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**Memorandum**

**To** Cal Tomkins

**From** Lisa E. Farrington

**Date** 1/23/85

**Re** ARTFORUM

William Rubin is in Europe at the moment, but he asked that I send you the attached final versions of his and Mr. Varnedoe's ARTFORUM replies (to the McEvilley article), since these are slightly different from the original drafts.

**CISM, II** This is the second in a continuing series of articles on the subject, Problems of Criticism.

sensus. Yet these objective qualitative principles, such as they are, remain hidden from discursive consciousness: they cannot be defined or exhibited. This is why such a thing as a position or standpoint cannot be maintained in the judging of art. A position, a point of view, depends on definable or exhibitable qualitative criteria, and the entire experience of art shows that there are none. Art can get away with anything because there is nothing to tell us what it cannot get away with—and there is nothing to tell us what it cannot get away with because art has, and does, get away with anything.

Of all the imputations to which this art critic has been exposed, the one he minds most is that his esthetic judgments go according to a position or "line." There are various reasons for this imputation, not least among them being, I suppose, the flat, declarative way in which he tends to write. But there is also a general reluctance, or even inability, to read closely, and an equally general tendency to assign motives. The only way to cope with this is the tedious one of disclaiming explicitly and repeatedly all the things you, the writer, are not actually saying or implying. And maybe in addition to that you have to call attention repeatedly to the rules of inference. And also pause to give little lessons in elementary esthetics, like the one I have just recited.

To impute a position or line to a critic is to want, in effect, to limit his freedom. For a precious freedom lies in the very involuntariness of esthetic judging: the freedom to be surprised, taken aback, have your expectations confounded, the freedom to be inconsistent and to like anything in art as long as it is good—the freedom, in short, to let art stay open. Part of the excitement of art, for those who attend to art regularly, consists, or should, in this openness, in this inability to foresee reactions. You don't expect to like the busyness of Hindu sculpture, but on closer acquaintance become enthralled by it (to the point even of preferring it to the earlier Buddhist carving). You don't, in 1950, anticipate anything generically new in geometrical-looking abstract painting, but then see Barnett Newman's first show. You think you know the limits of 19th-century academic art, but then come across Stobbaerts in Belgium, Etty and Dyce in England, Hayez in Italy, Waldmueller in Austria, and still others. The very best art of this time continues to be abstract, but the evidence compels you to recognize that below this uppermost level success is achieved, still, by a far higher proportion of figurative than of abstract painting. When jurying you find yourself having to throw out high-powered-looking abstract pictures and keeping in trite-looking landscapes and flower pieces. Despite certain qualms, you relish your helplessness in the matter, you relish the fact that in art things happen of their own accord and not yours, that you have to like things you don't want to like, and dislike things you do want to like. You acquire an appetite not just for the disconcerting but for the state of being disconcerted.

## COMPLAINTS OF AN ART CRITIC

**"You cannot legitimately want or hope for anything from art except quality."**

This does not mean that the situation of art at any moment is one of disorder. Time and place always impose a certain kind of order in the form of negative probabilities. Thus it appears unlikely that illusionist painting will be any more capable in the near future than in the recent past of creating truly major art. But the critic cannot proceed confidently on this probability, and least of all can he have a stake in it, so that he will be embarrassed or disappointed if it should chance to be violated (which it happens to be my very private prejudice to want to see happen). You cannot legitimately want or hope for anything from art except quality. And you cannot lay down conditions for quality. However and wherever it turns up, you have to accept it. You have your prejudices, your leanings and inclinations, but you are under the obligation to recognize them as that and keep them from interfering.

Art has its history as a sheer phenomenon, and it also has its history as quality. Order and logic can be discerned in both, and there is nothing illegitimate in the effort to discern them. But it is illegitimate to believe in, advocate, and prescribe such order and logic as you discern, and another frequent imputation this writer minds is that he is *for* the order and logic *he* discerns. Because he has seen "purity" (which he always puts between quotes) and "reduction" as part of the immanent logic of modernist art, he is taken to believe in and advocate "purity" and "reduction." As if "purity," however useful it may have been as an illusion, were anything more than an illusion in his eyes, and as if he ever wrote anything to indicate otherwise. Because this writer has dwelled on the fact that the most original sculpture of the recent past opens up the monolith in a radical way, he is also taken to be for "open" sculpture and against the monolithic kind. Yet there is nothing in what he has written that can be interpreted as even implying this. That analysis and description without anything more should so often be inferred to be a program reveals something like bad faith on the part of those who do such inferring—not just laziness, obtuseness, or illiteracy. I can't help thinking this. The bad faith derives from the need to pin a critic down so that you can say, when you disagree with him, that he has motives, that he likes this and not that work of art because he wants to, or because his program forces him to, not because his mere ungovernable taste won't let him do otherwise.

Last and worst, however, is that most art-lovers do not believe there actually is such a thing as ungovernable taste. It is taken for granted that esthetic judgments are voluntary. This is why disagreements about art, music, literature so "naturally" become personal and rancorous. This is why positions and lines and programs are brought in. But it is one thing to have an esthetic judgment or reaction, another thing to report it. The dishonest reporting of esthetic experience is what does most to accustom us to the notion that esthetic judgments are voluntary. Not only are you ashamed to say that a Norman Rockwell may move you more than a Raphael does (which can happen); you are also afraid simply to sound inconsistent—this because it is also taken for granted that esthetic judgments are rational as well as voluntary, that they are weighed and pondered. Yet rational conclusions can no more be chosen than esthetic ones can. Thus even if esthetic judgments could be arrived at through ratiocination, they would still be involuntary—as involuntary as one's acceptance of the fact that 2 plus 2 equals 4.

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# PROBLEMS OF CRITICISM, II

This is the second in a continuing series of articles on the subject, Problems of Criticism.

CLEMENT GREENBERG

I

Esthetic judgments are given and contained in the immediate experience of art. They coincide with it; they are not arrived at afterwards through reflection or thought. Esthetic judgments are also involuntary: you can no more choose whether or not to like a work of art than you can choose to have sugar taste sweet or lemons sour. (Whether or not esthetic judgments are honestly reported is another matter.)

Because esthetic judgments are immediate, intuitive, undeliberate, and involuntary, they leave no room for the conscious application of standards, criteria, rules, or precepts. That qualitative principles or norms are there somewhere, in subliminal operation, is certain; otherwise esthetic judgments would be purely subjective, and that they are not is shown by the fact that the verdicts of those who care most about art and pay it the most attention converge over the course of time to form a consensus. Yet these objective qualitative principles, such as they are, remain hidden from discursive consciousness: they cannot be defined or exhibited. This is why such a thing as a position or standpoint cannot be maintained in the judging of art. A position, a point of view, depends on definable or exhibitable qualitative criteria, and the entire experience of art shows that there are none. Art can get away with anything because there is nothing to tell us what it cannot get away with—and there is nothing to tell us what it cannot get away with because art has, and does, get away with anything.

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tion, in painting and sculpture." My impression is that the word acquired its present broader, and different, meaning when it became the name of an avant-garde Russian literary movement of the time of the First World War that proclaimed "form" as the main thing in verse and prose. Soon afterwards it became another of the "isms" in the Bolshevik lexicon of abuse, where it means modernist and avant-garde art and literature in general. Whatever its connotations in Russian, the term has acquired ineradicably vulgar ones in English. This is why I was surprised to see it come into currency not so long ago in American art writing. No proper literary critic would dream of using it. More recently certain artists have been referred to as belonging to a "formalist" school for no other reason than their having been championed by certain critics whom some other critics call "formalist." This is vulgarity with a vengeance.

One reason among others why the use of the term "formalism" is stultifying is that it begs a large part of the very difficult question as to just what can be sensibly said about works of art. It assumes that "form" and "content" in art can be adequately distinguished for the purposes of discourse. This implies in turn that discursive thought has solved just those problems of art upon whose imperviousness to discursive thinking the very possibility of art depends.

Reflection shows that anything in a work of art that can be talked about or pointed to automatically excludes itself from the "content" of the work, from its import, tenor, gist, or "meaning" (all of which terms are but so many stabs at a generic term for what works of art are ultimately "about"). Anything in a work of art that does not belong to its "content" has to belong to its "form"—if the latter term means anything at all in this context. In itself "content"remains indefinable, unparaphraseable, undiscussable. Whatever Dante or Tolstoy, Bach or Mozart, Giotto or David intended his art to be about, or said it was about, the works of his art go beyond anything specifiable in their effect. That is what art, regardless of the intention of artists, *has* to do, even the worst art; the unspecifiability of its "content" is what constitutes art as art.

All this has been said before, and there is no getting around it. Nor is there anything mystical about it. What has also been said before, but maybe not emphatically enough, is that the quality of a work of art inheres in its "content," and vice versa. Quality is "content." You know that a work of art has content because of its effect. The more direct denotation of effect is "quality." Why bother to say that a Velasquez has "more content" than a Salvador Rosa when you can say more simply, and with directer reference to the experience you are talking about, that the Velasquez is "better" than the Salvador Rosa? You cannot say anything truly relevant about the content of either picture, but you can be specific and relevant about the difference in their effect on you. "Effect," like "quality," is "content," and the closer reference to actual experience of the first two terms makes "content" virtually useless for criticism. . . .

There are different kinds of anti-"formalism." I am not sure but that those more ambitious critics who try to deal with "content" in abstract as well as representational art are not less sophisticated intellectually than those whose anti-"formalism" compels them to deprecate abstract art in general. To say that Pollock's "all-over" art reflects the leveling tendencies of a mass society is to say something that is ultimately indifferent in the context of art criticism—indifferent because it has nothing to do with Pollock's quality. To say (as Robert Goldwater does) that Kline's art offers an "image . . . of optimistic struggle of an entirely unsentimental 'grace under pressure' " is to say something that is both indifferent and wanton. Good art is by definition unsentimental, and of what good art can it be said, moreover, that it does not show grace under pressure? And if I choose to feel that Kline is pessimistic rather than optimistic, who can say me nay? Where is the evidence on the basis of which Dr. Goldwater and I can argue about that? There is not even the evidence of taste. For you do not have to be able to *see* painting in order to say or not say that Kline's art shows either optimism or pessimism. I, who am considered an arch-"formalist," used to indulge in that kind of talk about "content" myself. If I do not do so any longer it is because it came to me, dismayingly, some years ago that I could always assert the opposite of whatever it was I did say about "content" and not get found out; that I could say almost anything I pleased about "content" and sound plausible.

The anti-"formalist" whom I regard as more intellectually sophisticated concedes the case of abstract art but accuses the "formalist" of neglecting the crucial importance to pictorial and sculptural art, when it is representational, of the illustrated subject, whether as "form" or "content." I myself, as a reputed "formalist," would deny this charge. It is quite evident that the illustrated subject—or let's say "literature"—can play, does, and has played, a crucial part in figural art. Photography (which my experience tells me is not necessarily inferior to painting in its capacity for art) achieves its highest qualities by "story-telling." Nonetheless, it remains peculiarly difficult to talk with relevance about the literary factor in painting or sculpture.

The meaning of an illustrated subject *qua* subject — the prettiness, say, of a girl, her coloring, her expression, her attitude, etc., etc.—delivers itself to any eye, not just the one attuned to pictorial or sculptural art. The person who cannot tell the qualitative difference between a portrait by Ingres and one on the cover of *Time* perceives just as much of the subject *qua* subject as the person who can. Iconography is brilliantly practiced by people largely blind to the nonliterary aspects of art. It does seem that literary meaning as such seldom decides the qualitative difference between one painting or sculpture and another. Yet I say "seem" advisedly. For at the same time the illustrated subject can no more be thought away, or "seen away," from a picture than anything else in it can. The thing imaged does, somehow, impregnate the effect no matter how indifferent you may be to it. The problem is to show something of how this happens, and that is what I cannot remember having seen any art writer do with real relevance—with relevance to the quality of the effect. And I notice that even those fellow-critics who nowadays complain most about "formalism" will again and again in the showdown fall back on "formalism" themselves—because otherwise they find themselves condemned to repeat commonplaces or irrelevancies.

The art of Edvard Munch is a case in point. I know of nothing in art that affects me in anything like the way that his "literature" does. Yet the purely pictorial impact of his art (leaving his drawings and prints aside) remains something else, something less. His paintings, as successful as many of them are in their own pictorial terms, do not startle my eyes again and again the way great paintings do. Compared, say, with Matisse, Munch never looks more than minor. How then does his illustration manage to carry so strongly and convey so intensely? I wish some non-"formalist" critic would enlighten me here, if only a little bit. I am eager to be instructed by example.

I am all the readier to be instructed by an example of this kind because it is otherwise so much easier to deal in words with literary considerations than with "abstract" or "formal" ones. It is easier to write plausible literary criticism than plausible art criticism. You can write at length about the questions raised by the kind of life depicted in an indifferent novel or even poem, and whether or not you make a contribution to general wisdom, the chances are that your failure to deal with the novel or poem as art won't be noticed. Ruskin, murmuring at a picture he otherwise liked, because it showed children drinking wine, would not sound half so silly were it a piece of fiction he was talking about. Not that literary critics, properly speaking, get away with their irrelevance in the long run. But men of letters do, and so do iconographers. Nor do I object to this — as long as men of letters and iconographers do not claim to be critics. ■

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To the Editor:

After years of work on an exhibition, a curator derives a certain satisfaction from a review that attempts to engage the basic issues of his show in a fair-minded way and on a high level of discourse. This is true even when the review is largely negative, as in the case of Thomas McEvilley's article on The Museum of Modern Art's "Primitivism" ["Doctor Lawyer Indian Chief," November 1984]. Most analyses of exhibitions and their books fall away and are soon forgotten. McEvilley's could be one that becomes part of the history of the event it addresses. I hope, therefore, that he will take this extended commentary on his text at least somewhat as a compliment—an attempt to further thrash out and clarify some ideas and attitudes that mean much to both of us—and not as an exercise in logomachy. The questions McEvilley raises go far beyond the exhibition to the nature and motives of The Museum of Modern Art itself, and I appreciate the opportunity *Artforum* has given me to air some of these matters.

No project on the order of "'Primitivism' in 20th Century Art" can work out entirely satisfactorily and wholly free of inconsistencies. Had we to do the book and show over again, there are some things I would surely do differently (I do not necessarily speak here for my colleague, Kirk Varnedoe, whose comments follow). My auto-critique revolves largely around the definitions of "affinities," some of which, I think, could and should have been more sharply etched. I am, however, largely satisfied with the presentation of the main body of the show, the sections called "Concepts" and "History," both of which McEvilley attacked from a variety of angles. A few of his criticisms of these sections are well taken. I find, however, that notwithstanding his evidently good intentions, his review is interwoven with sufficient misconceptions, internal inconsistencies, and simple errors of fact that—given its seriousness—it should not go unchallenged.

At the outset, McEvilley has some very kind things to say about our show, among them that it was "thrilling" and "a tour de force of connoisseurship." As he proceeds, however, he describes the exhibition as operating in a kind of psychological, social, and historical void resulting from my supposed commitment to what he calls "formalist Modernism." He concludes his text with the put-down that "it takes more than connoisseurship to make an exhibition great."

There is some kind of contradiction here. I'm not sure what McEvilley means by "connoisseurship," which—etymologically, at least—implies far more than he presumably would wish to grant me. If I were wearing "formalist" blinders, could I really have chosen a great group of tribal works? Is their greatness not a function of their profound affectiveness on spiritual, poetic, and psychological—as well as on formal—levels? And do they not express, implicitly at least, societal values? Surely McEvilley does not believe that these qualities can be wholly separated from the objects' phenomenological (or plastic) configurations. Were not these affective factors necessarily, therefore, dimensions of my choices? While such components of the sculptures' expressiveness can be isolated for the purposes of discussion—indeed, the linear character of criticism virtually requires this—they cannot be separated from one another in the actual experience of the art.

McEvilley's repeated reproach that our show has no anthropological underpinning (of which more below) comes perilously close to suggesting that the tribal works, presented just in themselves, propose but a set of forms that communicate no "meaning" or "content." Picasso's remark, "all I need to know about Africa is in those [tribal] objects," was characteristic for him in its hyperbole—was also flip. But it nevertheless embraced a crucial point, namely that Picasso felt (quite rightly, I believe) he could apprehend aspects of the spirit, values, and nature of African civilizations through their art. Indeed, while some of the observations he put into words were anthropologically wrong (e.g., his notion of "freedom" in relation to tribal art—as I pointed out in our book), the sense of Africa he intuited through its sculpture rings truer today than does most anthropological writing of his day.

By reducing the virtues of our show to "connoisseurship," McEvilley also diminishes—if he does not entirely dismiss—what I hope art historians will consider a significant contribution to our discipline, one that revises many basic received ideas about primitivism. For McEvilley, our art history is largely an "overwhelming mass of information," and he concludes that "on the whole, [Robert] Goldwater's book [*Primitivism in Modern Painting*] still reads better." McEvilley suggests that the "general ideas" of our exhibition have been around since 1938 (the date of Goldwater's book) and points to instances in which other institutions (Centre Pompidou, Grand Palais) have purportedly provided at least limited prototypes for our project.

No one, I think, admires my late friend and colleague Robert Goldwater more than I. The preface to *"Primitivism" in 20th Century Art* is devoted to expressing this admiration. The fact is, however, that the premises of our exhibition are very much at odds with many of his conclusions. If by "reads better," McEvilley is referring to Goldwater's lapidary literary style, I would be the first to cede the point. But in terms of substance, our conclusions are at odds with Goldwater's as regards a host of basic questions—about which only one or the other of us can be right. Hence, if we have not simply fallen on our faces as historians, we have done more than merely, as McEvilley would have it, "refine and extend" Goldwater's research.

Most of the reproductions in Goldwater's book were of Modern works. Even in the revised and enlarged edition of 1967, only eight tribal works were illustrated, four of them paired visually with Modern objects. None of the eight had belonged to Modern artists and, so far as we know, only one of them was even in Europe in the days of the pioneer Modernists. Our multiplication of juxtapositions illustrating proposed (and often provable) relationships between Modern works and tribal objects in the artists' collections (or visible in museums they are known to have frequented) overturns one of Goldwater's basic principles, an insistence on the "extreme scarcity of the direct influence of primitive art forms" on 20th-century art. Moreover, Goldwater made no allowance for what we have called "invisible" influences (as documented by the pairings of Picasso's *Guitar* and his Grebo mask, [Henry] Moore's "Upright Internal and External Forms" and the British Museum's Malanggan, and [Marius] de Zayas' *Alfred Stieglitz* and the Pukapuka Soul-catcher). Nor did he connect the invention of collage, assemblage, and mixed media to the experience (Picasso's especially) of tribal art—or, indeed, treat most of the other topics taken up in the "Concepts" section of our exhibition. Finally, the artist's own words have undermined Goldwater's key assumption that Picasso's interest in tribal art was primarily formal. We are obliged to assign to Picasso's rediscovery of the "magical" roots and powers of art a more critical place in his development than we do any plastic or technical ideas he derived from tribal objects.

Contesting the Museum's assertion that our exhibition is the "first ever to juxtapose modern and tribal objects in the light of informed art history," McEvilley cites two purported precedents: the Menil Collections exhibition last spring at the Grand Palais, which "juxtaposed primitive and Modern works (a Max Ernst with an African piece, Cézanne with Cycladic) and sometimes, as in the [MoMA] exhibition, showed a Modern artist's work in conjunction with primitive objects in his collection"; and the Centre Pompidou, which "exhibited, in the vicinity of its Modern collections, about 100 tribal objects from the Musée de l'Homme." "Though not actually intermingled with Modern works," McEvilley says of the hundred objects, they "were intended to illus-

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trate relationships with them and included, as does the [MoMA] show, primitive objects owned by Picasso, Braque, and other early Modernists."

McEvilley's recollections here certainly don't jibe with mine or, as it turns out, with the facts. A rapid check reveals that 1) the two vitrines at the Centre Pompidou together never contained more than twenty or so objects; 2) none of them ever belonged to Picasso or Braque; 3) the objects in the Beaubourg vitrines could hardly have been intended to "illustrate relations" with Modern art since they were chosen by Jean-Hubert Martin "without respect," as he says, "to historical or formal questions" from a group proposed by Francine Ndiaye of the Musée de l'Homme, who has only a glancing acquaintance with Modern art, and whose mandate was to select such objects as would constitute an overview of African art; 4) the choice of African sculptures included many of types—and from tribal areas—totally unknown in France in the days of the "early Modernists." As for the fascinating Menil show—which, in any case, took place after the writing of our book—my recollections (as confirmed by Dominique de Menil herself) are that 1) the tribal material was shown almost entirely in its own separate areas; 2) contrary to McEvilley, no Modern works were "shown in conjunction with primitive objects from [the artists'] own collection[s]"; indeed, no tribal works from the collections of important Modernist artists were included anywhere in the Menil collections show; 3) the juxtaposition of the Cézanne with a Cycladic sculpture and the Ernst with an African work were determined by Mrs. de Menil's "pleasure in seeing them together," and were *not* the demonstration of any historical connection. Thus, the two supposedly precedent primitivist events proposed by McEvilley were not instances of "informed art history"; they were not, strictly speaking, instances of art history at all.

Why this determined effort on McEvilley's part to demonstrate that the premises and content of our show were "not new"? The answer may be found in one of the most remarkable rhetorical twists I have ever encountered. By convincing his reader that our efforts are "not new," McEvilley feels licensed to ask "why MoMA gives us primitivism now." The answer to this turns out to be his real point, namely that the "temple of formalist Modernism" is using the primitive to "revalidate" the Modernist movement in the face of "several years of sustained attack," which supposedly led us to need a "new defense." "The ultimate reason behind the exhibition," McEvilley insists, "is to revalidate Modernist esthetic canons"—whatever *they* are. "How brilliant," he opines, "to attempt to revalidate classical Modernist esthetics by stepping outside their usual realm of discourse and bringing to bear upon them a vast, foreign sector of the world."

How brilliant, indeed. Brushed aside here is the real history of our show, and the fact that it was an attempt to render explicit some art historical concerns that were implicit in MoMA exhibitions going back almost 50 years ("African Negro Art," 1936; "Indian Art of the United States," 1941; "Arts of the South Seas," 1946). No apparent consideration was given to my conversations with Picasso of 15 years ago which led me to conclude that the received art history of primitivism was profoundly distorted and that the whole topic would have to be restudied, or to the almost five years of the exhibition's actual integration (nor to the fact that if we hadn't rebuilt the Museum, the show would have taken place some years ago). By sweeping aside both the real motivations for, and the chronology of, this show (most of which is spelled out in our book), McEvilley could transform the nature of the event, and with it the actually fortuitous fact that it takes place "now" rather than some years ago, into an act of contemporary art politics.

For a man who, elsewhere in his text, shows a tremendous concern for the logic of argumentation, McEvilley's motivating of me is astonishing. Putting himself inside my mind, he confidently discovers and asserts agendas of which I had never thought. Anyone who knows me will consider laughable the idea that I would think Modernist art needs "revalidation." As I stroll through the galleries of the collection, the last thing in the world I imagine is that Cézanne, Picasso, Pollock *et alia* need to be authenticated by "primitives" or anyone else. It is not Rubin but McEvilley who thinks they need "revalidation"— and he conveniently projects onto me the strategies of his own art-political ways of thinking.

Perhaps the most persistent criticism in McEvilley's long article was directed to our omission of anthropological matter in relation to the tribal objects. He decries the fact that "no anthropologist was included in the team," with the result that the "wholeness" of the tribal objects is sacrificed to "the cult of pure form"; thus the show constitutes an act of "ethnocentric subjectivity inflated to co-opt [tribal] cultures and their objects ... [showing that] Western egotism [is] still as unbridled as in the centuries of colonialism and souvenirism." "The museum pretends to confront the Third World while really co-opting it and using it to consolidate Western notions of quality and feelings of superiority" (Needless to say, had I really been concerned with Western "feelings of superiority," I would hardly have mounted a show, the very terms of which guaranteed that the tribal works would on average be superior to the Modern ones.[1])

The Museum, of course, had no intention of confronting tribal cultures, or even tribal objects as such (i.e., in their own terms), no less the whole Third World. To have done so would have hopelessly confused what the Museum was in fact doing—namely, studying the reception of tribal objects by Western artists, the ethnocentricity of which history we ourselves described as manifest and accepted as given. But McEvilley won't let us have a show about that reception, which is, of course, precisely what "primitivism" —as opposed to "the primitive"—signifies. He wants the tribal objects presented in a wholly integral way (never spelled out) in which not even anthropological museums show them.

It isn't that McEvilley cannot understand our aims. Indeed, he quotes us saying: "As our focus is on the modernists' experience of tribal art ... we have not included anthropological hypotheses regarding the religious or social purposes that originally surrounded these objects." And also that "the ethnologists' primary concern—the specific function and significance of each of these objects —is irrelevant to [our] topic, except insofar as these facts might have been known to the modern artists in question." He might also have added our observations that primitivism "refers not to the tribal arts in themselves, but to the Western interest in and reaction to them" and that it was "an aspect of the history of Western art, not of tribal art."

"This position," McEvilley admits, "is consistent in itself." But he insists we are not entitled to it because we have "not consistently acted" on it. (What would have been *more inconsistent* with our position than the inclusion of precisely the anthropological information McEvilley calls for, about which the artists knew nothing?) Now, I don't doubt that given the breadth of our project, we have been guilty of some inconsistencies, although I do not agree that most of the examples McEvilley adduces—which have to do with the modes of functioning of tribal artists—*are*, in fact, inconsistencies (as we shall see below). But McEvilley seems not to understand the fact that *whatever the inconsistencies in execution* (and those he signals are in the book rather than the exhibition), *they do not by any twist of logic nullify the admitted consistency of our original perspective*. Even if we hadn't made those observations about tribal artists to which McEvilley objects, would *he* not still have wanted anthropological input? Wouldn't he still have objected that the tribal objects were decontextualized, that "the blood is wiped off them"?

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Of course, the tribal objects in our show *are* decontextualized (as they are in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, or, even more relevantly, in anthropological museums as well). In fact they are more than that; they are *recontextualized*, within the framework of Western art and culture. *And that is what our particular story is all about.* McEvilley simply refuses to accept the fact that our story is not about "the Other," but about ourselves. As I observed in my introductory chapter, "prior to the 1920's . . . at which time some Surrealists became *amateurs* of ethnology, artists did not generally know—nor evidently much care—about such [anthropological] matters." But as I also observed, the artists' lack of interest in or knowledge of the objects' religious purposes and functions did not mean that they were uninterested in "meanings." It was rather that "the meanings which concerned them were the ones that could be apprehended through the objects themselves." *This* is the real rub for, as we shall see, McEvilley refuses to accept that such meanings exist, indeed, that the tribal sculptures *are, in fact, art.*

Suppose we were to have taken McEvilley's advice and given an anthropological dimension to our show. What anthropology, whose anthropology should it have been? Should we have proposed the views of anthropologists of the Trocadéro itself in Picasso's time, such as Maurice Delafosse, who interpreted African tribal art as an Egyptian derivation? Not only is the work of such anthropologists irrelevant to our subject because unknown to the Modern artists, but it is wrong.[2] Even in our own day, there are an immense number of fundamental disagreements among anthropologists themselves, some of whom still credit the view, as does McEvilley, that there is no such thing as tribal art—only religious artifacts.

McEvilley appropriates the mantle and the voice of anthropology with far more certainty than is possessed by any professional anthropologist I have met. He constantly presumes to know and speak for the "intentionality" of long-dead tribal artists when, in fact, anthropology knows virtually nothing about them. He confidently puts himself into their minds in the same way he did into mine—and possibly with as little accuracy. Having granted the consistency of our perspective (at least in theory), he nevertheless states that by "their absolute repression of primitive context, meaning, content and intention (the dates of the [tribal] works, their functions, their religious or mythological connections, their environments)," MoMA has "treated the primitives as less than human, less than cultural—as shadows of a culture, their selfhood, their Otherness, wrung out of them." Does McEvilley himself know how little is known about most of these tribal objects? Even had they been relevant, we would have had to face the fact that the specific functions and the religious or mythological significance of many if not most of the tribal objects in our show are unknown (and will probably never be known). And many of the meanings attributed to some of them by previous generations of anthropologists are being dismissed left and right.

Consider the question of dates, which McEvilley seems to think we have suppressed: "The complete omission of dates from the primitive works is perhaps one of the most troubling decisions," he writes, though he admits that "many of these objects cannot be dated precisely." In fact, *not a single one of them* in our show can be dated precisely, and precious few can be dated approximately. Even the small minority that were field-collected by anthropologists have only a *terminus ad quem*; one can only speculate as to how long they existed before collection. Most of the tribal objects in the show have little history, or dubious ones. Even the decision as to whether most of them are 19th- or 20th-century objects is speculative, and usually made by historians of primitive art on a subjective rather than scientific basis. Far from being suppressed, the question of dates is not only discussed in the book, but is summarized on a panel that is repeated three times in various places in the exhibition. I excerpt from our panel "Since accurate dates are not known for most tribal art, no dates appear on the labels for tribal objects in this exhibition. These objects are often short-lived, in part because of their largely perishable materials, in part because they were not preserved after being desacralized. Hence, most of the fine tribal art preserved in the West dates from no earlier than the later 19th and early 20th centuries, and represents the later phases of long-standing traditions."

Where dates of tribal objects *are* relevant to the history of primitivism, they are the dates at which artists could have seen them in museums (what Picasso, for example, could have seen in the Trocadéro in 1907) and at which they purchased the pieces in their collections. We have spent hundreds of hours researching these dates and, where discoverable and relevant, have given them.

As one who has probably spent far more time haunting anthropological museums than has McEvilley, I can assure him that in virtually no cases do their labels give more information on "context, meaning, content, and intention" than we do. Will McEvilley please tell me how he learns anything about the "religious or mythological connections" of the objects in the vitrines of Tervuren, the Musée de l'Homme, or the Völkerkunde museum in Berlin (whose "fine arts" oriented installation surpasses that of the Metropolitan)? Do these objects have more "blood on them" than those at MoMA? To be sure, some anthropological museums provide short general text panels at the beginning of sections, but provide little or nothing on individual objects. Even these introductory panels are only possible because the material in their vitrines is geographically homogenous. Suppose—as demanded by McEvilley—we had wanted to provide "environments" for objects that came from over a hundred different cultures and societies, how could we have done it?

Does the presentation of tribal sculptures by themselves—the way great museums present all other cultures' sculpture from the Egyptian to the present—really imply treating their makers as "less than human, less than cultural"? Perhaps only if, like McEvilley, you consider the objects "not art, but religion or magic"—as if most of the world's sculpture *is not both art and religion at the same time.* Though this crucial fact gets lost in his fulminations against "formalist Modernism," McEvilley *never accepts tribal sculptures as art*, nor their carvers as "artists"—or even "sculptors"; the latter remain relegated to the caste of "craftspeople." For McEvilley, the mere assertion that these "craftspeople" were artists, not to say great artists, smacks of "co-option." I wonder how many of his readers who saw our show and stood before the monumental Nukuoro Island carving of the goddess Kave that introduces it, share McEvilley's conviction that what they were looking at was "not art."

Generations ago, anthropologists considered tribal sculptures only artifacts, and even Franz Boas held that their sculptors' function never exceeded the role of copying and the problems of craftsmanship. This assumption was partly based on the absence of a word for art in most tribal languages. But the same is true for the ancient Egyptians, yet that culture's painting and sculpture is not denied the status of art. Of course, the tribal sculptor, living in a religiocentric society made (the majority of) his objects in the spirit and to the purposes of religious practice and expression—which was also true of Egyptian and Christian Medieval artists, among others. He also considered himself a craftsman—as did his Egyptian and Christian counterparts (the medieval painters were enrolled in the saddlers' guild for the simple reason that painting saddles was one of their primary duties). But no less than his Egyptian or Christian counterparts, the tribal sculptor was *also* an artist, and we have presented him as such—"misleadingly," according to McEvilley. In any event, the 19th-century prejudice that tribal peoples produced no art has today been given up

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by most anthropologists.

Underlining certain similarities in the work of tribal and Modern artists does not mean, as McEvilley claims, that we have presented the tribal artist as a Modern one; we present him as an artist *tout court*. According to McEvilley, "Rubin's argument constantly attributes intentions to the tribal craftsmen, intentions associated with Modernist types of esthetic feeling and problem-solving attitudes." This is simply not so. I did, of course, attribute to tribal sculptors the need to make esthetic decisions, but that is because they functioned—among other things—as artists. The kind of questions I saw them confronting in terms of their ideographic language (which, McEvilley notwithstanding, did not invent itself)—a problem such as "how to make a nose"—could only be described as "Modernist ... problem-solving" by someone with McEvilley's skewed perspective. All art involves some sort of problem-solving, whether it happens self-consciously or not. And in attributing to tribal sculptors an esthetic instinct, which the anthropologist Robert Lowie (and, since him, many other anthropologists) have considered a common denominator of all mankind, I have simply chosen to believe those anthropologists whose views seem to me to accord with my experience of the sculptural objects themselves. McEvilley has chosen others, and we will have to agree to disagree. In terms of primitivism, however, it doesn't matter one whit *which* anthropologists you follow inasmuch as the Modern artists understood and acted upon the tribal objects *as art*.

I believe that it is McEvilley, not MoMA, who treats the tribal peoples as "less than human, less than cultural" by denying their cultures the fact of their art and their great artists. (He attributes the diversity and range of tribal art, which is considerable even within certain individual tribal units, to something he calls "communal inventiveness"—a process I leave the reader to try imagining.) He has a lot to say about MoMA's presumed inability to appreciate the otherness of the Other (which was more than evident to me *in tribal objects* long before I began reading anthropologists on primitive art). It is, indeed, exceedingly difficult to dissociate ourselves from Western values and ways of thinking sufficiently to truly appreciate the otherness of Third World peoples, as contemporary anthropologists are trying especially hard to do. But this was not what our show was about. Nor, in regard to this otherness, does McEvilley have any monopoly on virtue, since many leading anthropologists disagree sharply with his ideas.

It should also be remembered that there is another, negative "otherness" that is at issue for us in the West. This is the view that the Other is lazy, unintelligent, fit only for *travail de nègre* and, above all, uncultured. Most early anthropology is shot through with such prejudices, and the respect and admiration we find for tribal peoples on the part of Picasso and Matisse in the first decade of the century were not—with rare exceptions—to characterize anthropology until after World War II. If the peoples of the world are to get along with each other, they will not only have to appreciate their respective "otherness," they will have to recognize their common humanity. Some of us still do not think Schiller's hope that "*alle Menschen werden Brüder*" is tainted by co-option. By denying the manifest genius of tribal artists, McEvilley excludes whole peoples from this cultural commonality.

—William Rubin
The Museum of Modern Art
New York

1 Many critics and visitors to the exhibition noted that the quality of the tribal works was taken as a whole higher than that of the Modern works. This was accepted in advance as an inevitable result of the premises of the exhibition. Except for those tribal works that were in artists' collections, or those museum objects which had had a direct historical relation to the work of individual Modern artists (and the two together constituted a minority), the tribal works I chose were all—by my lights—the best of their types I could find during many years of study in public and private collections all over the world. Unlike the Modern art, these profited from unfamiliarity. The Modern works were by definition limited to artists involved with primitivism, hence not only were many great Modern artists not represented, but others who were in the exhibition (Brancusi, for example) were, for historical reasons, represented by objects that were not necessarily their very best. (Some artists were not as well represented as they should have been because loans were unobtainable. Matisse's great and highly relevant *Blue Nude* in the Museum of Modern Art could not, for example, be borrowed.)

Not surprisingly, only the greatest of Modern artists, such as Picasso and Brancusi, could hold their own against the best tribal artists. Nobody, I think, considers that Picasso or Brancusi suffered in the comparison. That some other artists did was inevitable. Needless to say, I did not look upon the exhibition as a contest of quality, a *mano a mano* between tribal and Modern artists, and I could have easily stacked the cards in either direction. I knew that our public was far more familiar with great Modern art than with great tribal art, and was at pains to emphasize the latter. The only review of the show that came to grips with this particular issue, analyzed it, and understood it properly was "Rubin's Primitives" by Allen Wardwell, which appeared in the November *Art World*.

2 I do not mean here to imply that everything Delafosse and his early-20th-century colleagues wrote about African art was wrong—although to read the critiques of them by contemporary anthropologists one could conclude that very little of what they said was right. There was, however, one anthropologist writing early in the century whose work, as Lydia Gasman has insisted, is interesting to consider in connection with Picasso's ideas about tribal art, and that is Marcel Mauss. Though Gasman is wrong in thinking that Picasso might have read Mauss' 1903-1904 essay on magic (Picasso did not read anthropological texts, and his French in 1907 would not have been up to it in any case), Mauss' ideas parallel those of Picasso, participate in the same zeitgeist. It is interesting to consider this in the light of McEvilley's view of Goldwater's book, a great part of which is devoted to a review of anthropological ideas, ironically, the one group of anthropologists Goldwater does *not* deal with is precisely as Gasman observes, the French school of Mauss and his followers.

To the Editor:

In his criticisms of my contributions to the "Primitivism" exhibition, Thomas McEvilley is occasionally sloppy (he thinks I wrote two chapters in the book; I wrote three). He is also selectively forgetful, as when he chidingly suggests that an outdated "earth-mother" notion motivated my selection of contemporary women artists. This ignores the part of my essay that explicitly denounces this very cliché, at length (pp. 680–81), yet McEvilley must know the passage, for he elsewhere quotes from it as evidence of my censorship of primitivism's deeper truths! Also, he generally overestimates my contributions, by supposing my handling of the contemporary sections in both show and book can be taken as centrally representative of the exhibition's conception; whereas in fact these contemporary sections were later add-ons, organized (as should be expected, given their content) on significantly differing premises. But let all this pass—I'm glad to be associated with the show, and to confront the substantive issues McEvilley raises in his serious and impassioned review.

McEvilley accuses me of writing on primitivism in a "value-saturated, interpretive" way. He is absolutely right: my essays, and particularly the contemporary essay with which he takes special issue, do have this character, and were intended to make those values and interpretations very evident. His opposing views also have this character—what he would term an "ideological" aspect—but I am afraid he is less forthright in declaring, or perhaps less clear in understanding, their implications. Often, in fact, it seems to me that he is more deeply guilty of the very mistakes he attributes to William Rubin and to me.

He holds that the artists I selected, and the issues I raised, did not confront primitivism's "raw realness, or its real rawness." He admires instead contemporary artists "whose intentionalities [a word he favors as a substitute for the simpler "intentions"] involve falling away from Western civilization and literally forgetting its values." Their work is not just better primitivism, but fully *primitive*, he says, because it shares "the intentionality proper to [tribal] objects." Yet these attitudes McEvilley admires are quintessentially modern and Western, involving goals that obviously could never have been held by tribal artists—who by definition never had civilized Western values to forget. McEvilley's semantic abuse of the already beleaguered term "primitive" is the least of his confusions here. He blames Rubin and me for supposedly attributing modern Western intentions to tribal artists, and opines that "The need to co-opt difference into one's own dream of order ... is a tragic failing. Only fear of the Other forces one to deny its Otherness." Yet when he attributes *tribal* intentions to *Modern* artists, Otherness vanishes in a more global identity of purpose than we would ever suggest, or believe possible, between creators in vastly different cultures. McEvilley thus seems unwittingly to reinforce the very prejudice of Western

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superiority he claims to reject. In his account, contemporary artists can know all about Primitive motives, and subsume them within their more complex projects; but the Primitive may not be credited with harboring any analogue of modern ways of thinking.

What, one should ask, constitutes this global notion of tribal purposes about which McEvilley seems so clairvoyant—this idea of an essential "intentionality" that for him embraces Senufo and Sepik, Polynesian and Punu alike? The definition is never fully spelled out, but the traces can be found in a constellation of effects he evokes. Primitive creation involves for him "violence" in religious practice, "awe and dread," objects drenched in blood, seen in "closed dark spaces by flickering torchlight," and a "terrifying power" of the "darkness of the unconscious." In short his is a deeply Romantic vision—latently more than a little racist—whose rather limited terms seem more appropriate to the generation of Joseph Conrad, or to a particularly unreconstructed Freudian, than to a 1980s understanding of the variety and complexity of social and mental life in tribal societies.

Imagining the power of tribal art exclusively in these terms, McEvilley seems to see only one legitimate avenue for its contact with Modern art: the domain of psychodrama and the expression of the dark unconscious. He accuses me by contrast of a "dread of the primitive, of the dangerous beauty that attracted Matisse and Picasso and that continues to attract some contemporary artists today." As instances of this ongoing tradition, he cites Hermann Nitsch, Paul McCarthy, Kim Jones, and Gina Pane. It would seem that the pairing of Matisse and Picasso might already suggest that there is a wide range of Modern primitivist responses that matches the wide range of tribal art. And no matter how deep one's respect for Nitsch, et al, it is peculiar praise to hold them up as the true legatees of Matisse. If "dread" is what keeps me from constructing this kind of geneal-[illegible] for primitivism, may I continue to live [illegible]

McEvilley claims [illegible]

facing up to the kind of primitivism he prefers, and even "deny [its] presence." This is false, and misinforms his readers. My "Contemporary Explorations" chapter explicitly and pointedly considers views such as those he holds, and primitivizing art of the kind he admires. I don't deny these notions of the Primitive exist, or that numerous contemporary artists believe in them sincerely. I do argue, however (in ways better examined in the essay itself), that there are other valid ways of thinking about the Primitive that inspire other serious artists, and I explain why in the end I find these latter more rewarding and stimulating. I try to explain, moreover, that the strain of Romantic, expressionist primitivism McEvilley favors, with its fantasies of total escape and forgetting, has disturbing undercurrents that are ultimately authoritarian in their implications.

My essay examines different ways interchanges between Modern and tribal art have worked, and stresses that the two spheres have points of contact in the mind as well as in the gut—Minimalism and Cubism are points of departure, or zones of affinity, as valid as angst-torn expressionism. Tribal art in my view can inspire not only violence and dark dread (a response which, as Rubin explains at length in the book, is often based on misconceptions of tribal life and misunderstandings of tribal forms), but also wit, fantasy, and sophisticated complexity—many tribal objects project, in fact, a classic sense of dignity and serene repose. Modern culture in turn provides not simply encumbering values which need forgetting, but also powerful new ways of insight into the variety of tribal creation. This view is indeed "value-saturated and interpretive"; it's intended to be so, and declares itself as such. McEvilley, on the other hand, who believes that Modern artists can willfully acquire the "intentionality" of their tribal counterparts, may similarly dream that there is some other way—presumably his own—in which a reading of primitivism and of the Primitive can involve no such shaping premises.

One panacea he recommends is scru[illegible] attention to intention and context. [illegible] and me for excluding

anthropological data from the exhibition labels for tribal objects, he seems to be arguing that proper awareness of original intentions will save us from the imperialist sin of misreading primitive art in our own terms. As I believe he demonstrates, however, construals of intention are every bit as problematic and value-laden as other forms of "appropriation" from tribal sources. But I do not mean by this to damn appropriation per se—only to ask McEvilley to rethink some false divisions he's setting up. He suggests that my extolling "the capacity of tribal art to transcend the intentions and conditions that first shaped it" should be restated as "the capacity of tribal art to be appropriated out of its own intentionality into mine." I would be happy enough with the paraphrase, if I thought McEvilley understood what he was saying. For someone so committed to an idea of the power of the unconscious, and its communication across the barriers of time and culture, a nostalgic devotion to the notion of an inviolate, ultimately controlling intention seems curious and inconsistent. In fact, even without appeal to unconscious factors, it is plain to see that no act or object, by Shakespeare or a Yoruba carver, would have any broad or long cultural impact if its meaning or potential consequence were totally constrained by its founding motivations (which are finally unknowable in any event). As modern literary theory has driven home repeatedly, there is no validity in a model of knowledge based on the ideal of a privileged reading of an original determining intention. All art, culture, and communication functions by "appropriations" from one context to another. McEvilley and the artists he admires appropriate the Primitive to their purposes just as certainly as I do. Between our two appropriations, the question is not which is pure—neither is or can be—but which is barren and which fertile, which is liberal and open-ended and which, in McEvilley's own terms, is a "rejection of the wholeness of life."

Unhappy with the exhibition's decontextualization of tribal objects, McEvilley offers what he seems to think is an ultimately [illegible] a par[illegible]

where the Western object (in this case a food container) is adopted by New Guinea tribesmen as a clothing ornament. McEvilley concludes that our museum showing tribal objects is as ludicrous as the natives wearing Kellogg's boxes. On the contrary, though, the ability to see art value where others see only garbage (as for example in cubist collage, or [Robert Rauschenberg) is to my mind a kind of receptivity, and creative intelligence, that is well worth respecting and thinking about. Specifically, the tribal use of Western discards is a potentially fascinating phenomenon, of which McEvilley has chosen a relatively uninteresting instance. He ignores the more telling examples of this kind of bricolage that we included in the exhibition, a striking Guere mask made from bullet casings, or an exceptional fetish fashioned around a bottle of Suze liqueur. By acts of appropriation, disregarding the functions the Western objects originally fulfilled, the tribesmen saw new possibilities for the discards and gave them new life and meaning. I agree with McEvilley that it's fair to draw a parallel between this activity and the modern Western attention to the formerly neglected power of tribal objects. But his reading of the situation ascribes naive stupidity to the natives and deluded venality to the Westerner, while mine would stress the common potential for invention, for expansion of cultural limitations, and for communication, that makes both actions compellingly and positively human.

—Kirk Varnedoe
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ARTFORUM TEXT

After years of work on an exhibition, a curator derives a certain satisfaction from a review that attempts to engage the basic issues of his show in a fair-minded way and on a high level of discourse. Such satisfaction is not totally eroded even when the review--as in the case of Thomas McEvilley's article on MoMA's "Primitivism" in the November Artforum--emerges as largely negative. Most reviews of exhibitions and their books fall away and are soon forgotten. → McEvilley's text could be one that becomes part of the history of the event it addresses. I hope, therefore, that he will take this extended (though necessarily very incomplete) commentary on his text at least somewhat as a compliment--an attempt to further thrash out and clarify some ideas and attitudes that mean much to both of us--and not as an → exercise in logomachy. The questions McEvilley raises go far beyond the exhibition to → the nature and motives of The Museum of Modern Art itself, and I appreciate the opportunity Artforum has given me to air some of these matters.

No project on the order of Primitivism in 20th Century Art can work out entirely satisfactorily and wholly free of inconsistencies. Had we to do the book and show over again, there are some things I would surely do differently (I do not necessarily speak here for my colleague, Kirk Varnedoe, whose comments follow). My auto-critique revolves largely around the definitions of "affinities," some of which, I think, could and should have been more sharply etched. I am, however, largely satisfied with the presentation of the main body of the show, the sections called "Concepts" and "History," both of which McEvilley attacked from a variety

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of angles. A few of his criticisms of these sections are well taken. I find, however, that notwithstanding his evidently good intentions, his review is interwoven with so many misconceptions, internal inconsistencies, and simple errors of fact that--given its seriousness--it should not go unchallenged.

At the outset, McEvilley has some very kind things to say about our show, among them that it was "thrilling" and "a tour de force of connoisseurship." As he proceeds, however, he describes the exhibition as operating in a kind of psychological, social and ——→ historical ——→ void resulting from my supposed commitment to what he calls "formalist Modernism." He concludes his text with the put-down that "it takes more than connoisseurship to make an exhibition great."

There is some kind of contradiction here. I'm not sure what McEvilley means by "connoisseurship," ——→ which--etymologically at least--implies far more than he presumably would wish to grant me. If I were ——→ wearing "formalist" blinders, could I really have chosen a great group of tribal works? Is their greatness not a function of their profound affectiveness on ——→ spiritual, poetic, and psychological--as well as on formal--levels? And do they not express, implicitly at least, societal values? Surely McEvilley does not believe that these qualities can be wholly separated from the objects' phenomenological (or plastic) configurations. Were not these affective factors necessarily, therefore, dimensions of my choices? While such components of the sculptures' expressiveness can be isolated for the purposes of discussion--indeed, the linear character of criticism virtually requires

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this--they cannot be separated from one another in the actual experience of the art.

McEvilley's repeated reproach that our show had no anthropological underpinning (of which more below) comes perilously close to suggesting that the tribal works, presented just in themselves, propose but a set of forms ——→ that communicate no "meaning." Picasso's remark, "all I need to know about Africa is in those [tribal] objects" was characteristic for him in its hyperbole; it was also flip. But it nevertheless embodied a crucial point, namely that Picasso felt (quite rightly, I believe) he could apprehend aspects of the spirit, values and nature of African civilizations through their art. Indeed, while some of the observations he put into words were anthropologically wrong (e.g. his notion of "freedom" in relation to tribal art--as I pointed out in our book), the sense of Africa he intuited through its sculpture rings truer today than does most anthropological writing of his day.

By reducing the virtues of our show to "connoisseurship," McEvilley also diminishes--if he does not entirely dismiss--what I hope art historians will consider a significant contribution to our discipline, one that revises many basic received ideas about primitivism. For McEvilley, our art history is largely an "overwhelming mass of information," and he concludes that "on the whole, Goldwater's book still reads better." McEvilley suggests that the "general ideas" of our exhibition have been around since 1938 (the date of Goldwater's book) and points to instances in which other institutions (Centre Pompidou, Grand Palais) have purportedly provided at least limited prototypes for our project.

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No one, I think, admires my late friend and colleague Robert Goldwater more than I. The preface to "Primitivism" in 20th Century Art is devoted to expressing this admiration. The fact is, however, that the premises of our exhibition are very much at odds with many of his conclusions. If by "reads better," McEvilley is referring to Goldwater's lapidary literary style, I would be the first to cede the point. But in terms of substance, our conclusions are at odds with Goldwater's as regards a host of basic questions--about which only one or the other of us can be right. Hence, if we have not simply fallen on our faces as historians, we have done more than merely, as McEvilley would have it, "refine and extend" Goldwater's research.

Most of the reproductions in Goldwater's book were of modern works. Even in the revised edition of 1967, only eight tribal works were illustrated, four of them paired visually with modern objects. None of the eight had belonged to modern artists and, so far as we know, only one of them was even in Europe in the days of the pioneer modernists. Our multiplication of juxtapositions illustrating proposed (and often provable) relationships between modern works and tribal objects in the artists' collections (or visible in museums they are known to have frequented) not only takes issue with Goldwater quantitatively; it overturns one of his basic principles, an insistence on the "extreme scarcity of the direct influence of primitive art forms" on 20th century art. Moreover, Goldwater made no allowance for what we have called "invisible" influences (as documented by the pairings of Picasso's Guitar and his Grebo mask, Moore's Upright Internal and External Forms and the British Museum's Malanggan, and de Zayas' Portrait of Stieglitz and the Pukapuka Soul-Catcher). Nor did

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he connect the invention of collage, assemblage, and mixed media to the experience (Picasso's especially) of tribal art--or, indeed, treat most of the other topics taken up in the Concepts section of our exhibition. Finally, the artist's own words have undermined Goldwater's key assumption that Picasso's interest in tribal art was primarily formal. We are obliged to assign to Picasso's rediscovery of the "magical" roots and powers of art a more critical place in his development than we do any plastic or technical ideas he derived from tribal objects.

Contesting the Museum's assertion that our exhibition is the "first ever to juxtapose modern and tribal objects in the light of informed art history," McEvilley cites two purported precedents: the Menil Collections exhibition earlier this year at the Grand Palais, which "juxtaposed primitive and Modern works (a Max Ernst with an African piece, Cézanne with Cycladic) and sometimes, as in the → [MoMA] exhibition, showed a modern artist's work in conjunction with primitive objects in his collection"; and the Centre Pompidou, which "exhibited, in the vicinity of its modern collections, about 100 tribal objects from the Musée de l'Homme." "Though not actually intermingled with modern works," McEvilley says of the hundred objects, they "were intended to illustrate relationships with them and included, as does the [MoMA] show, primitive objects owned by Picasso, Braque, and other early Modernists."

McEvilley's recollections here certainly don't jibe with mine or, as it turns out, with the facts. A rapid check reveals that 1) the two vitrines at the Centre Pompidou together never contained more than twenty or so objects; 2) none of them ever belonged to Picasso or Braque--or any other "early Modernist"; 3) there is no record that even the famous Fang mask,

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the "icon" of modernist primitivism, which had belonged to Vlaminck and Derain (and was shown in our exhibition next to Vollard's replica in bronze) was ever exhibited at the Centre Pompidou, though Derain's widow had bequeathed it there; 4) the objects in the Beaubourg vitrines could hardly have been intended to "illustrate relations" with modern art since they were chosen by Beaubourg curator J.-H. Martin "without respect," as he says, "to historical or formal questions" from a group proposed by Francine N'Diaye of the Musée de l'Homme, who has only a glancing acquaintance with modern art, and whose mandate ——————————→ was to select such objects as would constitute an overview of that continent's art; 5) the choice of African sculptures included many of types--and from tribal areas--totally unknown in France in the days of the "early Modernists." As for the fascinating Menil show--which, in any case, took place after the writing of our book--my recollections (as confirmed by Dominique de Menil herself) are that 1) the tribal material was shown almost entirely in its own separate areas; 2) contrary to McEvilley, no modern works were "shown in conjunction with primitive objects from [the artists'] own collection[s]"; indeed, no tribal works from the collections of important modernist artists were (included anywhere) in the Menil collections show; 3) the juxtaposition of the Cézanne with a Cycladic sculpture and the Ernst with an African work were determined by Mrs. de Menil's "pleasure in seeing them together," and were not the demonstration of any historical connection. Thus, the two supposedly precedent primitivist events proposed by McEvilley were not instances of "informed art history"; they were not, strictly speaking, instances of art history at all.

Why this determined effort on McEvilley's part to demonstrate that the premises and content of our show were "not new?" The answer may be

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found in one of the most remarkable rhetorical twists I have ever encountered. By convincing his reader that our efforts are "not new," McEvilley feels licensed to ask "why MoMA gives us primitivism now?" The answer to this turns out to be his real point, namely that the "temple of formalist Modernism" is using the primitive to "revalidate" the modernist movement in the face of "several years of sustained attack," which supposedly led us to need a "new defense." "The ultimate reason behind the exhibition," McEvilley insists, "is to revalidate Modernist esthetic canons" (whatever they are). "How brilliant," he opines, "to attempt to revalidate classical modernist esthetics by stepping outside their usual realm of discourse and bringing to bear upon them a vast, foreign sector of the world."

How brilliant, indeed. Brushed aside here is the real history of our show, and the fact that it was an attempt to render explicit some art historical concerns that were implicit in MoMA exhibitions going back almost fifty years (African Negro Art, 1936; Indian Art of the United States, 1941; Arts of the South Seas, 1946). No apparent consideration was given to my conversations with Picasso of fifteen years ago which led me to conclude that the received art history of primitivism was profoundly distorted and that the whole topic would have to be restudied, or ⟶ to the almost five years of the exhibition's actual ⟶ integration (nor to the fact that if we hadn't rebuilt the Museum, the show would have taken place some years ago). By sweeping aside both the real motivations for, and the chronology of, this show (most of which is spelled out in our book), McEvilley could transform the nature of the event, and with it the actually fortuitous fact that it takes place "now"

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rather than some years ago, into an act of contemporary art politics.

For a man who, elsewhere in his text, shows a tremendous concern for the logic of argumentation, McEvilley's motivating of me is astonishing. Putting himself inside my mind, he confidently discovers and asserts agendas of which I had never thought. Anyone who knows me will consider laughable the idea that I would think modernist art needs "revalidation." As I stroll through the galleries of the collection, the last thing in the world I think is that Cézanne, Picasso, Pollock et alia need to be authenticated by "the primitives" or anyone else. It is not Rubin but McEvilley who thinks they need "revalidation"--and he conveniently projects on to me the strategies of his own art-political ways of thinking.

Perhaps the most persistent criticism in McEvilley's long article was directed to our omission of anthropological matter in relation to the tribal objects. He decries the fact that "no anthropologist was included in the team," with the result that the "wholeness" of the tribal objects is sacrificed to "the cult of pure form;" thus the show constitutes an act of "ethnocentric subjectivity inflated to co-opt [tribal] cultures and their objects...[showing that] Western egotism [is] still as unbridled as in the centuries of colonialism and souvenirism." "The Museum pretends to confront the Third World while really co-opting it and using it to consolidate Western notions of quality and feelings of superiority." (Needless to say, had I really been concerned with Western "feelings of superiority," I would hardly have mounted a show, the very terms of which guaranteed that the tribal works would on average be superior to the modern ones.)

The Museum, of course, had no intention of confronting tribal objects

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as such (i.e. in their own terms), no less the whole Third World. To have done so would have hopelessly confused what the Museum was in fact doing--namely, studying the reception of tribal objects by Western artists, the ethnocentricity of which history we ourselves described as manifest. But McEvilley won't let us have a show about that reception, which is, of course, precisely what "primitivism"--as opposed to "the primitive"--means. He wants the tribal objects presented in a wholly integral way (never spelled out) in which not even anthropological museums show them.

It isn't that McEvilley cannot understand our aims. Indeed, he quotes us saying: "As our focus is on the modernists' experience of tribal art... we have not included anthropological hypotheses regarding the religious or social purposes that originally surrounded these objects." And also that "the ethnologists' primary concern--the specific function and significance of each of these objects--is irrelevant to [our] topic, except insofar as these facts might have been known to the modern artists in question." He might also have added our observations that primitivism "refers not to the tribal arts in themselves, but to the Western interest in and reaction to them" and that it was "an aspect of the history of Western art, not of tribal art."

"This position," McEvilley admits, "is consistent in itself." But he insists we are not entitled to it because we have "not consistently acted" on it. (What would have been more inconsistent (with our position) than the inclusion of precisely the anthropological information McEvilley calls for, about which the artists knew nothing?) Now, I don't doubt that in a project as large as ours, we are guilty of some inconsistencies, although I do not

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agree that most of those McEvilley adduces--which have to do with the modes of functioning of tribal artists--are, in fact, inconsistencies (as we shall see below). But McEvilley seems not to understand the fact that whatever the inconsistencies in execution (and those he signals are in the book rather than the exhibition), they do not by any twist of logic nullify the admitted consistency of our original perspective. Even if we hadn't made those observations about tribal artists to which McEvilley objects, would he not still have wanted anthropological input? Wouldn't he still have objected that the tribal objects were decontextualized, that "the blood is wiped off them?"

Of course, the tribal objects in our show are decontextualized (as they are in the Metropolitan or, even more relevantly, in anthropological museums). In fact, they are more than that; they are recontextualized, within the framework of Western culture. And that is what our particular story is all about. McEvilley simply refuses to accept the fact that our story is not about "the Other," but about ourselves. As I observed in my introductory chapter, "prior to the 1920's...at which time some Surrealists became amateurs of ethnology, artists did not generally know--nor evidently much care--about such [anthropological] matters." But as I also observed, the artists' lack of interest in or knowledge of the objects' religious purposes and functions did not mean that they were uninterested in "meanings." It was rather that "the meanings that concerned them were the ones that could be apprehended through the objects themselves." This is the real rub for, as we shall see, McEvilley refuses to accept that such meanings exist, indeed, that the tribal sculptures are, in fact, art.

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Suppose we were to have taken McEvilley's advice and given an anthropological dimension to our show. What anthropology, whose anthropology should it have been? Should we have proposed the views of anthropologists of the Trocadéro itself in Picasso's time, such as Delafosse, who interpreted African tribal art as an Egyptian derivation? Not only is the work of such anthropologists irrelevant to our subject because unknown to the modern artists, but it is wrong.[2] Even in our own day, there are an immense number of fundamental disagreements among anthropologists themselves, some of whom still credit the view, as does McEvilley, that there is no such thing as tribal art--only religious artifacts.

McEvilley appropriates the mantle and the voice of anthropology with far more certainty than is possessed by any professional anthropologist I have met. He constantly presumes to know and speak for the "intentionality" of long dead tribal artists when, in fact, anthropology knows virtually nothing about them. He confidently puts himself into their minds in the same way he did into mine--and possibly with as little accuracy. Having granted the consistency of our perspective (at least in theory), he nevertheless states that by "the absolute repression of primitive context, meaning, content, and intention (the dates of the [tribal] works, their functions, their religious or mythological connections, their environments)", MoMA has "treated the primitives as less than human, less than cultural--as shadows of a culture, their selfhood, their Otherness wrung out of them." Does McEvilley himself know how little is known about most of these tribal objects? Even had they been relevant, we would have had to face the fact that the specific functions and the religious or mythological

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significance of many if not most of the tribal objects in our show are unknown (and will probably never be known). And many of the meanings attributed to some of them by previous generations of anthropologists are being dismissed left and right.

Focus in on the question of dates, which McEvilley seems to think we have suppressed: "The complete omission of dates from the primitive works is perhaps one of the most troubling decisions," he writes, though he admits that "many of these objects cannot be dated precisely." In fact, not a single one of them in our show can be dated precisely, and precious few can be dated approximately. Even the small minority that were field-collected by anthropologists have only a terminus ante quem; one can only speculate as to how long they existed before collection. Most of the tribal objects in the show have little history, or dubious ones. Even the decision as to whether most of them are 19th or 20th century objects is speculative, and usually made by historians of primitive art on a subjective rather than scientific basis. Far from being suppressed, the question of dates is not only discussed in the book, but is summarized on a panel that is repeated three times in various places in the exhibition. I excerpt from our panel: "Since →

accurate dates are not known for most tribal art, no dates appear on the labels for tribal objects in this exhibition. These objects are often short-lived, in part because of their largely perishable materials, in part because they were not preserved after being desacralized. Hence, most of the fine tribal art preserved in the West dates from no earlier than the later 19th and early 20th centuries and represents the later

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phases of long-standing traditions."

Where dates of tribal objects are relevant to the history of primitivism, they are the dates at which artists could have seen them in museums (what Picasso, for example, could have seen in the Trocadéro in 1907) and at which they purchased the pieces in their collections. We have spent hundreds of hours researching these dates and, where discoverable and relevant, have given them.

As one who has probably spent far more time haunting anthropological museums than has McEvilley, I can assure him that in virtually no cases do their labels give more information on "context, meaning, content, and intention" than we do. Will McEvilley please ⟶ tell me how he learns anything about the "religious and mythological connections" of the objects in the vitrines of Tervuren, the Musée de l'Homme, or the Völkerkunde museum in Berlin (whose "fine arts" oriented installation surpasses that of the Metropolitan)? Do these objects have more "blood on them" than those at MoMA? To be sure, some anthropological museums provide short general text panels at the beginning of sections, but provide little or nothing on individual objects. Even these introductory panels are only possible because the material in their vitrines is geographically homogenous. Suppose--as demanded by McEvilley--we had wanted to provide "environments" for objects that came from over a hundred different cultures and societies, how could we have done it?

Does the presentation of tribal sculptures by themselves--the way great museums present all other cultures' sculpture from the Egyptian to the present--really imply treating their makers as "less than human, less than cultural?" Perhaps only if, like McEvilley, you consider the objects "not

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art, but religion or magic"--as if much of the world's sculpture is not both art and religion at the same time. Though this crucial fact gets lost in his diatribe against "formalist modernism," McEvilley never accepts tribal sculptures as art, nor their carvers as "artists"--or even "sculptors"; the latter remain relegated to the caste of "craftspeople." For McEvilley, the mere assertion that these "craftspeople" were artists, not to say great artists, smacks of "co-option." I wonder how many of his readers who saw our show and stood before the monumental Nukuro Island carving of the goddess Kave that introduces it, share McEvilley's conviction that what they were looking at was "hot art."

Generations ago, anthropologists considered tribal sculptures only artifacts, and even Boas held that the tribal sculptors' function never exceeded the role of copying and the problems of craftsmanship. This assumption was partly based on the absence of a word for art in most tribal languages. But the same is true for the ancient Egyptians; yet that culture's painting and sculpture is not denied the status of art. Of course, the tribal sculptor, living in a religiocentric society made (the majority of) his objects in the spirit and to the purposes of religious practice and expression--which was also true of Egyptian and Christian Medieval artists, among others. He also considered himself a craftsman--as did his Egyptian and Christian counterparts (the Medieval painters were enrolled in the saddlers' guild for the simple reason that painting saddles was one of their primary duties). But no less than his Egyptian or Christian counterparts, the tribal sculptor was also an artist, and we have presented him--"misleadingly" according to McEvilley--as such. In any event, the 19th century prejudice that tribal peoples produced no art has today been given up by most anthropologists.

Underlining certain similarities in the work of tribal and modern artists does not mean, as McEvilley claims, that we have presented the tribal artist as a modern one; we present him as an artist tout court. According to

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McEvilley, "Rubin's argument constantly attributes intentions to the tribal craftsmen, intentions associated with Modernist types of esthetic feeling and problem-solving attitudes." This is simply not so. I did, of course, attribute to tribal sculptors the need to make esthetic decisions, but that is because they functioned--among other things--as artists. The kind of questions I saw them confronting in terms of their ideographic language (which, McEvilley notwithstanding, did not invent itself)--a problem such as "how to make a nose"--could only be described as "Modernist...problem-solving" by someone with McEvilley's skewed perspective. All art involves some sort of problem-solving, whether it happens self-consciously or not. And in attributing to tribal sculptors an esthetic instinct, which the anthropologist Robert Lowie (and, since him, many other anthropologists) have considered a common denominator of all mankind, I have simply chosen to believe those anthropologists whose views seem to me to accord with my experience of the sculptural objects themselves. McEvilley has chosen others, and we will have to agree to disagree.

I believe that it is McEvilley, not MoMA, that treats the tribal peoples as "less than human, less than cultural" by denying their cultures the fact of their art and their great artists. (He attributes the diversity and range of tribal art, which is considerable even within certain individual tribal units, to something he calls "communal inventiveness"--a process I leave the reader to try imagining.) He has a lot to say about MoMA's presumed inability to appreciate the otherness of the Other (which was more than evident to me in tribal objects long before I began reading anthropologists on primitive art). ——————→ It is, indeed, exceedingly difficult though very necessary to dissociate ourselves

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from Western values and ways of thinking sufficiently to truly appreciate the otherness of Third World peoples, as today's anthropologists try especially hard to do. But this was not what our show was about. Nor, in regard to this otherness, does McEvilley have any monopoly on virtue, since many leading anthropologists disagree sharply with his ideas.

It should be also remembered that there is another, negative "otherness" that is at issue for us in the West. This is the view that the Other is lazy, unintelligent, fit only for travail de nègre and, above all, uncultured. Most early anthropology is shot through with such prejudices, and the respect and admiration we find for tribal peoples on the part of Picasso and Matisse in the first decade of the century was not--with rare exceptions--to characterize anthropology until after World War II. If the peoples of the world are to get along with each other, they will not only have to appreciate their respective "othernesses", they will have to recognize their common humanity. Some of us still do not think Schiller's hope that "alle Menschen werden Brüder" is tainted by co-option. By denying the manifest genius of tribal artists, McEvilley excludes whole peoples from this cultural commonality.

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NOTES

1. Many critics and visitors to the exhibition noted that the quality of the tribal works was, taken as a whole, higher than that of the modern works. This was accepted in advance as an inevitable result of the premises of the exhibition. Except for those tribal works that were in artists' collections, or those museum objects which had had a direct historical relation to the work of individual modern artists (and the two together constituted a minority), the tribal works I chose were all--by my lights--the best of their types I could find during many years of study in public and private collections all over the world. The modern works were by definition only by artists involved with primitivism; hence, not only were many great modern artists not represented (Mondrian, Kandinsky, etc.), but others who were in the exhibition (Brancusi, for example), were represented by objects that were not their best. —> (Some artists were not as well represented as they should have been because loans were unobtainable; Matisse's great and highly relevant Blue Nude and Madame Matisse, could not, for example, be lent.)

   Not surprisingly, only the greatest of modern artists, such as Picasso and Brancusi, could hold their own against the best tribal artists. Nobody, I think, considers that Picasso, nor even Brancusi, suffered in the comparison. That some other artists did was inevitable. I did not look upon the exhibition as a quality comparison, a "mano-a-mano" between tribal and modern artists. I knew that our public was far more familiar with great modern art than with great tribal art, and was at pains to emphasize the latter. The only review of the show

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which came to grips with this particular issue, analyzed it, and understood it properly was "Rubin's Primitives" by Allen Wardwell, which appeared in the November Art World.

2. I do not mean here to imply that everything Delafosse and his early 20th century colleagues wrote about African art was wrong--although to read the critiques of them by contemporary anthropologists one could conclude that very little of what they said was right. There was, however, one anthropologist writing early in the century whose work, as Lydia Gasman has insisted, is interesting to consider in connection with Picasso's ideas about tribal art (and that is Marcel Mauss.) Though Gasman is wrong in thinking that Picasso might have read Mauss's 1903-1904 essay on magic (Picasso did not read anthropological books, and his French in 1907 would not have been up to it in any case), Mauss's ideas parallel those of Picasso, participate in the same zeitgeist. It is interesting to consider this in the light of McEvilley's view of Goldwater's book, a great part of which is devoted to a review of anthropological ideas; ironically, the one school of anthropologists Goldwater does not deal with is precisely, as Gasman observes, that of Mauss.

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KIRK VARNEDOE reply to McEvilley 11/25/84

In his criticisms of my contributions to the Primitivism exhibition, Thomas McEvilley is occasionally sloppy (he thinks I wrote two chapters in the book; I wrote three). He is also selectively forgetful, as when he chidingly suggests that an oudated "earth-mother" notion motivated my selection of contemporary women artists. This ignores the part of my essay which explicitly denounces this very cliche, at length (p. 680-1); yet McEvilley must know the passage, for he elsewhere quotes from it as evidence of my censorship of primitivism's deeper truths! Also, he generally overestimates my contributions, by supposing my handling of the contemporary sections in both show and book can be taken as centrally representative of the exhibition's conception; whereas in fact these contemporary sections were late add-ons, organized (as should be expected, given their content) on significantly differing premises. But let all this pass -- I'm glad to be associated with the show, and to confront the substantive issues McEvilley raises in his serious and impassioned review.

McEvilley accuses me of writing on primitivism in a "value-laden, interpretive" way. He is absolutely right: my essays, and particularly the contemporary essay with which he takes special issue, do have this character, and were intended to make those values and intepretations very evident. His opposing views also have this character -- what he would term an "ideological" aspect -- but I am afraid he is less forthright in declaring, or perhaps less clear in understanding, their implications. Often, in fact, it seems to me that he is more deeply guilty of the very mistakes he attributes to William Rubin and to me.

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He holds that the artists I selected, and the issues I raised, did not confront the "real rawness, or raw realness", of primitivism. He admires instead contemporary artists "whose intentionalities [a word he favors as a substitute for the simpler "intentions"] involve falling away from Western civilization and literally forgetting its values." Their work is not just better primitivism, but fully primitive, he says, because it "shares the intentionality proper to [tribal] objects." Yet these attitudes McEvilley admires are quintessentially modern and Western, involving goals that obviously could never have been held by tribal artists -- who by definition never had civilized Western values to forget. McEvilley's semantic abuse of the already beleaguered term "primitive" is the least of his confusions here. He blames Rubin and me for supposedly attributing modern Western intentions to tribal artists, and opines that "The need to coopt difference into one's own dream of order...is a tragic failure. Only fear of the Other forces one to deny its Otherness." Yet when he attributes tribal intentions to modern artists, Otherness vanishes in a more global identity of purpose than we would ever suggest, or believe possible, between creators in vastly different cultures. McEvilley thus seems unwittingly to reinforce the very prejudice of Western superiority he claims to reject. In his account, contemporary artists can know all about Primitive motives, and subsume them within their more complex projects; but the Primitive may not be credited with harboring any analog of modern ways of thinking.

What, one should ask, constitutes this global notion of tribal purposes about which McEvilley seems so clairvoyant -- this idea of an essential "intentionality" that for him embraces Senufo and Sepik,

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Polynesian and Punu alike? The definition is never fully spelled out, but the traces can be found in a constellation of effects he evokes. Primitive creation involves for him "violence" in religious practice, "awe and dread", objects drenched in blood, seen in "closed dark spaces, by flickering torchlight", and a "threatening power" of the "darkness of the unconscious". In short his is a deeply Romantic vision -- latently more than a little racist -- whose rather limited terms seem more appropriate to the generation of Conrad, or to a particularly unreconstructed Freudian, than to a 1980s understanding of the variety and complexity of social and mental life in tribal societies.

Imagining the power of tribal art exclusively in these terms, McEvilley seems to see only one legitimate avenue for its contact with modern art: the domain of psychodrama and the expression of the dark unconscious. He accuses me by contrast of a "dread of the primitive, of the dangerous beauty that attracted Matisse and Picasso, and that continues to attract some contemporary artists today." As instances of this ongoing tradition, he cites Hermann Nitsch, Paul McCarthy, Kim Jones and Gina Pane. It would seem that the pairing of Matisse and Picasso might already suggest that there is a wide range of modern primitivist responses that matches the wide range of tribal art. And no matter how deep one's respect for Nitsch et al., it is peculiar praise to hold them up as the true legatees of Matisse. If "dread" is what keeps me from constructing this kind of genealogy for primitivism, may I continue to live in fear.

McEvilley claims that I timidly avoid facing up to the kind of primitivism he prefers, and even "deny [its] ~~existence~~ presence". This is false, and misinforms his readers. My "Contemporary Explorations" chapter

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explicitly and pointedly considers views such as those he holds, and primitivizing art of the kind he admires. I don't deny these notions of the Primitive exist, or that numerous contemporary artists believe in them sincerely. I do argue, however (in ways better examined in the essay itself) that there are other valid ways of thinking about the Primitive that inspire other serious artists, and I explain why in the end I find these latter more rewarding and stimulating. I try to explain, moreover, that the strain of Romantic, expressionist primitivism McEvilley favors, with its fantasies of total escape and forgetting, has disturbing undercurrents that are ultimately authoritarian in their implications.

My essay examines different ways interchanges between modern and tribal art have worked, and stresses that the two spheres have points of contact in the mind as well as in the gut -- Minimalism and Cubism are points of departure, or zones of affinity, as valid as angst-torn expressionism. Tribal art in my view can inspire not only violence and dark dread (a response which, as Rubin explains at length in the book, is often based on misconceptions of tribal life and misunderstandings of tribal forms), but also wit, fantasy, and sophisticated complexity -- many tribal objects project, in fact, a classic sense of dignity and serene repose. Modern culture in turn provides not simply encumbering values which need forgetting, but also powerful new ways of insight into the variety of tribal creation. This view is indeed "value-laden and interpretive"; it's intended to be so, and declares itself as such. McEvilley, on the other hand, who believes that modern artists can willfully acquire the "intentionality" of their tribal counterparts, may similarly dream that that there is some other way --

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presumably his own -- in which a reading of primitivism and of the Primitive can involve no such shaping premises.

One panacea he recommends is scrupulous attention to intention and context. Berating Rubin and me for excluding anthropological data from the exhibition labels for tribal objects, he seems to be arguing that proper awareness of original intentions will save us from the imperialist sin of misreading primitive art in our own terms. As I believe he demonstrates, however, construals of intention are every bit as problematic and value-laden as other forms of "appropriation" from tribal sources. But I do not mean by this to damn appropriation per se -- only to ask McEvilley to rethink some false divisions he's setting up. He suggests that my extolling "the capacity of tribal art to transcend the intentions and conditions that originally shaped it" should be restated as "the capacity of tribal art to be appropriated out of its own intentionality into mine." I would be happy enough with the paraphrase, if I thought McEvilley understood what he was saying. For someone so committed to an idea of the power of the unconscious, and its communication across the barriers of time and culture, a nostalgic devotion to the notion of an inviolate, ultimately controlling intention seems curious and inconsistent. In fact, even without appeal to unconscious factors, it is plain to see that no act or object, by Shakespeare or a Yoruba carver, would have any broad or long cultural impact if its meaning or potential consequence were totally constrained by its founding motivations (which are finally unknowable in any event). As modern literary theory has driven home repeatedly, there is no validity in a model of knowledge based on the ideal of a privileged reading of an original determining intention. All art, culture, and communication functions by "appropriations" from

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one context to another. McEvilley and the artists he admires appropriate the Primitive to their purposes just as certainly as I do. Between our two appropriations, the question is not which is pure -- neither is or can be -- but which is barren and which fertile, which is liberal and open-ended and which, in McEvilley's own terms, is a "rejection of the wholeness of life."

Unhappy with the exhibition's decontextualization of tribal objects, McEvilley offers what he seems to think is an ultimately damning image in riposte: a parallel but reverse decontextualization, where the Western object (in this case a food container) is adopted by New Guinea tribesmen as a clothing ornament. McEvilley concludes that our museum showing tribal objects is as ludicrous as the natives wearing Kellogg boxes. On the contrary, though, the ability to see art value where others see only garbage (as for example in cubist collage, or Rauschenberg) is to my mind a kind of receptivity, and creative intelligence, that is well worth respecting and thinking about. Specifically, the tribal use of Western discards is a potentially fascinating phenomenon, of which McEvilley has chosen a relatively uninteresting instance. He ignores the more telling examples of this kind of bricolage that we included in the exhibition: a striking Guere mask made from bullet casings, or an exceptional fetish fashioned around a bottle of Suze liqueur. By acts of appropriation, disregarding the functions the Western objects originally fulfilled, the tribesmen saw new possibilities for the discards and gave them new life and meaning. I agree with McEvilley that it's fair to draw a parallel between this activity and the modern Western attention to the formerly neglected power of tribal objects. But his reading of the

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situation ascribes naïve stupidity to the natives and deluded venality to the Westerner, while mine would stress the common potential for invention, for expansion of cultural limitations, and for communication, that makes both actions compellingly and positively human.

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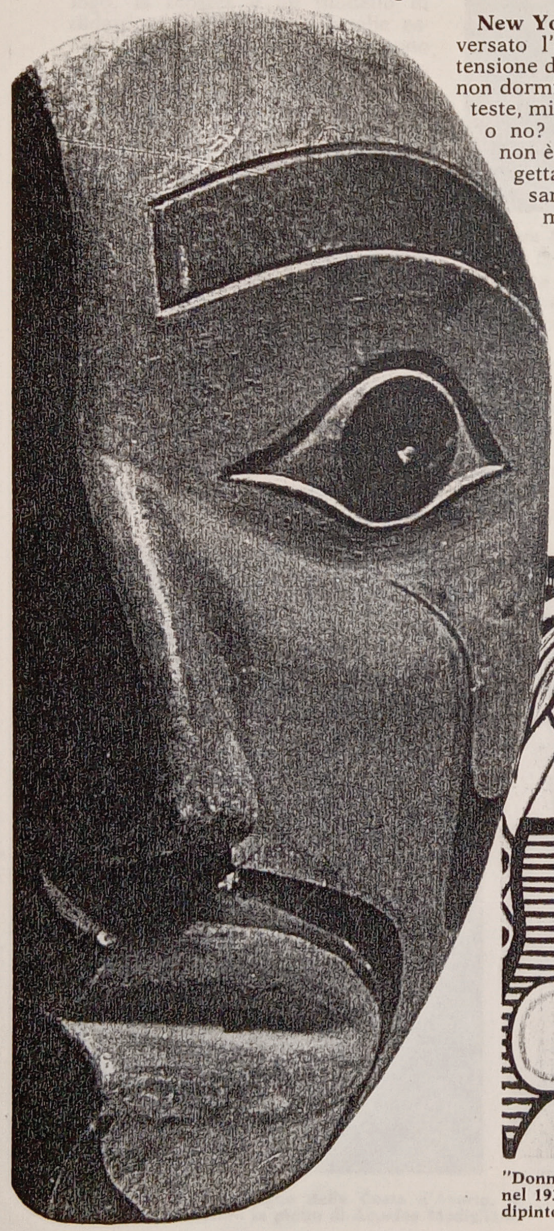


GRANDI ESPOSIZIONI

# Le affinità primitive

di UMBERTO ECO

Si è aperta al Museum of Modern Art di New York una delle mostre più affascinanti di questi anni: con un gioco di confronti spiega le influenze tra civiltà tribali e avanguardie storiche. Ma insegna molte altre cose



**New York. Credo di avere** attraversato l'oceano per sfuggire alla tensione del caso Modigliani. Ormai non dormivo più la notte: ma quelle teste, mi chiedevo, sono autentiche o no? Perché la vera angoscia non è sapere se nel fosso le han gettate i goliardi livornesi, che sarebbe ancora il meno. Ma metti che i ragazzi livornesi volessero fare uno scherzo ma fossero inabili a scolpire, sia pure rozzamente, e avessero chiesto a qualcuno di provvedergli una testa che assomigliasse a un Modigliani; e che questo qualcuno, malizioso, avesse affibbiato loro come un falso Modigliani quello che era invece un vero Modigliani, scoperto anni fa nel solito fossato. Come la metteremmo ora con l'eterno problema della verità?

La tensione era insostenibile, ho abbandonato l'Italia per tornarvi in tempi migliori. E arrivato qui a New York ho appreso che il Museum of Modern Art stava inaugurando proprio in questi giorni una mostra sul primitivismo dell'arte del ventesimo secolo. Sicuro di trovarvi degli autentici Picasso e delle autentiche maschere africane, vi sono andato, per dimenticare Livorno.

**Parliamo subito della** mostra: è una delle cose più belle e affascinanti che mi sia accaduto di vedere negli ultimi anni. La mostra ha alle spalle un lavoro ammirevole, e leggendo il catalogo si è impressionati dalle ricerche fatte per tempi lunghissimi in vari continenti, dal rigore filologico, dalla sagacia poliziesca con cui sono stati ricuperati i modelli autentici a cui i vari artisti si erano ispirati, ritrovando in collezioni disperse lo stesso idolo o la stessa maschera che in una vecchia fotografia appare alle spalle dell'artista, nel suo studio all'inizio del secolo. Il catalogo, splendido, è in due volumi, settecento pagine patinate con migliaia di riproduzioni, saggi sul modo e i tempi in cui i reperti delle civiltà tribali, dall'Africa all'Oceania, sono arrivati nel mondo occidentale, esame serrato per periodi e aree culturali, del gioco di influenze tra mondo primitivo e avanguardie storiche... Insomma, non un semplice catalogo ma una preziosa opera di consultazione, per la quale è impreciso parlare di tribalismo e avanguardia stori-



"Donna allo specchio" di Pablo Picasso, dipinta nel 1932. A sinistra: maschera Kwakiutl in legno dipinto, proveniente dalla Columbia Britannica.

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ca, perché la rassegna e il gioco delle comparazioni attraversa non solo tutti i movimenti della prima metà del secolo, surrealismo, espressionismo, dadaismo, pittura metafisica, fauves e così via, ma arriva sino ai giorni nostri.

**Ma anche senza l'ausilio** del catalogo, la mostra è un modello di didattica: pannelli e didascalie essenziali ma perspicui introducono alle varie sezioni, mettono in rilievo le analogie, dicono — e questo è uno degli aspetti filologicamente più interessanti — quando il rapporto, sempre visivamente lampante, tra l'opera moderna e il reperto etnografico deve essere visto come un caso di influenza o come un caso di affinità. In caso di influenza diretta la mostra documenta come quello specifico oggetto tribale fosse stato visto dall'artista, o perché apparteneva alla sua collezione privata, o perché si può provare che l'oggetto fosse a quell'epoca riprodotto in qualche libro oppure esposto in qualche museo.

I casi di affinità sono i più curiosi: quando si vede una scultura di Max Ernst, "Testa d'uccello" accanto a una maschera Tusyan dell'Alto Volta, il visitatore è convinto di trovarsi

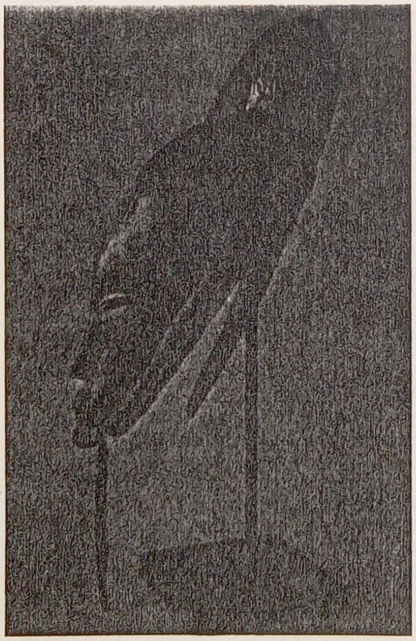


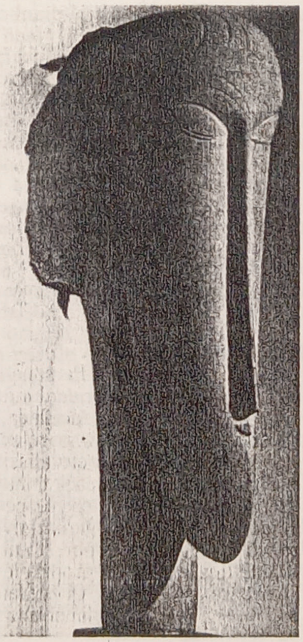


**Maschera Nimba, proveniente dalla Guinea e appartenuta a Pablo Picasso. A destra: "Busto di donna", bronzo di Picasso del 1931.**

di fronte a un chiaro esempio di imitazione con tutte le strizzate d'occhio del caso. In entrambe le opere, benché la seconda sia in fibre vegetali e la prima in bronzo, abbiamo una testa umanoide, rettangolare, sormontata da un becco d'uccello; in entrambi i casi occhi rotondi, in alto, bocca molto in basso...

Si sa che Max Ernst aveva consultato molte riproduzioni di reperti etnografici e in altri casi la mostra ci convince della indiscutibilità del prestito. Ma questa volta viene provato in modo lampante che il modello africano è arrivato in Europa solo poco prima della seconda guerra mondiale, mentre l'opera di Ernst è del 1934. Affinità, dunque: ampiamente spiegabile in un clima culturale ormai profondamente influenzato dall'arte primitiva, così che l'artista d'avanguardia più che copiare procedeva seguendo la stessa logica immaginativa che aveva animato i suoi modelli indiretti, forse dimenticati...





**Maschera Guro in legno della Costa d'Avorio. A destra: una scultura in pietra di Amedeo Modigliani.**

**Influenza o affinità che sia,** vedere queste opere, lontane nel tempo e nello spazio, l'una accanto all'altra ispira molte riflessioni. Che l'arte del nostro secolo si sia rifatta ai modelli primitivi, e per quali ragioni questo sia accaduto, è certo storia che sapevamo. Ma la mostra ci dice, in più qualcosa sulla ampiezza del fenomeno, che il profano non aveva mai potuto misurare con tanta dovizia di reperti e di accostamenti, e soprattutto permette di capire meglio perché l'artista contemporaneo lavorasse in un certo modo. Quando vediamo, vicino ad alcuni busti picassiani degli anni Trenta le maschere dello Zaire o della Nuova Guinea, cogliamo qualcosa che forse ci era sfuggito e iniziamo ad attribuire al gioco delle influenze anche degli aspetti stilistici che prima attribuivamo alla fantasia allucinata, al gusto della deformazione dell'artista europeo: il naso, le gote, le labbra, quei tratti gonfi, pronunciati, sono tutte traduzioni dal modello primitivo, anche

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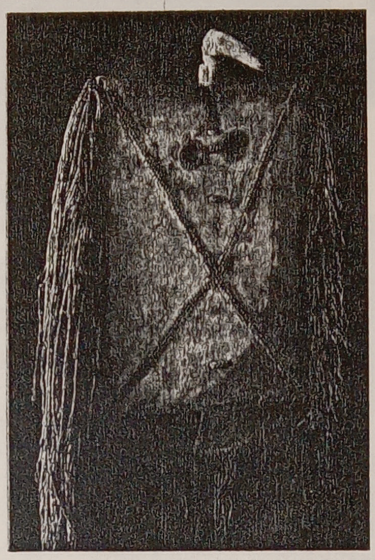
se ripensate in chiave ironica e surreale.

Quando, di fronte a quel capolavoro della deformazione che sono le "Demoiselles d'Avignon", vediamo le maschere dello Zaire, non si può reprimere il fremito dell'agnizione, come se assistessimo alla scena madre di un melodramma: «tu sei mia figlia, io sono tuo padre!». E continuando la comparazione su opere posteriori, si vede come la decisione provocatoria di disegnare il profilo in piena faccia, quasi spaccando il volto in due, trova riscontro mirabile in maschere della Columbia Britannica.

Del pari, si rimane affascinati dalla parentela tra un fallo Papua e la "Principessa X" di Brancusi, o tra certi feticci filiformi e le figure di Giacometti. Ripeto, a parole questo lo sapevamo tutti, e gli esperti lo sapevano anche a fatti (benché credo che sia la prima volta al mondo che tanti fatti vengono allineati come prove, tutti nello stesso luogo, in modo così eloquente), ma avere messo a disposizione degli amatori, del pubblico comune, questa brillante documentazione, è davvero una gran cosa.

**A questo punto il visitatore,** sfuggito al "caso Modi" di livornese memoria, non può evitare alcune riflessioni. In molti casi il passaggio dal modello tribale all'opera contemporanea ha prodotto un salto di qualità.

Ci colpisce il fatto che la maschera primitiva, precisa e levigata nella sua perfezione artigianale (e talora più affascinante e inquietante dell'opera moderna), rappresenta purtuttavia un oggetto riproducibile, a patto di avere gli strumenti adatti, il legno e le fibre giuste; mentre l'opera contemporanea meno si presta alla contraffazione, perché gioca su elementi di non finito, di formalmente ambiguo, come se oltre che all'oggetto tribale agisse, da modello inconscio, la Pietà Rondanini. Si vede cioè che l'opera non avrebbe potuto essere senza il modello tribale, e tuttavia non solo abbia sostituito l'inquietudine sacrale con l'ironia, o abbia al contrario creato sacralità e mistero là dove l'oggetto primitivo esibiva solo una sua tranquilla ritualità, ma abbia anche instaurato un dialogo con la materia, con le sue venature, con le sue idiosincrasie, là dove l'oggetto primitivo piegava la materia alle esigenze di una iconografia prefissata.





**Maschera in legno dell'Alto Volta, decorata con semi e fibre vegetali. A destra: "Testa-uccello", un bronzo di Max Ernst.**

E in questi casi avvertiamo che sapremmo riprodurre la maschera africana ma avremmo maggiori difficoltà a riprodurre l'opera contemporanea.

Ma vi sono altri casi in cui l'opera contemporanea appare altrettanto riproducibile della maschera africana, basta avere una buona abilità artigianale. Ed appare riproducibile perché ci si rende conto che ciò che costituiva quell'opera come oggetto artistico, sin dall'inizio, sia nelle intenzioni del suo autore che nel modo in cui l'Europa la guardava, non era l'abilità della fattura, il dialogo con la materia, la scommessa romantica sulla irripetibilità, ma se mai il suo contrario, e cioè il gesto "mentale" di sfida, il voler presentare l'opera come copia, come deliberato e provocatorio ritorno alle origini.

In parole semplici l'artista, a chi gli avesse detto «ma anch'io saprei fare una buona copia di quel feticcio», avrebbe potuto rispondere: «sì, ma io sono colui che per primo ha avuto l'idea di farla».

Che è poi una storia vecchia, e risale a Hegel: ed è la storia della morte dell'arte. Che non vuol dire che l'arte non c'è più, ma che l'artista vuole, nel produrre qualcosa, esprimere anzitutto una idea di cosa l'arte dovrebbe o dovrà essere.

Tendenza che ha raggiunto il proprio parossismo nell'arte concettuale: dove nessuno si pone più il problema se l'opera sia ripetibile o meno; certo che lo è, ogni sua falsificazione non può che produrre un oggetto fisicamente altrettanto autentico, ma l'autenticità stava nell'idea, non nelle sue possibilissime incarnazioni.

Ora il problema della morte dell'arte, anche se inespresso, domina tutte le avanguardie storiche: è possibile che l'artista, di fronte a due copie di due maschere primitive, giudicasse l'una soddisfacente e l'altra no, perché al postutto ragionava ancora secondo le linee della sensibilità occidentale. Ed è possibile che, insoddisfatto del prodotto (è accaduto a Modigliani) lo gettasse letteralmente a mare — o a fiume. Ma poteva gettarlo perché ormai lo aveva fatto, e nel farlo, sia pure male, aveva compiuto il suo gesto artistico. Per questo in molte di queste opere ci colpisce il fatto che il gesto sia stato compiuto, e in questa decisione storica (di cui l'oggetto è testimonianza) troviamo il fascino dell'oggetto.

**Molti di questi oggetti** sono altrettanto riproducibili quanto il loro modello artigianale e primitivo. Con qualche abilità di elegante bricoleur si può riprodurre la chitarra picassiana del 1912, esile architettura di latta e fil di ferro, come si può riprodurre la maschera della Costa d'Avorio che l'ha ispirata. E se qual-

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cuno mi portasse una chitarra simile, o quasi simile, io certo — che non sono un esperto attribuzionista — non saprei dire se è un vero Picasso, ma dal punto di vista dell'estetica e della storia dell'arte me ne importerebbe pochissimo. Me ne importerebbe certo se la scultura fosse di mia proprietà e dovessi decidere se venderla per un milione di dollari a un museo americano o farla fuori per diecimila lire a Porta Portese. Ma questo è un problema economico e ha scarsi rapporti con l'estetica. Questa chitarra, che sembra quella "vera", credo comunicherebbe a chiunque la sensazione di che cosa ha significato per il nostro modo di pensare e di sentire, all'inizio di questo secolo, la scoperta di nuove forme e il gusto di un nuovo classicismo non-occidentale, e il gusto della beffa — che non consiste nel fare un oggetto "non bello", ma nel farlo lasciando credere che si tratti di gioco, mentre di fatto si cercano altre radici e altri miti. Che è poi quel che io godo nella chitarra picassiana, quel che ne fa la grandezza e, se mi è permesso, il valore artistico.

E io vorrei che chi guardasse la chitarra (forse falsa) provasse non solo un brivido storico ma anche un brivido estetico e dicesse «che meraviglia, c'erano dunque dei giganti anche nel nostro secolo di nani!». Ma a questo punto, il problema dell'autenticità sarebbe accessorio.

**Qui a New York c'è** una testa di Modigliani, bella e inquietante, accanto a una testa della Costa d'Avorio che francamente mi attenderei di trovare anche, prodotta in serie, in un "duty free shop" africano. Ho visto i Modigliani di Livorno solo in fotografia, e mi basta per capire che la testa di New York (che viene dalla Tate Gallery di Londra) è più finita, più lavorata, di quelle livornesi, e secondo i canoni dell'arte classica, più "bella".

Per questo probabilmente Modigliani ha gettato quelle teste, perché non gli bastava il gesto concettuale e si sentiva ancora artista nel senso europeo del termine. Tuttavia, se quando un falsario famoso ha convinto il mondo che i suoi Vermeer erano autentici, si è parlato di genio della falsificazione, penso che un falsario di media statura potrebbe realizzare una copia accettabile del Modigliani della Tate (per le opere pittoriche credo che la storia sarebbe più complicata perché vi inter-



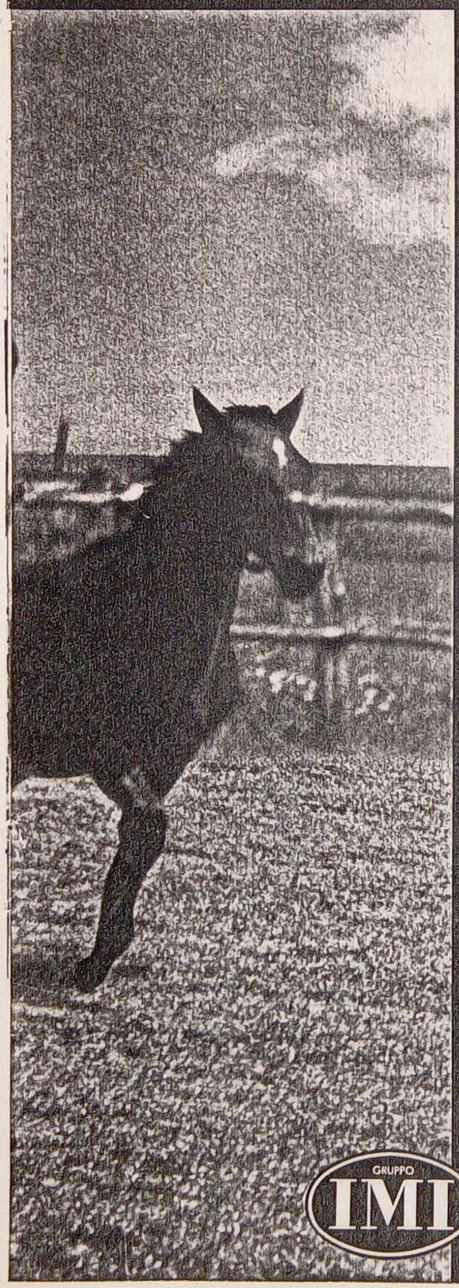
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Imicapital, Imirend: nati da campioni.

Oggi IMI e Fideuram annunciano la nascita dei due nuovi Fondi Comuni italiani: IMICAPITAL e IMIREND. Sono Fondi che promettono bene, perchè gestiti dallo stesso Gruppo IMI che ha fatto di Fonditalia e Interfund, dal 1968, i Fondi campioni della finanza italiana. Questi due nuovi prodotti finanziari - insieme agli altri servizi che i 1.580 Consulenti Fideuram sono in grado di fornire - rappresentano una risposta meditata alle nuove esigenze dei risparmiatori italiani. Fino ad oggi più di 210.000 sottoscrizioni e un patrimonio complessivo di 2.000 miliardi di lire investiti in Fondi Comuni, rappresentano i risultati di 16 anni di esperienza che solo Fideuram può vantare e che la pongono al vertice del settore in Italia e fra i primi in Europa.




Chi può dire altrettanto?

FIDEURAM
Una proposta meditata.

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vengono imponderabili tocchi di pennello).

Leggo però sul catalogo la profonda inquietudine che provarono gli amici che visitarono allora lo studio di Modigliani e videro quelle teste. Questa inquietudine rimane in noi, visitatori del Museum of Modern Art, e credo rimarrebbe anche se ci trovassimo di fronte a una copia: perché è l'inquietudine che si prova a pensare che quel gesto è stato possibile e si è potuto raffigurare in tal modo il volto umano.

Per quanto riguarda le teste di Livorno, inclino a dar fiducia sia a quelli che le han credute di Modigliani sia a coloro che han detto che erano troppo rozze per essere sue. Il grosso pubblico si chiede scandalizzato come mai dei professori così seri abbiano potuto sbagliarsi, perché — pensa — qui non si scappa, o si sono sbagliati gli uni o si sono sbagliati gli altri. Ma ho il sospetto che ci stiamo sbagliando tutti.

**Se quei sassi han potuto** passare per opere, sia pure imperfette, sia pure apocrife, di Modigliani, è perché testimoniavano di quel gesto innovatore di cui, se non erano documento autentico, erano tuttavia suggerimento e memoria. In tal senso, che esse fossero dei Modigliani veri e mal riusciti o dei brutti Modigliani ben falsificati era del tutto secondario.

Ma si voleva qualcosa di più, e cioè la conferma notarile della autenticità. E cos'è al postutto l'autentica autenticità? Che i sassi siano stati toccati davvero dalla mano di Modigliani, come la mano di babbo Coretti è stata toccata da quella di Umberto I.

Tutte le maschere tribali e i feticci che appaiono in questa mostra newyorkese sono stati sottratti, non so quando, a qualche comunità primitiva. Supponiamo che qualche stregone, con entrature all'Onu, oggi ce ne richieda una. Noi la facciamo rifare, con tecniche sofisticate, e poi cerchiamo di rifilargli la copia. Lo stregone l'annusa, ci fa sopra qualche scongiuro, una danza, alcuni suffumigi, poi dice: «no, non ci casco, questa non ha il mana». Che fare? Gli chiediamo scusa, e poi ci organizziamo su un bel seminario di antropologia culturale, sul feticismo primitivo.

Ma qualche stregone dovrebbe organizzare, nell'Alto Volta, o nella Costa d'Avorio, qualche seminario sul feticismo dei popoli civilizzati.

UMBERTO ECO

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# The Museum of Modern Art

To Richard Oldenburg

From William Rubin

Date November 30, 1984

Re PRIMITIVE AFFINITIES by Umberto Eco
L'Espresso 28 October 1984

Dear Dick:

Herewith a translation, done quickly, of what is pretty dense Italian:

"One of the most fascinating exhibitions of the past few years has opened at The Museum of Modern Art of New York. The play of confrontations explains the influences between tribal civilizations and historical avant-gardes. But it teaches many other things.

New York. I believe I crossed the ocean in order to flee from the tension of the Modigliani case. There came a point when I was no longer able to sleep at night: those heads, I would ask myself, are they authentic or not? The real anguish is not knowing whether or not they had been thrown into the sewer by Livornese university students; this would be the least of one's worries. But supposing that the Livornese youths had wanted to play a joke and, being incapable of doing sculpture, had asked someone to provide a head that would resemble a Modigliani, and that this person, being cunning, had burdened them with a false Modigliani that in reality was a genuine Modigliani discovered years ago in the same sewer? How should we now reconcile this supposition with the eternal problems of truth?

The tension was unendurable, and I abandoned Italy not to return until better times. On arrival in New York I learned that The Museum of Modern Art was about to inaugurate at that very time an exhibition on primitivism in 20th century art. Being certain that here I would find authentic Picassos and authentic African masks, I went to it, to forget Livorno.

Let us talk immediately about the exhibition: It is one of the most beautiful and fascinating exhibitions that I have had the opportunity to see in recent years. The show bears all the insignias of really admirable work, and in reading the catalogue one is impressed by the amount of research that had been carried out over a period of years on various continents, by the philological rigor, the detective-like intelligence which led to recuperating the actual models that served as inspirations to various artists, tracking down in widely dispersed

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collections the very figure sculptures and masks portrayed at the shoulders of the artist in an old photograph in his studio at the beginning of the century. The splendid catalogue is in two volumes, 700 pages adorned with a thousandfold illustrations: essays relating in what manner and at what years various tribal objects from Africa and Oceania made their appearances in the Occidental world; exhaustive examinations by periods and cultural areas of the play of influences between the primitive world and the historical avant-garde... In short- not a simple catalogue, but a precious reference work, for which the short description "tribalism and historical avant-garde," would be a misnomer, given its quantity of information and its play of comparisons, which spreads across all the movements of the first half of the twentieth century, surrealism, expressionism, dadaism, metaphysical painting, fauvism, and so forth, reaching into the present time.

But even without the aid of the catalogue, the exhibition is a model of how to inform: concise but perspicuous information panels and wall labels introduce the various sections, pinpoint the analogies, and state--and this in philological terms is one of the most interesting aspects--when the relationship, always visually manifest, between the modern work and the ethnographical evidence must be seen as a case of influence or as a case of affinity. In the case of direct influence, the exhibition documents how the specific tribal object had been seen by the artist, either because it belonged to his private collection, or because it could be proven that the object at the time had been reproduced in some book or was exhibited in some museum [visited by the artist].

The instances of affinity are the most curious: when one sees a sculpture by Max Ernst, Bird-Head next to a Tusyan mask from the upper Volta, the visitor is convinced that he is confronted by a clear example of direct influence...In both works, despite the fact that the second is in vegetable fibers and the first in bronze, we have a rectangular humanoid head, surmounted by a bird's beak, in both the instance of rounded eyes above, the mouth very much below...

We know that Max Ernst consulted many reproductions of ethnographical material, and other such cases in the exhibition convince us of the unquestionability of this appropriation. But in the present occurrence, we are shown incontrovertably, that the African model did not arrive in Europe until shortly after World War II, whereas Ernst's sculpture was executed in 1934. Thus, an affinity, and one wholly justifiable in a cultural climate by this time profoundly influenced by primitive art, so that the avant-garde artist, rather than copying, proceeded according to the same imaginative logic that had animated his indirect, perhaps forgotten, models...

Whether influence or affinity, to see these works, removed from time and space, one next to the other, gives much to reflect about. That the art of our century has referred to primitive models, and the reasons

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why this occurred, is certainly something that we knew. But the exhibition tells much more about the extent of this phenomenon, something the layman could never have measured even with such a wealth of documents, and above all enables one to better understand the reason why the contemporary artist works in a certain mode. When we see some masks from Zaire or New Guinea placed next to some of Picasso's busts of the 1930s, we grasp something that perhaps had escaped us, and begin to consider that the play of influences--such stylistic aspects as we formerly attributed to the European artist's hallucinated fantasy, or his taste for deformation: nose, cheeks, lips, these swollen, pronounced features--are all reconsiderations of the primitive model, reformulated in ironical or surreal ways.

When before that masterpiece of deformation, the Demoiselles d'Avignon, we see masks from Zaire, we cannot repress the thrill of recognition--as if we were witnessing the climactic scene of a melodrama: "You are my daughter, I am your father!" And continuing the comparison with respect to later works, we see how the provocative decision to draw the profile within the full face, virtually splitting the face in two, finds an admirable counterpart in masks from British Columbia.

Similarly, we are fascinated by the kinship of a Papuan phallus and the Princess X by Brancusi, or between certain filiform fetiches and the figures of Giacometti. I repeat, all of us thought we knew about this, and the experts surely knew many facts (although I believe it is the first time ever that so many such facts have been aligned as proofs, all in the same place, and in such eloquent fashion). But to have put at the disposal of the art-loving public at large this brilliant documentation, is truly a great thing.

At this point the visitor in flight from the "Modigliani case," cannot avoid certain observations. In many instances, the passage from the tribal model to the contemporary has produced a leap in quality.

We are struck by the fact that the primitive mask, so precise and smooth in its craftsmanly perfection (and thereby more fascinating and disquieting that the modern work), represents nevertheless an object capable of being reproduced, provided one has the proper instruments, the right wood and fibers; the contemporary work, on the other hand, lends itself less to reproduction, because it plays on elements of "non-finito," on formal anbiguity, as if in addition to the influence of tribal objects, there was an unconscious recollection of the Rondanini Pietà [of Michelangelo]. One sees namely, that the modern work could not have existed without the tribal model, and yet not only has it substituted irony for sacral disquiet, or alternatively created sacrality and mystery here where the primitive object exhibited only its own ritual tranquillity, but also it has instituted a dialogue with the material, with its veining, its idiosyncrasies here where the

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primitive object forced the material to bend to a pre-established iconography. And in these cases we observe that we would know how to reproduce the African mask but would have major difficulties in reproducing the contemporary work.

But there are other cases in which the contemporary work appears to be just as capable of being replicated as the African mask, given enough craftsmanship. And it appears reproducible because we realize that that which accounted for this object being considered as an art object from the outset, whether from the intentions of its author or the way in which Europe viewed it, was not the skill of workmanship, the dialogue with the material, the romantic wager of its "unreproducibility" but its contrary, namely the "mental" gesture of challenge, the will to represent the object as copy, as a deliberate and provocative return to the origins.

Stated in simple words, the artist, in reply to anyone telling him "but I also can make a good copy of this fetish," could have answered: "Yes, but I am the one who first had the idea of doing it."

That is henceforth an old story, and goes back to Hegel: it is the story of the death of art. That does not mean that there is no more art, but that the artist in the making of something wants to express before all an idea about what art should or shall be.

A tendency that has reached its very last paroxysm in Conceptual Art: where nobody now poses the problem of whether the work is repeatable or not. Certain that it is, each of its falsifications cannot but produce an object physically (materially) just as authentic, but the authenticity depended on the idea, not on the infinite possibilities of its incarnations.

Now the problem of the death of art, even if unexpressed, dominates all the historic avant-gardes: it is possible that the artist confronted with two copies of two primitive masks, would judge one to be satisfactory and the other not so, because at most he was still reasoning along the lines of occidental sensibility. And it is possible that being unsatisfied with the product (it happened to Modigliani), he threw it literally in the sea--or the river. But he could throw it away because by now he had made it, and in making it, even if badly, had accomplished his artistic gesture. On account of this we are struck by the fact that in many of these objects the gesture has been accomplished, and in this historical decision (to which the object is witness), we discover the fascination of the object.

Many of these [modern] objects are just as much capable of being reproduced as their primitive handcrafted counterparts. With the ability of any elegant bricoleur, one can reproduce the 1912 Guitar by Picasso, a slender structure made of sheet-metal and wire, just as one can

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reproduce the mask from the Ivory Coast which was [one of] its inspirations. And if anyone were to bring me a similar guitar, or one quite similar, I--who am not an expert in attributions--certainly would not be able to tell if it were a real Picasso. But from the point of view of esthetics and the history of art, that would be of little importance to me. It would be of consequence to me certainly if the sculpture were my property and I had to decide whether to sell it for a million dollars to an American museum or to unload it at the Porta Portese for ten thousand lire. But this is a monetary question and has little to do with esthetics. That [Picasso] guitar, which seems to be the "real" one, would, I believe, communicate to anyone the sensation of what was the essence of our mode of thinking and feeling at the beginning of this century--of the discovery of new forms and the taste for a new non-occidental classicism, and the taste for jest, which does not consist in making an object that is "not beautiful," but in the creative act that makes believe a game is being played while in fact searching for other roots and other myths. That is, then, what I take pleasure in in the Picassan Guitar, what makes its greatness and, if I may say so, what makes its artistic worth.

And I should like whoever looks at the Guitar (perhaps false) to experience not only an historical shiver but also an esthetical shiver and to say, "How marvelous, so there were also giants in our century of dwarfs!" But at this point, the problem of authenticity would be accessory.

Here in New York there is a head by Modigliani, beautiful, disquieting, next to a head from the Ivory Coast that frankly I would expect to find also, produced in series, in African "duty free" shops. I saw the Modiglianis of Livorno only in photographs, and this is sufficient to understand that the New York head (which comes from the Tate Gallery, London) is more finished, more finely wrought than the Livorno examples, and "more beautiful" according to the canons of classical art.

On this account probably Modigliani threw away those heads, because to him the conceptual gesture was not enough and he felt himself to be still an artist in the European sense of the term. However, when a celebrated counterfeiter has convinced the world that his Vermeers were authentic, and is spoken of as a genius of the art of counterfeiting (falsification), I think that a faker of medium ability could make an acceptable copy of the Tate Modigliani (I believe the story would be more complicated if applied to the pictorial works because of the intervention of imponderable touches of the brush).

I read however in the catalogue of the profound disquiet experienced by the friends who visited Modigliani's studio at the time and saw those heads. That feeling of disturbance dwells in us as visitors to The Museum of Modern Art, and I believe would remain also if we were to ind ourselves in front of a copy: for it is the disquiet that one

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experiences in thinking that that gesture had been possible and that it gave the power to represent the human face in such a manner.

Insofar as the heads of Livorno are concerned, I am inclined to place my trust as well in those who have thought they were by Modigliani as those who have said that they were too crude to be his. The public at large, scandalized, is asking itself how could such serious professors ever have made such an error, because--it thinks--here there can be no escape, either the ones are in error, either the others are. But I suspect that we are all in error.

That such stones have been able to pass for either somehow imperfect or somehow apocryphal works by Modigliani is because they could be considered testimony of that innovative gesture; if they were not authentic in a documented way, they were all the same suggestion and memory. Taken in this sense, whether they be authentic but badly executed Modiglianis or bad Modiglianis well falsified was of secondary import.

But something additional was wanted, namely the notarized confirmation of authenticity. And in the end, what is authentic authenticity? That the stones should have been really touched by Modigliani, just as the hand of papa Coretti was touched by that of Umberto I.

All the tribal masks and fetishes that appear in this New York exhibition were removed, I don't know when, from some primitive community. Let us suppose that some sorcerer, with entry to the UN, today would ask us for one. We have it remade, by sophisticated techniques, and then try to spin him the copy. The sorcerer smells out the trick, does a bit of conjuring over it, a dance, some fumigations, then says: "No, I don't care what happens, this does not have mana." What to do? We beg him to excuse us, and afterwards organize a fine seminar in cultural anthropology, on primitive fetishism.

But some sorcerer should organize, in Upper Volta, or on the Ivory Coast, a seminar on the fetishism of the civilized populations.

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THE NEW YORK TIMES, 3/12/72

# THE SELLING - OR EXCHANGING - OF MUSEUM ART: 'MOMA'S VIEW ...

By WILLIAM RUBIN, *Chief Curator of the Painting and Sculpture Collection, the Museum of Modern Art.*

IN his article "Very Quiet and Very Dangerous," John Canaday raised the serious and timely question of museums' exchanges or sales from their collections. While I quite agree that such transactions can be "hazardous," Canaday's statements are sometimes misleading and contrary to fact —certainly insofar as his references to the Museum of Modern Art are concerned.

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From its inception, the Museum of Modern Art has maintained its prerogative to sell or exchange what it considers lesser and less-needed works in order to obtain key paintings or sculptures. (Selling and exchanging are the same thing in that works have been sold *only* to finance purchase of others.) Throughout the stewardship of Alfred H. Barr Jr., who more than anyone else was responsible for building what is universally regarded as the greatest collection of modern art in the world, this prerogative was exercised when necessary. It may seem shocking that a number of lesser works by such great names as Cézanne, Degas, Renoir and Gauguin were sold in those years. (Masterpieces by some of these artists were also acquired.) But without these sales or exchanges the museum would not have such pictures by Picasso alone as "Les Demoiselles d'Avignon," "Ma Jolie," the "Card Player," and "Harlequin" (1915). It would not have Van Gogh's "Starry Night," nor any of its three Analytic Cubist Braques nor numerous other masterpieces by Chagall, Matisse, Miró, Leger, et al.

In order to obtain major works, we have sold or exchanged, during the nearly five years since I came to the museum, a small number of pictures which we considered if not mediocre, then decidedly inferior to other of our pictures by the same artist from the same period. These deaccessioned pictures had rarely been exhibited in the museum's galleries. Some were very necessary and useful to the museum decades ago when the collection was small, but through the years had been replaced on the walls by finer examples by the same artist; others came unsolicited as bequests. Canaday asserts that "if the works [to be sold] are minor, the prices will be minor, too." This is not necessarily true in the current market. Mediocre works—even bad ones —can bring considerable sums of money. Put a group of such sales together and a masterpiece can be obtained.

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Canaday claims that an "obituary exhibition" of pictures deaccessioned by museums would "appall the public." I don't agree at all, at least as regards MOMA—particularly if such pictures were juxtaposed to those acquired in their stead. In the last few years the latter would include Picasso's "Repose" and his sequel to "Guernica," the "Charnel House"; Duchamp's "Network of Stoppages" and "Rotary Demisphere"; Pollock's monumental "One" and his black period "Echo"; David Smith's "Cubi X" and other major examples by Klee, Ernst, Miró, Gorky and others right down to the two Russian Constructivist works whose acquisition was celebrated by your art editor in these same pages some weeks ago.

The deaccessioning procedure at MOMA has many built-in checks and balances designed to eliminate the vagaries of individual taste. Proposals are first discussed by all the curators concerned, and weighed in relation to the related acquisition(s). If passed by this group, the proposal goes before the Painting and Sculpture Committee, which includes among its trustee and non-trustee members a leading professor of art history and museum director, and a number of knowledgeable collectors. If it survives this test, the proposal is brought for approval before the entire Board of Trustees which includes such professionals formerly of the MOMA staff as Alfred Barr, James Thrall Soby and Monroe Wheeler.

Sale or exchange of works from the collection is, of course, only a last resort. We first try to interest a trustee or friends in a needed major work on a future gift or bequest basis. Our only fauve Matisse and fauve Braque have become promised gifts in this way during the last two years. This possibility is obviously very limited, and there are no specific appropriations for purchase funds. The small amount of cash donated for purchase hardly allows us to keep up with the work of new young artists.

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Canaday argues that when museums sell, they violate a "fiduciary trust" since, ethically speaking, their pictures are the property of the public (because of the tax-exemption of the institutions). Certainly they are. But how is the public short-changed by a trade of pictures for others of equal monetary value? Is the public not better served by a superb picture on view in the museum galleries than by the three or four sold from storage to make its acquisition possible?

By way of example, Canaday mentions the museum's deaccessioning of a Redon, "one of its only four." Five Redons, not four—and another great one in a future bequest—would have been more correct. But that is not the point. What matters is that the Redon in question was qualitatively inferior to the others which hang in the galleries. (Certainly that is why it has been on view for less than six months in the last 37 years, i.e. a bit over one per cent of the time.) Nor did it add anything to the collection either iconographically or stylistically, its two main motifs being treated more successfully in other of our Redons.

Mere numbers of works by an individual artist have no meaning in themselves; it is a question of quality, character and iconography. Canaday, who evidently never saw the Redon in question, believes that it is "no minor work" as "is testified to by the names of the museum, the collectors and the dealer involved." Believe me, Mr. Canaday, there are minor works in this museum as in all others, in every private collection I've ever seen, and in the hands of the dealer involved. (I would call the Redon we sold ordinary or run of the mill rather than minor.) Canaday hardly touched on what seems to me the best argument against deaccessioning: that it might be subject to fluctuations of taste. The Museum of Modern Art, however, has specifically not sold out-of-fashion pictures (works by Benton or Tchelitchew, for example); Redon is more highly regarded today than a generation ago.

We would naturally be against selling any great picture. Picasso's "Woman in White" went to the Metropolitan many years ago before MOMA had formally established a Permanent Collection, pursuant to a short-lived arrangement by which the Met was understood to be the final resting place for MOMA "classics" which had stood the test of time. We would love to have it still; but we are also delighted to view it on the walls of the Metropolitan.

THE NEW YORK TIMES 3/12/72

# ...And, From the Mail, Two Other Notable Views

TO THE EDITOR:

IN Thomas Hoving's response to John Canaday's charges, it was very reassuring to learn from Mr. Hoving himself that the Board of Trustees of the Metropolitan Museum has yet to "come to a final decision" regarding the works of art to be disposed of. By a strange coincidence, a famous auction house had already begun work on a catalogue of paintings to be "tentatively" included in a public sale. In response to objections like Canaday's these preparations have now been *stopped* and thus there is hope that the whole deaccessioning project may yet be abandoned.

Hoving upbraids Canaday for minor errors but ignores his basic point—that our tax laws give the public a vested interest in a museum's collection. Yet the public is not represented on the board or elsewhere by anyone to defend its interests. In view of what is happening, prospective donors may revise their wills. The spirit of their bequests certainly has not been to see peddled on the marketplace the works they wished to leave to the citizenry.

The *legal* right to dispose of works of art (such as two splendid Cézannes and a Gauguin that have disappeared from the Frick Collection) is beside the point. What matters is the irreparable damage to the cultural scene of our city. The errors of the past are legion, and are not necessarily the result of stupidity. What even Hoving cannot take into account are shifts of interest and appreciation. Works deaccessioned today may be bitterly missed by our grandchildren. The wisdom of these sales must be sanctioned by history—which is a more severe judge than all the deaccessioning committees of American museums combined.

What are we to believe when one director buys and his successor sells the same work? James Johnson Sweeney, when director of the Guggenheim Museum, obtained directly from Giacometti a group of drawings for the ridiculously low price of less than $200 apiece because it pleased the artist to have them in the Guggenheim. The artist's trust has since been betrayed when some (all?) of these drawings were dumped by the next director. Is it the role of a museum to conserve what it owns, or to exploit an artist's (or a collector's) generosity?

When a museum's collection becomes a source of revenue, deaccessioning to be worthwhile must be applied to works that will bring high prices. On that basis, good pictures are more likely to be sold than third-rate ones. In spite of all the precautions Hoving may be taking, the best insurance against mistakes is still to send unwanted works to the storage room rather than to hawk them.

Let Hoving organize an exhibition of all the works he intends to sell, accompanied by photographs of those already sold! This will enable us to judge whether his words match his deeds. He should have nothing to fear from such a show.

JOHN REWALD
Professor of Art History,
City University of New York

TO THE EDITOR:

. . . While I share Mr. Canaday's belief that "an occasional obituary exhibition" of works to be sold is unthinkable, I think it would be most illuminating to see a kind of balance-sheet exhibition, comparing the works sold by any museum with the works it was able to acquire as a result of these sales.

The title of Mr. Canaday's article, "Very Quiet and Very Dangerous," also reminds us that museums have indeed been "very quiet" about this aspect of their operations. The word among museum directors seems to be "discretion," and their aim seems to be to carry out these transactions with the minimum possible attention from the press and the public. Unfortunately, what to a museum director seems discreet may to the public seem surrepititious, and what seems surreptitious is interpreted as being improper. By acting as though they have something to hide, museums may have succeeded in convincing the public that they are engaged in an illicit activity.

If the museums believe, as I think they do, that the sale of works in their collections is on occasion a sensible, responsible and honorable action, a proper exercise of their stewardship, they might consider the possible advantages of announcing and justifying this action in advance and on their own volition, as the Cranbrook Academy and the Museum of American Folk Art have recently done, rather than hoping that no one will notice.

S. DILLON RIPLEY
Secretary, Smithsonian Institution
Washington, D.C.

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. . . While I share Mr. Canaday's belief that "an occasional obituary exhibition" of works to be sold is unthinkable, I think it would be most illuminating to see a kind of balance-sheet exhibition, comparing the works sold by any museum with the works it was able to acquire as a result of these sales.

The title of Mr. Canaday's article, "Very Quiet and Very Dangerous," also reminds us that museums have indeed been "very quiet" about this aspect of their operations. The word among museum directors seems to be "discretion," and their aim seems to be to carry out these transactions with the minimum possible attention from the press and the public. Unfortunately, what to a museum director seems discreet may to the public seem surreptitious, and what seems surreptitious is interpreted as being improper. By acting as though they have something to hide, museums may have succeeded in convincing the public that they are engaged in an illicit activity.

If the museums believe, as I think they do, that the sale of works in their collections is on occasion a sensible, responsible and honorable action, a proper exercise of their stewardship, they might consider the possible advantages of announcing and justifying this action in advance and on their own volition, as the Cranbrook Academy and the Museum of American Folk Art have recently done, rather than hoping that no one will notice.

S. DILLON RIPLEY
Secretary, Smithsonian Institution
Washington, D.C.

STATE O

# Give Art

By Roberta Smith

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STATE OF THE ART

# Give Art a Chance

**By Roberta Smith**

We are now halfway through the notorious '80s. Many changes in art and the art world have already been relentlessly discussed: the renewed emphasis on subject matter (erroneously elevated to "content") in art of all inclinations; the rebalancing of powers between American and European art; the blossoming of the East Village. There is also the commercialization of the art scene: the wider media play, the glamour of success, the frantic buying, and on and on.

The early '80s have *seemed* dominated by the intoxicating, naive confidence of male adolescence, whether it's Julian Schnabel's painterly acting-out, Eric Fischl's loaded self-examinations, or Kenny Scharf's "paintings-R-us" energy. At the same time, this period has also produced some of the best political, feminist, and Conceptual art so far. So it's not surprising that now, at midpoint, other '70s issues are being subjected to examination and further development. Figuration fever seems to be playing itself out, and artists on both sides of the Atlantic are working their way back to some newly referential, worldly (the term I used last week) form of abstraction. This flies in the face of dire predictions about the corrupting conservativeness of the market, and it makes sense. As so much art moves toward design, fashion, commerce, and rock 'n' roll stardom, the vacuum at the center is being filled by artists with different ambitions. White Column's "The New Capital" show suggests that art both more contemplative and more "difficult" (in the old-fashioned avant-garde sense) may be in the offing.

These developments are more or less within the control of artists, subject to the self-correcting processes of development and maturity. But something that intersects actively with all of the above, yet seems out of nearly everyone's control, is the state of museum curating—mired in problems so intricate, so pervasive, there is little hope for self-correction, or correction at all.

My editor often reminds me that "curating," while widely used, has not officially entered the dictionary. "Curator" is bona fide: someone charged with the care, feeding, and display of an institution's art collection; with overseeing acquisitions; and with organizing temporary exhibitions. Still, what's not yet an official word seems more and more an endangered activity, especially in New York where the pressures are greatest, and I'd like to begin the second half of this decade with a plea in curating's favor. These complaints will sound quite general but they're in response to basic attitudes that need to change. If my arguments aren't entirely clear, that's okay. Count this as an all-out semirational plea. Something must be done now, by everyone.

Curating, like writing criticism, is a vocation that has to be periodically reinvented from scratch. It makes perfect sense that it is not yet officially an active verb: it is also not a clear-cut respected activity. It is easy to do badly, and rarely done well. Both critics and curators work from perception, from what they see, and their job is to make others "see" and think through seeing. Both make critical ideas visible, one through language, the other through the presentation of art. Curators may have it rougher than critics, except possibly for the constant income. Critics, like artists, can work in relative isolation and autonomy; furthermore, their [illegible] is preserved on the printed page. The most effective curators work inside institutions, which is draining, and much of their fragile tradition disappears each time an exhibition closes. The art of installation is self-erasing. A show lives on tenuously in documentation and in the minds of the people who saw it, but its contribution to future curators is hard to pass along.

As museums become more cumbersome and costly to run, the odds for curatorial success are dropping to an all-time low. The Guggenheim, despite occasional awakenings (the second Kandinsky show last winter, maybe the Gilbert & George show this spring), has been so dormant that it hardly seems to exist. Its present season, consisting of Australia's entry in the Neo-X sweepstakes (backed by Will Insley and Horst Antes) and now a wan Motherwell retrospective, is a disaster. The Whitney continues, by default and through some effort, to be liveliest. A Borofsky retrospective has just opened—he's his own curator—and its other new show, Lisa Phillips's "The Third Dimension: Sculpture of the New York School," has an installation so beautiful it outshines the show's contents. Its better parts overlap with the just-closed "Blam" exhibition upstairs (which could have used the extra space). Still, curator Phillips has a talent that "Blam" curator Barbara Haskell, for all her diligence and research, lacks: the ability to make art look like something.

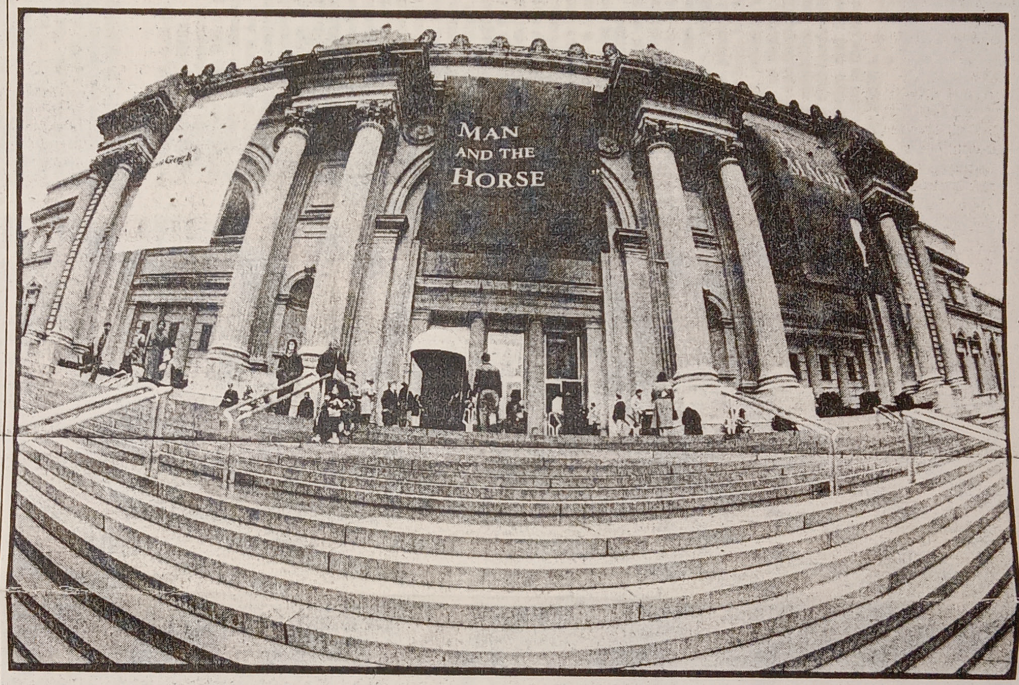
Underlying the current fatalism about New York museums is a collective, painful, little-written-about disappointment in the Museum of Modern Art, an institution whose past excellence is integral to the city's prominence as an art center. Criticism may be a bit premature since the museum is still settling into its new galleries and schedule—in which case I'll happily revise. Nonetheless, there is the inescapable feeling that while the Modern has reopened, it has not returned to anything like its former glory. That glory, or the last 30 years of it, never rested on its contemporary art exhibitions, but on its collection, now spread out in low-ceilinged windowless galleries and ruthlessly homogenized by identical frames. (There's some kind of horrifying justice in the thought that 30 years of glossing over contemporary art could contribute to MOMA's stifling the great old stuff too.) Meanwhile, the Modern's "International Survey" was inconsequential; its current blockbuster "Primitivism" seems weaker and more suspect with each viewing. Upstairs from "Primitivism," Irving Penn shared the gallery space with Alvar Aalto; the first show constituted the inflation of a largely commercial talent, the second the severe truncation of a major architectural one.

Museum attendance has reached such staggering figures that these complaints, like critical response to specific shows, may not matter anymore. As with popular movies, box office becomes its own measure of success and just reward. And everyone, especially museum directors, knows that art critics are too critical anyway. But the idea that the professional art world is no longer the museum's primary audience will not wash; museums cannot survive by dividing their exhibitions into two categories, like "popular" versus "art" films. At stake is a delicate aesthetic ecosystem whose destruction will kill art for everyone—sooner, not later, and not just for the specialized audience. Look at the Met. Look at its old 19th century European galleries, now mostly a walk-through to the American Wing, and at the new Andre Meyer convention hall, where you see every painting and every visitor all at the same time, unable to isolate anything.

The first thing to go, and it's already mostly gone, is the sense of curating as an active verb, as a creative, intuitive form of vision and critical thought. Art, and curators' connection to it, should generate it all—the shows, the structures, the thinking—but in fact the reverse is true. In far too many museums around the country, curators have lost control to administrators, art historians, planning officers, and architects. Museums are designed from the outside in; funding comes first when planning shows; exhibitions illustrate art-historical ideas rather than precipitate real-life encounters between art and viewer. It's hard to do inspiring exhibitions in ugly buildings; a domino-theory desensitization has taken its toll on curator and public alike.

The solutions to these problems, problems barely touched on here, are difficult to pinpoint. The people who run museums must start seeing curators as creative, as closer to artists, as possessed of sensitivity and temperament. And curators must be able to live up to this change of image, which is intended not so much to elevate them to the status of artists—creating another class of potential prima donnas—but merely to suggest that everyone's foremost responsibility is to art: The stake in its future is equally shared. Some collective curatorial anger, backed by outside support, could make a dent. Of course, courage and nerve are hard to maintain in the face of a museum's institutionalized pressures, and lack of practice doesn't help. (The "International Survey" was Kynaston McShine's first major contemporary exhibition in 13 years!) But curators should keep in mind what the young Germans say: You haven't got a chance, so use it. Time is truly running out, so you might as well take your professional lives in your hands.

As for the rest of us—I guess I'm trying to arouse some cohesive, willful sense of communal disgust. All the feverish activity in New York right now can make it seem lively beyond belief, but without the foundation of museums actively sorting through the present and keeping the past alive, art in this town doesn't have a chance. ■




FRED W. McDARRAH

*The state of museum curating, in this second half of the '80s, is mired in problems so intricate, so pervasive, that there's little hope for self-correction, or correction at all.*

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**ART VIEW**

MICHAEL BRENSON

# Are Major Museums Slighting Today's Art?

This is a good time in the New York art world. There is a sense now that anything can happen. Unlike the 1950's and 60's, when artists were unlikely to be taken seriously if their work did not reflect Abstract Expressionism, Pop Art, Minimal Art, or other currents in the artistic mainstream, artists can now work in almost any style and material and have a chance to receive appropriate critical and public attention. The variety and the amount of convincing work in the galleries and public spaces of New York City — painting that is expressive, naturalistic, conceptual or abstract, sculpture made with industrial materials, found objects, bronze or wood — has probably never been greater.

But this is also a bad time. The openness and possibility have been accompanied by a pervasive and seemingly impenetrable confusion. How is it possible now to distinguish between what is new and what is good, between fashion and inner necessity? How is it possible to balance the need for standards and the equally widespread resistance to dogma, or the belief in theory and the conviction that it is important not to exclude? There is more art being produced, by more artists, in more ways, for more American and European galleries and collectors. With the growing demand, there is also more hype and more pressure to produce. Almost every trend, fashion and desire is blown up by ever more insatiable mass media constantly on the lookout for material on which to feed. The conflicting cultural information within the art world is inseparable from the conflicting currents, references and styles that smash together and ricochet throughout our minds and cities every day.

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As usual, nothing can do as much to help us sort our way through these currents as art itself. With its difficult blend of high and low culture, high seriousness and bad taste, flashiness and conviction, some of the strongest new art hauls us into the center of the contemporary human and cultural arena. Whether people like the work of artists like Robert Longo, David Salle, Julian Schnabel and Cindy Sherman is, on one level, irrelevant. What matters more is that these artists are producing work that is not above the fray but is itself an intellectual and artistic battleground in which it is possible for people to test themselves and what they think.

Of the numerous segments of the art world, none have contributed as much to making the present artistic situation impenetrable as the major New York museums. Despite their large and sometimes impressive exhibitions, there now seems to be a crisis of purpose in these institutions that is particularly severe. Instead of helping to clarify the present, the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Museum of Modern Art and the Whitney Museum of American Art seem adrift in it. Since they are at or near the top of the New York art world pyramid — public, educational institutions in which all ages, arts and cultures are

Continued on Page 4

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woven together — their lack of direction has intensified the confusion.

One of the clearest barometers of the vitality of New York museums — or indeed of almost all major museums — is their treatment of contemporary art. This is an old area of attack. For years museums involved with contemporary art have been criticized for not doing enough, for not being representative, or for allowing too much time to elapse between the impact of new work and a museum's decision or ability to show it.

And indeed, museums are probably not equipped or meant to be on the very cutting edge of new art. But the real issue is not whether museums are showing contemporary art, or whether it will be shown in just the right balance with other work, or whether institutions like P.S. 1 and the New Museum of Contemporary

**The commercially viable exhibition is the rule.**

Art are taking up the slack. It is rather the institutional willingness to be active in the arena of contemporary life that is fundamental to any institution's enduring vitality and credibility. Contemporary art is not the only way in which institutions can remain in touch with their time. But it is the most direct and probably the most effective way. To say then that there is no probing, passionate concern with contemporary art in any of the major New York museums is very much the same as saying that these institutions seem to have no probing, passionate interest in problems and contradictions with which everyone in this culture is afflicted.

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One way to demonstrate such an interest is a consistent program, like the Museum of Modern Art's "projects" series, which ended in 1978. Another way is to present contemporary art with as much thoroughness and conviction as modern and Old Master material. Since the best contemporary art continues to be about courage and risk and about artists putting themselves on the line, a museum must be willing to take chances along with it. Nothing undermines an institution more than an overly safe exhibition policy that seems to contradict the nature of the work it presents.

Part of the museums' problem has been created by success. Museums like the Modern and the Whitney that for a long time were aligned with the new by their own process of development, have now become established. With the notable exception of the MOMA's "'Primitivism' in 20th Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern," the vast majority of painting and sculpture exhibitions mounted by New York's major museums this year have been not only conventional, but flat. There is almost no edge — no fresh connections or insight to convince us that the material urgently matters.

The success and growth of the museums have have also increased their bureaucracy and intensified their concern for the kind of commercial appeal that can attract corporate support and maintain operational and exhibition programs. This has contributed to a profound curatorial impasse. There now seem to be no distinct curatorial voices in New York City apart from William Rubin, who organized the "Primitivism" show, and Mr. Rubin's taste was formed more than 25 years ago.

In the major New York museums, ambitious curators now have little room in which to develop. They have little or no autonomy in terms of exhibitions — which are the flesh and blood of their profession, and are indispensable to the testing and development of curatorial taste. Without being able to present exhibitions on a regular basis, curators cannot master the grammar and expressive potential of installations, and they cannot test and develop their taste in a way that enables them to do justice to art with which they feel identified. At this moment, younger American curators with strong national reputations, such as Linda Cathcart at the Contemporary Arts Museum in Houston and Brenda Richardson at the Baltimore Museum of Art, have not only established themselves but remained outside New York.

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The one exception is the Brooklyn Museum, which is in a very different stage of its development. The museum is beginning again under its new director Robert Buck: Within a year and a half, Mr. Buck has turned the museum into an institution where new ideas and contemporary art seem welcome, and where there is a sense that the fresh and unexpected are possible. The museum's series of installations in its main lobby is the most consistent and open program of contemporary art in the major museums of this city. The series began with Richard Smith, Anne and Patrick Poirier and Robert Kushner. Pat Steir, whose installation continues through Feb. 18, will be followed by Longo and Sol LeWitt.

But the two museums that set the tone for museum life in this city are the Metropolitan Museum and the Museum of Modern Art. The Metropolitan has been deeply involved with construction and renovations, and it will not mount large exhibitions of 20th-century art until its 20th-century wing opens in 1986. But that does not excuse the caution that now characterizes its exhibition policy. With all its immense resources, which include the dedication of its staff, the grandeur of its collections and the scholarship of its exhibitions, the Metropolitan gives little indication that it will ever surprise us or itself.

An absence of imagination can be felt in the "Van Gogh in Arles" exhibition that closes next Sunday. The show itself is, in many ways, remarkable. What is problematical is the effect of the commercialism that surrounds it. Here was a chance for the museum to indicate its recognition of the life of art and artists. For example, during this glut of Expressionism, younger expressionist painters, including Enzo Cucchi, who recently painted a strong new work called "Van Gogh's Chair," could have been assembled for a painter's van Gogh symposium. Instead, we felt the full impact of the museum's distance from a figure as humble, searching and daring as van Gogh. The collision between the exhibition material and the museum's all-too-familiar promotional campaign and inevitable bazaar at the exit to the show has never been more jarring.

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In the Museum of Modern Art, the problems are different. There are contemporary exhibitions of photography and prints and drawings. Mr. Rubin continues to produce some of the most ambitious and important exhibitions on modern art in the world. But the museum also continues to treat contemporary painting and sculpture as if it did not merit the same thoroughness and attention as modern art. This continues to be hard to accept, given the mandate for maintaining a commitment to established and new art that was given by the museum's founder, Alfred Barr, and passed on by Dorothy Miller, in her celebrated shows in the 50's.

When the museum reopened last June, it claimed triumphantly that "An International Survey of Contemporary Painting and Sculpture" would be a sign of its steadfast commitment to contemporary art. The exhibition did not have the rigor of the museum's modernist shows. It turned out to be a potpourri, lacking any sense of urgency and any will to make the kinds of hard decisions that would oblige us to react and think.

The Modern's next opportunity to let us know what it thought of contemporary art was the "Primitivism" show. The focus of the contemporary art section was sharp, but specialized. As a result, it did not begin to

**Curators tend to become entangled in bureaucracy.**

clarify the present artistic situation, which is saturated with "primitivizing" impulses, methods and motifs. Art critic Peter Schjeldahl has remarked: "If 'primitivism' isn't an issue now, it never was." No one would know this from the show. And the museum's calendar of upcoming work by living painters or sculptors is blank until the third installment of "New Work on Paper" next summer.

At the Guggenheim Museum, the contemporary art program seems to have been drained by the uneven series of Exxon national and international exhibitions of contemporary art every fall. The other scattered contemporary art shows lack a consistent pattern or goal. As a result, the first question with exhibitions of artists like Michael Singer, Will Insley, Horst Antes and Norris Embry is likely to be not what is the work about, but why are these artists, rather than others, being shown.

The Whitney's problems are more severe. With the growing internationalism of the contemporary art scene and the ever increasing number of prominent foreign artists who have settled in New York, the museum is now somewhat boxed in by its mandate to show only American artists. One way to justify this position would be to be more comprehensive in the contemporary art it shows — a direction which the museum shows no signs of taking.

The Whitney has five curators involved with painting and sculpture, some of whom eat, sleep and breathe contemporary art. Yet those curators are not given the possibility for the kind of consistent, independent exhibitions that could hone their skills. Why not make the ground floor gallery available to individual curators on a rotating basis, let's say, and let them do what they want, no matter how traditional or adventurous?

Whatever they do, New York museums are going to have to do something. They owe art, themselves and us more than they are giving now. ■

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**SELECTION ONE, AN EXHIBITION OF 20TH CENTURY ART TO OPEN AT THE METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART, FEBRUARY 1**

**Exhibition dates: February 1 through April**
**Location: The Esther Annenberg Simon Gallery, main floor**

An exhibition of 20th Century art titled SELECTION ONE will open the new Esther Annenberg Simon Gallery of The Metropolitan Museum of Art on February 1.

SELECTION ONE initiates a series of exhibitions that will survey different aspects of the Museum's collections of 20th century art. Drawn from the Department of 20th Century Art at the Museum, the contents of each installation will be different.

Philippe de Montebello, Director of the Metropolitan Museum, remarked: "Too often people think that the Metropolitan Museum did nothing about modern art of our time. SELECTION ONE not only celebrates the depth of our 20th Century collection but also suggests in a provocative fashion the works of such artists as Avery, Tobey, Dali as precursors of Rothko, Pollock, and Lichtenstein. SELECTIONS TWO, THREE, and FOUR will present equally intriguing aspects of the Department of 20th Century Art's astonishing collection."

SELECTION ONE consists of forty-four paintings and two pieces of sculpture by American and European artists working during the nine decades of our century. In date, the earliest is Pablo Picasso's The Blind Man's Meal (1903), painted when he was twenty-two years old. The latest is David True's untitled painting, a large landscape (1984). Other recent acquistions include a Fauve landscape by Andre Derain (1905), Jackson Pollock's Pasiphäe (1943), and paintings by Balthus (1937), Willem de Kooning (1949), Roy Lichtenstein (1978), and James Rosenquist (1981).

(more)

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Gaston Lachaise's bronze Standing Woman (1927) and Henri Matisse's studio interior (1912)--with a still life of flowers and a detail of his earlier painting The Dance--are also recent acquisitions, both bequests of Scofield Thayer.

SELECTION ONE includes four loans: Seated Woman (1913) by Fernand Léger, Allee of Trees (1914) by Lyonel Feininger, Henry Moore's carving in wood, Reclining Figure: Holes (1975-78), and Salvador Dali's astonishing Madonna (1958). This enigmatic work when viewed up close is abstract; when seen from a greater distance the myriad dots become an ear with the figure of a Madonna and Child. Two of the four loans are promised gifts to the Museum.

Among other paintings on display is one of the Museum's earliest acquisitions of contemporary art, William Orpen's Self-Portrait: Leading the Life in the West. Painted in 1910, it was given to the Museum in 1914. Underscoring the department's active acquisitions program is the fact that ten of the paintings in the exhibition were purchased by the Museum within a few months after they had been completed. These range from Edward Hopper's Tables for Ladies (1930) to James Rosenquist's House of Fire, (1981).

**(End)**

**FOR FURTHER INFORMATION please contact John Ross or Ruth Gales, Public Information Department, The Metropolitan Museum of Art.**
**Tel: (212) 879-5500**

**January 1985**

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# Of Museums and Divas

To the Editor:

On behalf of the Museum of Modern Art's Projects program of contemporary art, of which I was coordinator for six of its 10-and-a-half years of exhibition presentations, I would like to comment on Michael Brenson's article of Dec. 23, 1984 ["Are Major Museums Slighting Today's Art?"]. Projects was essentially a program of one-person exhibitions from 1971 to 1981. Fifty-seven gallery exhibitions and 38 video programs (which were initiated by Projects) took place during this period. Most of the 95 presentations were not reviewed by The New York Times. Due to the museum's construction during the past four years the Projects exhibition program turned to publishing books entirely conceived by artists. From 1982 to 1984 five books in the Artists' Book Project were published (the artists whose work has been presented are Richard Bosman, Bryan Hunt, Jörf Immendorff, Gary Stephan and Telfer Stokes). Review copies of those books went to New York Times critics, but like most of the Projects exhibtions, were ignored.

As a curator who agrees that there is room for more contemporary art in New York museums, I feel there is a dearth of positive critical support for exhibitions of lesser-known artists. If recurring exhibitions like our Projects, the Exxon program at the Guggenheim, and the Whitney Biennial cannot engender thoughful and informative articles on a regular basis by the critics, where can the curator find support to present serious aspects of contemporary art? The informed judgments exhibition curators make regarding recent art are so often discounted that it is little wonder that contemporary exhibitions rarely occur in this country where attendance has vast economic repercussions in the life of the museums. Whet the appetite of the public for contemporary art by providing illuminating and involved reportage and criticism; then we may al see the kind of compelling contemporary exhibitions that Mr. Brenson claims he misses.

RIVA CASTLEMAN
Director, Department of Prints and Illustrated Books
Museum of Modern Art

To the Editor:

"Are Major Museums slighting Today's Art?" Michael Brenson's challenging question seems to focus on the role of the museum curator. He observes that "the majority of painting and sculpture exhibitions mounted by New York's major museums this year have not only been conventional but flat."

How many variations of a theme can be exciting or inspirational? One of the most successful was MOMA'S "Primitivism in 20th Century Art," an exceptional educational tour de force. But here were Picasso, Miró, Giacometti et al. In a new setting? Yes. But where haven't I seen those faces before? A curatorial triumph? Yes. New Art? No.

As a loyal member of MOMA, I endured two years awaiting completion of its renovation and expansion. I had hoped that the vastly increased exhibition space would find some small refuge for new Art. By new Art I mean unknown works of unknown artists. These would be changed frequently to insure widespread opportunities to be shown. Neither the museum nor the curators would risk their reputation by the selections — rather it would be a challenge to the viewing public and the art critic to promote the new artist. The fundamental challenge is "Are the Museums Slighting the New Artist?"

BENJAMIN GELBER
Brooklyn, N.Y.

To the Editor:

I read with expectation Michael Brenson's article in hopes of an objective, knowledgable approach to the subject. But perhaps the reality of the subject is too precarious for an art critic who must depend upon the established institution. It has become clear that the commercial art galleries, whose main motivation is by definition commercial, have a strong connection to, and unhealthy influence upon, our museums. The underlying links between commercial gallery personnel who end up as museum curators and administrators cannot but give pause to any notion of unbiased decision-making.

Mr. Brenson makes no mention of these connections but instead refers to the current van Gogh exhibition at the Met, stating rather pejoratively, "The commercially viable exhibition is the rule" at the museums. It is hard to imagine a more commercially viable or motivated group than the multitude of the corporate-sponsored avant-garde. Anyone familiar with the going prices of these avant-garde (such as Schnabel), or the popular appeal of Philip Glass cannot but admit their commercial viability. One can even go as far to say that an artist without the trappings of the avant-garde has little commercial viability. I cannot help but question both Mr. Brenson's notion that the avant-garde is necessary or even desirable for the sustenance of museums, especially the Met. Museums are by their definition institutions that prize thoughtfulness, qualitative judgment and knowledge in their selection process. They are not meant to be arenas of testing for contemporary trends and fluctuations of the art market, or the stock market.

In fact the closest museum to Mr. Brenson's ideal seems to be the Whitney, which has distinguished itself by being indistinguishable from a commercial gallery (except, of course, for the large public subsidies). The questioning of our museums is necessary — but we must be extremely careful who is asking the questions and why they are being asked.

JANICE BECKER
Long Island City, N.Y.

To the Editor:

Will Crutchfield's article, "Slavic Divas Create a Vocal Renaissance" [Dec. 9, 1984], is an irritatingly reductionistic example of naïvely informed, or ignorant, notions — unfortunately prevalent in our country — concerning the various ethnic groups in Central and Eastern Europe.

Mr. Crutchfield could have persisted in using the unnamed voice teacher's reference to "the Central European hoot" — however offensive it sounds — but should have refrained from lumping together all Central and Eastern Europeans between the Elbe and Moscow as Slavs.

Hungarians (and for that matter, Finns, Germans, Austrians, Greeks, and other small ethnic groups within these geographic limits, not the least the Balts) are not Slavs.

The great diva, Eva Marton, whose picture is identified as one of the great "sopranos of Slavic heritage," as well as Sylvia Sass, Julia Varady and Maria Nemeth, are not Slavs. The phrasing and the tonal quality of these divas cannot be compared to that of others mentioned in the article, nor can one describe *Qualiton Imports* "Historical Hungarian anthologies" as Slavic in character.

Please, save us from such generalizations in the future. Such misinformation was the exact cause of the ambiguous, and often brutally hurtful attitude of many in this country toward small, but fiercely individualistic groups, and nations, throughout the world.

G. J. SZEMLER
Evanston, Ill.

To the Editor:

This letter is probably only one of many pointing out the mistake in the picturecaption of your story of Dec. 9 ["'Messiah' Is Sounding Different Now"]. The lithograph is the Handel Centennial at Westminster Abbey in 1784 and not a 19th-century "monster" concert. Plenty of pictures of the London Crystal Palace concerts after 1851 do exist.

As to the article itself it is curious to

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# The Museum of Modern Art

11 West 53 Street, New York, N.Y. 10019 Tel. 956-6100 Cable: Modernart

No. 71
FOR RELEASE: Saturday June 19, 1971

The Department of Painting and Sculpture and the Departments including Drawings, Water Colors and Prints of The Museum of Modern Art will be restructured, William S. Paley, President, announced today. The post of the Director of Painting and Sculpture will be eliminated, and two new positions will be created: Chief Curator of Drawings, and Curator for Painting and Sculpture Exhibitions. The present position of Chief Curator of the Painting and Sculpture Collection will continue to be held by William S. Rubin, who was appointed to the post in 1969, and who has been associated with the Museum since 1967.

William S. Lieberman has been appointed Chief Curator of Drawings with responsibility also for water colors and prints, effective October, 1971. In announcing the appointment, Mr. Paley said: "I am delighted that Mr. Lieberman has accepted this appointment and that he will now be able to devote an increased amount of his time to the fields of modern art in which his scholarship and his expertise have long been widely recognized as outstanding. In his twenty-six years at the Museum, Mr. Lieberman has been greatly influential in building the Museum collection and has made notable contributions to the Museum's exhibition program. We are all pleased that the reorganization will allow him to use even more effectively his considerable and exceptional talents in mounting exhibitions and writing."

The new post of Curator for Painting and Sculpture Exhibitions will be filled in the near future, and its functions will be administered until then by Mr. Lieberman.

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William S. Lieberman has been associated with The Museum of Modern Art since 1945, and has held a succession of positions of high responsibility. Following study at the Alliance Française in Paris, Swarthmore College and Harvard University, Mr. Lieberman began his career at the Museum as assistant to Alfred H. Barr, Jr., first Director of the Museum and later Director of Collections. In 1953 Mr. Lieberman became Curator of Prints. He was named Director of Drawings and Prints in 1966 and a year later was also appointed Curator of Painting and Sculpture.

Mr. Lieberman has organized several large exhibitions of painting and sculpture, among them: AMEDEO MODIGLIANI (1951); PICASSO: 75TH ANNIVERSARY EXHIBITION (1957, assisting Alfred H. Barr, Jr.); GERMAN ART OF THE 20TH CENTURY (1958, assisting Andrew C. Ritchie); JOAN MIRO (1959); MAX ERNST (1961); THE NEW JAPANESE PAINTING AND SCULPTURE (1966, with Dorothy C. Miller); JACKSON POLLOCK (1967); and JEAN DUBUFFET (1968). During the past three years (1969-1971), he was responsible for the following exhibitions: JULIO GONZALEZ; KANDINSKY WATERCOLORS; TAMARIND: HOMAGE TO LITHOGRAPHY; GEORGE GROSZ: DRAWINGS AND WATERCOLORS; ARCHIPENKO: THE PARISIAN YEARS; THE SCULPTURE OF RICHARD HUNT, as well as the installation of FOUR AMERICANS IN PARIS: THE COLLECTIONS OF GERTRUDE STEIN AND HER FAMILY. Most recently, Mr. Lieberman directed the exhibition FROM CEZANNE THROUGH PICASSO: 100 EUROPEAN DRAWINGS which was seen at the National Museum of Western Art, Tokyo in May and June and he is currently in Japan preparing for its July opening at the Ishibashi Museum in Kurume.

In addition to his association with The Museum of Modern Art, Mr. Lieberman is a trustee or director of several organizations, including: The American Federation of Arts, the Cassandra Foundation, The Drawing Society, the International Graphic Arts Society, Pratt Graphic Art Center, the Jacques Lipchitz Art Foundation, the Print Council of America. He is also

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a committee member of several other organizations including the Dance Committee of the Library and Museum of the Performing Arts, the Exhibitions Committee of the Japan Society, the editorial board of Art in America, the Art Advisory Panel of the Internal Revenue Service of the United States Department of the Treasury. He has been a frequent juror at international biennials including those of Ljlubljana, Paris, and Tokyo. In 1970, the Republic of France named him Chevalier de l'Ordre des Arts et des Lettres.

Before undertaking his new duties, Mr. Lieberman is planning to take a six-month leave for travel and study.

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Additional information available from Elizabeth Shaw, Director of Public Information - 956-7501.

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The Museum of Modern Art
West 53 Street, New York, N.Y. 10019 Tel. 956-6100 Cable: Modernart

No. 82
FOR RELEASE:
Saturday, June 14, 1969

William S. Paley, President of The Museum of Modern Art, announced today that William S. Lieberman has been named Director of the Department of Painting and Sculpture and William S. Rubin, Chief Curator of the Painting and Sculpture Collection with primary responsibility for acquisitions and research on the collection. These appointments follow the retirement of Dorothy C. Miller, Senior Curator of Painting and Sculpture and a member of the Museum staff since 1934, on June 30.

William S. Lieberman, who is 45 years old, has been on the Museum staff since he graduated from Swarthmore College in 1943. He interrupted his career at the Museum once to attend graduate school at Harvard University and to study under Paul J. Sachs. When he returned to the Museum, he was assistant to Alfred H. Barr, Jr., who retired two years ago as Director of the Museum Collections. During his long career at the Museum, Mr. Lieberman has been Director of Drawings and Prints and also Curator of Painting and Sculpture.

William Rubin, 41 years old, joined the Museum staff as Curator of Painting and Sculpture July 1, 1967. He was previously a professor at Sarah Lawrence College and in the graduate school of the City University of New York. He received his BA degree from Columbia University in Italian Language and Literature, studied musicology at the University of Paris, and then received an MA degree in History from Columbia and a Ph.D. in the history of art, working in the latter field largely under Professors Meyer Schapiro and Millard Meiss. He is presently Professor of Art History on an adjunct basis at the Institute of Fine Arts, New York University.

While Mr. Rubin will have primary responsibility for acquisitions and research in painting and sculpture, he will continue to direct exhibitions, including both those drawn from the collection and loan shows. At the same time, Mr. Lieberman will continue to be active in the acquisition of works for the painting and sculpture collection and will also direct exhibitions.

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With the opening of the Abby Aldrich Rockefeller Print Room in 1949, Mr. Lieberman was made Associate Curator of the Print Collection and in 1953 became Curator. When the department expanded in 1960 to include the Museum's collection of drawings, he became Curator of Drawings and Prints and in 1966 was made Director of the department. In 1967 he was also appointed Curator of Painting and Sculpture.

The two departments, Painting and Sculpture, Drawings and Prints, will be reorganized in the coming months. Drawings and watercolors will revert to the painting and sculpture department, as formerly, while prints will revert to a separate activity, also as formerly, with the inclusion of illustrated books, a collection which has expanded in the Museum in the past few years.

During Mr. Rubin's tenure as Curator, he directed a major loan show, "Dada, Surrealism, and Their Heritage," and is director of "The New American Painting and Sculpture: The First Generation," made up of works from the Collection of The Museum of Modern Art including recent acquisitions and promised gifts, which opens June 18. He was largely responsible for the acquisition of the Sidney Janis Collection and other important gifts to the Museum. Mr. Rubin was formerly American Editor of Art International Magazine. His publications include The Church of Assy and Modern Sacred Art, Dada and Surrealist Art (on the fall publication list; H.N. Abrams, Inc.) and numerous articles in American and European periodicals.

Mr. Lieberman has directed and installed more than seventy-five exhibitions of drawings and prints at the Museum, and has organized the graphic sections of many major retrospective shows at the Museum. From the Museum's Theatre Arts Collection, he has directed "Chagall's Aleko" (1966) and "Jim Dine Designs for A Midsummer Night's Dream" (1967). He has also directed large exhibitions of painting and sculpture which include "Amedeo Modigliani" (1951), "Picasso 75th Anniversary Exhibition" (1957, under Alfred H. Barr, Jr.), "Chagall: 75th Anniversary Exhibition" (1958), "Joan Miro" (1959), "Max Ernst" (1961), "The New Japanese Painting and Sculpture" (1966, with Dorothy C. Miller), "Jackson Pollock" (1967), and two smaller exhibitions of the work of "Lyonel Feininger (1963 and 1967). Exhibitions he organized during the past year included: "Jean Dubuffet," "Julio Gonzalez," "Kandinsky Watercolors," and "Tamarind: Homage to Lithography." In addition, he has prepared some seventy exhibitions to travel

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throughout the United States, Canada, Latin America, Europe, Africa and Japan.

Among the books he has written for the Museum are: The Sculptor's Studio: Etchings by Picasso; Picasso: His Graphic Art; Redon: Prints and Drawings; Jacques Villon; Etchings by Matisse; Edvard Munch; Manhattan Observed; Max Ernst; and The New Japanese Painting and Sculpture. His Picasso: Blue and Rose Periods was published in 1954 by Harry Abrams, Inc., and Matisse: 50 Years of his Graphic Art by George Braziller in 1956; Edvard Munch by the Los Angeles County Museum of Art in 1969. His most recent publication for the Museum is Twentieth-Century Art from the Nelson Aldrich Rockefeller Collection, published this month (June, 1969).

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# The Museum of Modern Art

11 West 53 Street, New York, N.Y. 10019 Circle 5-8900 Cable: Modernart

No. 72
FOR RELEASE:
Tuesday, July 11, 1967

René d'Harnoncourt, Director of The Museum of Modern Art, announced today the first appointments to the Museum's reorganized Department of Painting and Sculpture which will concern itself with both the Museum Collection in this field and with its loan exhibitions of painting and sculpture, thus unifying these formerly separate fields of activity. In this reorganization Mr. d'Harnoncourt worked closely with Walter Bareiss, Trustee Chairman of the Committee on Painting and Sculpture, and with Bates Lowry who will assume the directorship of the Museum on July 1, 1968, and who, as of January 1, 1968, will assume the functions of Director of the Department of Painting and Sculpture.

William Rubin, formerly Professor of Art History at Sarah Lawrence College, will join the Museum staff as Curator of Painting and Sculpture with primary responsibility for recommending acquisitions, documentation, research and writing on the subject of the Collection. Miss Dorothy C. Miller, a member of the Museum staff since 1934, who previously served as Curator of the Museum's division of collections, will become Senior Curator of Painting and Sculpture with primary responsibility for the exhibition of the Collection, for loans from the Collection and for conservation of the Collection. Both appointments are effective July 1, 1967.

At the same time, Professor Craig H. Smyth, Director of the Institute of Fine Arts of New York University, announced that Mr. Rubin has joined the staff of the Institute with the rank of Full Professor, on a part-time, or adjunct, basis. He will teach one lecture course or seminar there each year beginning in the fall of 1968.

Since other staff members of the Museum will continue to have an active part in the Museum's activity in painting and sculpture, the new department will become the nucleus of a Curatorial Committee, or Curatorium, on which William S. Lieberman, Director of the Department of Drawings and Prints; Wilder Green, Director of the Exhibitions Program; and Waldo Rasmussen, Director of Circulating Exhibitions, will

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serve.

Additional appointments to the departmental staff and Curatorium will be made in the coming months.

For the past 16 years, William Rubin, who is 39, has taught at Sarah Lawrence College and recently at the City University of New York as a Professor of Art History. He has presented exhibitions of modern painting at Sarah Lawrence and Bennington Colleges and in 1957 was guest director for the MATTA exhibition at The Museum of Modern Art. He has lectured and written for many publications and was formerly American editor of Art International magazine. His book, The Church of Assy and Modern Sacred Art was published in 1961. Chapters from his forthcoming books Dada and Surrealist Art and Jackson Pollock and the Modern Tradition have been published in Artforum and Art International magazines. Mr. Rubin is directing a major exhibition at the Museum, DADA, SURREALISM AND THEIR HERITAGE, which will be on view in the spring of 1968 and is preparing another entitled THE MODERN ARTIST CONFRONTS RELIGION, tentatively scheduled for 1970.

Mr. Rubin was born in New York City. He attended the Fieldston School and Columbia University. His college career was interrupted by service in the American occupation forces in Europe where he conducted an Army Concert Band in Rome. Returning to Columbia he graduated with honors in Italian Language and Literature and then spent a year studying musicology at the University of Paris. Later he received from Columbia a Masters degree in History and a Ph.D. in the History of Art, working in the latter field largely under Professors Meyer Schapiro and Millard Meiss.

Dorothy Miller graduated from Smith College in 1925 and in 1959 received an honorary degree of Doctor of Humane Letters from Smith College. She is the widow of Holger Cahill, well-known author and art critic, who was national director of the W.P.A. Federal Art Project during the Roosevelt administration. Miss Miller joined the staff of the Museum as assistant to the director, Alfred H. Barr, Jr., later was Associate Curator of Painting and Sculpture, then Curator of the Museum Collections.

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She has organized many exhibitions of American art for the Museum, the most influential of which were a series of group shows held over the past 20 years, each one featuring 12 to 16 painters and sculptors little-known at the time to the Museum's large public. Other exhibitions of American art organized by Miss Miller were ROMANTIC PAINTING IN AMERICA, AMERICAN REALISTS AND MAGIC REALISTS, RELIGIOUS FOLK ART OF THE SOUTHWEST, and one-man shows of Feininger, Flannagan and Sheeler, all held during the 1940s. One of the most widely acclaimed exhibitions, which has been called the Armory Show in reverse, was THE NEW AMERICAN PAINTING, organized for the Museum's International Program and shown in 8 European countries in 1958-59. These exhibitions have been accompanied by catalogs written or edited by Miss Miller. Miss Miller also directed THE 1960s: PAINTING AND SCULPTURE FROM THE MUSEUM COLLECTION currently on view at the Museum.

Mr. Lieberman, Director of the Department of Drawings and Prints, joined the Museum staff in 1943. A graduate of Swarthmore College he also did graduate work at Harvard University. In addition to more than 55 exhibitions of drawings and prints, he has directed major retrospectives of European painters, including MIRÓ in 1959, MAX ERNST in 1961 and most recently JACKSON POLLOCK. He will direct a BRANCUSI show for the Museum in 1969.

Wilder Green joined the Museum staff as Assistant Director of the Department of Architecture and Design in 1957. This past year he has served as Coordinator of Program and is now Director of Exhibitions Program.

Waldo Rasmussen has been associated with the Museum since 1954 and has been Director of the Department of Circulating Exhibitions, domestic and international, since 1962. About 50 exhibitions are circulated throughout the United States and Canada each year and between 12 and 20 are sent abroad. The most recent exhibition directed by Mr. Rasmussen, TWO DECADES OF AMERICAN PAINTING, which opened in Japan last fall, was then shown in India and is now in Australia.

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Additional information available from Elizabeth Shaw, Director, Department of Public Information, The Museum of Modern Art, 11 West 53 Street, New York, N.Y. 10019. 245-3200.

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# "PRIMITIVISM" IN 20TH CENTURY ART
## Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern

THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART
11 WEST 53 STREET
NEW YORK, NY 10019
(212) 708-9400

No. 31 WILLIAM RUBIN

William Rubin, who organized "PRIMITIVISM" IN 20TH CENTURY ART: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern, is Director of the Department of Painting and Sculpture at The Museum of Modern Art, a position he has held since 1973. Mr. Rubin first joined the Museum staff in 1967 as Curator primarily responsible for acquisitions of painting and sculpture and scholarship associated with the Painting and Sculpture Collection.

Over the years, he has directed a number of highly acclaimed Museum exhibitions, including Cezanne: The Late Work (1977) and Pablo Picasso: A Retrospective (1980), the latter one of the most successful in the Museum's history and one of the greatest ever organized of the seminal modernist's work. Other notable exhibitions directed by Mr. Rubin include: Dada, Surrealism and their Heritage (1968), The New American Painting and Sculpture: The First Generation (1969), and European Master Paintings from Swiss Collections (1976). He has also organized important single artist surveys such as Frank Stella (1972), Anthony Caro (1975), Andre Masson (1976), and Giorgio De Chirico (1982); and has directed exhibitions and written catalogues for works by Picasso (1972) and Miro (1973) in the Museum's Collection.

Born in New York, Mr. Rubin, 57, received his A.B. from Columbia University, studied at the University of Paris, and then received an M.A. in history and a Ph.D. in the History of Art from Columbia. He taught for many years simultaneously at Sarah Lawrence College and in the graduate school of the City University of New York. He is presently Adjunct Professor of Art History at New York University's Institute of Fine Arts. In addition to his many Museum publications, he has written The Church of Assy and Modern Sacred Art and Dada and Surrealist Art.

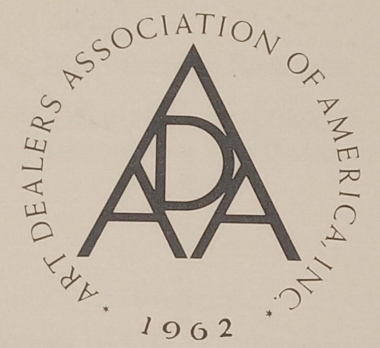
The exhibition and its national tour are sponsored by
Philip Morris Incorporated.
Additional support has been provided by the National Endowment for the Arts.

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*FIFTEENTH ANNUAL AWARD*
*OF*

# ART DEALERS ASSOCIATION OF AMERICA




Dinner at
The Museum of Modern Art
New York
Wednesday, April 9, 1986

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# PROGRAM

Introductory Remarks

Gilbert S. Edelson
Administrative Vice President
of ADAA

Welcome

Richard E. Oldenburg
Director of
The Museum of Modern Art

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*FIFTEENTH ANNUAL PRESENTATION*
*OF*

# *THE ADAA AWARD*

for outstanding lifetime achievement
in the field
of Art History
to

## *William S. Rubin*

Citation and grant of $10,000
and "The ADAA"
a stabile by Alexander Calder

Presented by William R. Acquavella
President of ADAA

1986 Award selection made by
ADAA past presidents

Alexandre P. Rosenberg
(1962-64, 1976-78)
Pierre Matisse
(1964-66)
Klaus G. Perls
(1966-68)
Eugene V. Thaw
(1970-72)
André Emmerich
(1972-74)
Clyde M. Newhouse
(1974-76)
Leo Castelli
(1978-80)
Stephen Hahn
(1980-82)
Norman S. Hirschl
(1982-84)

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# *Citation to William S. Rubin*

We are pleased and honored to present to you the 1986 ADAA Award for Excellence in Art History. Your accomplishments and distinctions as an art historian are well known. It is with enthusiasm and conviction that we add your name to those of your distinguished colleagues who have received the Award in earlier years.

After completing your education at Columbia University, where you earned your Ph.D., you embarked on your career as historian, teacher and connoisseur, and later as a curator at The Museum of Modern Art. Your publications and exhibitions have established you as one of the world's leading authorities on modern art.

From 1968 to 1973, you served as Chief Curator of Painting and Sculpture at The Museum of Modern Art, and since then as Director of the Department of Painting and Sculpture.

In addition to your museum responsibilities, you have taught with distinction as Adjunct Professor of Art History at the Institute of Fine Arts, New York University, since 1969. Among other academic achievements, you were Professor of Art History at Sarah Lawrence College from 1952 to 1967; Professor of Art History at Hunter College from 1954 to 1960; and Professor of

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In recognition
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in 1985.

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*Surrealism and the*
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Art History at the City University of New York from 1960 to 1967. You also were the American Editor of *Art International* magazine from 1958 to 1964.

In recognition of your outstanding abilities, you have been decorated as a Knight of the Legion of Honor in 1978; as a Commander in the French Order of Arts and Letters in 1979; and as a Fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences in 1985.

In addition to numerous articles and reviews in leading art periodicals, you are the author of many important books, including *Modern Sacred Art and the Church of Assy*, 1961; *Dada, Surrealism and their Heritage*, 1968; *Matta*, 1957; *Dada and Surrealist Art*, 1969; *Frank Stella*, 1970; *Picasso in the Collection of the Museum of Modern Art*, 1972; *Miro in the Collection of the Museum of Modern Art*, 1973; *Gerald Murphy*, 1974; *Anthony Caro*, 1975; *Andre Masson* (with Carolyn Lanchner), 1976; *Cezanne: The Late Work* (editor and contributing essayist), 1977; *Paris-New York: Situation de l'Art Contemporain* (with Marcelin Pleynet), 1978; *Pablo Picasso: A Retrospective* (editor), 1980; *De Chirico*, 1982; *"Primitivism" in 20th Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern* (editor and contributing essayist), 1984; and *Le Douanier Rousseau* (editor and contributing essayist), 1984.

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As fifteenth recipient of the ADAA Award, you join a distinguished group of scholars consisting of Alfred H. Barr, Jr., Meyer Schapiro, Millard Meiss, Wolfgang Stechow, Jakob Rosenberg, Lloyd Goodrich, George Heard Hamilton, Seymour Slive, Julius S. Held, Horst W. Janson, Sherman E. Lee, John Rewald, Sir John Pope-Hennessy, and Sydney J. Freedberg.

Your acceptance adds significantly to the distinction that has accrued to the ADAA Award from earlier recipients. We express the sentiments not only of the members of our Association, but also of all of your museum and academic colleagues throughout the world in wishing you a continued happy and productive life.

On behalf of our members, scholars, museum personnel, collectors and the art-interested public, we present the ADAA Award to you with our thanks and affectionate greetings.

ART DEA

William R.
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*Vice Pres*
Paula Coo
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Lawrence
Serge Saba
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R. Frederi

Leo Castel
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Pierre Mat
Clyde M. K
Klaus G. P
Alexandre
Eugene V.

Gilbert S.
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# ART DEALERS ASSOCIATION OF AMERICA

**Elected Directors 1984–86**

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Stephen Hahn
Norman S. Hirschl
Pierre Matisse
Clyde M. Newhouse
Klaus G. Perls
Alexandre P. Rosenberg
Eugene V. Thaw

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# *ADAA MEMBERS*

## *January 1, 1986*

(In New York City except where otherwise stated)

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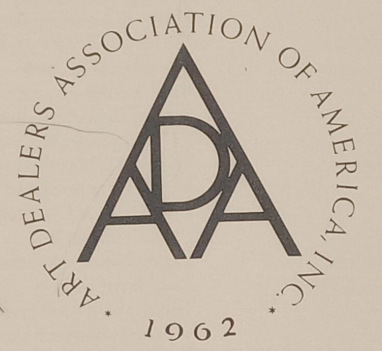
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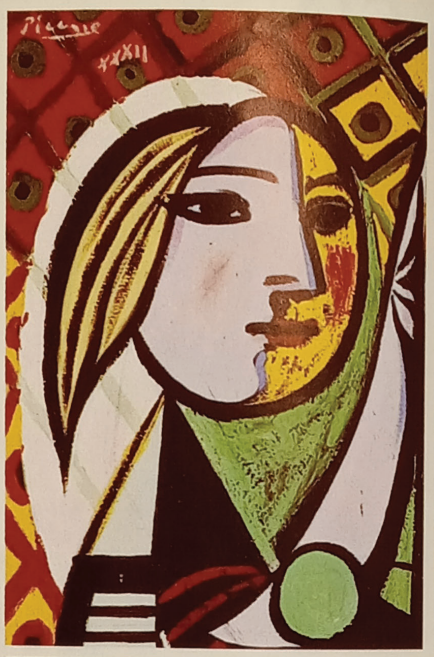
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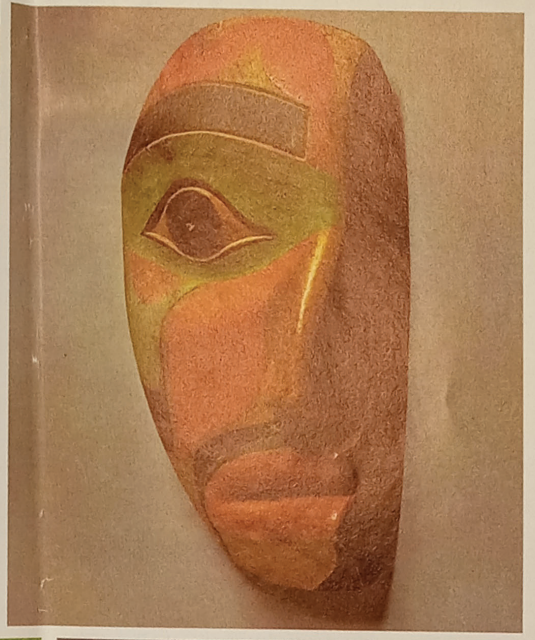

Artforum, Nov. '84

# DOCTOR LAWYER INDIAN CHIEF

## "'PRIMITIVISM' IN 20th CENTURY ART" AT THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART IN 1984

THOMAS McEVILLEY









Above left: **Pablo Picasso, *Girl Before a Mirror* (detail), 1932,** oil on canvas, 64 × 51¼". Collection of the Museum of Modern Art, New York; gift of Mrs. Simon Guggenheim. Above right: **Kwakiutl mask from British Columbia, n.d.,** painted wood, 13¼ × 7¼ × 4¼". Collection of the Museum für Völkerkunde, Berlin. According to the catalogue, it is almost certain that Picasso never saw masks like the one illustrated. More likely sources for *Girl Before a Mirror*, the text continues, are images in manuscripts of the late Middle Ages.

Below left: **Marsden Hartley, *Indian Fantasy*, 1914,** oil on canvas, 47 × 39½". Collection of the North Carolina Museum of Art, Raleigh. Below right: **Hopi Sio Hemis Kachina, Arizona, n.d.,** painted wood and feathers, 17½ × 10¾ × 4¼" (excluding feathers). Collection of the Museum für Völkerkunde, Berlin. The catalogue relates that Hartley visited the collection of the Museum für Völkerkunde, which included the Kachina. Elements from it and from other American Indian objects are incorporated in *Indian Fantasy*. Further, some motifs in the painting are adapted from Bavarian glass paintings.

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Something, clearly, is afoot. Richard Oldenburg, director of the institution here, describes one of its publications and the exhibition it accompanies, both titled "'Primitivism' in 20th Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern," as "among the most ambitious ever prepared by The Museum of Modern Art." "Over the years," he continues, "this Museum has produced several exhibitions and catalogues which have proved historically important and influential, changing the ways we view the works presented, answering some prior questions and posing new ones."[1] Indeed, this *is* an important event. It focuses on materials that bring with them the most deeply consequential issues of our time. And it illustrates, without consciously intending to, the parochial limitations of our world view and the almost autistic reflexivity of Western civilization's modes of relating to the culturally Other.

The exhibition, displaying 150 or so Modern artworks with over 200 tribal objects, is thrilling in a number of ways. It is a tour de force of connoisseurship. Some say it is the best primitive show they have seen, some the best Eskimo show, the best Zairean show, the best Gauguin show, even in a sense the best Picasso show. The brilliant installation makes the vast display seem almost intimate and cozy, like a series of early Modernist galleries; it feels curiously and deceptively unlike the blockbuster it is. Still, the museum's claim that the exhibition is "the first ever to juxtapose modern and tribal objects in the light of informed art history"[2] is strangely strident. Only the ambiguous word "informed" keeps it from being ahistorical. It is true that the original research associated with this exhibition has come up with enormous amounts of detailed information, yet since at least 1938, when Robert Goldwater published his seminal book *Primitivism in Modern Painting*, the interested public has been "informed" on the general ideas involved.[3] For a generation at least, many sophisticated collectors of Modern art have bought primitive works too, and have displayed them together. For five or so years after its opening in 1977, the Centre Pompidou in Paris exhibited, in the vicinity of its Modern collections, about 100 tribal objects from the Musée de l'Homme. Though not actually intermingled with Modern works, these were intended to illustrate relationships with them, and included, as does the present show, primitive objects owned by Picasso, Braque, and other early Modernists. More recently, the exhibition of the Menil Collections in Paris' Grand Palais, in April, 1984, juxtaposed primitive and Modern works (a Max Ernst with an African piece, Cézanne with Cycladic), and sometimes, as in the present exhibition, showed a Modern artist's work in conjunction with primitive objects in his collection. The premise of this show, then, is not new or startling in the least. That is why we must ask why MoMA gives us primitivism now—and with such intense promotion and overwhelming mass of information. For the answer one must introduce the director of the exhibition, and, incidentally, of the museum's Department of Painting and Sculpture, William Rubin.

One suspects that for Rubin the Museum of Modern Art has something of the appeal of church and country. It is a temple to be promoted and defended with a passionate devotion—the temple of formalist Modernism. Rubin's great shows of Cézanne, in 1977, and Picasso, in 1980, were loving and brilliant paeans to a Modernism that was like a transcendent Platonic ideal, self-validating, and in turn validating and invalidating other things. But like a lover who becomes overbearing or possessive, Rubin's love has a darker side. Consider what he did to Giorgio de Chirico: a major retrospective of the artist's work, in 1982, included virtually no works made after 1917—though the artist lived and worked for another half century. Only through 1917, in his earliest years as an artist, did de Chirico practice what Rubin regards as worth looking at. This was a case of the curator's will absolutely overriding the will of the artist and the found nature of the oeuvre. (It sure made the late work chic.) A less obvious but similar exercise occurs in Rubin's massive book *Dada and Surrealist Art*[4]—a book not so much about Dada and Surrealism as against them. The Dadaists of course, and following them the Surrealists, rejected any idea of objective esthetic value and of formally self-validating art. They understood themselves as parts of another tradition which emphasized content, intellect, and social criticism. Yet Rubin treats the Dada and Surrealist works primarily as esthetic objects, and uses them to demonstrate the opposite of what their makers intended. While trying to make antiart, he argues, they made art. Writing in 1968, at a time when the residual influence of the two movements was threatening formalist hegemony, Rubin attempted to demonstrate the universality of esthetic values by showing that you can't get away from them even if you try. Dada and Surrealism were, in effect, tamed.

By the late '70s the dogma of universal esthetic feeling was again threatened. Under the influence of the Frankfurt thinkers, and of post-Modern relativism, the absolutist view of formalist Modernism was losing ground. Whereas its esthetics had been seen as higher criteria by which other styles were to be judged, now, in quite respectable quarters, they began to appear as just another style. For a while, like Pre-Raphaelitism or the Ash-can School, they had served certain needs and exercised hegemony; those needs passing, their hegemony was passing also. But the collection of the Museum of Modern Art is predominantly based on the idea that formalist Modernism will never pass, will never lose its self-validating power. Not a relative, conditioned thing, subject to transient causes and effects, it is to be above the web of natural and cultural change; this is its supposed essence. After several years of sustained attack, such a credo needs a defender and a new defense. How brilliant to attempt to revalidate classical Modernist esthetics by stepping outside their usual realm of discourse and bringing to bear upon them a vast, foreign sector of the world. By demonstrating that the "innocent" creativity of primitives naturally expresses a Modernist esthetic feeling, one may seem to have demonstrated once again that Modernism itself is both innocent and universal.

"'Primitivism' in 20th Century Art" is accompanied by a two-volume, 700-page catalogue, edited by Rubin, containing over 1,000 illustrations and 19 essays by 15 eminent scholars.[5] It is here that the immense ideological web is woven. On the whole, Goldwater's book still reads better, but many of the essays here are beautiful scholarship, worked out in exquisite detail. Jack Flam's essay on the Fauves and Rubin's own 100-page chapter on Picasso exemplify this strength. The investigation and reconstruction of events in the years from 1905 to 1908 recur in several of the essays; these years constitute a classic chronological problem for our culture, like the dating of the Linear B tablets. At the least, the catalogue refines and extends Goldwater's research (which clearly it is intended to supplant), while tilling the soil for a generation of doctoral theses on who saw what when. Its research has the value that all properly conducted scientific research has, and will be with us for a long time. In addition to this factual level, however, the catalogue has an ideological, value-saturated, and interpretive aspect. The long introductory essay by Rubin establishes a framework within which the other texts are all seen, perhaps unfortunately. (Some do take, at moments, an independent line.) Other ideologically activated areas are Rubin's preface, and the preface and closing chapter ("Contemporary Explorations") by Kirk Varnedoe, listed as "codirector" of the exhibition after "director" Rubin.

A quick way into the problems of the exhibition is in fact through Varnedoe's "Contemporary Explorations" section. The question of what is really contemporary is the least of the possible points of contention here, but the inclusion of great artists long dead, like Robert Smithson and Eva Hesse, does suggest inadequate sensitivity to the fact that art-making is going on right now. One cannot help noting that none of the types of work that have emerged into the light during the last eight years or so is represented. Even the marvelous pieces included from the '80s, such as Richard Long's *River Avon Mud Circle*, are characteristic of late '60s and '70s work.

A more significant question is the unusual attention to women artists—Hesse, Jackie Winsor, Michelle Stuart, and above all Nancy Graves. Though welcome and justified, this focus accords oddly with the very low proportion of women in the show that preceded " 'Primitivism' " at the new MoMA, "An International Survey of Recent Painting and Sculpture." That show had a different curator, yet in general it seems that curators need a special reason to include a lot of women in a show—here, perhaps the association of women with primitivism, unconsciousness, and the earth, a gender cliché which may have seemed liberating ten years ago but may seem constricting ten years hence.

In the context of Modern art, "primitivism" is a specific technical term: the word, placed in quotation marks in the show's title, designates Modern work that alludes to tribal objects or in some way incorporates or expresses their influence. Primitivism, in other words, is a quality of some Modern artworks, not a quality of primitive works themselves. "Primitive," in turn, designates the actual tribal objects, and can also be used of any work sharing the intentionality proper to those objects, which is not that of art but of shamanic vocation and its attendant psychology. Some contemporary primitivist work may also be called primitive; yet the works

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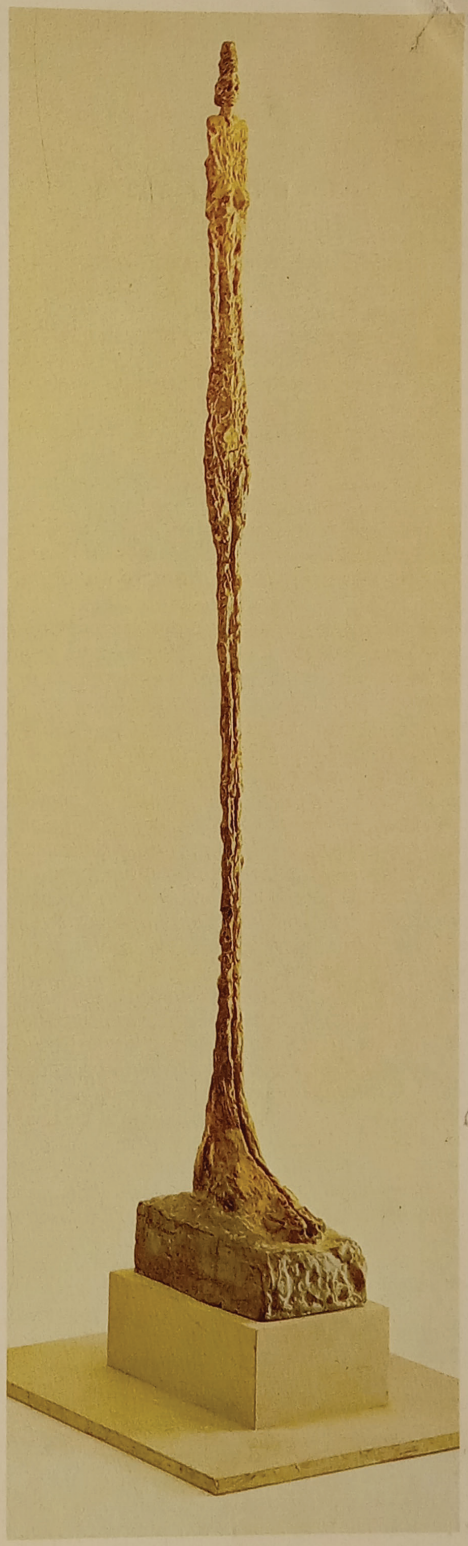

selected by Varnedoe are conspicuously nonprimitive primitivism. The works of Smithson and Hesse, for example, may involve allusion to primitive information, but they express a consciousness highly attuned to each move of Western civilization. Rubin and Varnedoe make it clear that they are concerned not with the primitive but with the primitivist—which is to say they ask only half the question.

There are in fact contemporary artists whose intentionalities involve falling away from Western civilization and literally forgetting its values. These are the primitive primitivists; they are edited out of the show and the book altogether. The farthest the museum is willing to go is Joseph Beuys. Varnedoe explicitly expresses a dread of the primitive, referring darkly to a certain body of recent primitivist work as "sinister," and noting that "the ideal of regression closer to nature is dangerously loaded," that such works bring up "uncomfortable questions about the ultimate content of all ideals that propose escape from the Western tradition into a Primitive state."[6] The primitive, in other words, is to be censored out for the sake of Western civilization. The museum has evidently taken up a subject that it lacks the stomach to present in its raw realness or its real rawness. Where is the balance that would have been achieved by some attention to work like Eric Orr's quasishamanic objects involving human blood, hair, bone, and tooth, or Michael Tracy's fetishes of blood, hair, semen, and other taboo materials? The same exorcising spirit dominates the schedule of live performances associated with the exhibition: Meredith Monk, Joan Jonas, and Steve Reich, for all their excellences, have little to do with the primitivist, and less with the primitive. Where are the performances of Hermann Nitsch, Paul McCarthy, Kim Jones, and Gina Pane? Varnedoe's dread of the primitive, of the dangerous beauty that attracted Matisse and Picasso and that continues to attract some contemporary artists today, results in an attempt to exorcise them, and to deny the presence, or anyway the appropriateness, of such feelings in Western humans.

Our closeness to the so-called contemporary work renders the incompleteness of the selection obvious. Is it possible that the classical Modern works are chosen with a similarly sterilizing eye? Was primitive primitivist work made in the first third of this century, and might it have entered this exhibition if the Western dread of the primitive had not already excluded it from the art-history books? Georges Bataille, who was on the scene when primitive styles were being incorporated into European art as Modern, described this trend already in 1928, as Rosalind Krauss points out in the catalogue's chapter on Giacometti. He saw the estheticizing of primitive religious objects as a way for "the civilized Westerner . . . to maintain himself in a state of ignorance about the presence of violence within ancient religious practice."[7] Such a resistance, still dominant in this exhibition almost 60 years later, has led not only to a timid selection of contemporary works but to the exorcising of the primitive works themselves, which, isolated from one another in the vitrines and under the great lights, seem tame and harmless. The blood is wiped off them. The darkness of the unconscious has fled. Their power, which is threatening and untamed when it is present, is far away. This in turn affects the more radical Modern and contemporary works. If the primitive works are not seen in their full primitiveness, then any primitive feeling in Modernist allusions to them is bleached out also. The reason for this difficulty with the truly contemporary and the truly primitive is that this exhibition is not concerned with either: the show is about classical Modernism.

The fact that the primitive "looks like" the Modern is interpreted as validating the Modern by showing that its values are universal, while at the same time projecting it—and with it MoMA—into the future as a permanent canon. A counterview is possible: that primitivism on the contrary invalidates Modernism by showing it to be derivative and subject to external causation. At one level this show undertakes precisely to coopt that question by answering it before it has really been asked, and by burying it under a mass of information. The first task Rubin and his colleagues attempt, then, is a chronological one. They devote obsessive attention to the rhetorical question, Did primitive influence precede the birth of Modernism, or did it ingress afterward, as a confirmatory witness? It is hard to avoid the impression that this research was undertaken with the conclusion already in mind. The question is already begged in the title of the exhibition, which states not a hypothesis but a conclusion: " 'Primitivism' in 20th Century Art. Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern."

The central chronological argument, stated repeatedly in the book, is that although the Trocadéro Museum (later the Musée de l'Homme) opened in Paris in 1878, primitive influences did not appear in Parisian art till some time in the period 1905 to 1908. This thirty-year lag is held to show that the process of diffusion was not random or mechanical, but was based on a quasideliberate exercise of will or spirit on the part of early Modern artists—in Rubin's words, an "elective affinity."[8] It was not enough, in other words, for the primitive images to be available; the European receptacle had to be ready to receive them. As far as chronology goes the argument is sound, but there is more involved than that. What is in question is the idea of what constitutes readiness. Rubin suggests that the European artists were on the verge of producing forms similar to primitive ones on their own account—so positively ready to do so, in fact, that the influx of primitive objects was redundant. For obvious reasons Rubin does not spell this claim out in so many words, yet he implies it continually. For example, he writes that "the changes in modern art at issue were already under way when vanguard artists first became aware of tribal art."[9] The changes at issue were of course the appearance of primitivelike forms. The claim is strangely improbable. If one thinks of Greco-Roman art, Renaissance art, and European art through the 19th century, there is nowhere any indication that this tradition could spawn such forms; at least, it never came close in its thousands of years. A countermodel to Rubin's might see readiness as comprising no more than a weariness with Western canons of representation and esthetics, combined with the gradual advance, since the 18th century, of awareness of Oceanic and African culture.



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The phenomena of art nouveau (with its Egyptianizing tendencies) and *japonisme* filled the thirty-year gap and demonstrate the eagerness for non-Western input that was finally fulfilled with the primitive works. Readiness, in other words, may have been more passive than active.

Clearly the organizers of this exhibition want to present Modernism not as an appropriative act but as a creative one. They reasonably fear that their powerful show may have demonstrated the opposite—which is why the viewer's responses are so closely controlled, both by the book and, in the show itself, by the wall plaques. The ultimate reason behind the exhibition is to revalidate Modernist esthetic canons by suggesting that their freedom, innocence, universality, and objective value are proven by their "affinity" to the primitive. This theme has become a standard in dealing with primitivism; Goldwater also featured the terms "affinities," rather than a more neutral one like "similarities."

A wall plaque within the exhibition informs us that there are three kinds of relations between modern and primitive objects: first, "direct influence"; second, "coincidental resemblances"; third, "basic shared characteristics." This last category, referred to throughout the book as "affinities," is particularly presumptuous. In general, proofs of affinity are based on the argument that the kind of primitive work that seems to be echoed in the Modern work is not recorded to have been in Europe at the time. Ernst's *Bird Head*, for example, bears a striking resemblance to a type of Tusyan mask from the upper Volta. But the resemblance, writes Rubin, "striking as it is, is fortuitous, and must therefore be accounted a simple affinity. *Bird Head* was sculpted in 1934, and no Tusyan masks appear to have arrived in Europe (nor were any reproduced) prior to World War II."[10] The fact that the resemblance is "fortuitous" would seem to put it in the category of coincidental resemblances. It is not evidence but desire that puts it in the "affinities" class, which is governed as a whole by selection through similarly wishful thinking. In fact, the Ernst piece cannot with certainty be excluded from the "direct influences" category either. The argument that no Tusyan masks were seen in Europe in 1934 has serious weaknesses. First of all, it is an attempt to prove a negative; it is what is called, among logical fallacies, an *argumentum ex silentio*, or argument from silence. All it establishes is that Rubin's researchers have not heard of any Tusyan masks in Europe at that time. The reverse argument, that the Ernst piece shows there were probably some around, is about as strong.

A similar argument attempts to establish "affinity" between Picasso and Kwakiutl craftspeople on the basis of a Kwakiutl split mask and the vertically divided face in *Girl Before a Mirror*, 1932. For, says Rubin, "Picasso could almost certainly never have seen a 'sliced' mask like the one we reproduce, but it nonetheless points up the affinity of his poetic thought to the mythic universals that the tribal objects illustrate."[11] The argument is weak on many grounds. First, Picasso had long been familiar with primitive art by 1932, and that general familiarity, more than any "universals," may account for his coming up with a primitivelike thing on his own. The same is true for Ernst and the *Bird Head*. Modern artists don't necessarily have to have seen an object exactly similar to one of their own for influence to exist. Anyway, the similarity between *Girl Before a Mirror* and the "sliced" Kwakiutl mask is not really that strong. The mask shows a half head; the girl has a whole head with a line down the middle and different colors on each side. Rubin attempts to correct this weakness in the argument by noting that "Northwest Coast and Eskimo masks often divide integrally frontal faces more conventionally into dark and light halves."[12] But most of the world's mythological iconographies have the image of the face with the dark and light halves. Picasso had surely encountered this common motif in a variety of forms—as the alchemical Androgyne, for example. There is, in other words, no particular reason to connect his *Girl Before a Mirror* with Kwakiutl masks, except for the sake of the exhibition.

In addition to Rubin's reliance on the notoriously weak argument from silence, his "affinities" approach breaches the Principle of Economy, on which all science is based: that explanatory principles are to be kept to the smallest possible number (*entia non multiplicanda sunt praeter necessitatem*). The Principle of Economy does not of course mean keeping information to a minimum, but keeping to a minimum the number of interpretive ideas that one brings to bear on information. The point is that unnecessary principles will usually reflect the wishful thinking of the speaker, and amount to deceptive persuasive mechanisms. In the present case, ideas like "elective affinity," "mythic universals," and "affinity of poetic thought" are all *entia praeter necessitatem*, unnecessary explanatory principles. They enter the discourse from the wishful thinking of the speaker. An account lacking the ghost in the machine would be preferred. The question of influence or affinity involves much broader questions, such as the nature of diffusion processes and the relationship of Modernist esthetics to the Greco-Roman and Renaissance tradition. In cultural history in general, diffusion processes are random and impersonal semiotic transactions. Images flow sideways, backwards, upside down. Cultural elements are appropriated from one context to another not only through spiritual affinities and creative selections, but through any kind of connection at all, no matter how left-handed or trivial.

The museum's decision to give us virtually no information about the tribal objects on display, to wrench them out of context, calling them to heel in the defense of formalist Modernism, reflects the exclusion of the anthropological point of view. Unfortunately, art historians and anthropologists have not often worked well together; MoMA handles this problem by simply neglecting the anthropological side of things. No attempt is made to recover an emic, or inside, sense of what primitive esthetics really were or are. The problem of the difference between the emic viewpoint—that of the tribal participant—and the etic one—that of the

Far left: **Alberto Giacometti, *Tall Figure*, 1949,** painted bronze 65⅜ × 6½ × 13½". Collection of the Museum of Modern Art, New York; James Thrall Soby Bequest. Left: **Nyamwezi figure from Tanzania, n.d.,** wood, 58⅞ × 2 × 1⅞". Collection of J.W. Mestach. The catalogue remarks that Giacometti probably saw the Nyamwezi sculpture in a Paris collection, as well as similarly shaped Etruscan figures at the Villa Giulia in Rome.

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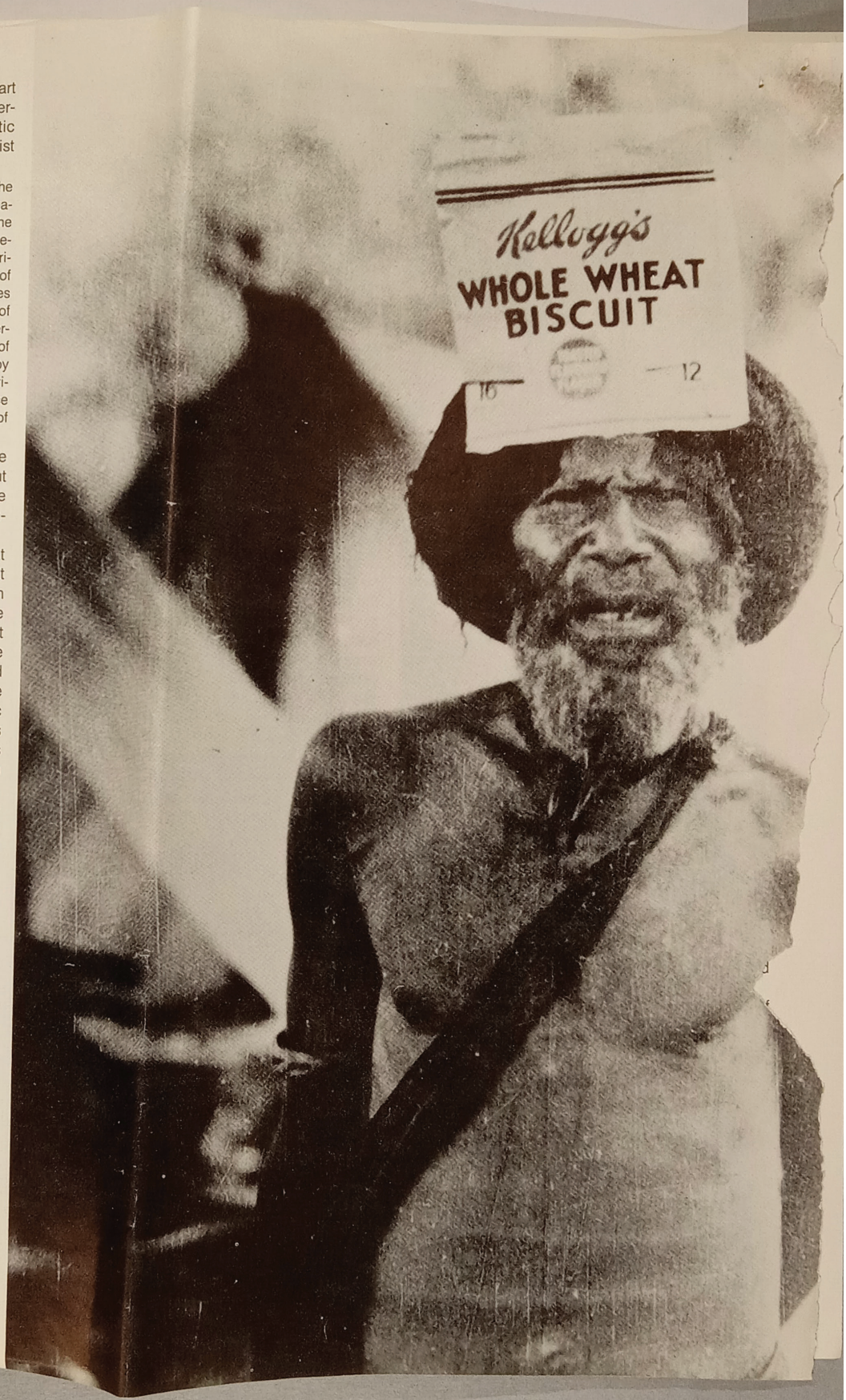

outside observer—is never really faced by these art historians, engrossed as they seem to be in the exercise of their particular expertise, the tracing of stylistic relationships and chronologies. The anthropologist Marvin Harris explains the distinction:

> Emic operations have as their hallmark the elevation of the native informant to the status of ultimate judge of the adequacy of the observer's descriptions and analyses. The test of the adequacy of emic analyses is their ability to generate statements the native accepts as real, meaningful, or appropriate. . . Etic operations have as their hallmark the elevation of observers to the status of ultimate judges of the categories and concepts used in descriptions and analyses. The test of the adequacy of etic accounts is simply their ability to generate scientifically productive theories about the causes of sociocultural differences and similarities. Rather than employ concepts that are necessarily real, meaningful, and appropriate from the native point of view, the observer is free to use alien categories and rules derived from the data language of science.[13]

The point is that accurate or objective accounts can be given from either an emic or an etic point of view, but the distinction must be kept clear. If etic pretends to be emic, or emic to be etic, the account becomes confused, troubled, and misleading.

MoMA makes a plain and simple declaration that their approach will be etic. Materials in the press kit which paraphrase a passage of Rubin's introduction argue, "As our focus is on the modernists' experience of tribal art, and not on ethnological study, we have not included anthropological hypotheses regarding the religious or social purposes that originally surrounded these objects." Rubin similarly argues in his own voice that "the ethnologists' primary concern—the specific function and significance of each of these objects—is irrelevant to my topic, except insofar as these facts might have been known to the modern artists in question."[14] The point of view of Picasso and others, then, is to stand as an etic point of view, and is to be the only focus of MoMA's interest; emic information, such as attributions of motives to the tribal artists, is to be irrelevant.

This position is consistent in itself, but is not consistently acted on. In fact, it is violated constantly. It must be stressed that if the emic/etic question is to be neglected, then the intentions of the tribal craftsmen must be left neutral and undefined. But Rubin's argument constantly attributes intentions to the tribal craftsmen, intentions associated with Modernist types of esthetic feeling and problem-solving attitudes. The very concept of "affinity" rather than mere "similarity" attributes to the tribal craftsmen feelings like those of the Modernist artists, for what else does the distinction between affinities and accidental similarities mean? The claim that there is an "affinity of poetic spirit" between Picasso and the Kwakiutl who made the "sliced" mask attributes to the Kwakiutl poetic feelings like those of Picasso. The assertion that their use of "parallelisms and symmetries" demonstrates a "propinquity in spirit"[15] between Jacques Lipchitz and a Dogon sculptor attributes to the Dogon a sensibility in general like that of Lipchitz. And so on. Rubin says that the "specif-




**Michael Leahy, New Guinea highlander, 1934, black and white photograph.** Still from Robin Anderson and Robert Connolly, *First Contact*, 1983, color and black and white film in 16 mm., 54 mins.

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ic function and significance of each of these objects" is irrelevant—for example, what ceremony the object was used in, how it was used in the ceremony, and so on. The use of the word "each" here is tricky. It is true that Rubin ignores the specific function of each object, but it is also true that he attributes a general function to all the objects together, namely, the esthetic function, the function of giving esthetic satisfaction. In other words, the function of the Modernist works is tacitly but constantly attributed to the primitive works. It is easy to see why no anthropologist was included in the team. Rubin has made highly inappropriate claims about the intentions of tribal cultures without letting them have their say, except through the mute presence of their unexplained religious objects, which are misleadingly presented as art objects. This attitude toward primitive objects is so habitual in our culture that one hardly notices the hidden assumptions until they are pointed out. Rubin follows Goldwater in holding that the objects themselves are proof of the formal decisions made, and that the formal decisions made are proof of the esthetic sensibility involved. That this argument seems plausible, even attractive, to us is because we have the same emic view as Rubin and MoMA. But connections based merely on form can lead to skewed perceptions indeed. Consider from the following anthropological example what absurdities one can be led into by assuming that the look of things, without their meaning, is enough to go on:

In New Guinea, in a remote native school taught by a local teacher, I watched a class carefully copy an arithmetic lesson from the blackboard. The teacher had written:

4 + 1 = 7
3 − 5 = 6
2 + 5 = 9

The students copied both his beautifully formed numerals and his errors.[16]

The idea that tribal craftsmen had esthetic problem-solving ambitions comparable to those of Modernist artists involves an attribution to them of a value like that which we put on individual creative originality. An anthropologist would warn us away from this presumption: "in preliterate cultures . . . culture is presented to its members as clichés, repeated over and over with only slight variation." "Such art isn't personal. It doesn't reflect the private point of view of an innovator. It's a corporate statement by a group."[17] Yet Rubin declares, again relying only on his sense of the objects, without ethnological support, that "the surviving works themselves attest that individual carvers had far more freedom in varying and developing these types than many commentators have assumed."[18] Surely Rubin knows that the lack of a history of primitive cultures rules out any judgment about how quickly they have changed or how long they took to develop their diversity. The inventiveness Rubin attributes to primitive craftsmen was probably a slow, communal inventiveness, not a matter of individual innovation. In prehistoric traditions, for example, several thousand years may be needed for the degree of innovation and change seen in a single decade of Modernism. Rubin asserts formalist concerns for the tribal craftspeople "even though they had no concept for what such words mean."[19] Consider the particular value judgment underlying the conviction that the only thing primitives were doing that is worth our attention, their proof of "propinquity in spirit" with the white man, was something they weren't even aware of doing.

From a purely academic point of view Rubin's project would be acceptable if its declared etic stance had been honestly and consistently acted out. What is at issue here, however, is more than a set of academic flaws in an argument, for in other than academic senses the etic stance is unacceptable anyway. Goldwater had made the formalist argument for tribal objects in the '30s; it was a reasonable enough case to make at the time. But why should it be replayed fifty years later, only with more information? The sacrifice of the wholeness of things to the cult of pure form is a dangerous habit of our culture. It amounts to a rejection of the wholeness of life. After fifty years of living with the dynamic relationship between primitive and Modern objects, are we not ready yet to begin to understand the real intentions of the native traditions, to let those silenced cultures speak to us at last? An investigation that really did so would show us immensely more about the possibilities of life that Picasso and others vaguely sensed and were attracted to than does this endless discussion of the spiritual propinquity of usages of parallel lines. It would show us more about the "world-historical" importance of the relationship between primitive and Modern and their ability to relate to one another without autistic self-absorption.

The complete omission of dates from the primitive works is perhaps one of the most troubling decisions. Are we looking at works from the '50s? (If so, are they modern art?) How do we know that some of these artists have not seen works by Picasso? One can foresee a doctoral thesis on Picasso postcards seen by Zairean artists before 1930. The museum dates the Western works, but leaves the primitive works childlike and Edenic in their lack of history. It is true that many of these objects cannot be dated precisely, but even knowing the century would help. I have no doubt that those responsible for this exhibition and book feel that it is a radical act to show how equal are the primitives to us, how civilized, how sensitive, how "inventive." Indeed, both Rubin and Varnedoe passionately declare this. But by their absolute repression of primitive context, meaning, content, and intention (the dates of the works, their functions, their religious or mythological connections, their environments), they have treated the primitives as less than human, less than cultural—as shadows of a culture, their selfhood, their Otherness, wrung out of them. All the curators want us to know about these tribal objects is where they came from, what they look like, who owns them, and how they fit the needs of the exhibition.

In their native contexts these objects were invested with feelings of awe and dread, not of esthetic ennoblement. They were seen usually in motion, at night, in closed dark spaces, by flickering torchlight. Their viewers were under the influence of ritual, communal identification feelings, and often alcohol or drugs; above all, they were activated by the presence within or among the objects themselves of the shaman, acting out the usually terrifying power represented by the mask or icon. What was at stake for the viewer was not esthetic appreciation but loss of self in identification with and support of the shamanic performance. The Modernist works in the show serve completely different functions, and were made to be perceived from a completely different stance. If you or I were a native tribal artisan or spectator walking through the halls of MoMA we would see an entirely different show from the one we see as 20th-century New Yorkers. We would see primarily not form, but content, and not art, but religion or magic.

Consider a reverse example, in which Western cultural objects were systematically assimilated by primitives into quite a new functional role. In New Guinea in the '30s, Western food containers were highly prized as clothing ornaments—a Kellogg's cereal box became a hat, a tin can ornamented a belt, and so on. Passed down to us in photographs, the practice looks not only absurd but pathetic. We know that the tribal people have done something so inappropriate as to be absurd, and without even beginning to realize it. Our sense of the smallness and quirkiness of their world view encourages our sense of the larger scope and greater clarity of ours. Yet the way Westerners have related to the primitive objects that have floated through their consciousness would look to the tribal peoples much the way their use of our food containers looks to us: they would perceive at once that we had done something childishly inappropriate and ignorant, and without even realizing it. Many primitive groups, when they have used an object ritually (sometimes only once), desacralize it and discard it as garbage. We then show it in our museums. In other words: our garbage is their art, their garbage is our art. Need I say more about the emic/etic distinction?

The need to coopt difference into one's own dream of order, in which one reigns supreme, is a tragic failing. Only fear of the Other forces one to deny its Otherness. What we are talking about is a tribal superstition of Western civilization: the Hegel-based conviction that one's own culture is riding the crucial time-line of history's self-realization. Rubin declares that tribal masterpieces "transcend the particular lives and times of their makers";[20] Varnedoe similarly refers to "the capacity of tribal art to transcend the intentions and conditions that first shaped it."[21] The phrase might be restated: "the capacity of tribal art to be appropriated out of its own intentionality into mine."

As the crowning element of this misappropriation of other values comes the subject of representation. Rubin distinguishes between European canons of representation, which are held to represent by actual objective resemblance, and the various primitive canons of representation, which are held to represent not by resemblance but by ideographic convention. Our representation, in other words, corresponds to external reality, theirs is only in their minds. But the belief that an objective representational system can be defined (and that that system happens to be ours) is naive and inherently contradictory. It is worth noting that tribal peoples tend to feel that it is they who depict and we who symbolize. Representation involves a beholder and thus has a subjective element. If someone

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says that A doesn't look like B to him or her, no counter-argument can prove that it does. All conventions of representation are acculturated and relative; what a certain culture regards as representation is, for that culture, representation.

Rubin's love of Modernism is based on the fact that it at last took Western art beyond mere illustration. When he says that the tribal artisans are not illustrating but conceptualizing, he evidently feels he is praising them for their modernity. In doing so, however, he altogether undercuts their reality system. By denying that tribal canons of representation actually represent anything, he is in effect denying that their view of the world is real. By doing them the favor of making them into Modern artists, Rubin cuts reality from under their feet.

The myth of the continuity of Western art history is constructed out of acts of appropriation like those Rubin duplicates. The rediscovery of Greco-Roman works in the Renaissance is an important instance of this, for the way we relate to such art is also in a sense like wearing a cereal-box hat. The charioteer of Delphi, ca. 470 B.C., for example, was seen totally differently in classical Greece from the way we now see him. He was not alone in that noble, self-sufficient serenity of transcendental angelic whiteness that we see. He was part of what to us would appear a grotesquely large sculptural group—the chariot, the four horses before it, the god Apollo in the chariot box, and whatever other attendants were around. All was painted realistically and must have looked more like a still from a movie than like what we call sculpture. Both Greco-Roman and primitive works, though fragmented and misunderstood, have been appropriated into our art history in order to validate the myth of its continuity and make it seem inevitable.

It is a belief in the linear continuity of the Western tradition that necessitates the claim that Western artists would have come up with primitivelike forms on their own, as a natural development. The purpose of such theorizing is to preclude major breaks in Western art history; its tradition is to remain intact, not pierced and violated by influence from outside the West. The desire to believe in the wholeness, integrity, and independence of the Western tradition has at its root the Hegelian art-historical myth (constructed by the critical historians like Karl Schnaase, Alois Riegl, and Heinrich Wölfflin) that Western art history expresses the self-realizing tendency of Universal Spirit. (This is Rubin's vocabulary. He once declared, for example, that Pollock's paintings were "'world historical' in the Hegelian sense."[22]) When brought down to earth—that is, to recorded history—this view involves not only the conclusion that the shape and direction of Modern art were not really affected by the discovery of primitive objects, but another conclusion equally unlikely, that the shape and direction of European art were not really influenced by the discovery of Greco-Roman works in the Renaissance.

In fact, Western art history shows three great breaks: one when the population of Europe was changed by the so-called barbarian invasions in the late Roman Empire, which led to the transition from Greco-Roman to Christian art; the second with the Renaissance, the transition from Christian art to European art; the third at the beginning of the 20th century, with the transition from European to Modern art. Each of these breaks in tradition was associated with a deep infusion of foreign influence—respectively Germanic, Byzantine, and African/Oceanic. To minimize these influences is to hold the Western tradition to be a kind of absolute, isolated in its purity. From that point of view, the adoption of primitive elements by early Modernists is seen as a natural, indeed inevitable, inner development of the Western tradition. But the context of the time suggests otherwise. In the 19th century the Western tradition in the arts (including literature) seemed to many to be inwardly exhausted. In 1873 Arthur Rimbaud proclaimed his barbarous Gallic ancestors who buttered their hair,[23] and called for a disorientation of the patterns of sensibility. The feeling was not uncommon; many artists awaited a way of seeing that would amount simultaneously to an escape from habit and a discovery of fresh, vitalizing content. For there is no question that the turn-of-the-century fascination with archaic and primitive cultures was laden with content: Baudelaire, Rimbaud, Picasso, and Matisse were attracted, for example, by the open acknowledgment of the natural status of sex and death in these cultures. By repressing the aspect of content, the Other is tamed into mere pretty stuff to dress us up.

Of course, you can find lots of little things wrong with any big project if you just feel argumentative. But I am motivated by the feeling that something important is at issue here, something deeply, even tragically wrong. In depressing starkness, "'Primitivism' " lays bare the way our cultural institutions relate to foreign cultures, revealing it as an ethnocentric subjectivity inflated to coopt such cultures and their objects into itself. I am not complaining, as the Zuni Indians have, about having tribal objects in our museums. Nor am I complaining about the performing of valuable and impressive art-historical research on the travels of those objects through ateliers (though I am worried that it buries the real issues in an ocean of information). My real concern is that this exhibition shows Western egotism still as unbridled as in the centuries of colonialism and souvenirism. The Museum pretends to confront the Third World while really coopting it and using it to consolidate Western notions of quality and feelings of superiority.

Hamish Maxwell, chairman of Philip Morris, one of the sponsors of the exhibition, writes in the catalogue that his company operates in 170 "countries and territories," suggesting a purview comparable to that of the show. He continues, "We at Philip Morris have benefited from the contemporary art we have acquired and the exhibitions we have sponsored over the past quarter-century. . . They have stirred creative approaches throughout our company."[24] In the advertisement in the Sunday *New York Times* preceding the " 'Primitivism' " opening, the Philip Morris logo is accompanied by the words, "It takes art to make a company great."

Well, it takes more than connoisseurship to make an exhibition great. ■

Thomas McEvilley is a contributing editor of *Artforum* and a professor at the Institute for the Arts, Rice University, Houston.

1. Richard E. Oldenburg, "Foreword," in William Rubin, ed., *"Primitivism" in 20th Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern*, New York: the Museum of Modern Art, 1984, p. viii.
2. The Museum of Modern Art, New York, press release no. 17, August 1984, for the exhibition " 'Primitivism' in 20th Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern," p. 1.
3. Revised and republished as Robert Goldwater, *Primitivism in Modern Art*, New York: Vintage Books, 1967. In 1933, 1935, 1941, and 1946, the Modern itself had exhibitions of archaic and primitive objects separately from its Modern collections. René D'Harnoncourt, director of the Museum for 19 years, was an authority on the subject.
4. William Rubin, *Dada and Surrealist Art*, New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1968.
5. Two by Rubin, two by Kirk Varnedoe, two by Alan G. Wilkinson, and one each by Ezio Bassani, Christian F. Feest, Jack Flam, Sidney Geist, Donald E. Gordon, Rosalind Krauss, Jean Laude, Gail Levin, Evan Maurer, Jean-Louis Paudrat, Philippe Peltier, and Laura Rosenstock.
6. Kirk Varnedoe, "Contemporary Explorations," in Rubin, *"Primitivism"*, pp. 662, 681, 679.
7. Rosalind Krauss, "Giacometti," in Rubin, *"Primitivism"*, p. 510.
8. William Rubin, "Modernist Primitivism: An Introduction," in Rubin, *"Primitivism"*, p. 11.
9. Ibid.
10. Ibid., p. 25.
11. Rubin, "Picasso," in Rubin, *"Primitivism"*, pp. 328–330.
12. Ibid., p. 328.
13. Marvin Harris, *Cultural Materialism: The Struggle for a Science of Culture*, New York: Vintage Books, 1980, p. 32.
14. Rubin, "Modernist Primitivism," in Rubin, *"Primitivism"*, p. 1.
15. Ibid., p. 51.
16. Edmund Carpenter, *Oh, What a Blow That Phantom Gave Me!*, New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1973, p. 54.
17. Ibid., pp. 53, 56.
18. Rubin, "Modernist Primitivism," in Rubin, *"Primitivism"*, p. 5.
19. Ibid., p. 19.
20. Ibid., p. 73.
21. Kirk Varnedoe, preface, in Rubin, *"Primitivism"*, p. x.
22. Cited in Peter Fuller, *Beyond the Crisis in Art*, London: Writers and Readers Publishing Cooperative Ltd., 1980, p. 98.
23. Arthur Rimbaud, *Une saison en enfer* (A season in hell), 1873, trans. Louise Varèse, New York: New Directions, 1961, p. 7.
24. Hamish Maxwell, in Rubin, *"Primitivism"*, p. vi.

All works reproduced (except on p. 58) are from the exhibition " 'Primitivism' in 20th Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern," the Museum of Modern Art, New York, September 27 1984–January 15 1985. It will travel to the Detroit Institute of Arts, February 27–May 19 1985, and to the Dallas Museum of Art, June 23–September 1 1985.

**Yombe fetish figure from Zaire or Cabinda, n.d.,** wood, iron, shell, and mixed media, 43½ × 19 × 14¾". Collection of the Detroit Institute of Arts.

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# LETTERS

## ON "DOCTOR LAWYER INDIAN CHIEF: "'PRIMITIVISM" IN 20TH CENTURY ART' AT THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART IN 1984"

To the Editor:

After years of work on an exhibition, a curator derives a certain satisfaction from a review that attempts to engage the basic issues of his show in a fair-minded way and on a high level of discourse. This is true even when the review is largely negative, as in the case of Thomas McEvilley's article on The Museum of Modern Art's "Primitivism" ["Doctor Lawyer Indian Chief," November 1984]. Most analyses of exhibitions and their books fall away and are soon forgotten. McEvilley's could be one that becomes part of the history of the event it addresses. I hope, therefore, that he will take this extended commentary on his text at least somewhat as a compliment—an attempt to further thrash out and clarify some ideas and attitudes that mean much to both of us—and not as an exercise in logomachy. The questions McEvilley raises go far beyond the exhibition to the nature and motives of The Museum of Modern Art itself, and I appreciate the opportunity *Artforum* has given me to air some of these matters.

No project on the order of "'Primitivism' in 20th Century Art" can work out entirely satisfactorily and wholly free of inconsistencies. Had we to do the book and show over again, there are some things I would surely do differently (I do not necessarily speak here for my colleague, Kirk Varnedoe, whose comments follow). My auto-critique revolves largely around the definitions of "affinities," some of which, I think, could and should have been more sharply etched. I am, however, largely satisfied with the presentation of the main body of the show, the sections called "Concepts" and "History," both of which McEvilley attacked from a variety of angles. A few of his criticisms of these sections are well taken. I find, however, that notwithstanding his evidently good intentions, his review is interwoven with sufficient misconceptions, internal inconsistencies, and simple errors of fact that—given its seriousness—it should not go unchallenged.

At the outset, McEvilley has some very kind things to say about our show, among them that it was "thrilling" and "a tour de force of connoisseurship." As he proceeds, however, he describes the exhibition as operating in a kind of psychological, social, and historical void resulting from my supposed commitment to what he calls "formalist Modernism." He concludes his text with the put-down that "it takes more than connoisseurship to make an exhibition great."

There is some kind of contradiction here. I'm not sure what McEvilley means by "connoisseurship," which—etymologically at least—implies far more than he presumably would wish to grant me. If I were wearing "formalist" blinders, could I really have chosen a great group of tribal works? Is their greatness not a function of their profound affectiveness on spiritual, poetic, and psychological—as well as on formal—levels? And do they not express, implicitly at least, societal values? Surely McEvilley does not believe that these qualities can be wholly separated from the objects' phenomenological (or plastic) configurations. Were not these affective factors necessarily, therefore, dimensions of my choices? While such components of the sculptures' expressiveness can be isolated for the purposes of discussion—indeed, the linear character of criticism virtually requires this—they cannot be separated from one another in the actual experience of the art.

McEvilley's repeated reproach that our show had no anthropological underpinning (of which more below) comes perilously close to suggesting that the tribal works, presented just in themselves, propose but a set of forms that communicate no "meaning" or "content." Picasso's remark, "all I need to know about Africa is in those [tribal] objects," was characteristic for him in its hyperbole; it was also flip. But it nevertheless embodied a crucial point, namely that Picasso felt (quite rightly, I believe) he could apprehend aspects of the spirit, values, and nature of African civilizations through their art. Indeed, while some of the observations he put into words were anthropologically wrong (e.g., his notion of "freedom" in relation to tribal art—as I pointed out in our book), the sense of Africa he intuited through its sculpture rings truer today than does most anthropological writing of his day.

By reducing the virtues of our show to "connoisseurship," McEvilley also diminishes—if he does not entirely dismiss—what I hope art historians will consider a significant contribution to our discipline, one that revises many basic received ideas about primitivism. For McEvilley, our art history is largely an "overwhelming mass of information," and he concludes that "on the whole, [Robert] Goldwater's book [*Primitivism in Modern Painting*] still reads better." McEvilley suggests that the "general ideas" of our exhibition have been around since 1938 (the date of Goldwater's book) and points to instances in which other institutions (Centre Pompidou, Grand Palais) have purportedly provided at least limited prototypes for our project.

No one, I think, admires my late friend and colleague Robert Goldwater more than I. The preface to *"Primitivism" in 20th Century Art* is devoted to expressing this admiration. The fact is, however, that the premises of our exhibition are very much at odds with many of his conclusions. If by "reads better," McEvilley is referring to Goldwater's lapidary literary style, I would be the first to cede the point. But in terms of substance, our conclusions are at odds with Goldwater's as regards a host of basic questions—about which only one or the other of us can be right. Hence, if we have not simply fallen on our faces as historians, we have done more than merely, as McEvilley would have it, "refine and extend" Goldwater's research.

Most of the reproductions in Goldwater's book were of Modern works. Even in the revised and enlarged edition of 1967, only eight tribal works were illustrated, four of them paired visually with Modern objects. None of the eight had belonged to Modern artists and, so far as we know, only one of them was even in Europe in the days of the pioneer Modernists. Our multiplication of juxtapositions illustrating proposed (and often provable) relationships between Modern works and tribal objects in the artists' collections (or visible in museums they are known to have frequented) overturns one of Goldwater's basic principles, an insistence on the "extreme scarcity of the direct influence of primitive art forms" on 20th-century art. Moreover, Goldwater made no allowance for what we have called "invisible" influences (as documented by the pairings of Picasso's *Guitar* and his Grebo mask, [Henry] Moore's "Upright Internal and External Forms" and the British Museum's Malanggan, and [Marius] de Zayas' *Alfred Stieglitz* and the Pukapuka Soul-catcher). Nor did he connect the invention of collage, assemblage, and mixed media to the experience (Picasso's especially) of tribal art—or, indeed, treat most of the other topics taken up in the "Concepts" section of our exhibition. Finally, the artist's own words have undermined Goldwater's key assumption that Picasso's interest in tribal art was primarily formal. We are obliged to assign to Picasso's rediscovery of the "magical" roots and powers of art a more critical place in his development than we do any plastic or technical ideas he derived from tribal objects.

Contesting the Museum's assertion that our exhibition is the "first ever to juxtapose modern and tribal objects in the light of informed art history," McEvilley cites two purported precedents: the Menil Collections exhibition last spring at the Grand Palais, which "juxtaposed primitive and Modern works (a Max Ernst with an African piece, Cézanne with Cycladic) and sometimes, as in the [MoMA] exhibition, showed a Modern artist's work in conjunction with primitive objects in his collection"; and the Centre Pompidou, which "exhibited, in the vicinity of its Modern collections, about 100 tribal objects from the Musée de l'Homme." "Though not actually intermingled with Modern works," McEvilley says of the hundred objects, they "were intended to illus-

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trate relationships with them and included, as does the [MoMA] show, primitive objects owned by Picasso, Braque, and other early Modernists."

McEvilley's recollections here certainly don't jibe with mine or, as it turns out, with the facts. A rapid check reveals that 1) the two vitrines at the Centre Pompidou together never contained more than twenty or so objects; 2) none of them ever belonged to Picasso or Braque; 3) the objects in the Beaubourg vitrines could hardly have been intended to "illustrate relations" with Modern art since they were chosen by Jean-Hubert Martin "without respect," as he says, "to historical or formal questions" from a group proposed by Francine Ndiaye of the Musée de l'Homme, who has only a glancing acquaintance with Modern art, and whose mandate was to select such objects as would constitute an overview of African art; 4) the choice of African sculptures included many of types—and from tribal areas—totally unknown in France in the days of the "early Modernists." As for the fascinating Menil show—which, in any case, took place after the writing of our book—my recollections (as confirmed by Dominique de Menil herself) are that 1) the tribal material was shown almost entirely in its own separate areas; 2) contrary to McEvilley, no Modern works were "shown in conjunction with primitive objects from [the artists'] own collection[s]"; indeed, no tribal works from the collections of important Modernist artists were included anywhere in the Menil collections show; 3) the juxtaposition of the Cézanne with a Cycladic sculpture and the Ernst with an African work were determined by Mrs. de Menil's "pleasure in seeing them together," and were *not* the demonstration of any historical connection. Thus, the two supposedly precedent primitivist events proposed by McEvilley were not instances of "informed art history"; they were not, strictly speaking, instances of art history at all.

Why this determined effort on McEvilley's part to demonstrate that the premises and content of our show were "not new"? The answer may be found in one of the most remarkable rhetorical twists I have ever encountered. By convincing his reader that our efforts are "not new," McEvilley feels licensed to ask "why MoMA gives us primitivism now." The answer to this turns out to be his real point, namely that the "temple of formalist Modernism" is using the primitive to "revalidate" the Modernist movement in the face of "several years of sustained attack," which supposedly led us to need a "new defense." "The ultimate reason behind the exhibition," McEvilley insists, "is to revalidate Modernist esthetic canons"—whatever *they* are. "How brilliant," he opines, "to attempt to revalidate classical Modernist esthetics by stepping outside their usual realm of discourse and bringing to bear upon them a vast, foreign sector of the world."

How brilliant, indeed. Brushed aside here is the real history of our show, and the fact that it was an attempt to render explicit some art historical concerns that were implicit in MoMA exhibitions going back almost 50 years ("African Negro Art," 1936; "Indian Art of the United States," 1941; "Arts of the South Seas," 1946). No apparent consideration was given to my conversations with Picasso of 15 years ago which led me to conclude that the received art history of primitivism was profoundly distorted and that the whole topic would have to be restudied, or to the almost five years of the exhibition's actual integration (nor to the fact that if we hadn't rebuilt the Museum, the show would have taken place some years ago). By sweeping aside both the real motivations for, and the chronology of, this show (most of which is spelled out in our book), McEvilley could transform the nature of the event, and with it the actually fortuitous fact that it takes place "now" rather than some years ago, into an act of contemporary art politics.

For a man who, elsewhere in his text, shows a tremendous concern for the logic of argumentation, McEvilley's motivating of me is astonishing. Putting himself inside my mind, he confidently discovers and asserts agendas of which I had never thought. Anyone who knows me will consider laughable the idea that I would think Modernist art needs "revalidation." As I stroll through the galleries of the collection, the last thing in the world I imagine is that Cézanne, Picasso, Pollock *et alia* need to be authenticated by "primitives" or anyone else. It is not Rubin but McEvilley who thinks they need "revalidation"— and he conveniently projects onto me the strategies of his own art-political ways of thinking.

Perhaps the most persistent criticism in McEvilley's long article was directed to our omission of anthropological matter in relation to the tribal objects. He decries the fact that "no anthropologist was included in the team," with the result that the "wholeness" of the tribal objects is sacrificed to "the cult of pure form"; thus the show constitutes an act of "ethnocentric subjectivity inflated to co-opt [tribal] cultures and their objects ... [showing that] Western egotism [is] still as unbridled as in the centuries of colonialism and souvenirism." "The museum pretends to confront the Third World while really co-opting it and using it to consolidate Western notions of quality and feelings of superiority." (Needless to say, had I really been concerned with Western "feelings of superiority," I would hardly have mounted a show, the very terms of which guaranteed that the tribal works would on average be superior to the Modern ones.[1])

The Museum, of course, had no intention of confronting tribal cultures, or even tribal objects as such (i.e., in their own terms), no less the whole Third World. To have done so would have hopelessly confused what the Museum was in fact doing—namely, studying the reception of tribal objects by Western artists, the ethnocentricity of which history we ourselves described as manifest and accepted as given. But McEvilley won't let us have a show about that reception, which is, of course, precisely what "primitivism" —as opposed to "the primitive"—signifies. He wants the tribal objects presented in a wholly integral way (never spelled out) in which not even anthropological museums show them.

It isn't that McEvilley cannot understand our aims. Indeed, he quotes us saying: "As our focus is on the modernists' experience of tribal art ... we have not included anthropological hypotheses regarding the religious or social purposes that originally surrounded these objects." And also that "the ethnologists' primary concern—the specific function and significance of each of these objects —is irrelevant to [our] topic, except insofar as these facts might have been known to the modern artists in question." He might also have added our observations that primitivism "refers not to the tribal arts in themselves, but to the Western interest in and reaction to them" and that it was "an aspect of the history of Western art, not of tribal art."

"This position," McEvilley admits, "is consistent in itself." But he insists we are not entitled to it because we have "not consistently acted" on it. (What would have been *more inconsistent* with our position than the inclusion of precisely the anthropological information McEvilley calls for, about which the artists knew nothing?) Now, I don't doubt that given the breadth of our project, we have been guilty of some inconsistencies, although I do not agree that most of the examples McEvilley adduces—which have to do with the modes of functioning of tribal artists—*are*, in fact, inconsistencies (as we shall see below). But McEvilley seems not to understand the fact that *whatever the inconsistencies in execution* (and those he signals are in the book rather than the exhibition), *they do not by any twist of logic nullify the admitted consistency of our original perspective.* Even if we hadn't made those observations about tribal artists to which McEvilley objects, would *he* not still have wanted anthropological input? Wouldn't he still have objected that the tribal objects were decontextualized, that "the blood is wiped off them"?

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Of course, the tribal objects in our show *are* decontextualized (as they are in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, or, even more relevantly, in anthropological museums as well). In fact they are more than that; they are *recontextualized*, within the framework of Western art and culture. *And that is what our particular story is all about*. McEvilley simply refuses to accept the fact that our story is not about "the Other," but about ourselves. As I observed in my introductory chapter, "prior to the 1920's... at which time some Surrealists became *amateurs* of ethnology, artists did not generally know—nor evidently much care—about such [anthropological] matters." But as I also observed, the artists' lack of interest in or knowledge of the objects' religious purposes and functions did not mean that they were uninterested in "meanings." It was rather that "the meanings which concerned them were the ones that could be apprehended through the objects themselves." *This* is the real rub for, as we shall see, McEvilley refuses to accept that such meanings exist; indeed, that the tribal sculptures *are, in fact, art*.

Suppose we were to have taken McEvilley's advice and given an anthropological dimension to our show. What anthropology, whose anthropology should it have been? Should we have proposed the views of anthropologists of the Trocadéro itself in Picasso's time, such as Maurice Delafosse, who interpreted African tribal art as an Egyptian derivation? Not only is the work of such anthropologists irrelevant to our subject because unknown to the Modern artists, but it is wrong.[2] Even in our own day, there are an immense number of fundamental disagreements among anthropologists themselves, some of whom still credit the view, as does McEvilley, that there is no such thing as tribal art—only religious artifacts.

McEvilley appropriates the mantle and the voice of anthropology with far more certainty than is possessed by any professional anthropologist I have met. He constantly presumes to know and speak for the "intentionality" of long-dead tribal artists when, in fact, anthropology knows virtually nothing about them. He confidently puts himself into their minds in the same way he did into mine—and possibly with as little accuracy. Having granted the consistency of our perspective (at least in theory), he nevertheless states that by "their absolute repression of primitive context, meaning, content, and intention (the dates of the [tribal] works, their functions, their religious or mythological connections, their environments)," MoMA has "treated the primitives as less than human, less than cultural—as shadows of a culture, their selfhood, their Otherness, wrung out of them." Does McEvilley himself know how little is known about most of these tribal objects? Even had they been relevant, we would have had to face the fact that the specific functions and the religious or mythological significance of many if not most of the tribal objects in our show are unknown (and will probably never be known). And many of the meanings attributed to some of them by previous generations of anthropologists are being dismissed left and right.

Consider the question of dates, which McEvilley seems to think we have suppressed: "The complete omission of dates from the primitive works is perhaps one of the most troubling decisions," he writes, though he admits that "many of these objects cannot be dated precisely." In fact, *not a single one of them* in our show can be dated precisely, and precious few can be dated approximately. Even the small minority that were field-collected by anthropologists have only a *terminus ad quem*; one can only speculate as to how long they existed before collection. Most of the tribal objects in the show have little history, or dubious ones. Even the decision as to whether most of them are 19th- or 20th-century objects is speculative, and usually made by historians of primitive art on a subjective rather than scientific basis. Far from being suppressed, the question of dates is not only discussed in the book, but is summarized on a panel that is repeated three times in various places in the exhibition. I excerpt from our panel: "Since accurate dates are not known for most tribal art, no dates appear on the labels for tribal objects in this exhibition. These objects are often short-lived, in part because of their largely perishable materials, in part because they were not preserved after being desacralized. Hence, most of the fine tribal art preserved in the West dates from no earlier than the later 19th and early 20th centuries, and represents the later phases of long-standing traditions."

Where dates of tribal objects *are* relevant to the history of primitivism, they are the dates at which artists could have seen them in museums (what Picasso, for example, could have seen in the Trocadéro in 1907) and at which they purchased the pieces in their collections. We have spent hundreds of hours researching these dates and, where discoverable and relevant, have given them.

As one who has probably spent far more time haunting anthropological museums than has McEvilley, I can assure him that in virtually no cases do their labels give more information on "context, meaning, content, and intention" than we do. Will McEvilley please tell me how he learns anything about the "religious or mythological connections" of the objects in the vitrines of Tervuren, the Musée de l'Homme, or the Völkerkunde museum in Berlin (whose "fine arts" oriented installation surpasses that of the Metropolitan)? Do these objects have more "blood on them" than those at MoMA? To be sure, some anthropological museums provide short general text panels at the beginning of sections, but provide little or nothing on individual objects. Even these introductory panels are only possible because the material in their vitrines is geographically homogenous. Suppose—as demanded by McEvilley—we had wanted to provide "environments" for objects that came from over a hundred different cultures and societies, how could we have done it?

Does the presentation of tribal sculptures by themselves—the way great museums present all other cultures' sculpture from the Egyptian to the present—really imply treating their makers as "less than human, less than cultural"? Perhaps only if, like McEvilley, you consider the objects "not art, but religion or magic"—as if most of the world's sculpture *is not both art and religion at the same time*. Though this crucial fact gets lost in his fulminations against "formalist Modernism," McEvilley *never accepts tribal sculptures as art*, nor their carvers as "artists"—or even "sculptors"; the latter remain relegated to the caste of "craftspeople." For McEvilley, the mere assertion that these "craftspeople" were artists, not to say great artists, smacks of "co-option." I wonder how many of his readers who saw our show and stood before the monumental Nukuoro Island carving of the goddess Kave that introduces it, share McEvilley's conviction that what they were looking at was "not art."

Generations ago, anthropologists considered tribal sculptures only artifacts, and even Franz Boas held that their sculptors' function never exceeded the role of copying and the problems of craftsmanship. This assumption was partly based on the absence of a word for art in most tribal languages. But the same is true for the ancient Egyptians; yet that culture's painting and sculpture is not denied the status of art. Of course, the tribal sculptor, living in a religiocentric society made (the majority of) his objects in the spirit and to the purposes of religious practice and expression—which was also true of Egyptian and Christian Medieval artists, among others. He also considered himself a craftsman—as did his Egyptian and Christian counterparts (the medieval painters were enrolled in the saddlers' guild for the simple reason that painting saddles was one of their primary duties). But no less than his Egyptian or Christian counterparts, the tribal sculptor was *also* an artist, and we have presented him as such—"misleadingly," according to McEvilley. In any event, the 19th-century prejudice that tribal peoples produced no art has today been given up

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by most anthropologists.

Underlining certain similarities in the work of tribal and Modern artists does not mean, as McEvilley claims, that we have presented the tribal artist as a Modern one; we present him as an artist *tout court*. According to McEvilley, "Rubin's argument constantly attributes intentions to the tribal craftsmen, intentions associated with Modernist types of esthetic feeling and problem-solving attitudes." This is simply not so. I did, of course, attribute to tribal sculptors the need to make esthetic decisions, but that is because they functioned—among other things—as artists. The kind of questions I saw them confronting in terms of their ideographic language (which, McEvilley notwithstanding, did not invent itself)—a problem such as "how to make a nose"—could only be described as "Modernist ... problem-solving" by someone with McEvilley's skewed perspective. All art involves some sort of problem-solving, whether it happens self-consciously or not. And in attributing to tribal sculptors an esthetic instinct, which the anthropologist Robert Lowie (and, since him, many other anthropologists) have considered a common denominator of all mankind, I have simply chosen to believe those anthropologists whose views seem to me to accord with my experience of the sculptural objects themselves. McEvilley has chosen others, and we will have to agree to disagree. In terms of primitivism, however, it doesn't matter one whit *which* anthropologists you follow inasmuch as the Modern artists understood and acted upon the tribal objects *as art*.

I believe that it is McEvilley, not MoMA, who treats the tribal peoples as "less than human, less than cultural" by denying their cultures the fact of their art and their great artists. (He attributes the diversity and range of tribal art, which is considerable even within certain individual tribal units, to something he calls "communal inventiveness"—a process I leave the reader to try imagining.) He has a lot to say about MoMA's presumed inability to appreciate the otherness of the Other (which was more than evident to me *in tribal objects* long before I began reading anthropologists on primitive art). It is, indeed, exceedingly difficult to dissociate ourselves from Western values and ways of thinking sufficiently to truly appreciate the otherness of Third World peoples, as contemporary anthropologists are trying especially hard to do. But this was not what our show was about. Nor, in regard to this otherness, does McEvilley have any monopoly on virtue, since many leading anthropologists disagree sharply with his ideas.

It should also be remembered that there is another, negative "otherness" that is at issue for us in the West. This is the view that the Other is lazy, unintelligent, fit only for *travail de nègre* and, above all, uncultured. Most early anthropology is shot through with such prejudices, and the respect and admiration we find for tribal peoples on the part of Picasso and Matisse in the first decade of the century were not—with rare exceptions—to characterize anthropology until after World War II. If the peoples of the world are to get along with each other, they will not only have to appreciate their respective "otherness," they will have to recognize their common humanity. Some of us still do not think Schiller's hope that "*alle Menschen werden Brüder*" is tainted by co-option. By denying the manifest genius of tribal artists, McEvilley excludes whole peoples from this cultural commonality.

—William Rubin
The Museum of Modern Art
New York

1. Many critics and visitors to the exhibition noted that the quality of the tribal works was, taken as a whole, higher than that of the Modern works. This was accepted in advance as an inevitable result of the premises of the exhibition. Except for those tribal works that were in artists' collections, or those museum objects which had had a direct historical relation to the work of individual Modern artists (and the two together constituted a minority), the tribal works I chose were all—by my lights—the best of their types I could find during many years of study in public and private collections all over the world. Unlike the Modern art, these profited from unfamiliarity. The Modern works were by definition limited to artists involved with primitivism; hence, not only were many great Modern artists not represented, but others who were in the exhibition (Brancusi, for example) were, for historical reasons, represented by objects that were not necessarily their very best. (Some artists were not as well represented as they should have been because loans were unobtainable; Matisse's great and highly relevant *Blue Nude* and *Madame Matisse*, could not, for example, be borrowed.)

   Not surprisingly, only the greatest of Modern artists, such as Picasso and Brancusi, could hold their own against the best tribal artists. Nobody, I think, considers that Picasso or Brancusi suffered in the comparison. That some other artists did was inevitable. Needless to say, I did not look upon the exhibition as a contest of quality, a *mano a mano* between tribal and Modern artists, and I could have easily stacked the cards in either direction. I knew that our public was far more familiar with great Modern art than with great tribal art, and was at pains to emphasize the latter. The only review of the show that came to grips with this particular issue, analyzed it, and understood it properly was "Rubin's Primitives" by Allen Wardwell, which appeared in the November *Art World*.
2. I do not mean here to imply that everything Delafosse and his early-20th-century colleagues wrote about African art was wrong—although to read the critiques of them by contemporary anthropologists one could conclude that very little of what they said was right. There was, however, one anthropologist writing early in the century whose work, as Lydia Gasman has insisted, is interesting to consider in connection with Picasso's ideas about tribal art, and that is Marcel Mauss. Though Gasman is wrong in thinking that Picasso might have read Mauss' 1903-1904 essay on magic (Picasso did not read anthropological texts, and his French in 1907 would not have been up to it in any case), Mauss' ideas parallel those of Picasso, participate in the same zeitgeist. It is interesting to consider this in the light of McEvilley's view of Goldwater's book, a great part of which is devoted to a review of anthropological ideas; ironically, the one group of anthropologists Goldwater does *not* deal with is precisely, as Gasman observes, the French school of Mauss and his followers.

To the Editor:

In his criticisms of my contributions to the "Primitivism" exhibition, Thomas McEvilley is occasionally sloppy (he thinks I wrote two chapters in the book; I wrote three). He is also selectively forgetful, as when he chidingly suggests that an outdated "earth-mother" notion motivated my selection of contemporary women artists. This ignores the part of my essay that explicitly denounces this very cliché, at length (pp. 680–81); yet McEvilley must know the passage, for he elsewhere quotes from it as evidence of my censorship of primitivism's deeper truths! Also, he generally overestimates my contributions, by supposing my handling of the contemporary sections in both show and book can be taken as centrally representative of the exhibition's conception; whereas in fact these contemporary sections were later add-ons, organized (as should be expected, given their content) on significantly differing premises. But let all this pass—I'm glad to be associated with the show, and to confront the substantive issues McEvilley raises in his serious and impassioned review.

McEvilley accuses me of writing on primitivism in a "value-saturated, interpretive" way. He is absolutely right: my essays, and particularly the contemporary essay with which he takes special issue, do have this character, and were intended to make those values and interpretations very evident. His opposing views also have this character—what he would term an "ideological" aspect—but I am afraid he is less forthright in declaring, or perhaps less clear in understanding, their implications. Often, in fact, it seems to me that he is more deeply guilty of the very mistakes he attributes to William Rubin and to me.

He holds that the artists I selected, and the issues I raised, did not confront primitivism's "raw realness, or its real rawness." He admires instead contemporary artists "whose intentionalities [a word he favors as a substitute for the simpler "intentions"] involve falling away from Western civilization and literally forgetting its values." Their work is not just better primitivism, but fully *primitive*, he says, because it shares "the intentionality proper to [tribal] objects." Yet these attitudes McEvilley admires are quintessentially modern and Western, involving goals that obviously could never have been held by tribal artists—who by definition never had civilized Western values to forget. McEvilley's semantic abuse of the already beleaguered term "primitive" is the least of his confusions here. He blames Rubin and me for supposedly attributing modern Western intentions to tribal artists, and opines that "The need to co-opt difference into one's own dream of order ... is a tragic failing. Only fear of the Other forces one to deny its Otherness." Yet when he attributes *tribal* intentions to *Modern* artists, Otherness vanishes in a more global identity of purpose than we would ever suggest, or believe possible, between creators in vastly different cultures. McEvilley thus seems unwittingly to reinforce the very prejudice of Western

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superiority he claims to reject. In his account, contemporary artists can know all about Primitive motives, and subsume them within their more complex projects; but the Primitive may not be credited with harboring any analogue of modern ways of thinking.

What, one should ask, constitutes this global notion of tribal purposes about which McEvilley seems so clairvoyant—this idea of an essential "intentionality" that for him embraces Senufo and Sepik, Polynesian and Punu alike? The definition is never fully spelled out, but the traces can be found in a constellation of effects he evokes. Primitive creation involves for him "violence" in religious practice, "awe and dread," objects drenched in blood, seen in "closed dark spaces, by flickering torchlight," and a "terrifying power" of the "darkness of the unconscious." In short his is a deeply Romantic vision—latently more than a little racist—whose rather limited terms seem more appropriate to the generation of Joseph Conrad, or to a particularly unreconstructed Freudian, than to a 1980s understanding of the variety and complexity of social and mental life in tribal societies.

Imagining the power of tribal art exclusively in these terms, McEvilley seems to see only one legitimate avenue for its contact with Modern art: the domain of psychodrama and the expression of the dark unconscious. He accuses me by contrast of a "dread of the primitive, of the dangerous beauty that attracted Matisse and Picasso and that continues to attract some contemporary artists today." As instances of this ongoing tradition, he cites Hermann Nitsch, Paul McCarthy, Kim Jones, and Gina Pane. It would seem that the pairing of Matisse and Picasso might already suggest that there is a wide range of Modern primitivist responses that matches the wide range of tribal art. And no matter how deep one's respect for Nitsch, et al, it is peculiar praise to hold them up as the true legatees of Matisse. If "dread" is what keeps me from constructing this kind of genealogy for primitivism, may I continue to live in fear.

McEvilley claims that I timidly avoid facing up to the kind of primitivism he prefers, and even "deny [its] presence." This is false, and misinforms his readers. My "Contemporary Explorations" chapter explicitly and pointedly considers views such as those he holds, and primitivizing art of the kind he admires. I don't deny these notions of the Primitive exist, or that numerous contemporary artists believe in them sincerely. I do argue, however (in ways better examined in the essay itself), that there are other valid ways of thinking about the Primitive that inspire other serious artists, and I explain why in the end I find these latter more rewarding and stimulating. I try to explain, moreover, that the strain of Romantic, expressionist primitivism McEvilley favors, with its fantasies of total escape and forgetting, has disturbing undercurrents that are ultimately authoritarian in their implications.

My essay examines different ways interchanges between Modern and tribal art have worked, and stresses that the two spheres have points of contact in the mind as well as in the gut—Minimalism and Cubism are points of departure, or zones of affinity, as valid as angst-torn expressionism. Tribal art in my view can inspire not only violence and dark dread (a response which, as Rubin explains at length in the book, is often based on misconceptions of tribal life and misunderstandings of tribal forms), but also wit, fantasy, and sophisticated complexity—many tribal objects project, in fact, a classic sense of dignity and serene repose. Modern culture in turn provides not simply encumbering values which need forgetting, but also powerful new ways of insight into the variety of tribal creation. This view is indeed "value-saturated and interpretive"; it's intended to be so, and declares itself as such. McEvilley, on the other hand, who believes that Modern artists can willfully acquire the "intentionality" of their tribal counterparts, may similarly dream that there is some other way—presumably his own—in which a reading of primitivism and of the Primitive can involve no such shaping premises.

One panacea he recommends is scrupulous attention to intention and context. Berating Rubin and me for excluding anthropological data from the exhibition labels for tribal objects, he seems to be arguing that proper awareness of original intentions will save us from the imperialist sin of misreading primitive art in our own terms. As I believe he demonstrates, however, construals of intention are every bit as problematic and value-laden as other forms of "appropriation" from tribal sources. But I do not mean by this to damn appropriation per se—only to ask McEvilley to rethink some false divisions he's setting up. He suggests that my extolling "the capacity of tribal art to transcend the intentions and conditions that first shaped it" should be restated as "the capacity of tribal art to be appropriated out of its own intentionality into mine." I would be happy enough with the paraphrase, if I thought McEvilley understood what he was saying. For someone so committed to an idea of the power of the unconscious, and its communication across the barriers of time and culture, a nostalgic devotion to the notion of an inviolate, ultimately controlling intention seems curious and inconsistent. In fact, even without appeal to unconscious factors, it is plain to see that no act or object, by Shakespeare or a Yoruba carver, would have any broad or long cultural impact if its meaning or potential consequence were totally constrained by its founding motivations (which are finally unknowable in any event). As modern literary theory has driven home repeatedly, there is no validity in a model of knowledge based on the ideal of a privileged reading of an original determining intention. All art, culture, and communication functions by "appropriations" from one context to another. McEvilley and the artists he admires appropriate the Primitive to their purposes just as certainly as I do. Between our two appropriations, the question is not which is pure—neither is or can be—but which is barren and which fertile, which is liberal and open-ended and which, in McEvilley's own terms, is a "rejection of the wholeness of life."

Unhappy with the exhibition's decontextualization of tribal objects, McEvilley offers what he seems to think is an ultimately damning image in riposte: a parallel but reverse decontextualization, where the Western object (in this case a food container) is adopted by New Guinea tribesmen as a clothing ornament. McEvilley concludes that our museum showing tribal objects is as ludicrous as the natives wearing Kellogg's boxes. On the contrary, though, the ability to see art value where others see only garbage (as for example in cubist collage, or [Robert] Rauschenberg) is to my mind a kind of receptivity, and creative intelligence, that is well worth respecting and thinking about. Specifically, the tribal use of Western discards is a potentially fascinating phenomenon, of which McEvilley has chosen a relatively uninteresting instance. He ignores the more telling examples of this kind of bricolage that we included in the exhibition: a striking Guere mask made from bullet casings, or an exceptional fetish fashioned around a bottle of Suze liqueur. By acts of appropriation, disregarding the functions the Western objects originally fulfilled, the tribesmen saw new possibilities for the discards and gave them new life and meaning. I agree with McEvilley that it's fair to draw a parallel between this activity and the modern Western attention to the formerly neglected power of tribal objects. But his reading of the situation ascribes naïve stupidity to the natives and deluded venality to the Westerner, while mine would stress the common potential for invention, for expansion of cultural limitations, and for communication, that makes both actions compellingly and positively human.

—Kirk Varnedoe
Institute of Fine Arts
New York University
New York

*Thomas McEvilley replies:*

I'm the one who barked these grouchy bears out of the woods, so I guess I have to listen to their howling and gnashing of teeth. In a sense it's a chance in a lifetime. We rarely see these bears out in the open—especially the big one. The angry bears, rising from what they must have thought was a well-deserved sleep, are after me. But they are shoddy arguers. Helpless in the face of issues which their

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replies indicate they barely understand—and then only in a 19th-century kind of way—they have adopted the courtroom strategy of discrediting the witness rather than responding to his testimony. They have attempted to undermine the readers' confidence in me by claiming inaccuracies in my text.

Let's consider this charge of inaccuracies. Varnedoe leads off with a daring revelation of a typographical error—how feeble, to attempt to discredit me on the grounds that a sprite of the typesetting or proofreading realms, after the finished, correct text had left my hands, didn't pick up the fact that three had been changed to two—a common sort of scribal error—deep in a footnote. The thing to notice is not that there is a typo—because that happens—but that this scholar and curator, with a month to comb the text, could find nothing more important to criticize in the introduction of his reply than a typographical error in a footnote. Rubin shows a more ambitious version of the discrediting strategy: he wants to bury my readers' faith and my criticisms deep in an atmosphere of manufactured doubt. He begins his reply, understandably, by distancing himself from Varnedoe's "Contemporary Explorations" section of the show; he specifies the parts of the show that he is pleased with (the "Concepts" and "History" sections) and makes no mention of Varnedoe's unfortunate venture into the contemporary. He goes on to expressions of his familiar Picassoism, then defends the two-volume book that accompanies the exhibition from my statement that it merely refines and extends the research of Robert Goldwater. "But in terms of substance, our conclusions," he says, "are at odds with Goldwater's as regards a host of basic questions." Those familiar with Goldwater's book will recognize that this is a gross overstatement. The lines and themes of research are Goldwater's, the terminology is Goldwater's; what is at issue where they differ, as in Rubin's insistence that Goldwater did not recognize as many examples of direct influence as does Rubin's team, is just the gathering of more information.

The strategy underlying Rubin's approach, I suspect, is both to weaken the readers' confidence in me and to attempt to bog me down in answering petty disagreements, in the hopes that I will never fight through to the issues themselves—since those are the challenges Rubin wishes to avoid. I must drag the reader through a certain amount of this petty bickering about details, both in order to clear the reader's mind of manufactured doubt about the integrity of my article, and to illustrate Rubin's method of debate. Here's the sentence that is meant to lean the readers back in their chairs, distancing them from me once and for all: "His review," Rubin writes, "is interwoven with sufficient misconceptions, internal inconsistencies, and simple errors of fact that—given its seriousness—it should not go unchallenged." The charge of these supposed factual errors centers around a paragraph in which I demonstrated with a few obvious examples—and I could have used others—that the practice of regarding and exhibiting primitive and Modern works together was not really new to this show, as one might be led to believe by the claims and promotion around the show, despite its qualifier, "in the light of informed art history." Rubin professes to find my statements about recent earlier exhibitions to be nests of inaccuracies. First is my statement that the Centre Pompidou, for several years beginning in the late '70s, "exhibited, in the vicinity of its Modern collections, about 100 tribal objects from the Musée de l'Homme," some of them owned by early Modernist artists including Braque and Picasso, with the intention of illustrating relationships with the Modern works in the Beaubourg collection. In reply Rubin attacks first my number, one hundred. Citing the authority of Jean-Hubert Martin, who was at the time a Beaubourg curator and in charge of the loans from the Musée de l'Homme, he declares: "1) the two vitrines at the Centre Pompidou together never contained more than twenty or so objects." But in conversation with me subsequent to his conversation with Rubin, Martin stated that each vitrine—not both together—held twenty or twenty-five objects, bringing the total to forty or fifty at any one time. And there is more than meets the eye hidden in Rubin's unobtrusive little word "never." Why doesn't he just say (however mistakenly) that the vitrines did not hold more than 20 objects? Because he is repressing the fact or doesn't know that the objects in these vitrines were changed, since more objects had been borrowed from the Musée de l'Homme than the vitrines would hold. "Never" means not at any one time, and has nothing whatever to do with the total over a period of time. No listing of the total number of objects has been located, but Beaubourg curator Jean-Yves Mock, whose memory provided my original estimate of one hundred, still says that figure is not unreasonable.

Next, Rubin denies that any of the objects in the Beaubourg vitrines had ever been owned by Braque or Picasso. In fact, at the writing of my article one of the authorities on this subject had ventured the opposite opinion, yet finally it seems this point must remain moot, in light of the fact, acknowledged by Rubin, that no exact listing of the objects has been found. Still, the fact that some of the objects there belonged to early Modernist artists is acknowledged by all. Rubin goes on to say that these objects "could hardly have been intended to 'illustrate relations' with Modern art since they were chosen by Jean-Hubert Martin 'without respect,' as he says, 'to historical or formal questions. . . .'" In clarifying this point to me, Martin said otherwise: the primary purpose of the installation was to open viewers' eyes to non-Western ways of seeing, he remarked, but added, "Of course it was also to remind people, without specific historical scholarship, that the painters in Paris at that time [early in the century] were aware of primitive art." Indeed, unless one were trying to point out a relation of some type, why else would one exhibit primitive works in a museum specifically dedicated to *l'art moderne*?

Rubin's second set of claims of inaccuracies focuses on my remark that the exhibition of the Menil collections, "*La rime et la raison*," at Paris' Grand Palais in the spring of 1984 "juxtaposed primitive and Modern works (a Max Ernst with an African piece, Cézanne with Cycladic) and sometimes, as in the [MoMA] exhibition, showed a Modern artist's work in conjunction with primitive objects in his collection." I am going to quote Rubin on this point, minor as it is, in order to demonstrate the more clearly his method. Again he numbers his points as if stacking up an inexorable case against me. He writes, "1) the tribal material was shown almost entirely in its own separate areas." Again, note the unobtrusive little word, in this case "almost." The fact Rubin can neither growl away nor live with is that the tribal objects were not shown *entirely* in their own separate area. That was my point, and he concedes it while pretending to deny it. Yes, the Ernst *was* shown with an African piece; yes, the Cézanne *was* shown with a Cycladic piece; and so on, through examples I have not mentioned. Rubin goes on: "2) contrary to McEvilley, no Modern works were 'shown in conjunction with primitive objects from [the artists'] own collection[s].'" Yet there is a plain statement in the catalogue, by Walter Hopps, curator of the exhibition, discussing the mixing of primitive and Modern objects, in which he notes, "*Ainsi, dans la section des surréalistes, on trouve, a coté de leurs oeuvres, des objets leur ayant appartenus*" (thus, in the section on the Surrealists, beside their own works one finds objects that belonged to them).These include, for example, Eskimo masks, of which "*plusieurs furent acquises. . . par des surréalistes français établis à New York*" (several were bought . . . by French Surrealists living in New York).

His next point is no stronger: "3) the juxtaposition of the Cézanne with a Cycladic sculpture and the Ernst with an African mask were determined by Mrs. de Menil's 'pleasure in seeing them together,' and were *not* the demonstration of any historical connection." Here again the unobtrusive little element, in this case the italicizing of "not," directs the reader away from the point. The point is that Rubin has acceded completely to my statement, while again pretending to reject it. He has had to agree that the Cézanne was shown with the Cycladic piece, the Ernst with an African, and so on. To distract attention from that fact he attempts to shift the readers' attention to the last part of the sentence through the emphasis. Of

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course, the works were "*not* the demonstration of any historical connection." I never for a moment said they were. I am being corrected on statements I never made. Here again is the key catalogue passage from that show, on which my statements were in part based. "*Ici l'art primitif est représenté à égalité avec l'art occidental; l'art occidental le plus ancien est juxtaposé avec l'art le plus moderne. Les affinités ne sont pas chronologiques, elles sont conceptuelles, iconographiques et formelles, destinées à suggérer les correspondances profondes entre les valeurs esthétiques et spirituelles de peuples et de temps fort divers. Ainsi, dans la section des surréalistes, on trouve, à coté de leurs oeuvres, des objets leur ayant appartenus. Dans la même esprit, quelques oeuvres modernes sont exposées au milieu d'objets archaïques ou traditionnels*" (here, primitive art is represented equally with Western art; the oldest Western art is juxtaposed with the most modern. The affinities are not chronological but conceptual, iconographic, and formal; they are intended to suggest the deep correspondences between the esthetic and spiritual values of very different peoples and times. Thus, in the section on the Surrealists, beside their own works one finds objects that belonged to them. In the same spirit, several Modern works are shown among ancient or traditional objects). Hopps goes on to mention the Ernst with the African piece, and so on. Rubin attempts to reduce the importance of the Menil show, along with the Beaubourg installation, saying they are "not instances of 'informed art history'"; he even goes so intemperately far as to say, "they were not, strictly speaking, instances of art history at all." And why not, in the case of the Menil show? His reason is that the juxtapositions under discussion "were determined by Mrs. de Menil's 'pleasure in seeing them together.'" Now, to say that the pleasure of the eye of a sensitive and long-trained collector is not automatically an exercise of informed art history is already somewhat questionable. The collection itself is an act of "informed art history," and the Menil show was the quintessential demonstration of collectorly connoisseurship's long habit of mingling the Modern and the primitive. When Rubin declares that because objects were juxtaposed merely for the pleasure of seeing them together the show is disqualified as informed art history, doesn't he realize that he is damning his own show too? Why, for example, was Picasso's *Girl before a Mirror* shown with the Kwakiutl mask—even on the cover of the catalogue and a poster for the show, as if this juxtaposition were the essence of it all? As I demonstrated in the article, there was absolutely no reason whatever to show these particular two pieces together except Rubin's "pleasure in seeing them together." Indeed, the greater part of his show was made up of that pleasure and his indulgence in it.

The careful way Rubin's and Varnedoe's letters are constructed is to give the impression that many factual inaccuracies have been found in my text. Rubin, for example, makes his remark about inaccuracies, then goes on for several paragraphs about matters of critical dispute that have nothing to do with claims of factual error. This blurring of the distinction between factual error and critical dispute is a basic method in both letters. If we pause and count up the inaccuracies they have found, we see that Rubin has found none, and Varnedoe has come up with a typographical error in a footnote. That is all. Enough with the distracting fog of these tactics. Rubin's achievement was not, surely, in originating the idea of juxtaposing primitive and Modern objects, nor in being the first to act it out, but in doing it more extensively than his predecessors had—in fact too extensively, considering that certain of his juxtapositions are meaningless.

It is in their treatment of the real issues that these men reveal, I think, a poverty of intellect. I am serious when I say that they seem to have brought only 19th-century ways of thinking, 19th-century minds, to bear on the discussion. Very near the beginning of his statement Rubin takes refuge in references to "my conversations with Picasso," a tactic that amounts, throughout his text, to the fallacy called the Appeal to Authority. In an obvious Appeal to Authority Rubin defends himself from my belief that more information should have been given about the primitive works by quoting Picasso's remark, "all I need to know about Africa is in those [tribal] objects." Rubin comments, "Picasso felt (quite rightly, I believe) he could apprehend aspects of the spirit, values, and nature of African civilizations through their art." But Picasso's remark could just as clearly mean, "all I need to know about Africa is how these objects look," for that is indeed all you get from just looking at them: how they look. Later, Rubin, quoting himself, says that the meanings that concerned Modern primitivists "'were the ones that could be apprehended through the objects themselves.' *This*," he goes on, "is the real rub for, as we shall see, McEvilley refuses to accept that such meanings exist." Here Rubin is relying on an implied claim to universal sameness of esthetic feeling, an out-of-date piece of Platonic lore that has no ground in evidence whatever. The surprising thing is that Rubin evidently has no inkling of cultural conditioning and what it does to one's eyes. The meanings that we read directly from tribal objects are highly unlikely to be the ones the tribal image-makers intended; they will predominantly be the ones that our own cultural conditioning has ingrained in us. To say, as he does, that one can derive the intended emic content merely by looking at the tribal works is to say that we need no study of ethnology at all, no struggle with the emic-etic problem—in short, no attempt to understand the tribal images and image-makers on their own terms; our own terms, he is saying, must be universal, evidently just because they are ours. This is in fact the principle on which his show and book are based. That, after reading my article, he fails to perceive the simple and basic point of cultural relativity indicates how deep is his resistance to it and how unquestioning is his commitment to the claim of the universal supremacy of Western cultural values.

In another defense against my charge that the realities of the tribal works were actually repressed in both the "'Primitivism'" show and, above all, the book, Rubin says that the museum was "studying the reception of tribal objects by Western artists." "But," he laments, "McEvilley won't let us have a show about that reception, which is, of course, precisely what 'primitivism'—as opposed to 'the primitive'—signifies." This is of course not strictly true. I said that I would be far happier with the show (and book) than I am if they had truly limited themselves to the reception; the problem is that both the show and the book (especially Rubin's introductory essay) attribute motives to the primitive as well as to the primitivist—in fact, the same motives—making them (what else?) like us. It is primarily in his category of "affinities" that he attributes to the tribal image-makers this and that Modern Western esthetic feeling and ambition, ignoring their own expressions of their feelings and ambitions. Rubin shows a strange immunity to criticism here. He refers to his "auto-critique," which would feature improvements in his "affinities" category; yet his categories were one of the leading subjects of my article and he has nowhere replied to my criticism of them, except vaguely to imply that he is privately improving them.

Throughout Rubin's letter he resorts to the childish tactic of throwing my accusations back at me ("*You* are"—"No, *you* are"—this is Varnedoe's reflex too) rather than answering them. He says, for example, that McEvilley "constantly presumes to know and speak for the 'intentionality' of long-dead tribal artists ... He confidently puts himself into their minds...." In fact, I have attributed no motives to the tribal image-makers, except to deny, on the soundest of anthropological, linguistic, and psychological grounds, that the motives he attributes to them apply. When Rubin claims that "many leading anthropologists disagree sharply with [McEvilley's] ideas," he is suggesting again that I presented some definition of tribal Otherness. Of course I did not; I criticized Rubin's definition, since his idea of Otherness is simply to make it look like oneself. And for his part Varnedoe writes, "[McEvilley] seems to be arguing that proper awareness of original intentions will save us from the imperialist sin of misreading primitive art in our own terms." Yes, that is to an extent what I mean, and I direct the readers' attention to the somewhat mocking tone of the phrase "imperi-

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alist sin." Like a Westerner of the 19th century, Varnedoe cannot take the question of an imperialistic sin at all seriously, though to many it virtually leaps off the walls of the exhibition. A prominent non-Western artist, for example, hearing the show praised, said, "No; we don't want to be their mascots."

Both Rubin and Varnedoe claim that the absence, in both the show and the book, of information about the attitudes of the people who made, used, and understood these objects is justified by our lack of knowledge of such attitudes. "Construals of intention are every bit as problematic and value-laden as other forms of 'appropriation' from tribal sources," says Varnedoe; and Rubin asks, "Does McEvilley himself know how little is known about most of these tribal objects?" They suggest, in other words, that since we cannot know what these things were made for, we are justified in projecting our own fantasies onto them. Rubin asks, "Will McEvilley please tell me how he learns anything about the 'religious or mythological connections' of the objects in the vitrines of Tervuren, the Musée de l'Homme, or the Völkerkunde museum in Berlin…?" Why, I'd be glad to. I would suggest first of all more attention to the relevant ethnologic literature (yes, it is there) and, above all, to the history of religion. Of course there are many problems in the anthropological literature and many blind places in our knowledge of tribal attitudes, but in fact the one area where there is rather abundant knowledge is that of ritual practices, which is the major area relevant to the works in the exhibition. To illustrate the sometimes difficult types of content that primitive images might have, I might even be so bold as to suggest my own monograph on some Indus Valley icons, published in *RES*, journal of the Peabody Museum of Harvard University and of the Laboratoire d'Ethnologie of the University of Paris. I would be glad to provide further reading lists.

Both Rubin and Varnedoe seem determinedly innocent of serious attention to the question of how primitive cultures develop and change. In prehistoric art, for example, thousands of years may be needed for a small development in image-making. The situation is very likely the same in more recent tribal cultures. This I referred to as "communal inventiveness," which Rubin describes as "a process I [Rubin] leave the reader to try imagining." Well, one might for example try imagining the American automobile industry, where stylistic change arises through a communal development, or again look at a shelf full of books and contemplate the changes in book design over the last hundred years, or, again, the design changes of utilitarian objects like household goods and cigarette lighters, all of which change in essentially communal ways. The evidence is that tribal images were regarded as utilitarian objects by their makers and users, and that their design changes would better be compared with those of our utilitarian objects than with the originality-obsessed Western practice of art.

When Rubin says that I want "the tribal objects presented in a wholly integral way (never spelled out) in which not even anthropological museums show them," he is being disingenuous. Rubin claims that I "demanded" "'environments'" in the installation; no such demand occurs in my article. I want the objects written about without attributing our motives to their makers. I want writing and exhibiting that are as clean as possible of ego projections. That is all. In response to my request for more information about the tribal objects, Rubin and Varnedoe claim that they cannot be dated and, somehow, need not be dated. Yet anyone who opens a scholarly book on primitive objects, or who visits anthropological museums (and by the way, I'll put my hours in them against Rubin's any day), will see that at least approximate dates are usually given for the works. The fact that these dates are reconstructed by scholars does not in the least invalidate them, as Rubin claims; *all* dates are reconstructed by scholars. The fact that these reconstructions will change as the available evidence changes does not mean we should ignore them; it means that at any time we must use the best possible scholarly approximation, with an understanding that it is less than absolute. Without dates how do we know that we are dealing with what Rubin calls "long-dead tribal artists"? One very good reason for including dates in this show—one brought up in my article and conveniently ignored by both Rubin and Varnedoe—is that it is absolutely certain that tribal image-making since the 19th century has been increasingly influenced by Western arts and crafts. The distinction between ethnic and tourist arts is all important.[1] As soon as a market began to exist for tribal objects their character changed. If the objects in the show are all genuine, that is, premarket, or pretourist works, then they were used in ritual ways as I described in the article; if they were not so used, then they are the products of tourist industries. In other words, the omission of dates amounts to another hidden tactic for avoiding the confrontation with the actual uses of these objects in their tribal settings. One could almost believe that Rubin would rather show tourist works, since they were never used in ways that Western eyes have trouble facing.

Let's consider the tribal object that Rubin uses in an attempt to suggest that my approach is opposed to esthetic feeling and appreciation—the large Nukuoro Island figure that introduces the exhibition. Rubin identifies this figure as "the goddess Kave," and says no more. By mentioning the mythological title Rubin gets one foot into the ethnology of the piece, but never puts the other in. And why not? Brian Brake, James McNeish, and David Simmons, in their book *Art of the Pacific*, show the same icon of Kave and note that she was a goddess to whom human sacrifices were offered.[2] Rubin has, in other words, invoked the very positive feelings that Greek mythology and related traditions have instilled in us toward the idea of a "goddess," in connection with a figure that should have very different associations. If he was going to name her at all he should have told us not only who but *what* she is. The other way would have been simply to present the icon as an object, with no references to goddesses and myth-names at all. Let me put the point clearly: *if* the Kave icon is authentic, then it was used in its own culture for human sacrifices rather than for esthetic enjoyment; if, on the other hand, it was never bloodied by human sacrifice, then it is probably not authentic but a tourist work.

Rubin focuses very extensively on the fact that I raised questions about calling tribal objects artworks plain and simple. He says that to me the tribal objects are "not art, but religion or magic." This fragment of a quotation from my article eliminates context and attributes to me a point I made about a hypothetical tribal observer. What I actually wrote was this: "If you or I were a native tribal artisan or spectator walking through the halls of MoMA we would see an entirely different show from the one we see as 20th-century New Yorkers. We would see primarily not form but content, and not art, but religion or magic." The statement, by the way, is correct beyond a doubt. I have not, in other words, denied these objects any status by questioning the way their wholeness is fragmented and repressed as they are appropriated into Rubin's art realm. The question ultimately is not whether these things are or are not art (an essentially barren question of linguistic usage), or whether they should or should not be regarded as art; the real issue is how these men regard art and its relationship to the world, to history, to culture, to civilization. This is not exclusively a question about so-called civilized versus so-called primitive cultures. It is a question about the critic's or curator's willful ego-projections onto the objects. (How Rubin represented the works of the Dadaists and Surrealists in an earlier book is a similar case.) The problem with calling the tribal objects art merely through their design similarity to Modern art is precisely that this tactic amounts to a rejection of the intentions of the makers and an imposition on them of foreign intentions that would not have made sense to them.

Varnedoe replies to my desire that the tribal image-makers' intentionality be attended to by claiming that "modern literary theory has driven home repeatedly [the idea that] there is no validity in a model of knowledge based on the ideal of a privileged reading of an original determining intention." By "modern literary theory" he seems to mean the formu-

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lation by W. K. Wimsatt and Monroe Beardsley, in the '40s, of the idea of the intentional fallacy. Of course, an artist's statements cannot be allowed utterly to control the interpretation of his or her work, but neither can they be ignored. In any case the idea of the intentional fallacy is wrongly brought up by Varnedoe here; it does not apply to my argument. I am talking about the fact that cultural objects arise in cultural contexts, and that within that larger context—in which the particular maker's personal and specific intentions are merely a detail within a larger whole—they are communally understood in certain ways which, for that culture, constitute the reality of the object. Varnedoe's invocation of the intentional fallacy springs from his misunderstanding of the difference between the word intention, which refers to an individual's intention and is what the intentional fallacy is about, and intentionality, which is a larger world-constituting type of understanding having always communal resonances. The whole-cloth 19th-century-ism of Varnedoe's thought is revealed in a display of comedic ignorance. He quotes me as using the term "intentionalities" and notes parenthetically that this is "a word [McEvilley] favors as a substitute for the simpler 'intentions.'" He evidently doesn't recognize that "intentionality" is a technical term in the philosophy of Edmund Husserl and in the whole phenomenological movement. I used the word "intentionalities" rather than the very different word "intentions" to indicate that, like linguistic philosophy, phenomenology also would give us insight into the problems at issue here—to indicate that I was discussing the way that one's cultural horizon, like one's language, both shapes the mind and constitutes the world it relates to. Twentieth-century ways of thinking like linguistic philosophy and phenomenology have tried precisely to pry us loose from the unremitting colonialistic egotism of our 19th-century ways. Varnedoe remains silent in the face of such arguments, evidently not recognizing the terminologies. Both he and Rubin even use quotation marks around "intentionality" as if to suggest that it is some monstrous, affected coinage of mine. The anthropological linguists Edward Sapir and Benjamin Lee Whorf have argued very influentially that if a people's language does not permit the expression of a certain concept, then there can be no reason at all for saying that that people have that concept. This fact has been experimentally confirmed in a number of ways.[3] Now, in light of that, can there be any justification for ignoring the fact that the languages of the tribal cultures whose objects were seen at MoMA utterly lacked words or even circumlocutions that could express what we mean by art? It is a simple fact, both on linguistic and on ethnological grounds, that the makers and users of the tribal objects in the MoMA show did not regard them at all as we regard our art. Why then should our concept prevail over theirs in discussions of their objects? Is it not merely arrogance to bring in our term from outside, on all the tribal objects we like, as if we knew what they were? Is it not in fact a dead end to show no curiosity about attitudes different from our own?

The making of objects whose only or primary function is pure contemplation and esthetic appreciation is, in Western cultural history, peculiar to ancient Greek culture and its descendants and offshoots, including us. Something similar, but by no means identical, arose in T'ang-dynasty China. Most of the world's cultures did not know of this activity until they came into contact with the European stream of influence. What we call art, in other words, as opposed to functional types of image-making and craftsmanship, is not an etic or objective and universal phenomenon.

Rubin, noting that tribal peoples lack a word for art, remarks, "But the same is true for the ancient Egyptians; yet that culture's painting and sculpture is not denied the status of art." The fact is that most of what we regard as Egyptian artworks the Egyptians themselves understood as functional objects within the very practical activity of funerary magic. To us, the activity of making something art prominently involves the act of displaying it or reporting on it to others. But virtually every object in the great Egyptian Museum at Cairo was made to be buried underground and hidden from human eyes and from human knowledge forever; nor is there anywhere in the abundant Egyptian literature any hint that ghosts or gods or anyone else were intended to take esthetic pleasure in these objects in the way we do. The reasons why they were so gorgeously designed and crafted, then, remain a mystery which it should be our concern to penetrate rather than to avoid with an easy term. We could honestly say that these things are funerary objects, and then go on to say that we like to look at our artworks next to their funerary objects. But instead we co-opt the whole cultural reality of these objects into our language game, so that we can use a word we feel at home with , regardless of the fact that it has a very limited and partial application to them. Rubin and Varnedoe are implicitly declaring that everything native to these non-Western cultures is unimportant next to our mania for calling their spoons and things art. The tribal person, in other words, has no dignity in terms of his or her own aspirations and concepts. Our conviction that we understand these things properly by calling them art, even that we elevate them by giving them that name, necessarily implies that the people who made them and the people for whom they were made did not understand them properly—a bizarrely skewed claim. It is to avoid such atrocities of thinking that I suggest we begin to loosen up our habit of believing that we honor those objects by conferring on them our revered concept "art."

"McEvilley," says Rubin, "simply refuses to accept the fact that our story is not about 'the Other,' but about ourselves." In fact my point is the opposite. What is at issue is not simply a matter of attempting to understand other cultures; it is a matter of attempting to understand ourselves. By forcing other cultures into our own familiar modes of naming and feeling we rob them of the power to reveal ourselves by our otherness from them, we rob them of the power to show us our limitations and to suggest possible ways to grow beyond those limits.

Rubin shows no awareness of the complexity of the question, "Is it art?" In a very important sense that question is meaningless until completed with some such phrase as "Is it art to you, or to me, or to that person there?" This phenomenological aspect relates, again, to the linguistic. The rule of usage as the arbiter of meaning was the fundamental insight of 20th-century linguistic thought, the center of the work of both Ferdinand de Saussure and Ludwig Wittgenstein—the insight that there was no necessary relation between word and thing. As Saussure said, the connection between the signifier and the signified is arbitrary, governed merely by usage. In Wittgensteinian terms, to be art simply means to be called art. The question is not, "Is it art?," but, "Is it called art?" In this sense, for the figure of the goddess Kave, for example, the answer is double: no, for its makers and the people of the culture in which it was made, it is not art; and yes, for us who call it art, it is art. It is art by our redesignation of it as such; it is art in the same way that unhewn stones brought into a gallery by Robert Smithson were made art by the act of so designating them.

Finally, I think it is clear that Rubin's emphasis on the question, "Is it art?" involves a serious misreading of my article. I did not say the tribal objects were not art, but that there were several senses in which something might be called art, and that some of these clearly don't apply to the tribal objects. Neglecting the complexities of the question altogether, Rubin asks, in effect, why did McEvilley question the practice of calling these things art and nothing more, and the only answer he can imagine is this: McEvilley must think it's not good enough to be art!

He then, most regrettably, takes this drastic misreading to the limit. "Most early anthropology," says Rubin, "is shot through with such prejudices" as "the view that the Other is lazy, unintelligent, fit only for *travail de nègre* and, above all, uncultured." How easy this blatant reversal of my argument makes it to deal with me. But it gets even worse than that. "I wonder," Rubin asks gravely, "how many of his readers who saw our show and stood before the monumental Nukuoro Island carving of the goddess Kave that introduces it, share McEvilley's convic-

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tion that what they were looking at was 'not art.'" He has, in other words, simply struck up the national anthem of the kingdom of esthetic feeling, as if I alone were saying that these objects are not noble, spiritual, and great. In fact, I am saying something quite different—that these objects fall outside the categories of our language, that this is the great freedom they offer us, and that a vast opportunity is lost when we force them into one of the categories of our known language with its familiar and limited horizon or intentionality. But note that along with me Rubin has excluded, without a glance at them or a feeling for them, the Nukuoro Islanders themselves, who, supposedly "like McEvilley," think that the Kave figure is "not art"—not because it is of insufficient formal beauty to be called art, but because, for all its magnificent formal beauty, like a mountain or an automobile it happens to be something else. Rubin thinks he is doing the Nukuoro Islanders a favor because he is saying that they are like him; but what if they don't want to be like him? He should face the facts of what the Nukuoro Islanders themselves did before that figure of Kave to which he sings the anthem of esthetic feeling.

In terms of the affirmation or denial of the art identity of tribal works, three periods of history must be distinguished. There was the period prior to the scholarship of Franz Boas, when primitive objects were denied the status of art as if it were an honor that they did not deserve, as if they were just not good enough to be called art. Then came a second phase in which tribal objects such as those in the show were thought be formally and intellectually "good enough" to be called art and the habit arose of so calling them. More recently the possibility has arisen of a third phase, which anthropologists are finding the way into now, when one may begin to look at the tribal objects from the point of view of their own culture and to realize that, whatever they are, they fall in between the categories on our grid. In other words, it is not the objects that are inadequate but our conceptual grasp of them. My skepticism about the act of bestowing the word art in these and certain other contexts is a phase three rather than phase one attitude. I think this is obvious to anyone who reads the article. I must not, of course, be misconstrued as meaning that there should be no museums of primitive art, or courses in primitive art, or studies of the relationships between these objects and ours, and so on. The objects in question are of such great interest that one delights in studying and regarding them, and in so doing the temptation to relate them to things that look like them from our own culture is easily submitted to. But I suggest that the phase three act must be different from the phase two act of esthetic appreciation that we are all so good at and comfortable with. What we must learn is to see a doubleness, the two aspects at once, simultaneously feeling these objects as art, which is our way of appreciation, and maintaining a sharp and constant awareness of the fact that the people of their own culture did not so feel them. This keen awareness of cultural relativity and of the arbitrariness of one's own horizon is simply the necessary step in maturation for our culture—and a step necessary for the safety of the whole world.

Finally I must deal with the cheapest of Rubin's and Varnedoe's tactics against me, their presentation of me as an ideologue because I speak of subjects besides formal similarities. Rubin says I have transformed the event into "an act of contemporary art politics," and refers to my "art-political ways of thinking." He is practicing the familiar tactic of dismissing criticism by calling it "political"; what I performed was an act of criticism, not an act of politics. Rubin's accusations of political motivation are paralleled by Varnedoe's claim that I am a person interested in violence and the darkness of the unconscious, echoed by Rubin's repeated quotation of a phrase in which, thinking, for example, of the human sacrifices to Kave, I used the word "blood." This is really low argumentation. They have attributed to my personal tastes the qualities of primitive religious practices that I denounced them for ignoring and censoring. There is no doubt whatever that primitive religious practices were characterized by what we would call violence, and that many of the objects in the show, if they are genuine, were used in conjunction with sacrifices and ritual bloodshed. I asserted that these men, by editing out the facts, misrepresent the objects. Their replies suggest that because I would not edit out the real qualities of primitive religious rites, I must have a ghoulish attraction to blood and violence. In their view, it seems, an accurate and realistic description of primitive ritual practices would be unhealthy; a totally misleading and censored version like theirs, on the other hand, is supposedly the product of a healthier mind. This is what I meant by saying that they shouldn't have dealt with the topic at all: if they feel that the realities of the topic have to be censored out on moralizing grounds, then they manifestly are not the right people to have treated the topic in the first place. Their assumption that to face the topic squarely would somehow show bad character reveals an appalling lack of scholarly integrity. They are forgetting that scholarship (including art history) is a type of science. I felt that the context of blood was necessary to confront *because it was factually there*. Rubin's and Varnedoe's belief that Western civilization and its ethic are served by ignoring the realities of the topic shows an absolute lack of understanding of the difficult responsibility of science to face up to all the facts, not just the pleasant ones.

But these letters, of course, get even worse than that, for example the part where Rubin slops Mom, country, apple pie, and German slogans all over me. It's his grand peroration, where he goes for nothing less than a destruction of the idea of my humanity. You remember: "If the peoples of the world," he intones somberly, "are to get along with each other, they will not only have to appreciate their respective 'otherness'"—note the quotation marks: here again is something he doesn't really think exists—"they will have to recognize their common humanity." (Wow!) "Some of us," he says, "still do not think Schiller's hope that *alle Menschen werden Brüder* is tainted by co-option. By denying the manifest genius of tribal artists, McEvilley excludes whole peoples from this cultural commonality." But I have not of course for a moment denied the genius of tribal peoples; I have suggested that it might be saner and more interesting to try to appreciate their genius in as many of its own terms as we can, and that it is to an extent possible to find those terms out. So why don't we try to do it? As far as excluding people from "this cultural commonality," I seriously question whether what the peoples of the Third World need is the kind of Western-imposed "commonality" implied by a German slogan that is more about forcing people to be one's brothers than about becoming theirs. I, and I think they too, want out of that sick dream. It sounds too much like a Leni Riefenstahl film to me, all the peoples of the world trudging along together hollering out the Ode to Joy. That Rubin would introduce such a completely gratuitous and sophistic argumentum ad hominem, one so ungrounded in argumentation, is disgraceful, and a disgrace that our readers will have seen he shares with his collaborator, whose only tactics are sophistic reversals, ad hominem arguments, and empty denials. In response, for example, to my claim that his "Contemporary Explorations" section was dominated by the earth mother view of the female, he asserts that he denied that association in his essay; well, deny it he might, but the fact remains that that is what he did in the exhibition. Both men in effect say, "don't watch what I actually do, just listen to my claims about what I do."

I gave the "'Primitivism' in 20th Century Art" exhibition reasoned criticism, and Rubin and Varnedoe gave me back rhetorical tricks. I gave them historical and philosophical arguments and they met not one of them, not one, dear reader, because they *could not*. They are bad bears indeed, and I am going to bark them back into the forest now as I barked them out some months ago so we could look at them. I did not think they would look as bad as they do. I expected worthier adversaries.

1. See, for example, Nelson H.H. Graburn, ed., *Ethnic and Tourist Arts*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976.
2. Brian Brake, James McNeish, and David Simmons, *Art of the Pacific*, New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1980, p. 132.
3. See, for example, B. Berlin and P. Kay, *Basic Color Terms*, Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1970; A. Capell, *Studies in Socio-Linguistics* Hawthorne, N.Y.: Mouton, 1966, and R. Brown and E. Lenneberg, "A Study in Language and Cognition," in S. Saporta, ed., *Psycholinguistics*, New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1961.

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Under normal circumstances I would not trouble Artforum's readers with a continuation of the exchange between myself and Thomas McEvilley on the "Primitivism" exhibition at The Museum of Modern Art. However, there are important issues which have been obscured in this fray, and these need clarifying. Thus I ask the reader to rise above the intemperate tone of McEvilley's 'final word' and to--dare I say?--please bear with me.

In places, McEvilley and I argue past each other, creating differences where I hope we might in time agree. But there is no mistaking the huge gap in opinion which separates us. McEvilley's disgust with the history of Western colonialism--a history I deplore as much as he does--unfortunately leads him to the kind of indiscriminate extremism where Schiller becomes a sloganeer compared to Hitler's pet film maker, and where we are asked to admire most those contemporary artists who somehow have the gift of "literally forgetting [Western civilization's] values." McEvilley is surely not alone in his anti-Western position--but he is surely right if he senses that these are not the positions of the organizers of the exhibition. It is no wonder that he finds so much to criticize in the show and, as I took the trouble to suggest at the beginning of this exchange, anyone interested in these issues can only be impressed by the sincerity and intensity of his response.

But there is obviously one tradition of Western thought that McEvilley admires--at least, so one would gather from his eagerness to cite experimental evidence and his appeal to scientific method in art history--and that is the Western practice of scholarly and scientific inquiry which rests ultimately on the tradition of critical dialogue. I more than share McEvilley's enthusiasm for this tradition, and, as any student of my

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writings will know, I have in the past found such exchanges--many of them stemming from disagreements at least as great as that between McEvilley and myself--to be immensely profitable and stimulating.

I had hoped that the exchange between McEvilley and myself would continue that tradition. But in order for such exchanges to be productive it is necessary that the intellectual basis of critical discussion not be undermined. In the history of rational inquiry, it has generally been thought unproductive to attack what you take to be your opponent's motives rather than his arguments--and particularly unproductive to attribute to him sinister or conspiratorial motives. Nor does it advance the discussion to appeal to discredited or, worse, unnamed authorities. And it is fatally destructive to the nature of discourse--however much it may appeal in the heat of intellectual contest, and even on what may seem to be a minor point--to fabricate evidence rather than admit error.

Anyone who has taken the trouble to read my writings or attend my lectures will be as unable as I am to recognize McEvilley's portrait of me as a kind of high priest who insures the mysterious "canons" of what McEvilley calls "formalist modernism", and who dwells in "the temple of formalist modernism" on 53rd Street, where the "cult of pure form" is unashamedly practiced according to the "dogma of universal esthetic feeling." I suppose that I should be flattered to be mistaken for this Druid, since he is obviously quite a guy. (He will do <u>anything</u>--including mounting exhibitions that co-opt entirely unrelated art--in order to "revalidate modernist esthetic canons.") But then (I surmise) he has some unattractive traits, too: according to McEvilley, he is always ready to abandon a colleague when it seems convenient. Thus, McEvilley writes that Rubin "begins his reply, understandably, by distancing himself from

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Varnedoe's 'Contemporary Explorations' section of the show." My remark about not speaking for my colleague did no more, of course, than recognize that, as Varnedoe was appending his own letter, I considered him more than able to speak for himself. Lest there be any doubt whatever in McEvilley's mind, I very much liked Varnedoe's selections for 'Contemporary Explorations', as I did his entirely persuasive letter outlining the principles behind them. Above and beyond inevitable differences in judgment--indeed, in part because of them--Varnedoe's particular contributions to all parts of the show were critical to its success.

Alas, all those who will now haunt the galleries of the Museum hoping for a glimpse of the dark lord of modernism will be sadly disappointed. My own ambitions are much more modest than those McEvilley imagines for me. In all my work I have never thought to "validate" modernism; I am only trying to understand it. Nor can I fathom what McEvilley means when he says, citing our show of the late work of Cézanne, that modernism is "self-validating." Is it that it doesn't have to be approved by the party or the church? Or McEvilley? And how does Cézanne's art go on "validating and invalidating other things?" What does it "invalidate"? What has been suppressed from MoMA's 20th century collection because "invalidated" by Cézanne? And is modernism "above the web of...cultural change," as McEvilley claims? What better example of the way it is not than primitivism itself? The very year of Cézanne's Memorial Exhibition, artists presumably "validated" by him, Picasso and Braque, began to study tribal art, which Cézanne would surely never have considered "valid."[1]

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It is my supposed fixation with something called "pure form" (a meaningless phrase I have never used nor would think of using) which, according to McEvilley, has left me entirely uninterested in the historical context of any art. I, on the other hand, would never have become an art historian were I not committed to the belief that the fullest understanding of art objects requires that we know as much as we possibly can about the cultures from which they came. It is precisely because I am concerned with historical context that I virtually omitted anthropological information from the exhibition--richly stimulating though I find it--where it could only mislead the viewer about the actual intellectual context and content of modernist primitivism, after all, the subject of our show. It is simply a fact that (with but rare exceptions, beginning only around 1930) the cultural and historical context of 20th century primitivism did not include anthropological information; it was totally irrelevant to the pioneer modernists' reaction to tribal objects.

The rare instances when modernist artists possessed some ethnological information were noted in our book. However, the problem with even these anthropological "facts" is that they usually turned out to be fictions--i.e., theories discredited by later anthropologists. Let me give a classic example. Michel Leiris was one of many ethnologists I consulted several times in preparing our show. He was a member of the Dakar-Djibouti mission of 1931-33, is an expert on the collection of the Musée de l'Homme, a great writer and long a close friend of Picasso. He told me that, by the thirties, Picasso would certainly have heard that the big-nose Baga (Guinea) Nimba figures and masks were a sort of "goddess of fertility"--the way many collectors and dealers in African art still refer to them.[2] This merited being brought into the discussion because Picasso owned two

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such figures and a giant mask (which stood in the entrance of his chateau), and the big-nose busts of Marie-Thérèse Walter he sculpted at that time (and her image in Girl Before a Mirror) associate her with a kind of fertility goddess.

Today, however, the anthropologist Leon Siroto, a specialist in West African art, will tell you that the Baga figures have nothing demonstrable to do with a "goddess of fertility" and that, even for the mask, such an interpretation is inadequate ("fertility" was only one of its possible aspects) and misleading (because the very word "goddess" is Eurocentric and wrongly applied in the case at hand to African cult symbols). So had we presented these tribal objects from the perspective of today's anthropology, we would have had to explain that on this rare occasion when a modern artist actually knew something about "primitive context, meaning, or content," what he knew was essentially a fiction. I can imagine the visitors reeling out of the galleries after attempting to digest such dual-track information. That the operative fictions of modernist primitivism were in fact Eurocentric was, of course, something we had accepted, indeed, insisted upon from the start. The whole history of modernist primitivism, at least until very recently, took place within the context of Eurocentric assumptions, and it cannot be recounted or understood outside those terms--certainly not within the ex post facto framework of today's advanced anthropology.

Similar strictures apply to the problem of providing dates for tribal works. Our omission of individual dates for the tribal objects, which we had described as mostly from the later 19th and early 20th centuries, was seen by McEvilley as "another hidden tactic for avoiding the confrontation with the actual uses of these objects in their tribal settings"--as if the

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latter ethnological concerns were relevant, or had ever been our purpose. Moreover, not a single tribal object in our show can be dated "precisely," and precious few can even be dated approximately. Where tribal objects are given dates by scholars, such dates are almost always of the exceedingly elastic order of those attributed to a handful of objects in the Menil family collection catalogue (where many of the African objects are totally undated and only six of the 44 Oceanic objects are given even approximate dates.) As in this catalog, the most focussed dates scholars normally proffer for these objects are of the order of "19th century", "19th-20th centuries" and "20th century." As "20th century" could apply equally to objects made yesterday and those that predate the modernists' discovery of tribal art, it is obvious that this or other vague dates are useless for the study of primitivism. Far more important--indeed, crucial--for the study of primitivism was the question of the dates at which objects could have been seen in the West, a subject to which we devoted an immense and unprecedented scholarly effort. (McEvilley's claim that in "anthropological museums...at least approximate dates are usually given for the works" is simply untrue. In the African section of the Musée de l'Homme in Paris--as I took the trouble to reconfirm on a recent visit--not one of the labels for any of the hundreds of objects contains even an approximate date. The same thing is true for the tribal objects in the African and Oceanic galleries of the American Museum of Natural History--among other ethnological museums).

Of course, in the largest sense there are "anthropological" issues at stake throughout the show, in that it deals with human artifacts and was always intended to raise larger questions about the nature of human creativity. Here there is room for rich and profitable debate between

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McEvilley and myself, as there is, indeed, room for such debate between art historians and anthropologists, as well as, of course, among anthropologists themselves. (It was precisely in order to welcome and further such debate that we invited a group of distinguished anthropologists and historians of primitive art to join us in a day of intellectual exchange about the exhibition in early November.) It is, of course, a basic assumption of the exhibition that when we talk about the tribal objects as art or sculpture we are saying something perfectly sensible and meaningful. McEvilley refuses to accept this position, and embraces instead a radical form of cultural relativism. In support of this position, he dogmatically cites various kinds of evidence from art history, anthropology, and anthropological linguistics.

Now, I do not pretend to be anything of an expert on either anthropological or linguistic issues. Nor do I imagine that such immensely rich and complicated issues can be sorted out in this kind of exchange (though I would think it not impossible that some real progress might still be made). I can only envy McEvilley's authority in art history, anthropology, linguistics, phenomenology, and literary theory, and sympathize with his need to mock the comedic ignorance of those less accomplished than he. Alas, as but a poor art historian, I can only hope that after a professional lifetime in this field I know something about it, at least. And yet when I come to consider McEvilley's art historical citations, I am often really startled. For example, in order to cut through a supposed "myth of the continuity of Western art history"(another sacred dogma of mine which somehow I had previously been unaware I held), McEvilley asks us to consider that "The charioteer of Delphi, ca. 470 B.C., for example, was seen totally (sic) differently in Classical Greece from the way we see him now. He was not alone in that noble, self-sufficient

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serenity of transcendental angelic whiteness that we see." Perhaps I should take it less amiss to find my own ideas being transformed beyond recognition by McEvilley, when I discover that he can also somehow transform this familiar monument of introductory art history from a bronze into a marble.

I am afraid that almost all of McEvilley's art historical assertions come from the same quarry as the marble charioteer. I had pointed out that the Egyptians produced art, although they had no word for it. McEvilley counters this by saying that "what we regard as Egyptian artworks the Egyptians understood as functional objects within the very practical activity of funerary magic...virtually everything in the great Egyptian Museum at Cairo was made to be buried underground and hidden from human eyes and human knowledge forever...the reasons why their [painting, sculpture and decorated objects] were so gorgeously designed and crafted, then, remains a mystery..." Only to McEvilley. McEvilley seems to be crossing his fingers and hoping that none of his readers has been to the Egyptian Museum where, contrary to his assertion, there are a great many objects not intended "to be buried underground."[3] Some of the objects in royal tombs were, in fact, the very ones previously used in palaces. Moreover, anyone who visits Karnak or a variety of other sites can still see a great deal of Egyptian painting and sculpture that was intended to be seen in the light of day. Indeed, the tomb paintings, sculptures and objects were <u>not</u> (as Leo Steinberg said to me of this passage in McEvilley) put underground to be hidden from human eyes forever. "They were designed," he observed, "to be enjoyed, both functionally and esthetically by human eyes in an assured afterlife precisely forever. McEvilley is simply projecting his own skepticism about the

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after-life upon the ancient Egyptians." Or--may I add?--"appropriating their intentionality into his."

In defense of his astonishing concept of "communal inventiveness" as a description of the process of change in tribal art, McEvilley cites "the American automobile industry, where stylistic change arises through a communal development, or, again, the design changes of utilitarian objects like household goods and cigarette lighters..." Yet, as any beginning student in the history of industrial design knows, the development of design objects--including automobiles and cigarette lighters--were very much the consequence of individual inspirations by gifted designers. At the same time, all Western art might be considered "communal" insofar as its development depends on the sharing of ideas within artists' communities.

McEvilley's record in art historical citation, therefore, makes me a little uneasy about the unassailable truth of the anthropological and linguistic evidence he calls on so confidently. And, indeed, a little digging in the library suggests that these assertions are not, shall we say, unproblematic. In his attempt to demonstrate that objects in the show were used for human sacrifice and ritual bloodshed, McEvilley claims to quote a secondary text on the Nukuoro Island Kave figure to the effect that "she was a goddess to whom human sacrifices were offered." In fact, the authors had said only that she is "reputed to have human sacrifices offered to her."[4] Going back to the primary scholarly source on the Kave,[5] we discover that this story of human sacrifice derives entirely from 19th century travelers' tales, a genre known for its Grand Guignol exaggerations. As Susan Vogel, director of The Center for African Art observes, "hardly any of the African objects in the show ever had blood

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on them, and, in those few exceptions, it was always chicken blood, not human blood."[6] McEvilley tries to qualify his statement by saying that the objects in the show "were used in conjunction with" sacrifices, but this is equally true of classical Greek art, which also functioned "in conjunction with sacrifices and ritual bloodshed," as when animals were sacrificed on the altar-derived triple steps of the Parthenon. This is not to suggest, of course, that Greek and African rites were the same; but it does demonstrate that McEvilley's attempt to show that tribal objects cannot be considered "art" in the Western sense because they were sometimes used in conjunction with sacrificial activities is simply unfounded.

Then we come to McEvilley's claim that the "point of cultural relativism" can be upheld by the work of the linguists Sapir and Whorf, whose theories of linguistic relativism "have been experimentally confirmed in a number of ways." I was puzzled to read that this was so, since the thesis, as I understood it--that people don't have something if they don't have a word for it--seemed to be falsified many times in my own modest experience as a multi-lingual. The French, for instance, have no word for design (in recent years they have taken to using the English word, pronounced in the English manner)--and yet who would claim that there was no design in France? I have since been pleased to learn that my own common-sense argument was in fact a key point in a famous debunking article about the Whorfian hypothesis by the eminent linguist Joshua Fishman.[7] (That is, Fishman pointed out that the claim that we have to have a single word for a thing in order to have the concept is absurd; some languages may need many words to make the same point that in others can be made with one, but that does not mean that the language

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determines the conceptual structure.) Moreover, McEvilley's assertion that the tribal peoples "lacked...even circumlocutions that could express what we mean by art" is simply false. The Africans can and do use numerous "circumlocutions," for they possess many words--such as "balance", "evenness", "to make beautiful"--that they use to describe the character of their art, and there is a notable literature on this subject.[8]

On the whole question of whether or not primitive objects can be called art, the simplest position seems to be this: No culture's art is similar to another's in every sense; all art is something Other. But since it is made by human beings its Otherness is a matter of degree. If we are to call an object art, it must involve some esthetic ordering of its materials to non-practical, expressive purposes--whatever magic or religious ends it may also have. This either is the case with tribal sculpture or it is not; and if it is--as seems to me painfully obvious[9]--then it is perfectly appropriate to call it art, though we may choose to call it many other things as well.

We now come to the question of the truth of McEvilley's claims about various other exhibitions which were supposed to have made ours old hat. I have very little appetite for this debate, since such questions of priority normally hold no interest for me at all.[10] But McEvilley insisted, and presumably continues to insist, that our show was mounted not for its stated purpose but rather in order to "revalidate classical Modernist esthetics." This theory, in turn, rested syllogistically on a set of "facts" purportedly proving that our exhibition was "not new" and that, therefore, it must have some other, secret agenda. The necessity of contesting McEvilley's "facts," therefore, lay less in

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their intrinsic importance than in their role in his reasoning--though it is worth getting the record straight in any event.

Rather than concede mistakes in the face of my critique, McEvilley returned with "proofs" designed to show the errors were mine. ("If we pause and count up the inaccuracies they have found, we see that Rubin has found none..."). The slippery nature of his reply, however, has shifted the issue to the more significant and telling area of scholarly honesty. Take the question of the content of the Beaubourg vitrines. "Rubin," he writes, "denies that any of the objects in the Beaubourg vitrines had ever

> been owned by Braque or Picasso. In fact, at the writing of my article one of the authorities on the subject had ventured the opposite opinion, yet finally it seems this point must remain moot, in the light of the fact, acknowledged by Rubin, that no exact listing of the objects has been found. Still, the fact that some of the objects there belonged to early Modernist artists is acknowledged by all."

For a man who accuses me of "the fallacy called the Appeal to Authority" because I cite Picasso on Picasso's own views about primitive objects, the reference to an unnamed "authority" in the above passage is extraordinary. I wonder if this "authority" is not an invention of McEvilley for, so far as I know, I am alone in having made a study of Picasso's and Braque's tribal objects and their various locations. Let McEvilley refute me by naming his "authority" and describing the bona

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fides that entitle him or her to an opinion on this specialized subject.[11] More importantly, however, there is nothing at all "moot" about this question. There cannot have been any of Braque's of Picasso's tribal sculptures in the Béaubourg vitrines since there are none in the collection of the Musée de l'Homme, which provided Beaubourg with the objects. Thus the issue of a supposedly lost "listing" is irrelevant. Nor did I ever "acknowledge", as McEvilley claims, that no such list had been found. I never mentioned any list. Moreover, I always assumed that the Musée de l'Homme had such a list; they do, and I now have a copy of it.[12] Finally, "the fact that some of the objects [in the Beaubourg vitrines] belonged to early Modernist artists" is not "acknowledged by all," as McEvilley claims. It was not "acknowledged" by me, nor has it been, so far as I know, by anyone except McEvilley. And with good reason, for none of the objects lent by the Musée de l'Homme ever belonged to a modern artist.[13]

Now let us turn to the Menil family show, where McEvilley attempts to prove he is right about its role as a precedent for our exhibition by pointing to "a plain statement in the catalogue by Walter Hopps, curator of

> the exhibition, discussing the mixing of primitive and modern objects, in which [Hopps] notes, "Ainsi dans la section des surrealistes, on trouve, a côté de leurs oeuvres, des objets leur ayant apartenus" (thus, in the section on the Surrealists, beside their own works one finds objects that belonged to them). These include, for example, Eskimo masks, of which

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"plusieurs furent acquises...par des surrealistes français établis à New York (several were bought... by French Surrealists living in New York)." [Italics mine; ellipses McEvilley's]

All of this would seem pretty convincing...unless you saw the Menil show (which McEvilley, to judge from what he says, evidently did not), or unless you had at hand the catalogue, La rime et la raison, from which McEvilley has misappropriated his "facts." In the latter case you would see that Hopps' sentence about "objects that belonged to [the Surrealists]," though slightly ambiguous because poorly translated, is not located, as McEvilley claims, in a discussion about the "mixing of primitive and Modern objects." And if you had seen the show, you would have known that the "objects" to which Hopps was, in fact, referring were not tribal sculptures at all but bibelots, exotica and memorabilia; the few tribal sculptures in those areas were not from artists' collections, nor did Walter Hopps ever say they were.[14] But that's not all. The last part of McEvilley's paragraph cites Eskimo masks in the Menil show as examples of tribal objects supposedly owned by Surrealists, an assertion elaborated with a quotation seemingly continued from Hopps' text. But this passage ("several were bought...") is by another author, occurs 329 pages later in the Menil catalogue, and does not refer to the Eskimo masks in the show.[15] Is this the scholarship that "is a type of science?"

William Rubin
Museum of Modern Art

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NOTES

1) Cézanne was so deeply attached to the tradition of Renaissance and post-Renaissance painting, with its emphasis on visual perception and on sculptural plasticity, that he derisively dismissed Gauguin's mature style as "Chinese painting." One can hardly imagine his having accepted the far more conceptual and ideographic stylizations of tribal art.

2) This is not meant to imply that Leiris himself subscribes to such a description, only that he said it was common coin in the thirties among amateurs of what was then universally called art nègre, and that Picasso would have heard it.

3) Remembering a good deal of large sculpture from my visit to that museum, I checked with the Egyptologists at the Metropolitan who suggested that something less than one fourth of what is visible of this immense and as yet not fully catalogued collection would be material not taken from tombs. Thus, tomb material could hardly be said to comprise "virtually every object" there.

4) Brian Brake [photographs], James McNeish [conversations] and David Simmons [commentary], Art of the Pacific, N. Y. Abrams, 1980. See Simmons note for #78.

5) Janet Davidson, "A Wooden Image from Nukuoro in the Auckland Museum", Journal of the Polynesian Society, March 1968. There we discover that the suggestion of human sacrifice was hearsay reported by traders, among them the donor Mr. Cousens, whose statement was published in an Auckland newspaper in 1878. The newspaper says that it "cannot say"

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if the statement was "well founded," and observes: "It [the sculpture] is very rude, but it is for this reason a proof of the barbarous and primitive worship" in the Islands. (c.f. also note 6)

6) As the making of sculptures was, for the African artist, a primarily religious function, he often--as Susan Vogel notes--sacrificed a chicken before beginning a piece.

In Africa, human sacrifice, except in the kingdoms of Dahomey and Benin, was always very rare, reserved for major ritual occasions. "Human sacrifice is a difficult subject on which to find unbiased information," writes Vogel. "Early visitors to Africa--missionaries or representatives of the colonial powers--had every reason to make their constituents in Europe believe that the Africans whom they encountered were benighted savages, badly in need of conversion or policing. They tended to exaggerate the prevalence of human sacrifice." ("Rapacious Birds and Severed Heads: Early Nigerian Bronze Rings", Art Institute of Chicago Centennial Lectures, Museum Studies X, 1983 (pp. 330-357).

7) Joshua Fishman, "A Systematization of the Whorfian Hypothesis," Behavioral Science, V. 5, 1960-61 p. 323; c.f. also Elizabeth Rosche, "Linguistic Relativity," in A. Silverstein (Ed.), Human Communication: Theoretical Perspectives. N. Y. 1974.

8) As, for example, Robert Farris Thompson, "Yoruba Artistic Criticism," The Traditional Artist in African Societies, ed. Warren L. d'Azevedo (Bloomington, 1979) and Susan M. Vogel "Baule and Yoruba Art Criticism: A Comparison," The Visual Arts, Plastic and Graphic, ed. Justine M. Cordwell, New York, 1979.

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9) How else explain--among other stylistic variations--the obvious changes within established types made by single sculptors, such as the innovations of the Buli Master or the Master of Ogol? Such differences alter the esthetic expressiveness of the object, but cannot be explained by practical cult necessities nor do they reflect any change in iconography.

10) MoMA had never claimed that "Primitivism" was the first show anywhere in which tribal objects from artists' collections had been juxtaposed with their work, only that it was the first to deal with the subject in depth and "in the light of informed art history." A small exhibition had taken place in Berlin many years ago, in which some objects belonging to German Expressionist artists were shown with their work. Our show was the first to do this with tribal art belonging to all major European and American primitivists.

11) McEvilley cites two curators, Jean-Yves Mock and Jean-Hubert Martin, on other aspects of the Beaubourg vitrines. Neither, I am certain, would claim the slightest expertise on the subject of tribal art in general, nor the tribal art collections of modern artists in particular.

12) This list, and the accompanying information, for both of which I am indebted to Francine Ndiaye, confirms my statement that a number of the tribal objects at Beaubourg were from regions and were of types--as well as accessioned at dates--which would have made it impossible for them to be seen by Paris modernists. The list shows both McEvilley and me to have been in error about the number of objects involved. Beaubourg received 65 not 100 objects, of which 13 were returned almost immediately. There is no record of how many of the

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remaining 52 objects were shown at any one time, although it is clearly more than I had remembered.

13) The only possible exception to what I have been saying about the Beaubourg vitrines, and a very unlikely one, concerns a Fang mask bequeathed to the Centre Pompidou by the widow of Andre Derain, which may have been shown for a short time after its arrival at Beaubourg in the African vitrine. Jean-Hubert Martin thinks this is possible, but is not sure. The fiche for the object indicates that it was not shown at all. It was an object we searched for during a period of years, never coming upon it at Beaubourg. Through an agent for the late Mme. Derain's estate, we finally discovered that it had been given to Beaubourg. Even in the unlikely event that this Derain-owned object were to have been shown for a short time, it would fall far short of confirming that "some of the objects there belonged to early Modern artists."

14) See La rime et la raison, Paris 1984, p. 16 and passim.

15) The quotation in the second part of McEvilley's paragraph is from the catalog notes on the Kuskokwim masks of the 19th century. None of the catalog notes is individually signed, but all were by the experts who wrote the introductory texts on the geographical area involved, as McEvilley should well have been aware. On page 355, Edmund Carpenter, writing of the Menil family Eskimo masks says that they come from a group of 32 pieces purchased at the beginning of the century by George Heye. Of this group, he notes, "many were later acquired by French Surrealists established in New York." He says this not about the Menil masks, which--as he has reconfirmed to me--never belonged to Surrealist artists.

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Dots with Cream
Autumn at Sea