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Introduction: From the Outside In - 'Magiciens de la Terre' and Two Histories of Exhibitions

-Pablo Lafuente

Consider the following scene: several women and a man, wearing coats and hats, stand against a barrier, attentively looking down with amusement at two men sitting on the floor, which they are in the process of decorating with a concentric composition of clean, straight lines. The two seated men are wearing what looks like traditional ('folkloric', perhaps?) clothing (headbands, necklaces, belts, light-coloured trousers) that contrasts with the austere outfits of the onlookers (mostly of dark colours, the women with high necklines, long skirts and hats, the man in a suit, tie and handkerchief). We can't see their faces, but we can assume from the clothes, and from the drawing on which they are working, that those being observed come from a different cultural context and tradition (and perhaps ethnicity) from those behind the barrier. They appear concentrated on making, while those behind the barrier seem focused on looking - curious, pensive. The floor composition, and the large painting that covers part of the wall to the right, are clearly new imports in the space, visibly different from the granite drawing on which they are working, that those being observed come from a different cultural context and tradition (and perhaps ethnicity) from those behind the barrier. They appear concentrated on making, while those behind the barrier seem focused on looking - curious, pensive. The floor composition, and the large painting that covers part of the wall to the right, are clearly new imports in the space, visibly different from the granite drawing on which they are working, that those being observed come from a different cultural context and tradition (and perhaps ethnicity) from those behind the barrier. They appear concentrated on making, while those behind the barrier seem focused on looking - curious, pensive. 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The narrative could start in the sixteenth century with the 'human zoos' held in European courts of African, South American or Asian peoples, and could continue with the colonial presentations within the World Exhibitions in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the creation of the Musée de l’Homme in Paris in 1937 and MoMA's 'ethnographic' projects throughout the first half of the twentieth century. But it was not until the mid-to-late 1980s that cultural practice that had not originated in the West was addressed directly and explicitly by several large-scale initiatives within the Western art system. The size and ambition of these projects, as well as their repercussions in terms of ideas, production and commerce, generated a series of polemics and dramatic shifts in artistic, curatorial and collecting practices that changed, for good, the context of contemporary art production.

Two of these initiatives stand out. The first was "Primitivism" in 20th Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern', organised at MoMA in 1984–85, a show that reanimated the original perspective of the 'discovery' of non-Western cultural production by Western art (modern artists in Paris) from 1905 onwards, by displaying masks, totems and other cultural objects from Africa, South America or Polynesia in juxtaposition with works of modern and contemporary Western art. The exhibition, through the notion of 'affinity', identified form as a shared concern between 'primitive' and modern art, and from there proposed a universalist and humanist conception of artistic creation, written from a modern (Western) perspective. It gave occasion to a lively, sometimes heated discussion that mostly focused on issues of cultural representation, and a critique of the Eurocentric, colonial attitude implied by the adoption of a modernist outlook to frame both modern art and non-Western objects. Shortly thereafter, a similar diatribe emerged as a response to 'Magiciens de la Terre', a show that, from an equivalent Western institutional framework (France's national museum of art, the Centre Georges Pompidou in Paris), attempted to present art from the West and the non-West on an alleged equal footing. The exhibition, which presented itself as the 'first worldwide exhibition of contemporary art', bought together more than one hundred artists, half from the West and half from the non-West, and juxtaposed their work in two exhibition venues in the city of Paris, the Centre Pompidou and the Grande Halle de La Villette. The artists were invited by the curatorial team to develop new work on site (in most cases), and were selected on the basis of a set of agreed criteria that included radicalism, a sense of adventure and excitement, their originality with respect to cultural tradition, or the relationship between the maker and his or her work. At the exhibition's base there was a humanist, universalist conception of the act of artistic creation—one that attempted to relativise the centrality of the Western perspective by defending the equality of the practice of those included—and, by extension, the equality of artistic practice globally. But, perhaps in reaction to the polemics surrounding "Primitivism" and in an attempt to address its hegemonic perspective, it abandoned from the start some key modernist tropes (for example, by substituting the term 'magicien' for the term 'artist') while embracing others (adopting a notion of the subject's creativity that translated in the exhibition to the presentation of artists as agents). This equality was denounced as fictitious, as oblivious to the socio-cultural and historical context in which the different selected practices emerged, and therefore as exoticising, and 'Magiciens de la Terre' became, especially in the Anglo-Saxon context, the embodiment of a neocolonialist attitude that allowed the contemporary art system to colonise, commercially and intellectually, new areas that were previously out of bounds.

Simultaneously to these two landmarks, not directly in response to them but as a result of a wider cultural, political and economic mood, divergent approaches emerged in both the West and the non-West contesting the Western history of art (and its modernist underpinnings) and, perhaps more importantly, the articulation of agency within the representation process. Looking at it from the self-other dichotomy, in these years, exhibitions of the self began to be organised not only by the West but by those outside of it, on a scale and with a reach beyond their 'home' territory that were unheard of in earlier decades. The Bienal de La Habana, with its original...
Latin American and later Third Worldist vocation, and 'The Other Story: Afro-Asian Artists in Post-War Britain' in 1989, with its formulation of an unrecognised modernism produced by cultural and racial minorities in the UK, are representative of an impulse that was to be furthered throughout the 1990s and that by the 2000s had lost steam.

But this history of representation only tells a fraction of the story. Partly due to political urgencies in the motivation for (at least a large percentage of) these exhibitions, and also as an effect of the discourse of identity politics that was constructed around them (both by those organising the exhibitions and by their critics), what was often forgotten was a consideration of what arguably constitutes the essential aspect of the medium of exhibitions: display. By this I refer not to the exercise of selection, nor to the matter of who made the decisions about that selection and authored the conceptual framework, but the actual articulation of a specific set of relations between objects, people, ideas and structures within the exhibition form. Display, and the principles that rule its articulation, proposes a discourse that is sometimes at odds with the discourse that surrounds the exhibition. Only by addressing the two together does a comprehensive picture of the actual position of the exhibition in relation to this history of identity struggle emerge. And not just this. By concentrating on identity and representation, and the way in which display enacts this movement of inclusion and exclusion, we can attempt to look at this 'partial' history of identity struggle as more than that: as a means to understand something about the nature and the mechanisms of 'art' and 'exhibition'. That is, if considered in this way, this particular history becomes a lens through which to access a more general understanding of the processes by which the contemporary exhibition form works, along division lines that are no longer geopolitical or civilisational, but rather refer, for example, to the nature of knowledge and the effects of its presence or absence, the differing agencies of both artist/maker and object, and the way aesthetics might relate to the political – not only in terms of political representation and knowledge production but also of its specific effectivity. The history of the inclusion in the (Western) contemporary art context of what comes from its outside (in the form of both cultural products and producers) offers a privileged window from which to understand, and therefore intervene in, the contemporary art system itself.

The similarities between the two opening scenes obscure an important development in the history of exhibitions as a story of cultural and geographical identity struggle: a historical shift towards the inclusion of the artist or cultural producer as an acting subject within the contemporary exhibition context, rather than his or her inclusion as a represented subject (the 'indigenous' or 'primitive' creator or maker), or the inclusion of the objects for which he or she is responsible. In 'Indian Art of the United States' the act of 'performing' a work in front of an audience highlighted the difference of the Navajo artists with respect to the modern artists whose work the museum would normally exhibit, turning their presence into an act of representation. In contrast, in 'Magiciens de la Terre' the artist was no longer just represented; rather, the figure of the artist was the structural unit that gave form to the exhibition. (That is, the exhibition consisted of a number of artists invited on the strength of their individual practices, although the display might have subsequently modulated their individuality by creating relations that disturbed it). The fact that the inclusion of this or that artist was not an act of representation doesn't mean that there was no representation; representation took place, to a certain degree, as a result of the show's claim to be the 'first worldwide exhibition' and its insistence on an equality in numbers, an even split between the artists from the West and those from elsewhere. But it remains a partial abstraction, one that abandons nations and regions, and with them actual political considerations. Instead, it assigns each artist a singular location in the world, a dot in a map pictured on each of the artists' sections in the catalogue, always at its centre, so that every one of them is presented as an inhabitant of a common space. In summary, the notion of exhibition adopted by 'Magiciens de la Terre' is the result of a coming together of (living) artists who, on equal terms, produce work (either together or in parallel) on the exhibition site.

This conception had already been put into practice in a contemporary art context in the late 1960s, when exhibitions such as 'When Attitudes Become Form', organised by Harald Szeemann in 1969 at Kunsthalle Bern, portrayed curatorial work as a two-stage process: a selection of artists in the first place, following curatorial research and international travel, and, secondly, an organic development of work by the selected artists in the exhibition space, perhaps in response to it. Whether this research method and organic

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11 Although they were not 'artists' but 'magiciens', as noted earlier.

12 Neither the marketing material nor the catalogue classified the selected artists according to either of those categories, so this split is notional rather than actual. This might lead to an interesting guessing game in relation to some of the artists' status, but that would be a diversion, since the stress is on the equality of their positions, not in the definition of two fields or teams.

10 The parallels are highlighted by the fact that this process of development of
installation process were actually the case or just a constructed narrative in Szememann's exhibition does not matter as much as the fact that the model of exhibition-making that it claimed for itself went from being a newly marketed idea in the late 1960s to becoming common and even dominant throughout the 1990s and 2000s. If in the late 1960s and 70s it was associated with a recognition of the artist's agency in the studio and outside of it, in combination and/or conflict with the gallerist, collector and exhibition organiser, in 'Magiciens de la Terre' the move can be seen as the effect of an egalitarian impulse in relation to the role of the artist (rather than a negotiation between different roles within the art system). The principle enacted is that those making work outside the West and its traditions are equal to those making work within it.

In order to claim such equality, the curatorial team of 'Magiciens de la Terre' chose to abandon modernist constraints by leaving behind some of its key terminology. Adopting the term 'magicien' instead of 'artist' proposed an alternative to controversial framings of practitioners from the outside. These had been, until then, either 'artists' working with an exported, colonial modern canon, or 'craftsmen' working outside of that canon, often subjects without a name or a face, dissolved into the collective expression of a tribe, a region, a country or a continent. Artists working within modern traditions that

work and installation was registered, at the initiative of the curatorial team, in two very similar recordings (for television, in the case of 'When Attitudes Become Form', and as a video release by the Centre Pompidou, in the case of 'Magiciens de la Terre'). The two documents show the artists at work, making or installing their contributions, as well as discussing them in front of the camera. (See Marlene Belillos and André Gauthier, *Quand les attitudes deviennent formes*, Television Suisse Romande, broadcast on 6 April 1969, and Gianfranco Barberi and Marco di Censi (dir.), *Magiciens de la Terre*, VHS PAL, 52min, Turin: Cataloga, 1989.) It is also perhaps productive to compare the curatorial selection process carried out by Harald Szememann for 'When Attitudes Become Form' and that of Jean-Hubert Martin as a process in which, to some extent, selection preceded the research trip, and the curator's encounter with the artist functioning as a verification or confirmation, rather than an act of discovery. For a discussion of the curatorial process of 'When Attitudes Become Form', see Christian Ratschmeyer, "Op Loss Schroeven" and "When Attitudes Become Form" 1969," in C. Ratschmeyer et al., *Exhibiting the New Art: Op Loss Schroeven* and *When Attitudes Become Form* 1969, London: Afterall Books, 2010, pp.12–26. For 'Magiciens de la Terre', see L. Steeds, "Magiciens de la Terre", op. cit.

The research model of international travel after identifying the artist or community of artists of interest has become the dominant practice within curatorial practice today. The organic development of works by artists brought together on the occasion of the exhibition has most often been the case with large-scale periodical exhibitions internationally.


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they claimed as their own were the focus of exhibitions such as 'The Other Story', 'Seven Stories about Modern Art in Africa' (1995) and 'The Short Century: Independence and Liberation Movements in Africa, 1945–1994' (2001–02). But the confrontation with the common enemy, a contemporary art, cultural and market sector wilfully ignorant of those artists and oblivious to their work, was often overshadowed by a confrontation between those speaking from the position of the diaspora and those who were working on the ground. Such confrontation might have been the result of a very specific history within the wider history of identity struggle; that of Africa and its artistic and cultural production. This history is complicated by the absence of strong local institutional structures, the relatively small number of initiatives of self-historisation and conceptualisation, and consequently
the importance of diasporic positions and the need for a negotiation (sometimes confrontation) between these and 'local' ones. But at the root of these disputes there seems to be a dynamic of antagonism, a constant mode of confrontation based on the fact that what is being negotiated is not how specific work is being dealt with in the exhibition context. Instead, what appears to be at stake is a redefinition of the field of agencies, and of the voices that are authorised to speak with and about those agencies.

Historically, this redefinition has been accompanied by a defence of the agency of the artist, in conflict with that of the curator and to the detriment of the work. In 'Magiciens de la Terre', such redefinition is accompanied by two additional twists, which makes it a specially revealing case. In the first place, the agency of the artist, in order to escape the problematics of modernism and its sociocultural determination, is reframed as the agency of the magician — an individual who has a privileged relationship to group and place and who, thanks to that privileged relationship, gains his or her individuality. (This individuation is, curiously, not far from the Western romantic notion of the artist.) The second inflection is that, again thanks to that privileged relationship, the magician is not only distinct from his or her cultural context (the work of the artists included is not the expression of a culture and a time), he or she is also to some extent freed from it. That is, the magician is the individual who wants to and is able to escape the determinations presented by his or her immediate context. The relationships of opposition are then not binary, in the form of an acting subject versus a passive subject or an absent subject, present through his or her 'silent' work. 'Magiciens de la Terre' is also an exhibition of makers that sets itself against both an exhibition of cultures and an exhibition of silent objects. This set of oppositions, if developed into a system of relations with two variables, results in a diagram with four nodes: exhibitions of contextualised objects; exhibitions of contextualised subjects; exhibitions of decontextualised subjects; and exhibitions of decontextualised objects. Such a diagram might allow us to move from an understanding of the history of inclusion of non-Western art as a negotiation of voices and identities to a consideration of how this history, through a study of modes of display, might actually expose the workings of the system of art.

While 'Seven Stories', 'The Short Century' or 'The Other Story' showcased the work of artists embedded within a certain cultural and political history (that of modernism in some of its variations), 'Magiciens de la Terre' singled out artists and presented them exclusively in relation to other artists, without in principle any given connection. The variable between these two groups is context, and the constant among them the figure of the artist — and necessarily the fact that in none of the cases did the presence of the artist actually guarantee that his or her agency was decisive when confronted with the agency of the curator. The humanist, decontextualising exercise of 'Magiciens de la Terre' could be (and was) faulted for being a Western, colonial imposition: the exercise of decontextualisation to which both Western and non-Western artists were exposed was something with which at least some of the Western artists were arguably more familiar, and more able strategically to address. There are, then, practical limits to the claims for decontextualisation to which the Western museum, the white cube and the black box are epistemologically and experientially bound — limits that allow for the development of strategies for interaction by those who have the necessary knowledge or cultural capital. However, there are also problematic implications for the opposed position: a contextual presentation designed by the exhibition's curator has the potential to conflict with the artists' perspective (again, a confrontation between the agency of the artist and that of the curator). But, more importantly, a narrative based on biographical, social, economic or historical determinations might curtail or even neutralise the artist's agency. In 'Magiciens de la Terre', the artists or magicians were all presented as equally capable of signifying independently from their context, even though at least some of the non-Western artists were less equal than the others because of their lack of familiarity with the new context that they had (suddenly) entered. In 'The Short Century', on the other hand, artists were treated equally, but only in the sense of being conditioned by their biography and context. The risk of this position is that an understanding
of subjects' actions as the result of their context can, in its most extreme formulation, give the impression that the actions of those subjects are just the expression of their circumstances. " Contextual determination threatens to curtail, even do away with, artists' agency, betraying the emancipatory promise that art and the aesthetic experience might hold."

Between 'Magiciens de la Terre', an exhibition of artists removed from their socio-cultural context, and "Primitivism in 20th Century Art", an exhibition of similarly displaced objects, the constant is the decontextualising move, and the variable is the element that is decontextualised (artists in the former and objects in the latter). Such a clean distinction is complicated by the fact that "Primitivism" was, more precisely, an exhibition in which non-Western art objects were extracted from their context in order to be recontextualised in relation to modern and contemporary Western artworks, following the history of the 'discovery' of 'primitive' art by the modern artists in Paris in the early years of the twentieth century. The exhibition, presented as "the first ever to juxtapose modern and tribal objects in the light of informed art criticism", was denounced in a series of (once more) tense exchanges between Thomas McEvilley and its curators, William Rubin and Kirk Varnedoe, as an attempt to 'revalidate' modernist aesthetics by means of primitive art. Furthermore, McEvilley criticised the curators' 'ego projections' on the 'primitive' works as inaccurately claiming an intentionality that was not the case. The problem identified, then, was not the reconstruction of a modern 'primitivist' narrative, but the fact that the curators actually confused the modern artists' perspective with the perspective of those who made the objects. Besides the habitual suspicion of the curatorial role (a curator's will that is seen as tending to overrule the artist's will), what emerges in this dispute between the intentions of the modern artists on the one side and the intentions of the objects' makers on the other is a discourse on how, or rather, whether, the objects speak independently from the voices of the modern artists and the makers. Are the objects mute, and do they therefore need text (information, explanation) to speak for them, as McEvilley demands? Or can they instead talk through their form, independently from their function, as the curators maintain? But even those who claim that the objects can speak by themselves decide to speak for them, therefore deciding what they say: Rubin and Varnedoe want the primitive objects to talk about form and universality, and most importantly to talk as art objects; McEvilley wants them to talk as the expression of collective culture, and to do so about dread, communal identification and loss of self.

The struggle on this occasion is no longer a struggle among individuals, but among individuals and objects — objects that might be willing to act in certain ways, and that are made to act by the curators in a manner that might be contradictory with those ways. The ghost in this discussion, as it was with artists in the earlier opposition, is context; the question that hovers in the background is whether objects are able (or willing) to set themselves apart from their original context without being forced to. For McEvilley, the answer is no: by invoking Edmund Carpenter, he makes recourse to ethno-aesthetics and its privileging of context. Ethno-aesthetics, following the writings of Bronislaw Malinowski and Alfred Radcliffe-Brown, responded to the massive, uninformed incorporation of indigenous objects into Western commercial and exhibition contexts with the demand to understand art through its indigenous social system, conceived as holistic and balanced. But by the early 1970s, such faith in a signifying context had been abandoned in the search for a system that accounted for relations among local groups (the objects were not only made for internal use, and in any case they circulated between different groups, in different modes) and with a global scene (in interaction with international tourism and consumption). On this occasion, as is often the case, art criticism was late.

Rubin and Varnedoe instead embraced the strategy of dislocation of the classic model of the Western art museum, in order 'to deal with the questions...
raised by the form of the objects, rather than with the other kinds of questions that could only be answered by supporting texts about their origins or functions.\textsuperscript{35} This was seemingly done without any reservation nor decontextualized; in which objects can do and undo relations, including relations with the system that makes them possible; and in which objects can interact with artists and curators on a level playing field. This approach avoids a 'classical' discourse that, by establishing ontological differences between substances (man and thing, individual and collective, nature and society), is obliged to distinguish, without remission, between the processes and representations in which each of them engages. Instead, those elements are to be seen as 'multiple entities with an ontological status and a capacity for action that varies according to the positions they occupy in relation to each other'.\textsuperscript{40}

For the field of art exhibitions, following this path would offer an alternative to the conception of this history as one of identity struggle – of a dispute about inclusions and exclusions, about who is allowed to speak and who is not – which seems all but exhausted. Instead, it would open the door for considering artworks and artists as essentially able to enter into changing sets of relations, and would inscribe 'Magiciens de la Terre' into an alternative history of exhibitions. This would include shows such as 'Lotte or the Transformation of the Object', the 'Núcleo histórico' of the 24th Biennial of São Paulo; documenta 12 or 'The Potosi Principle',\textsuperscript{41} and could claim for itself a history of more 'ethnographic' predecessors, including Georges Henri Rivière's work as curator of the Musée de l'Homme in Paris and Lina Bo Bardi's displays at the Museu d'Arte Popular in Salvador de Bahia in the 1950s and 60s.

What all these exhibitions and practices share, despite their differences, is an incorporation of the object (the art object, the cultural object, or the 'primitive' object) that refuses to determine what this object is, or how it should be read. Whether it is north Brazilian craft production in the case of Bo Bardi; Polynesian, African or South American tribal works for Rivière; a 1940s German doll called Lotte, manufactured decades later in the West Coast of Africa and incorporated by the Yoruba people into their rituals; Francis Bacon paintings in São Paulo; rubands from Tajikistan and sculptures of their own, on the same level as that of artists and curators, and might provide the thread for another category of exhibitions in which objects are neither context-bound nor decontextualized; in which objects can set and undo relations, including relations with the system that makes them possible; and in which objects can interact with artists and curators on a level playing field. This approach avoids a 'classical' discourse that, by establishing ontological differences between substances (man and thing, individual and collective, nature and society), is obliged to distinguish, without remission, between the processes and representations in which each of them engages. Instead, those elements are to be seen as 'multiple entities with an ontological status and a capacity for action that varies according to the positions they occupy in relation to each other'.\textsuperscript{40}

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\textsuperscript{36} In the writings, for example, of Friedrich Schille.

\textsuperscript{37} In political theory, this need to escape contextual determinations recurs, in different manners, from Aristotle to Hannah Arendt to Jürgen Habermas or Jacques Rancière.

\textsuperscript{38} 'The deepest metamorphosis begun when art no longer had any end other than itself'. André Malraux, Les Voix du silence, Oeuvres Completes, Vol 4, Paris: Gallimard, 2004, pp.204–05.


by John McCracken in documenta 12; or colonial paintings of the Potosí mines from Bolivia, the issue at stake in these exhibitions was not what had been included and left out, or the level of engagement of those who made those objects. What all of them can be seen to be attempting, in different ways, is an exploration of the possibilities of display, the effects of the absence or presence of limited or copious information, the effect that both display and information have on viewers as collective or individual subjects and a reflection on (or prodding of) the limits of the art system's ability to deal with what is not conceived within or for it. This is not a history of 'better' exhibitions, but an alternative historical thread that might shed light on the possibilities of the system of art, no longer to secure visibilities and shape identities, but to develop ways to understand how cultural objects and cultural producers (from anywhere) might relate to each other. Here the notion of 'migration of form', proposed by Roger Buergel and Ruth Noack as the grammatical unit of documenta 12, is perhaps a useful tool.42 Like the 'affinities' that Rubin and Varnedoe defined as 'basic shared characteristics' or 'common denominators',43 'migration of form' is a strategic tool in exhibition-making rather than a hard concept; but unlike the 'affinities', and against its actual name, 'migration of form' is not about form, it is about a displacement that allows for new articulations of both form and content.

'Magiciens de la Terre' did not obviously set out to propose such articulations, but its insistence on form and its belief in the equal availability of artistic practice certainly brings it close. Its display disturbed the individuality of the artist's figure that its discourse proclaimed, and articulated visual relations that could be understood as 'migrations of forms', or 'contact zones' in which mixed and shifting agencies are possible.44 'Magiciens de la Terre' was perhaps the first exhibition of the self that refused to accept the existence of an other who could not have a place within it: no longer an exhibition of 'us', but an exhibition in which everything (or, rather, everyone) belonged. By working towards this goal, it suggested the possibility of another exhibition, the show in which nothing actually belongs. And this is perhaps what the exhibition form is: a place where nothing belongs, but where, because of this, objects and people (artists, curators and others) enter into relations, according to and against their will.

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44 For the notion of the 'contact zone' in relation to 'Magiciens de la Terre', see J.-M. Poinot, 'Review of the Paradigms and Interpretative Machine', *op. cit.*