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Art Concepts, Art Markets. Some Remarks on Contemporary Non-Western Art

Contemporary art from non-western countries is no longer a mystery. Art museums, one by one, focus their attention on art centres outside the western world. People discover the world once more in the form of exhibitions and articles in newspapers. It happens in ethnological museums, but also in the most prestigious art-temples. The most recent and most important example was the exhibition *Les magiciens de la terre* which was to be seen in Paris in the summer of 1989. One hundred artists from all over the world were presented on an individual base. Interest is clearly mounting.

A clear definition of contemporary non-western art is hard to give. The vagueness of the term results from the fact that there are so many overwhelming forms and aspects of contemporary art. In order to understand the essential characteristics of the field, it is necessary to compare different case-studies. In that way, I hope, differences as well as the similarities may become clearer.

When I mention contemporary non-western art, I mean all of the visual art forms made in the present time from a non-western source, showing a clear deviation from traditional or classical art forms. Within this broad concept we can see many things happening. When we scan the vast territory, we feel an urge to differentiate for instance between classical art and popular art, tourist art, academic art, expressionist art, abstract art in the Tantra sense or a calligraphic sense, representational art and modern folk art. Many categories and many divisions are to be made, sometimes based on the visual character, sometimes on the functions, the meaning or the iconography. All of these categories flow into each other and are intermingled. In short, an extremely confusing situation.

In this article I can only deal with parts of the theoretical problems involved in this subject. I will proceed in two steps. First I will try to explain why it is so difficult to analyse contemporary non-western art, although it often seems close to us, closer than most traditional art. And I will try to show that the road to understanding lies in the specific concept of art being used. Then I will go on to describe an important factor which in my idea determines the character and direction of development of contemporary non-western art for a great deal: the art market.

Before I start I would like to stress the point that I am not an anthropologist. I was trained as an art historian, but by profession I am a museum-man in a very concrete sense: I show objects to people and tell stories about them.

Looking at contemporary non-western art

Why is it difficult to look at non-western art? Studying other cultures, we always have to face the fact that we ourselves are a product of a different culture. At the moment we judge any part of that culture, we use, consciously or unconsciously, our own

value-systems, based on our upbringing, our experiences and our references. This is true for culture as a whole. This is also true for art.

When we look at art, it is impossible for us to judge it in a so-called «pure» or objective way, forgetting the concept of art we grew up with, forgetting the colours, shapes and objects we learned to like and learned to despise, forgetting the associations we have with certain themes and subjects. Nobody can appraise with eyes only: our eyes are directly connected to our brain, and so with memories and feelings. Our way of looking at objects is determined culturally.

The fact that we cannot evaluate objectively is important when we look at art, because we need and use our visual experiences, our memories of objects, when we want to see, remember, classify and analyse works of art. So in dealing with art we have to use our individual, very personal equipment, but we should be aware of the cultural biases: a very complicated situation, which cannot really be solved. This problem is quite obvious when we consider objects from a foreign culture, where there are functions, meanings and esthetics which we do not instantly understand, feel or share. The greater part of this symposium will deal with this.

Our first impression of most forms of *contemporary non-western art* is that they are more familiar to us than most forms of traditional non-western art. In most examples we see structures and elements we think that we recognize and therefore that we understand. This creates a temptation to be quick with our judgements. This however is often incorrect. To show you what I mean by this I will give you a few examples.

We feel quite at ease with the painting *Lipstick for mother* by the Indonesian painter Dede Eri Supria (fig. 1). We find immediate associations with American pop art. We see modern objects such as the hair-dryer painted in a manner which brings Rosenquist to mind. We see a familiar, photo-realistic style, and a collage-like combination of different elements. These kinds of associations with art we know are often accidental. Only in this case, the artist is a painter, trained in one of the larger Indonesian academies of art, and quite capable of knowing American pop art from art books, if not by visiting the United States. In the same way he is familiar at least with most other modern art movements.

The similarity then is not a coincidence but results from a conscious choice of style. The reason for using this style or form, however, may well be very different from the pop artists. Many representatives of the western art world look at the dates of these works and have their judgements ready: it is just a late copy of a western avant-garde movement («late» meaning «too late»), a weak derivative with no originality.

Dede Eri Supria is in his technical perfect mode of hyperrealism a rebel in Indonesia. The older generation of artists does not approve of his work although they appreciate his craftsmanlike mastership: technical skill and a careful finish is a deeply embedded characteristic of quality in Java. Stylistically, his colleagues disapprove of his realism, because they think it is old-fashioned. The Indonesian phase of realism had its hey-days in the period after independence with its stress on politics.

For the specific art context of Dede Eri Supria's work, he is avant-garde or at least stubborn. In Indonesia, where the authority of the master, the guru, is extremely important, this rebellious position is even more striking. His position as a critic is evident not only in his style but also in his subjects. Under the «hair-dryer» is not an average Indonesian woman but Kartini, frontleader of the Indonesian organisation of women. The lipstick and hair-dryer are sarcastic symbols of westernisation in this



Fig. 1: Dede Eri Supria, *Lipstick for mother*, 1980, 200x100 cm, acrylic paint on canvas. Private collection.

context, symbols that make Kartini cry. Dede Eri Supria has chosen his role as an outsider who has to tell his story, to warn his countrymen against wrong management of the society.

Let's move on to another continent, Africa, to the painter Augustin Okoye. He signed this large oil painting with «Middle Art» (fig. 2). This is the name he gave himself, his careername so to speak. This in itself is in our own eyes a strange thing to do. It reminds us more of business practice than an artist's habit. Middle Art has had exhibitions in several large cities in Nigeria and abroad in Europe. His works have sold well. Also, we can associate them with pop art: they are colorful, lively, and there are associations with advertisements. They often contain texts and are not without humour.

Technically, however, Middle Art is less refined than his Indonesian colleague. In spite of his success, he works in a small shed near one of the larger streets in Onitsha, in the South-East of Nigeria. In the street itself there is a sign where he advocates himself as a painter. Although his name has primarily artistic connotations, the sign reads that Middle Art will do all sorts of work, including the painting of license plates and the carving of rubber stamps.

Apparently he works for several markets. He does very simple practical jobs for local firms, with nothing that can be called artistic freedom. He designs advertisements for hotels and shops with narrative scenes and he makes large and elaborate paintings with self-chosen contents, real free art works so to speak, mainly for European customers or foreign exhibitions.

His portrayal shows technical shortcomings, but we learn that he has taught himself. In some portraits we wonder why the faces are so grey. Then we find out that he normally uses black and white photographs as a model. In his advertisement signboards we see that he uses varying relations in size, in order to focus clearly on the main attractions of the place: good food and fancy people. Why does he make art works for exhibitions as well as license plates?

Middle Art sees himself basically as a craftsman. He needs the money to feed his family and sees no shame in doing simple work to achieve that. He was never raised in the conviction that being an «artist» means fulfilling a higher vocation, as it does in the west since the romantic period in western art history. As the customers for his free art works are outsiders, they form an irregular, unstable market. He is not so much familiar with western art traditions as with the trivial western culture consisting of pictures in magazines, film posters and photographs. It is clear after comparing Middle Art to Dede Eri Supria, that it is always essential to determine how the artist, or the maker of objects, sees himself; what his aims, convictions, hopes and ambitions are. How did he become what he is, in action and thought. This is not always easy to find out but Middle Art once made a painting in which he made some of this clear. In a storyboard (fig. 3), he portrayed his life, like a painted autobiography. In one of the scenes he shows how he meets «Mr Ulli Beier and his lovely wife». Ulli Beier and his wife Georgina, who is an artist herself, are well known in the history of the new Nigerian art. Beier encouraged many young Nigerians to enter the visual arts and made the most successful ones known in the west. Without this meeting and the role the Beiers played, the ambiguity of Middle Art's career is not easy to explain. His personal version of the dialogue with western art views and culture is always evident.

As the third and final introductory example, I will discuss briefly an extremely lively art, which thrives in the major cities of India. In this country, many of the

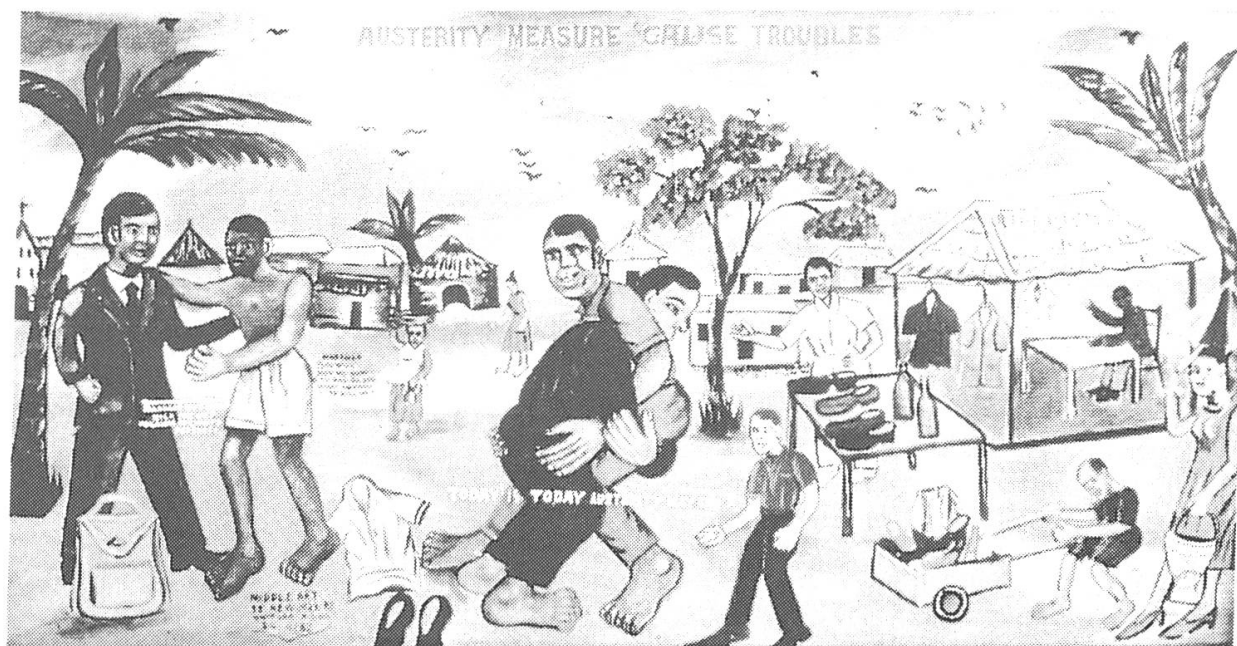


Fig. 2: Middle Art, *Austerity measure cause troubles*, oilpaint on wood. Private collection.

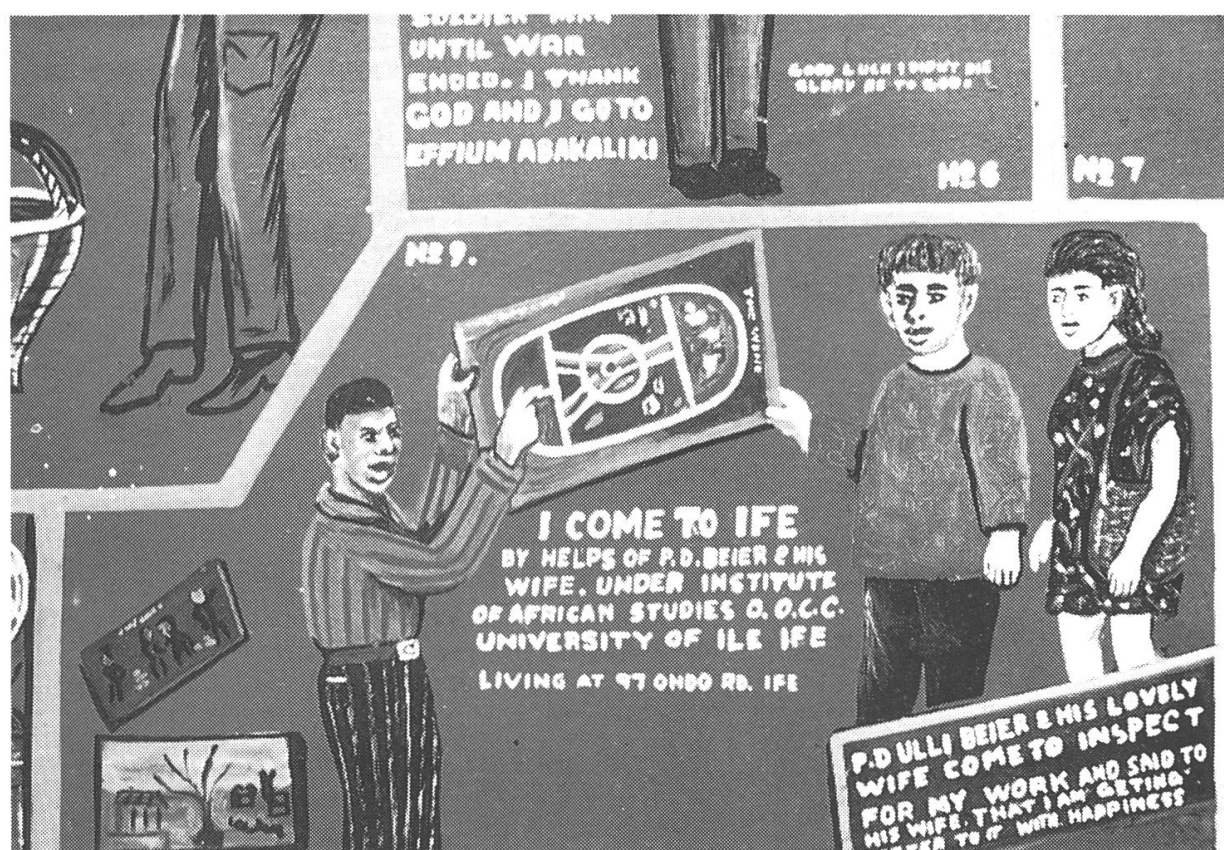


Fig. 3: Middle Art, *Suffering stages of life* (detail), 1972, 90 x 60 cm, oilpaint on wood. Private collection.



Fig. 4: Rakhal Pal, *Durga*, 1988, height 188 cm, painted clay. Collection Museum of Ethnology Rotterdam.

traditional cultural elements have survived the colonial past. The religious continuancy is the clue to the preservation of a strong individual cultural character. Hinduism, of course, has changed over the centuries in many ways but that is the usual path for any living culture. One of the most outspoken forms of visual expression is making images of the gods for the large Hindu festivities.

The painted clay image of the goddess Durga seems strange and familiar to us at the same time (fig. 4). Hundreds of these images are made yearly for the great Durga-festival, especially in Bengal. The familiarity of its outlook originates in the stylistic mixture of realism and baroque. Due to the English art traditions introduced in the 19th century, these images became more and more naturalistic over the years. In spite of the great popularity, the realistic versions of Durga did not fully replace the traditional stylised versions. They still exist side by side. Gods in India can be popular as a movie star can be popular (or is it the other way around?). It is not uncommon to see goddesses with the recognisable features of famous actresses. Who are the makers? Rakhai Pal is not an academically trained artist and not an autodidact. He is a master craftsman, he has been working with clay all his life, and before him his father did. In a long and slow process he acquired the art of making images in clay, painting them and decorating them. Is he «just» a craftsman?

That is very hard to say. In spite of the large production of images in dozens of workshops, there are clear stylistic differences and conceptions. Surprisingly in spite of the large number of image makers in Calcutta, many ordinary people can mention several ones by name, simply because they are so famous for their work: during the festivals people walk for miles to see the greatest *pandals* (tent-like structures in which the images are displayed). Insiders can recognize images by the hand of the maker. It is true that Rakhai Pal has a large staff to help him, but so did Rubens. His self-image is based on religious inspiration but also on a task of innovation on a personal level. He is capable of producing versions of Durga in a very restrained, stylised, classical way, but he also realises his own type of goddess, his own vision of divine beauty.

The works from these three artists make it clear that it is certainly not easy to simply look at art and to fully appreciate it, although it is sometimes tempting to do so. They also prove that there is no such thing as *the* non-western contemporary art: the differences between these three artists are immense. The common element is that they carry on a dialogue with western culture.

This would have become clear had we asked the three «artists» if they saw themselves as artists. All three would have answered: yes. The English word «art» is truly international. We come across it in every country, it is one of those status-symbols that have conquered the world, together with Coca Cola, Dallas and the portable radio. But what people mean by it shows a great variety. In the field of contemporary non-western art we come across a large variety of mixtures between private, regional or national worldviews with what is known of the western art concept. And sometimes the western art concept is so vaguely known or understood that its terms do not play a role at all. Anyway the outcome of these syncretic clashes of ideas vary from case to case. And we will always have to define what we mean by the word «art», when we want to use the term.

A good example of this confusion can be found in the catalogue of the above mentioned exhibition *Les magiciens de la terre*. All participating artists were asked to define «art». But what exactly was the question asked of the Nepalese *thanka*-maker?

Or the Papua carver? Was the English word «art» used, or was it translated? And how? Even with the translation of «art» into the German *Kunst*, shifts in meaning occur.

One can not simply pretend to be able to translate the word «art» without explaining what we mean by it. It is the scientist's job to disentangle the knot of ideas and to define the aim and intention of the maker of objects. Without describing the specific art concept, the definition of the self-image of the creator, we will never be able to judge his products on the right terms.

The art market

The change from traditional art to contemporary art is often a change in production methods. And the change from traditional art production into modern art production is mainly a result of changing markets.

When we try to survey the 20th century we find that many art forms of the non-western world disappeared or diminished when colonial rule ended existing political and economical structures. Kings, chiefs and societies that lost power were no longer able to order status objects or religious artifacts to be made. Religious zeal from missionary societies cut down the production of many ritual art forms. It took a long time before the art market recovered. But in the run of the 20th century new art markets developed beside the remaining ones. Occasionally, there were missionaries who ordered for Christian religious art, in order to keep the local style and craftsmanship alive.

All over the world, tourism to far, exotic places increased, building up an ever increasing market for objects. On a very individual level there were art lovers who worked and lived in the non-western world, who were sorry to see indigenous art decline and who tried to stimulate alternatives.

There are many fascinating individual stories in this field. We know of Walter Spies and Rudolf Bonnet in Bali, Pierre Desfosses in the former Belgian Congo, Ulli Beier in Nigeria and Papua New Guinea, De Witt Peters in Haiti. What they had in common was that they introduced new materials, techniques and methods, showed real interest in what was done with them and, probably most decisive in the end, created a market for the products by making contact with the international art market.

They were all active in a place and in a period where the local economy was changing into a money-based system. There were many new things to purchase with money, but it was difficult for most people to get hold of it. Besides the challenge of creation itself, the possibility of selling «art-objects» for money was a great stimulus for the growth of a so-called free art production. Besides the esthetical and iconographical changes, this new art meant a way of living. In this new profession there was a different relation with the clients than there ever was in traditional art production. When we talk about meaning, relevance, function and esthetics of art objects we always have to consider the public, the clients, purchasers and commissioners. In the beginning, the clients were almost always Europeans or Americans, representatives of a different culture and mostly temporary guests who took the objects with them as they left. They had different tastes, had to carry the objects in their suitcases, and looked for things that suited their idea of an exotic culture. They did not make the rules but formed a mighty economical power.

Let's look at a few examples. The new art-forms that developed in Bali somewhere in the year 1931 have a complex origin. This was surely connected with the presence of Walter Spies and Rudolf Bonnet who were both living and painting on the island at that time. They were close to many Balinese artists and they had new materials, knew other techniques and liked other motives. The esthetical change that took place around 1931 can be attributed to one or two Balinese painters and sculptors but the new style spread rapidly. Why were these drawings and paintings made? They had no direct use in the traditional sense like in the existing painting schools in the so-called *wayang* style. Was it just for the fun of making them? This hypothesis is certainly not implausible. The immensely rich material culture of the Balinese is not easy to grasp without the culturally embedded veneration of creation.

But Spies and Bonnet were not only appreciators and, in a limited sense, gurus, but they were also the men who took care of marketing Balinese drawings. There was a fast growing market in Bali itself due to the sudden increase of tourism, attracted by the almost magical fame of Bali as a paradise on earth. But the organisation which was co-founded by Spies and Bonnet, the *Pita Maha*, was also very active in organising sales exhibitions of Balinese paintings abroad, in Indonesia, Europe and America. By far the greatest part was sold outside the island. The international interest and the presence of a rich jet set tourist clientele motivated art dealers who lost no time in organising a fast art production line. This has been going on ever since. The streets in traditional centres of art production such as Ubud and Batuan are lined with shops selling commercial art for busloads of tourists.

It is the strength of Bali that in this money-oriented art industry there are still very capable artists working with conviction and integrity. They make autonomous art works but these are based on a deep respect for the classical contents and the mastership of real creation. There are also capable makers still working for traditional purposes. But the big change is that these different markets work side by side. So far the Balinese have succeeded in keeping a balance between the two markets as they keep a balance in all oppositions. Not everywhere does this balance exist.

Moving from Bali to Haiti, we go from one island to another and from one famous art centre to another. But we also go through some severe cultural changes. Haiti is notorious for being the poorest nation in the western hemisphere. The poverty originates from a long term isolation earned by the spectacular coup around 1800 when the black slave rebellion succeeded finally to expel the French colonial masters. Haiti became the first black state but it found itself surrounded by the United States and Latin American states which were hardly sympathetic neighbours. The long French occupation and the French oriented life style of the Creole elite created a cultural bias with the many social and religious characteristics of the former African peoples that formed the black population.

During the times of slavery, the African deities were given the appearance of catholic saints for security reasons. For religious purposes, a visual language was created which focussed on the many different syncretist deities. There were more or less naturalistic portrayals of the gods on temple walls, stylistically based on European or French ways of painting, and there were the so-called *veves*, the symbolical signs of the same gods, made in flour on the ground and in iron on graves. There were not many more manifestations of material culture. During the Second World War, after 19 years of American occupation (1915-1934), the well-known painting revolution started. The act in itself was quite modest, but the result was quite

overwhelming. The American Dewitt Peters founded in 1943 a *Centre d'art* in Port-au-Prince to stimulate the meagre cultural life in the capital. His first idea was to organise drawing courses for the young members of the upper class. One day, however, he was approached by a man who had brought along one of his paintings. It lacked the naturalistic approach with correct mathematical perspective as taught by Dewitt Peters in his courses, but it showed imagination, humour, and a bold unacademic combination of colours. This, in combination with a certain spontaneity what reminded Dewitt Peters of the French naive painters, moved him deeply.

We know from the historical descriptions of this period that this first painting was followed by an enormous outburst. Within a year, dozens of painters had manifested themselves. Some of them had painted before in seclusion, in Voodoo temples or Free Masonry temple rooms, but many others simply started because they liked the idea of trying it. Why this outburst? Dewitt Peters always made clear that he certainly was not an esthetical guide, that he did not train them. The stories finally boil down to the effect that Dewitt Peters did two really important things: he showed real interest and he created for them an art market. In the beginning, he did this by buying the paintings himself, later on he organised sales exhibitions. So his deed was an artistic one, but at the same time he brought to life a new profession, in relation with the western money based economy, creating objects for money. This story in fact is very similar to the case of Bali though Bonnet and Spies were active painters. Also the following events show the same pattern. The increase in number of painters is directly parallel to the initial increase in tourism at first, and the growth of an export market later on. As the tourist industry had failed in several periods in Haiti, a solution was found to ship paintings on a large scale to other Caribbean islands and sell them there as Haitian or, if that worked better, as authentic Jamaican, Dominican and so on.

In the large army of average painters who work fast and repetitively, there are always the talented ones. They to, however, are open to exploitation by an ever increasing art market. One well-known painter was offered an apartment in Miami in exchange for 40 paintings. On a more personal and sympathetic note we can see the invasion of western standards of art in the subscript of the painter Philomè Obin, in a painting with his self-portrait: *Le plus célèbre artiste du monde*.

What are the effects of this extreme type of export-market? Art is a major product of the Haitian economy controlled by the large galleries. Many paintings, certainly the good and therefore expensive ones, are sold abroad. They do not form an available standard of excellence anymore as is the case for much traditional art.

It is also unavoidable that the painters are aware of the popular taste of the art market. There are also artists who have consciously styled themselves after well known naive painters. Salnave Philippe-Auguste has based his paintings without doubt on the work of Henri Rousseau, the French naive artist of the turn of the century. Rousseau has been named time after time ever since André Breton introduced Haitian painting in France. Philippe-Auguste makes this comparison come true out of art history books. Just as striking is the work of the painter Saint-Louis Blaise who has styled his paintings after the present day famous painter from Columbia, Fernand Botero.

One cannot judge all Haitian painters for these kinds of practices. There are powerful exceptions as exist in Bali, and the economic proceedings do not take anything away from the often surprising forms of imagination of many Haitian artists. Only in Haiti the balance seems lost, the art has taken on a strange function,

of being an important economic export, a producer of exotic but sympathetic images in western interiors and finally an indirect symbol of national identity.

The increasing involvement of the international art market in the field of contemporary non-western art is probably most striking in the case of the work and life of the Australian Aboriginal painters. Both ends of the cultural scale meet here in a most unusual way. We have one of the most isolated, proudest, but most repressed cultures we know. A people with a very modest material expression, but a very intense, deep abstract image of their existence, in a magical dreamworld. One of the ways they express this worldview is by making sand paintings, which are more or less symbolic maps drawn in the sand, maps marking the magical and ritual places in the landscape, in which the whole arrangement of hills, wells, paths and animal prints is filled with religious significance, with legendary tales closely connected with the origin of the tribe.

Due to the character of the function and of the material used the visual form of these dream-maps is simple, but very striking, it shows a certain mixture of abstract and symbolic images, of repetition and variety. This specific mixture appealed much to the taste of some western outsiders who were confronted with this art in a period when the Aboriginals were an outcast people, whose only meaning for the Australian government was that of a social problem. The Aboriginals had been hard to fit into the Australian money-oriented economy, because they had lived until recently as hunters and gatherers and had no urge to give up the way of their ancestors.

From the western point of view it was a logical idea to see if their magical sand paintings could be made into saleable objects. This was done by translating them into «artworks» in acrylic paint onto canvas. This started in the sixties. The colours were the same as those of the original sand paintings: white, ochre and brown. In the beginning it was treated by most white visitors as tourist-art. But during the seventies the paintings became a commercial success, as they were transformed into fashionable works for the art market, first in the large galleries of Australian cities, but then quickly conquering the western world. American collectors or art-investors were amongst the first to buy. The most fancy galleries in New York have contracts with organisations for the deliverance of art works. Private customers are on a waiting list of the galleries, from Mick Jagger to the Pope. One can see this as an acknowledgement of the importance of aboriginal culture. But the art market is taking over completely the original intention, while using the image of the «raw primitive» which fits so interestingly in the modern interior. No wonder that the commercial success has led to *papunya*-designs on T-shirts, ties and anything you can imagine.

To give an extreme example of the possible conflicts due to this type of economical change, I quote an incident from an article of Willis and Fry (1988:15): «Six members of a single family were victims of a mass killing in Arnhem Land in the Northern Territory in September 1988. One of the victims was Dick Murramurra, a well known bark painter whose work is in the Australian National Gallery. The incident has been attributed to a fight over the distribution of income from the sale of a painting. A cultural economy of ownership, artistic identity and property collided with a cultural economy of common goods. In the weighted movement from one system of exchange to another the ethnocidal impetus gained momentum.»

Considering these examples, one comes to the conclusion that one characteristic of contemporary non-western art seems to be the «commodification» of the art

object, and that in many cases the production seems to be regulated in a growing sense by the art market, as part of the international art world.

This observation forms only part of the truth. Rakhal Pal, Middle Art and Dede Eri Supria and many more sell their works for money. But they have strong motives besides giving a strongfelt content to their works. Moreover, commercial oriented art is often fascinating. In the clash with the western world many highly evocative objects and symbols have been created. The appreciation of contemporary non-western art seems to me a deed of historical justice after a long period of arrogance and ignorance and a weapon against ethnocentric behaviour. At the same time there is a great danger looming: the very effective and ever growing power of art dealers.

Conclusions

I have left much to be told. Esthetical and stylistic approaches of contemporary non-western art are very valuable and much needed, and lead to other results. Analysis of contents, themes and stories holds a special relevance and offers a gold mine of iconological research in a fast changing period of modern art history. Every topic we choose stands on its own, connected with its own culture and its own specific history of dialogue with the western world and western art standards. To understand this process, much research is to be done.

I would like to plead for a multidisciplinary approach to a number of cases which can still be studied in a historical perspective. Knowledge is needed in historical research in an art-anthropological sense and in western art history as it is channelled through books, art history courses and visual material to many artists in the non-western world. In this way we can try to understand the origins and the character of the specific art concepts of the artist, in order to follow the rapid developments of today.

The internationalisation I mentioned in the beginning will not stop. We know biennales in Venice but also in Cuba, São Paulo or Manila. *Les magiciens de la terre* will be followed by other exhibitions. This process is highly important for the future, there are large interests involved. There is the matter of status, and the issue of cultural, national, ethnical and individual identity within the ideology of global art. In that important discussion we have to be present, to separate between an easy, surface-oriented appreciation and a real and justified understanding.

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