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Magiciens sans Terre: The Darkness of Our Time

The end of Cold War has been considered by many as a moment marking the beginning of an unprecedented globalization process that changed the world in which we live. Under the guise of freedom and democracy, what was successfully spread was the system of (neo)liberal capitalism, introducing new market logic worldwide. Simultaneously, we have witnessed the expansion of institutions of contemporary art, from biennials to museums, also demanding the change of art production in localities at stake. Nowadays, we measure cultural and economic development of a place on the basis of existence or absence of museums of contemporary art. Hence, our aim will be to try to understand why has such an abstract notion entailing perception of time been employed to describe current artistic production, and we will try to reveal the practices usually hidden behind it.

PART 1: *The Magicians*

According to several authors, the 1990s in Europe were significant not only on a political level, but had marked a new moment in the development of artistic and curatorial practices as well. A new kind of curator suddenly had to become an expert not only on history of art, but on local cultures as well. Or, in the words of Francesco Bonami, “The role of the curator today involves such enormous geographical diversity that the curator is now a kind of visual anthropologist—no longer just a taste maker, but a cultural analyst.”¹ In the moment of re-canonization of Western artistic practices, new tools for understanding art from all over the world were needed. Curiously enough, they were found in anthropology. Nevertheless, these two disciplines have responded to the post-1989 shifts in highly different ways. As Thomas Boutoux notices,

Whereas anthropology plunged into years of epistemological crisis and anxious introspection, contemporary art can be said to have inaugurated an unprecedented era of vitality and expansion. (...) Throughout the 1990s, the anthropological world found itself in a quandary, when asked to explain how it contributed to the understanding of the world in which we live. (...) During the same period, the contemporary art world enthusiastically embraced “the global,” taking this new phenomenon as an opportunity to reinvent itself. Rather than being shaken, like anthropologists, by the size and power of emergent global circulation, the art world's protagonists were impressed by the pervasive raggedness of this new world, focusing on global coherence and using it as leverage to integrate sites of artistic production previously considered marginal to Western modernism.²

We will look now in a more detailed way how did the field of contemporary art take over the questionable anthropological categories and methodology, and at the same time distorted them.

The official art history takes as a turning point of this shift the exhibition "Magiciens de la Terre" that took place at the Pompidou Centre in Paris in 1989. The exhibition was conceived already in 1985 by Jean-Hubert Martin, a newly appointed director of the Paris Biennale,

Originally intended as a replacement for the Biennale's traditional format (in which contributors were selected by cultural representatives and committees from each participating country), this show has now grown into a major exhibition of international contemporary art. Its organizers intend to explore the 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 Western Europe.³

I would suggest here that we first take a look at a short and rare video document from the preparation of this exhibition. We will proceed with the analysis of this segment

and juxtapose it to the curatorial explanations given by its chief curator Jean-Hubert Martin in an interview by Benjamin H.D. Buchloh.

[video, <http://vimeo.com/14421900>]

As we have seen, this short segment opens with the images of the artists under the title Yuendumu, Australia, hence one could consider it to be the name of this group, community, or a tribe. Nevertheless, it is a name of a town that ranks “as one of the larger remote communities in central Australia”⁴ and was established by the Australian government after World War II; here, we find it used as a naming tool for this group of artists belonging to either Walpiri or Anmatyerr people. We find them working on a large painting on the ground, but we do not understand a word they are saying. We see their faces, noses, hands, they talk between each other, but we are not given a translation or insight into their talk. Nevertheless, what is translated is the explanation of their artwork: it represents the dreaming of rain; you can see the rain that falls, and the clouds are next to it.

The following part offers us no name for the artist filmed next: we see a Chinese guy washing newspapers in a washing machine, and making a wall installation from it. We hear from him that his main inspiration is Taoist philosophy which refuses to seek for answers, that he has a problem to define his relationship with the Chinese culture although he is supposed to represent China at this exhibition, and that he finds this show very important as it allows him to compare himself to other, Western artists, hence discover new things about his work.⁵

The third part introduces a group of Tibetan monks working on a sand mandala. We see the hard work they are investing in this almost impossible task of creating a complex image using only dust and metal sticks. We hear the sound of scrubbing, we see the drops of sweat on their foreheads, but we are given no names and hear no voice from them.

The last part of the video states the name of the artist – we see Joe Ben Jr., a Navajo American Indian. But before we see him, we witness a short talk between his wife and an African woman wearing traditional clothes. On first woman's comment that her blanket looks just like the American Indians' one, African woman asks “In India?” and hears “No, no... United States Indian.” We hear her “Aha” as a polite expression

of understanding something that does not seem logical. Further on, we see a couple with a little daughter working in the sand. The father is the artist, and we see him putting different pigments, working on the sand painting. His daughter participates as well, she shows her little painting to her mum and erases it in the next moment by burring it with sand. A little gesture of destruction as a prerequisite for the possibility of a new creation, we could say.

What can be fruitful for our discussion at this point is to try to understand the definition of contemporary art in this case. We see collectives (in some cases the families) of artists—from Australia, Tibet and the USA, as the representatives of what we could call traditional artistic practices; the only individual here that seems to correspond the closest to the canon of what we name modern art is the nameless Chinese artist; even in his explanation, he states that his motivation to participate here was in confronting his own practice with the Western artists. In the case of the representatives of traditional art, they seem as if they were abruptly taken out of their original context and placed in the proclaimed neutral space of a white cube, a sort of a 'democratic' platform where different artistic practices will be compared to each other. Although a small fragment, and almost an accidental testimony of this exhibition, the video does not give us any information about the other, Western artists participating here. What becomes obvious, nevertheless, is that contemporary art is understood in its most literary meaning, as an activity of producing art in the present, contemporary moment.

According to the curator Jean-Hubert Martin, his intention was to “treat contemporary art production on a global, worldwide scale.”⁴ The way to do this, according to him, is through the eyes of Euro-centrism:

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. I intend to select these objects from various cultures according to my own history and my own sensibility.²

Although approaching the same territories and cultures, Martin distinguishes his method from the ethnographic one:

If, for example, an ethnographer suggests to us a particular example of a cult in a society in the Pacific, but it turns out that the objects of this culture do not communicate sufficiently well in a visual-sensuous manner to a Western spectator, then I would refrain from exhibiting them.⁸ (...) I cannot select objects in the manner of ethnographers, who choose them according to their importance and function inside a culture, even though such objects may "mean" or "communicate" very little – or nothing at all – to us.

On Buchloch's question what are his criteria for the "strength" of a work, Martin replies, "The intensity of communication of meaning..."

BB: Meaning for us, or meaning for *them*?

JHM: For us, obviously. That is important because whatever meaning a practice has for its practitioners is not relevant to us if it cannot be communicated to us.⁹

As his main idea was to create a dialogue with other cultures, we can assume that Martin believes this was the way to do it – not trying to understand elements of other cultures, but focusing only on the items that we might consider visually attractive hence valuable. Or as he had formulated his answer to the possible neo-colonial subtext of this exhibition:

I oppose the idea that one can only look at another culture in order to exploit it. Our first concern is with exchange and dialogue, with understanding others in order to understand what we do ourselves.¹⁰ One cannot say that we still live in a neo-colonialist period. Obviously, the Western world maintains dominant relationships with respect to the Third World, but that should not prohibit us from communicating with the people of these nations, nor from looking at their cultural practices.¹¹

And that is achieved, one might conclude, by looking at them from our own perspective, favoring our own cultural framework in relation to theirs, offering them to participate in a dialogue with previously set rules and communicators.

Nevertheless, the reason for this exhibition, as we read further, is in order to gain primacy in taking a discourse of Western art into a new direction:

What is especially important to recognize is that this will be the first truly international exhibition of worldwide contemporary art. (...) The objects in our exhibition will be displaced from their functional context, and they will be shown in a museum and another exhibition space in Paris. But we will display them in a manner that has never been used for objects from the Third World. That is, for the most part, the makers of these objects will be present, and I will avoid showing finished, movable objects as much as possible. I will favor "installations" (as we say in our jargon) made by the artists specifically for this particular occasion – for example, a Tibetan mandala, an Ijele "mask" from Nigeria, or a Navajo sand painting.¹²

Hence, a newness promoted through this exhibition was to exhibit not only objects, but the artists as well, a fact to which we will come back later.

Just like the Chinese artist has articulated in the video, one of the effects of this exhibition was to juxtapose, to compare all those different works belonging to different contexts and traditions, to one source – that of Western art. We are not to expect a multilateral comparison between different cultures, a method in which Western art would become one among many, but it will serve as a parameter to which all others will be compared to. Or in the words of its curator:

This exhibition will also establish other types of cross-cultural relationships: for example, between the manner in which the repetition of identical models functions in Tibetan Tanka painting and in the work of a contemporary painter such as Daniel Buren, who has consistently repeated the model which he established for himself in the late 1960s.¹³

One of the most contradictory statements given by the curator relates to the question of the effect of Western invasion on other peoples and cultures, in which we also hear about the Australian Aborigines' reason to participate in the first place:

I am really against the assumption that we have in fact destroyed all other cultures with Western technology. A text written by the aboriginal artists of

Australia who are participating in this exhibition has clarified this issue for me. They state the problem of decontextualization perfectly well. But they go on to argue that they commit their "treason" for a particular purpose: to prove to the white world that their society is still alive and functioning. Exhibiting their cultural practices to the West is what they believe to be the best way to protect their traditions and their culture at this point in time.⁴⁴

Hence, the Aboriginal participation can be seen as part of their protest, as part of their resistance of the destruction brought by the white people; in an interesting twist of arguments, their desire to communicate that they still exist, not because of the mercy of the whites but thanks to their fight and resistance, has been turned into a proof that we have been forgiven for the crimes.

Let us now try to go back to the nineties: when we think about the artistic production and the exhibitions of that time, the word that defines this period, the concept that inevitably comes to mind is 'identity.' In those times of various shifts and global invasion of liberal capitalism (popularly named 'globalism'), the definition of clear ethnic identities in art and politics had become one of the most important traits of human beings to be worked upon. As we have seen, the field of contemporary art had become one of the main collaborators in this project, and suddenly the key to understand different artistic practices was found in the domain of culture and cultural identities, more often in the origin of the artists than in the art schools they might have attended. As it seems, we are to believe today that all this has been resolved, at least – try to think about when was the last time you have heard the word 'identity' in the arts? What is important to repeat at this point is that at the very same time, the anthropological theory had officially reached its crisis. This happened after the discovery that its approach, its methodology, only exoticized the Others it was researching about, being used as an extended hand of colonialism and having devastating consequences on the political level for those Others. As it seems, the art world did not have any problem with taking over the production and reproduction of the images of all those strange Others, turning them into a main product on the art market. The avatar body of the dark side of anthropology has found its new materialization, using this opportunity for the production of a new spectacle.

The strong and productive connection between museum culture and early anthropology has been already formulated by many and one of the explanations for this has been offered by Roy Wagner:

For museums form the logical point of transition or articulation between the two major senses of “culture”; they metaphorize ethnographic specimens and data by analyzing and preserving them, making them necessary to our own refinement although they belong to some other culture. (...) The study of “primitives” had become a function of our invention of the past.¹⁵

One of the sad stories we are always reminded when discussing the relationship between anthropology and museological practice, is the story about Ishi, who was the last surviving member of his American Indian tribe Yaha after the years of massacre by Europeans searching for gold. He was saved from prison by one of the founding fathers of American anthropology, Alfred Luis Kroeber, and has spent last years of his life living in a museum. A tragedy of one of the American tribes, as we have seen, translated into a comforting story that at least there was a museum in which Ishi could spend his last years, in an almost 'natural' environment, sharing his skills and knowledge with the visitors. As Wagner notices:

Museums had by then assumed fully the role of a reservation for Indian culture, and we are told that in good weather Kroeber and others would take Ishi back into the hills so that he could demonstrate Yahi techniques and bushcraft. (...) But this, again, is precisely the point; by accepting employment as a museum specimen, Ishi accomplished the metaphorization of life into culture that defines much of anthropological understanding.¹⁶

Hence, what we have witnessed with the anthropological museology is, according to Wagner, a process of metaphorization of life into culture; in comparison to this, what happens when all this is taken over by contemporary art?

If we go back to the video we have seen, one of the important aspects of these 'exotic' artistic practices is their ephemeral nature; if you have noticed, their material is mostly sand or dust, used in different ways. After the show is over, there is nothing

left behind to be sold at the market. Nevertheless, by fixating the identities in the art world, this new collection of exotic cabinet wonders testifies not only about the ongoing project of erasing everything different from the Western traditions [by giving them the place in the museum, things are already seen as if on their death bed] – it also testifies about the fact that since there is nothing there we could turn into a product and sell on the art market, the only thing left to be turned into currency and traded are their identities. According to the curator of the *Magiciens*, contemporary way of exhibiting will not mean exhibiting material objects only, but their creators as well. Artistic/shamanistic/human creativity has been displaced, taken out of its context, reduced to its aesthetic level, giving the illusion that we now understand it, that we comprehend what happens there, that we are now in possession of knowledge: nevertheless, what we actually have is information and not knowledge. Information about the others that does not mean the possession of true understanding, of the knowledge that has to come from within, from the inside – a process that can never leave us unchanged. If the aim of this exhibition was to establish a dialogue between the equals, the question that remains open could be formulated as: What would happen to contemporary art if it was judged by the other cultures following the same criteria? What would be the value of 'our' masterpieces? The answer to this question underlines the importance of cultural values inserted into art objects, something this exhibition consciously had erased: it is clear that without exporting the symbolic value with them, the value of our masterpieces would never reach the prices assigned to them at the Sotheby's for example.

PART II: *On the Meaning of Contemporary*

The final part of our discussion will open a space for questions related to the concept of 'contemporary' in contemporary art. As we are witnessing today, the use of the term 'contemporary art' has a blurry history. In some canons and institutions, it officially begins after 1945, in others after 1960s or after the disappearance of art movements. There have been at least three influential attempts to discuss this issue – the well-known questionnaire by the magazine *October* in the autumn of 2009, two issues of the *e-flux journal* at the same time, and in Germany, “the “Global Art and the Museum” project of Hans Belting, Andrea Buddensieg and Peter Weibel has

hosted a range of seminars and publications analyzing the overlaps and antagonisms between discourses of 'contemporary art'.¹⁷

Hence, what does contemporary art mean today? In the past twenty years, it is possible to diagnose the expansion of two main ways in which spectacularization happened in the art world: through the biennialization on one side, and the emergence of monster-museums often as signs of corporatization on the other. The system of contemporary art is also a highly speculative one: as nobody is able to predict the value of artistic production in this moment, the value will be accumulated with the passage of time, through the build-up of artist's career, the number of sold works, the number of exhibitions... and various other parameters which will allow the unprecedented profit in some imaginary future. A future that will prove that betting on that horse was a right decision, a right investment. What we fail to see in that construction of the future is that we most likely won't be there to profit from it. So, the remaining question is: Who will? Well, at least that is clear: the market itself. Hence, this construction contains the belief that the system will not be changed in the future, and that the same parameters to judge artistic creativity will remain as well. Therefore, we should all participate in defending the system, it must not be changed as 'our' art and future profits depend on it. As it seems, after the rejection of naivety of modernist belief of progress, utopias and transformation – the contemporary is here to introduce a belief that we have already reached that future, and that we live in the peak of human civilization, hence there is no need to imagine a different world. The only thing that matters is to keep on living 'in the present.'

What we witness today is the positioning of contemporary art between high culture and entertainment or, as Medina has named it, “intermediary region between elite entertainment and mass culture”: “In a compelling and scary form, modern capitalist society finally has an art that aligns with the audience, with the social elites that finance it, and with the academic industry that serves as its fellow traveler.”¹⁸

Having all this in mind, what happened to the artists? Simon Critchley reflects on the role the artists have served in the past years as a tool of promoting a particular economy through their life-style:

The contemporary artist has become the aspirational paradigm of the new worker: creative, unconventional, flexible, nomadic, creating value, and endlessly traveling. In a post-Fordist work paradigm defined by immaterial labor, artists are the perfect entrepreneurs and incarnate the new faux bohemianization of the workplace.¹⁹

In the analysis of contemporary art, a question that inevitably comes to mind is also: What does the new architecture of museums and institutes of contemporary art tell us?





When we look at those contemporary temples, we see mesmerizing buildings that look more like spaceships that have just landed, than museums we have been used to see around. And when they land in a certain territory, they bring with them not only precious art objects, but tourist crowds and consumerist desires as well. They are clean in usually dumpy neighborhoods 'under construction'; they offer French cuisine on their menu, perfumed toilets, and souvenirs with the images of all that critical art. What matters even more here is that the current public discussions related to the political discourse has been moved into these confined spaces, spaces where anything is allowed as long as it does not disturb the architecture of the building and as long as it stays inside, never endangering the rulers.

One of the most common interpretations of the term 'contemporary' is that it means the relationship we have not with the time, but with other human beings living at the same time. Or, as Hans Ulrich Obrist has formulated it: "It may be what is perhaps most clearly seen in its use as a noun: the word "contemporary" implies a relation; one is a contemporary of another."²⁰

Another discussion would be necessary to trace how this meaning of the term came to be; but what matters is to stress a different interpretation given by Giorgio Agamben, as this might be the key to its understanding. Agamben stresses the fact that this term implies a relation to the time, therefore the relation each of us has to time, and not to one another. This inevitably brings out the different concepts regarding time, we might add, as different cultures imply different definitions of time as well. According

to Agamben, the terms that mark this relation of true contemporaries to time is, following Nietzsche, disconnection and out-of-jointness: “Those who are truly contemporary, who truly belong to their time, are those who neither perfectly coincide with it nor adjust themselves to its demands. They are in this sense irrelevant [inattuale].”²¹ The contemporary also keeps a distance from his own time, or, in other words: “An intelligent man can despise his time, while knowing that he nevertheless irrevocably belongs to it, that he cannot escape his own time. (...) More precisely, it is *that relationship with time that adheres to it through a disjunction and an anachronism.*”²² What does, then, the contemporary see while looking at his time? According to Agamben, “The contemporary is he who firmly holds his gaze on his own time so as to perceive not its light, but rather its darkness. The contemporary is precisely the person who knows how to see this obscurity, who is able to write by dipping his pen in the obscurity of the present.”²³ And in this engagement with the darkness of one's time lies its political strength:

The contemporary is the person who perceives the darkness of his time as something that concerns him, as something that never ceases to engage him. The contemporary is the one whose eyes are struck by the beam of darkness that comes from his own time.²⁴

What this means in relation to art is that if it wants to be called contemporary, it has to be made by the ones “who do not allow themselves to be blinded by the lights of the century,”²⁵ who are able through “the archeology of the present” to make us aware of what it means to be living at this time, assumed the same for everyone. The contemporary artists should be able to reflect on the past as well: “If, as we have seen, it is the contemporary who has broken the vertebrae of his time; (...) then he also makes of this fracture a meeting place, or an encounter between times and generations.”²⁶ And for the beginning, one might hope that there will be a different art possible as well: art that will not be made for the blinding lights of those false space ships who are placed there only to confuse us, to disorientate us, linking the progress and future to capitalism itself. As we have seen, the prevailing interpretation of the term 'contemporary' is to convince us that we have reached this utopian moment when all the people of this planet are interconnected, that globalization brought us awareness of the “butterfly effect” while what it really brought is the awareness that, unfortunately, we all have different experiences of contemporaneity, we live under

different circumstances and the facts show only that the codependency of rich minority from the poor majority has never been bigger. Perhaps the Russian version of the term contemporary art “современное искусство” (meaning literary “contemporary experience”) makes this much clearer – defining art as a space in which to reflect on the experience of contemporaneity and not a space for the production of fetishized subjects and objects. As Johannes Fabian has shown us, one of the main achievements of the colonial discourse was to make it possible to share the same physical space with the colonized ones, while locating them into different time zones. A fact we should always keep in mind, not allowing to be seduced by the bright lights of ‘the contemporary.’ As a conclusion, we might hope at this point that the same paralysis that haunts anthropology from the beginnings of ‘globalization’ soon catches the art world as well. For the beginning, perhaps the least we can do is to start calling things their right names.

[This paper was presented at the conference “Collecting Geographies – Global Programming and Museums of Modern Art” at the Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam, 13-15 March 2014, under the title “The Darkness of Our Time: On the Meaning of Contemporary in Contemporary Arts”]

¹ Cited in Boutoux, Tomas. “A Tale of Two Cities: Manifesta in Rotterdam and Ljubljana.” In: *The Manifesta Decade. Debates on Contemporary Art Exhibitions and Biennials in Post-Wall Europe*. Ed. Vanderlinden, Barbara and Elena Filipovic. Roomade and MIT, Cambridge: 2005. pp.203-204.

² *Ibid.*, pp. 201-202.

³ Buchloh, Benjamin (interview with Jean-Hubert Martin), “The Whole Earth Show.” In: *Art in America*, vol.77, no. 5, May 1989, pp. 150.

⁴ “Yuendumu, Northern Territory.” Wikipedia, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Yuendumu,_Northern_Territory [visited October 3, 2012].

⁵ His name is actually Huang Yong Ping, and we can find the following information on his Wikipedia page: “In 1989 at the age of 35 Huang Yong Ping went to Paris for the *Magicians of Earth* exhibit. He then ended up immigrating to France and living there ever since.” http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Huang_Yong_Ping [visited October 17, 2012]

⁶ Buchloh, Benjamin. *Ibid*, pp.152.

⁷ *Ibid.*, pp.153.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, pp.155.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, pp.211.

[12](#) *Ibid.*, pp.154.

[13](#) *Ibid.*, pp.213.

[14](#) *Ibid.*, pp.156.

[15](#) Wagner, Roy. *The Invention of Culture (revised and expanded edition)*. The University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London, 1981 [1975], pp.28.

[16](#) Wagner, *Ibid.*, pp.28-29.

[17](#) Gardner, Anthony; Hallam, Huw. “On the contemporary–and contemporary art history. A review of Terry Smith, *What Is Contemporary Art*.” *Journal of Art Historiography* No.4, June 2011. pp.1.

[18](#) Medina, Cuauhtémoc. “Contemp(t)orary: Eleven Theses.” *e-flux journal* #12, January 2010, pp.3.

[19](#) Critchley, Simon, “Absolutely-Too-Much.” *The Brooklyn Rail*, July-August 2012.
<http://www.brooklynrail.org/2012/08/art/absolutely-too-much> [visited August 1, 2012].

[20](#) Obrist, Hans Ulrich. “Manifestos for the Future.” *e-flux journal* #12, January 2010, pp.6.

[21](#) Agamben, Giorgio. *What is an Apparatus?* Stanford University Press, 2009, pp.40.

[22](#) *Ibid.*, pp.41.

[23](#) *Ibid.*, pp.44.

[24](#) *Ibid.*, pp.45.

[25](#) *Ibid.*, pp.45.

[26](#) *Ibid.*, pp.52.