

**Paris and Cologne  
'Bilderstreit' and 'Magiciens de la  
Terre'**

*Bilderstreit* (at the **Rheinhallen der Kölner Messe, Cologne**, 8th April to 28th June)<sup>1</sup> has been justifiably criticised as one of the worst conceived exhibitions of the decade. Taking up where *Westkunst* left off, the organisers, Siegfried Gohr and Johannes Gachnang, set out to chart the course of art in Europe and America from 1960 onwards, on the premise that European art has principally been figurative while American art has been almost entirely non-figurative (either conceptual or minimal). They bravely sought to juxtapose within the same room works from entirely different persuasions; thus one found Baselitz and Penck together with Judd and LeWitt, or late Guston (poorly chosen) with Gilbert and George, Andre, Richter and Buren. While this might indicate in the most banal way the different options open to artists at any given moment, it uses the art itself in an illustrative manner. For every European figurative artist one might put forward a counterpart working in a conceptual mode. That is not to say that there were no European conceptual artists on view but simply that they were selected with narrow-minded partiality and some, such as Toroni, given too much space. One of the problems with this exhibition was its simplistic view of art history.

Another major problem was more political. While a range of western European countries were represented, one was meant to leave this exhibition with the feeling that Germany had made the single most important contribution to European art since 1960. The works of Baselitz and Penck cropped up repeatedly as though acting as some kind of standard against which all other artists must measure themselves. Baselitz, for example, was shown in five separate galleries in the company of different artists on each occasion. Penck, a less important artist, was found in three different contexts, as also was Polke. Undoubtedly the works of Baselitz and Polke are of considerable quality but there is something sinister about this Germanocentric view, which one had hoped had disappeared over the last forty years.

A distinguished British artist recently suggested to me that power in the art world resided with museum curators. My retort was that it resided with dealers and, regrettably, *Bilderstreit* proved the point. This exhibition was dominated by the artists of one particular Cologne gallery and as a result the organisers' intelligence and integrity were called into question. Criticisms aside, however, there were some notable works on show, although few were unknown. There were also some important artists who were poorly represented and inadequately displayed.

The pretensions of *Bilderstreit* to internationality have been brought into focus by *Magiciens de la Terre* (at the **Centre Georges Pompidou** and the **Grande Halle La Villette, Paris**, 18th May to 14th August)<sup>2</sup> which claims to be the first truly international exhibition. The show

is founded upon the observation that the western 'civilised' world is introspective in its insistence on the primacy of western art and that all so-called international exhibitions have hitherto been limited by this perspective. Furthermore westerners regard any art which lies outside the western tradition as either ethnographic, and therefore not art, or as craft. *Magiciens* sets out to show that contemporary art is also produced within less developed countries and that in the same way as western artists work within, develop and deviate from a tradition, so too do their 'third world' counterparts (Fig.103).

The basis of the selection of the 'third world' artists lay in the quality and interest of their work from a western point of view. The organisers fully admit that it was impossible and even undesirable for them to select from any standpoint other than the one with which they are familiar. In spite of extensive consultation with many different people from a multitude of countries, they lay themselves open to the accusation that they have plundered 'third world' art as colonisers, imposing their values and judgments on cultures to which these may be irrelevant.

Broadly, the western artists were chosen for their affinity with ethnographic or 'primitive' art (Houshiary, Long, Alberola, Tony Cragg and Bourgeois; Fig.104) or for their interest in issues relating to the third world (Haacke, Baldessari), so that a fruitful dialogue would ensue. This resulted in whole sections of contemporary art being overlooked in the interests of a coherent show.

The purpose of the exhibition, therefore, is to supply 'third world' art with a context and a framework in which it may be understood by the western visitor. The choice of artists in both camps seems relatively haphazard since for every one chosen there must have been many omitted for reasons of space as much as anything else. For example, Shirazeh Houshiary is included but not Anish Kapoor, Rasheed Araeen and not Sonia Boyce. In addition, for whatever reason, it was decided to exclude those western artists, such as Stephen Cox, who actually employ 'native' craftsmen and work within native traditions, an omission which seems particularly odd in view of the interest this exhibition generates in the crossover of cultures (Clemente is included but is represented only by strictly autograph works).

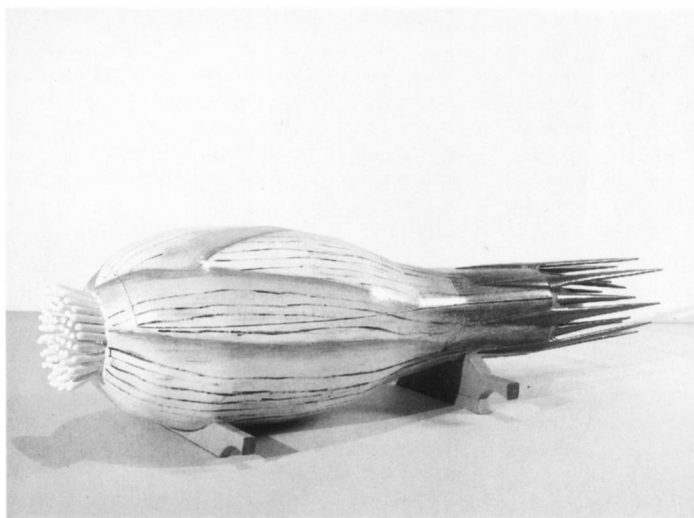
The cross-currents are one of the most fascinating aspects of the exhibition which is particularly beautifully installed at La Villette. For example, how is it that Navajo Indians, Haitians, Aborigines and South Africans all make paintings in the sand or earth? To what extent did the traditions within which they work ever come into contact? Similarly the exhibition makes a point of underlining interests shared between these artists and their western counterparts, no more markedly than in the juxtaposition of Richard Long's *Red earth circle* with the Yuendumu Aborigine earth painting employing sacred herbs. The ritualistic and religious nature of the Aborigine work endows Long's circle with

a meaning which, in another context, it might not have; but it is much the stronger for it. Indeed Long is one of the few western artists to survive with credit, for many of his colleagues emerge as too calculating and too reliant on strategy to withstand the freshness, the directness and depth of meaning of the 'third world' art. Where religion, sex, death and functionalism seem to be the basis for the creation of most forms of 'ethnic' art, art itself is often the only reason for the making of western art.

Although an artist such as Kiefer tackles important issues, his work appears grandiose next to the beautiful tantric drawings of Raja Babu Sharma from Jaipur, whose simple forms and sense of balance recall the work of the late Peter Kinley. In the context of the sand and earth paintings, however, one begins to wonder whether the encrusted, earthy nature of the surface of Kiefer's paintings has an affinity with such 'primitive' religious or voodoo rituals. Indeed viewing western art in such company allows us to re-evaluate its importance. Polke (in this context only, and maybe deliberately) seems cynically trivial, Alberola empty and Kawara sterile. Baldessari's photographic story-book seems tired and knowing when juxtaposed with the innocence of Frédéric Bruly-Bouabré, whose own imaginative tales deal with the language of animals, stones and trees and illustrate the evolution of the nuclear missile from the chicken-bone by way of the arrow, and whose view of history (Caesar and Ulysses, for example), previously known to westerners in a European form, seems equally plausible as African history. It would be wrong, however, to suggest that only artists of the 'third world' are capable of maintaining such innocence, for the contribution of Ilya Kabakov is magical in its naïvety and folkloric nature (some might argue here that in terms of contemporary art the USSR is a 'third world' nation). Houshiary contributes a work of dignity, poise and intensity dealing with the elements of earth, water and fire suggesting ritual and religion, a sacred altar and an eternal monument, a place for enacting magic ceremonies.

Another of the exhibition's functions is to show how similar ideas can develop independently of each other, in both western and 'third world' countries. For example, Esther Mahlangu's painted house (Fig.105) is highly reminiscent of Matt Mullican's cosmologies (not included in the show) while the imaginative and powerfully rich panel paintings of Twins Seven Seven combine a Klee-like demonism with Nigerian primitive imagery. Even his titles are reminiscent of Klee's (for example *The mother of the world reptile*) and it may be no coincidence that he is collected in Germany.

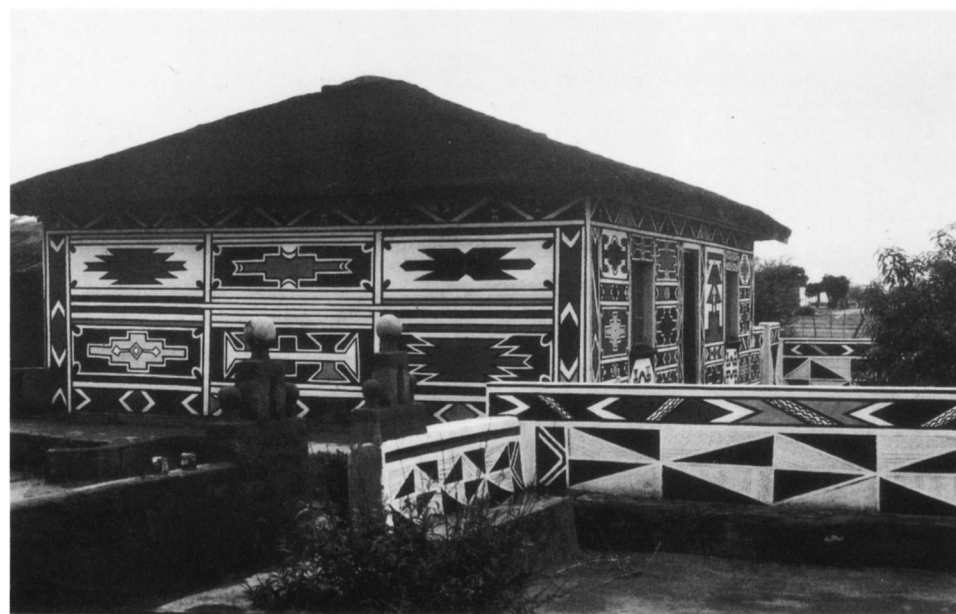
Although the influence on western art of primitive culture has been treated at length in recent years (for example *Primitive Art in the Twentieth Century*, held in 1984 at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, and the surrounding debate, to which the present exhibition is in part a counter-punch), little interest has been aroused, except among ethnographers and anthropologists, in the extent to which 'third



103. *Onion*, by Kane Kwei. 1988. Painted wood. 70 by 265 by 70 cm. (Exh. Georges Pompidou Centre, Paris).



104.



world' art has been touched by the western world. This is another theme underlying the choice of exhibitors, although at times one feels that artists have been selected to illustrate the point rather than because the resulting art is good. Nevertheless there are some interesting observations to be made. For example, Chief Mark Unya exhibits a head-dress whose principal motif is an aeroplane, whereas all his other head-dresses are depictions of fish. While the fish are figures of fantasy, the aeroplane is treated in a naturalistic manner showing, possibly, the difficulty of incorporating unfamiliar motifs essentially alien to the artist's own culture. Equally interesting is Unya's reliance on fluorescent colours which are obviously of western origin.

While *Magiciens* ask serious questions, it deliberately withholds answers. Given the paucity of our knowledge of art other than western, how do we judge what is laid before us? It becomes immediately apparent how much we rely on inherited traditions and context in the understanding of the art of our own culture, as the organisers admitted when they made their selection. How then should we approach the art of uncharted cultures? Furthermore, how typical of 'third world' art producers are those who have been selected for this show? If they are as typical as the western artists invited to exhibit, then one must assume that there is a vast production of art which continues to be unknown to us and which this exhibition encourages us to explore. To what extent are the 'third world' exhibitors artists and what differentiates them from craftsmen or even high priests? The Nepalese monks state in the catalogue that the notion of art does not exist for them. By including them in such an exhibition, are the organisers imposing an interpretation and function on their 'art' which is intrinsically alien to it? If religious artefacts, such as Jimmy Wululu's funerary monuments, are removed from their functional context, to what extent do they lose their meaning, and do they become simply sculpture in the secular western tradition? Can the same question be asked of renaissance altar-pieces which have now, in many respects, become secularised by their removal to museums? Conversely, when a secular work of western art such as Long's *Red earth circle* is displayed in the context of ritualistic or religious art, how valid is its extended and amplified meaning? Finally, at what point do 'third world' objects transcend the barrier between folk art and fine art and are these valid distinctions?

104. *Articulated lair*, by Louise Bourgeois. 1986. Painted steel and rubber. (Robert Miller Gallery, New York; exh. Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris).

105. *Mabhoko - Kwandebele*, by Esta Mahlangu. Photograph of the artist's painted house in Mabhoko, South Africa. (Exh. Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris).

*Magiciens de la Terre* is one of the most thought-provoking exhibitions of this decade because it demonstrates the shallowness of our knowledge of art and our arrogant occidental attitudes. Whether one can continue to show 'developed' western art in such a context while at the same time widening the range of art is another matter, for in the end this show is as selective within its own terms as an exhibition devoted exclusively to western art. It takes a brave person to organise such a show and an even braver artist to participate in it.

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Tate Gallery

<sup>1</sup>*Bilderstreit. Widerspruch, Einheit und Fragment in der Kunst seit 1960.* By Siegfried Gohr and Johannes Gachnang + several contributions. 544 pp. + numerous ill. in col. and in b. & w. (DuMont Buchverlag Köln, 1989). ISBN 3-7701-2372-7.

<sup>2</sup>*Magiciens de la Terre.* Introduction by Jean-Hubert Martin + essays. 271 pp. + numerous ill. in col. and in b. & w. (Editions du Centre Pompidou, 1989), FF490, HB. ISBN 2-85850-498-9.

## Meaux French painting

Conceived and organised by Jean-Pierre Changeux, Professor at the Collège de France, well known neurobiologist and passionate *amateur* of old-master paintings, the exhibition *De Nicolò dell'Abbate à Nicolas Poussin* set out to explore French painting at the end of the sixteenth and the beginning of the seventeenth century, a period of transition neglected by art historians. It was held at the **Musée Bossuet, Meaux** (to which Professor Changeux has given ten seventeenth- and eighteenth-century French paintings) from December 1988 through February 1989, and both the thought-provoking selection of works and the catalogue,<sup>1</sup> written by fifteen major scholars of the period, raise interesting questions, proposing no less than a whole new account of French painting.

The *Rape of Helen* given to the studio of Primaticcio, from the Bowes Museum, Barnard Castle – of which certain portions are so beautiful that one wonders if it is not at least partly by the master – and a group of works by Niccolò dell'Abbate, including an unpublished fragment discovered in store at the Musée de Quimper by Pierre Rosenberg – were included as a preface to the show to represent the First School of Fontainebleau. The Second Fontainebleau School was convincingly explored in a large group of paintings. They included a new discovery, *Jonah delivered from the whale* from the Church of St Alpin, Châlons-sur-Marne, by Toussaint Dubreuil, whose style remains problematical especially as one knows that he furnished his collaborators with his drawings for them to execute

in oil: *Angelica and Medoro* at the Louvre, with its elongated figures and boldly cut-off planes, lit by the sun before a storm, appeared very different from the other paintings attributed to him in the exhibition. Martin Fréminet could be studied in unpublished works of great importance: first, a series of *modelli* in oil and grisaille for the decorations of the Chapel of the Trinity at Fontainebleau, recognised by Dominique Cordellier among the unattributed works in the Cabinet des Dessins of the Louvre and now shown in the new galleries devoted to French painting there; and second, a large *Adoration of the shepherds* from the Musée de Gap. Quentin Varin appeared in various guises: Jacques Thuillier is right to remove the *Martyrdom of a saint* at Beauvais from his *œuvre*, while the two sloppily painted canvases from the Church at Les Andelys, the *Martyrdom of St Vincent* and the *Martyrdom of St Clare*, are reminiscent, in their childish narrative style, of processional banners. On the other hand, the *Wedding at Cana* of about 1618-20 or perhaps slightly later, from Rennes, painted for the high altar of the Church of St-Gervais in Paris, is an absolute masterpiece, refined and subtle and a major touchstone in the history of French painting.

Bellange's artistic personality was hardly made any clearer by the works assembled in the show. The firmest attribution – and the only one at all comparable in its visionary extravagance and virtuosity of execution to his drawings and engravings – was the superb *Lamentation* from the Hermitage, which is related to a drawing at Dijon; the bust-length *Magdalen* from the Musée Lorrain at Nancy, although of far lesser quality, is directly related to it stylistically. A *Christ crowned with thorns* which recently reappeared at auction (at Tours, 6th March 1989) is yet to be fully studied, but appears very close. Other pictures pose different problems. Is the large *Stigmatisation of St Francis* from the Musée Lorrain certainly by Bellange? The stiff heavy figures accord ill with those in the picture from the Hermitage and with what we know of Bellange's style from his drawings and paintings; Pierre Rosenberg explains these discrepancies by proposing that the St Francis is an early work. Or should we, as for La Tour, imagine two different styles for this artist – a diurnal and a nocturnal Bellange?

The art of the Rouennais Jean de St-Igny, represented by the *Presentation in the Temple* recently acquired by the Musée de Dunkerque, now appears more sharply in focus. The ravishing group of eight small pictures, mostly in grisaille, of French sovereigns on horseback, courtly scenes and half-length female figures (at Rouen, Nîmes and Chantilly, in the Musée des Arts Décoratifs, Paris and a private collection; at Versailles and at Vassar College, Poughkeepsie) should certainly be removed from his *œuvre*. Their supple and brilliant technique in any case reveals a Flemish hand. They may well be by Juste d'Egmont (1601-74), one of the most important painters in Paris and one of the founding members of the Académie in 1648. The

correspondence in style and handling between the picture at Poughkeepsie and his large group portrait of *Anne of Austria, Louis XIV and the Duke of Anjou* at the Château de Balleroy is striking.<sup>2</sup> On the other hand, a large number of the drawings in red chalk traditionally given to Bellange ought instead to be attributed to St-Igny.<sup>3</sup> His painting style appears more graphic and rougher, more summary and also drier without any Flemish overtones. I would like tentatively to propose that the beautiful *Crucifixion* at the Château de Lourmarin (Fig. 107) might be by him. In St-Igny, Juste d'Egmont and Bellange, we are faced with three distinct artistic personalities linked only by their taste for fashionable hats with large plumes.

Georges Lallemant's *œuvre* now appears more clearly defined, with a corpus of paintings for churches, some of them documented, recognisable by their rather unstable, elongated figures with hooked noses and tense attenuated fingers – for example those at St Nicolas-des-Champs and Notre-Dame-de-Bonne-Nouvelle, Paris, and at Rouen, Senlis and Lombard. The *Adoration of the Magi* in the Musée de Lille, already attributed to Lallemant by Charles Sterling in 1937, fits in easily to this group, but the canvas of the same subject in the Hermitage is feebly executed and looks like a copy. Are the *Good Samaritan* at Nancy and the *St Sebastian* by Ponce, which are so close in style, really by Lallemant? The abbreviated sculptural forms and the highly contrasted lighting surely argue against his authorship. The beautiful series of six paintings at Notre-Dame-des-Blancs-Manteaux, Paris, does not have much to do with Lallemant: an inscription, '*Elle*' on one of the canvases may be a signature (an article by Jean-Claude Boyer on this problem will soon be published).

The Le Nain brothers were represented by the well-known *Bacchus and Ariadne* from Orléans, and by an unpublished *Adoration of the Magi* acquired by Professor Changeux in 1986 and given by him to the Museum at Meaux. As it was still undergoing restoration it was not shown in the exhibition, and is therefore illustrated here after its cleaning (Fig. 106), which revealed an overpainted angel in the upper part. This picture can be added to the very coherent group of mostly religious subjects which Jacques Thuillier assembled in 1978 as the 'group of the Adoration' without suggesting it belonged to the *œuvre* of the three brothers, and prudently hypothesising instead that these were youthful works by a yet-to-be identified artist. Now, in the catalogue, convinced by the Changeux *Adoration*, he – rightly in my view – integrates his whole group into the Le Nain corpus. However, I hold to my opinion that we see here not so much the hand of a tyro, but that of Mathieu after 1648: this is suggested by the number of works in this group, their stylistic coherence (I cannot see more than one hand), the evidence of the early sources which describe Mathieu as specialising in '*histoires*', and their complete stylistic and intellectual divergence from the four canvases of the Life of the Virgin painted for the marquis de Mirabel