted the museum [4]. Here was a sculpture, wittily titled *Home Run*, that exceeded the physical space of the museum ball park. At the same time it brought into ambiguous contact different kinds of objects (perishable fruit on the window sills, bronze sculpture in the museum garden), agents (semiprivate residents and semipublic curators), and spaces (homes and museums). This is institutional critique with a lyrical touch, which, as with Tiravanija, does not mean that it is inconsequential.

In a signal piece of 1992, Tiravanija also used the dislocating of space and the offering of food as a means to confuse the normal positions and conventional roles of art, artist, viewer, and intermediary (in this case the art dealer). At 303 Gallery in New York he moved the private unseen rooms of the gallery, which contained the business office, the packing, and shipping areas, and all the other materials of its daily functioning, into its public viewing spaces [5]. The director and assistants at desks were on display in the central gallery, while Tiravanija worked over a stove in the back gallery where he cooked and served Thai curry vegetables over jasmine rice to interested gallery visitors, often with conversation added. In subsequent works he has often played on such reversals of physical space, substitutions of expected function, and displacements of

▲ Introduction 4, 1971, 1992

4 • **Gabriel Orozco, *Home Run*, 1993**

Installation in apartment building, view from the
Museum of Modern Art, New York



5 • **Rirkrit Tiravanija, *Untitled (Free)*, 1992**

Tables, stool, food, crockery, and cooking utensils,
dimensions variable



object exchange that invite one to reflect on the enforced conventionality of all of these categories in the art world and beyond.

“Not the monument,” Durham has remarked of his work in a way that relates to the other artists as well, “not the painting, not the picture.” Rather, he seeks an “eccentric discourse of art” that might pose “investigatory questions about what sort of things it might be, but always within a political situation of the time.” In this way the work of these artists constitutes the equivalent of the “minor literature” defined by the French critics Gilles Deleuze (1925–95) and Felix Guattari (1930–92) in their 1975 study of Franz Kafka: “The three characteristics of minor literature are the deterritorialization of language, the connection of the individual and the political, the collective arrangement of utterance. Which amounts to this: that ‘minor’ no longer characterizes certain literatures, but describes the revolutionary conditions of any literature within what we call the great (or established).”

FURTHER READING

- Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994)
- Tom Finkelpearl et al., *David Hammons* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1991)
- Jean-Hubert Martin et al., *Les Magiciens de la terre* (Paris: Centre Georges Pompidou, 1989)
- Laura Mulvey et al., *Jimmie Durham* (London: Phaidon Press, 1995)
- Molly Nesbit et al., *Gabriel Orozco* (Los Angeles: Museum of Contemporary Art, 2000)
- Peter Wollen, *Raiding the Icebox: Reflections on 20th Century Culture* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993)

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To Nikos Stangos (1936–2004), in memoriam

With love, admiration, and grief, we dedicate this book to Nikos Stangos, great editor, poet, and friend, whose belief in this project both instigated and sustained it through the course of its development.

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