

Curated by:
Jean-Hubert Martin

Joe Ben
Cai Guo-Qiang
Gedewon
Gera
Daniel Spoerri

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art

that

heals



apexart curatorial program

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Cover
Image: Joe Ben,
Installation, 1995 at the
exhibition: Galerie des 5
continents, Musée des
Arts d'Afrique et d'Océanie,
Paris. On the sandpainting stands
Number 26A - Black and White, a
painting by Jackson Pollock,
(MNAM Centre Pompidou, Paris)
covered with a tapestry by
Hosteen Klah (d 1937), Navajo
artist who fast linked his traditions
and modernity in the twenties.

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Art that Heals

This issue of an exhibition putting the emphasis on curatorship leads me to find a way to show together art works coming from different cultural contexts in the same space, despite its small size. Since *Magiciens de la Terre*, it has been a constant goal for me to break the borders that modernity has erected to protect itself. Considering that cultures have an equal value because they represent the way human beings relate to the external world and their environment, there is no point in drawing a line between the different levels of technology they have reached.

Through a paradoxical process modernity has helped lend to the recognition of other cultures and different esthetical canons. It has even used them and included them in its quest for new territories in art. But, at the same time, Western civilization could not stop its will to dominate the world and to become a colonial empire, it put aside the authors – until very recently – and declared itself universal because of its incorporation of the others and its very large level of knowledge and information. Hence it forgot that having freed itself from religion, it condemned all the practices linked to faith and magic carried out by communities to be relegated to a strange no man's land. What has constituted art for centuries and makes the core of museum collections has been suddenly relegated to the past by Hegelian philosophy. What is true for us may not be true for others. The difference between the elaborate strategies of Western art are certainly quite far from the practices of Ethiopian traditional healers. Nevertheless, they are contemporary in the way they can share the same time and space and they are thus aware of each other's activity.

I have tried for years to meet such "remarkable men" (Peter Brook) and show their visual work as far as they can meet the understanding and the sensitivity of a Western public. In the last decade, many curators have opened up to what was called the periphery. In my opinion they have done it in a very shy way. There is today a sort of trend among artists coming from other continents, but it concerns mostly artists who have

adopted the methods and the strategies of Western contemporary art. The very idea of installation certainly has permitted a lot of contacts and interplay, in so far as it allows a great flexibility. Foreign artists can include elements of their own culture in a more authentic way than painting allowed. Stretched canvas always conveys the idea that the medium is the message. There have been many exhibitions whose topics were questioning either identities or nomadism, passage, travels, border crossing, etc... But almost none of them had the courage to question our system and its categories of art vs. craft or religious vs. lay individuals and communities. This requires a real revision of art history the way it has been written for a few centuries, i.e., in a totally Euroamerican-centered way.

On the other hand, the ignorance of the art world center toward Native American art is surprising. It is obvious that illustrative and folkloric works have nothing in common with innovative contemporary art. Nevertheless, the dominance of the theory of critical distance has ignored some highly interesting works. If contemporary art is not so much interested in overtaking formal solutions from the arts of populations without writing, there has been a constant interest in rituals practiced by these communities (Jackson Pollock, Jean Rouch). When I was doing the research for the exhibition *Magiciens de la Terre*, I enquired about medicine-men and artists who would possibly have taken over the tradition of sand paintings linked to healing rituals. Christianization and the development of stereotyped "Indian" images and craft have not helped much for the survival of those rites. After a long quest, my friend Mark Francis had the chance to meet **Joe Ben** (born 1958), son of a medicine-man, who is able to do ritual painting as well as personal art creation on sand. He is a specially gifted artist in the way he draws lines with colored mineral powder. His works rely on a cosmic background. They result from intense involvement and meditation. When using traditional patterns, Joe Ben takes care to transform them to avoid sacrilege. The ephemeral quality of the work, its refined execution and its deep spiritual input make it exceptional. I could never understand why his work received no attention from New York.

This deeply loaded work became the core of the curatorial project I felt compelled to undertake. Combined with a few other works of different continents and cultures, it is considered here in the light of its origin: a drawing made of sand and minerals that helps to cure people.

Group shows gather different works around a common denominator that can be either conceptual or formal. The ideal is to combine both, but it usually comes down to stress an already existing group of works and to re-assert history. To gather four artists around an anthropological idea has something of a dadaist absurdity. This is where its real meaning lies. Because it forces one to think about differences and not similarities, heterogeneity against homogeneity. The world of thoughts and ideas generates such incredibly varied formal expressions that it results in the present time. And not everything can be explained by history – a typical Western stereotype. This is why I still think – against many reviewers and critics – that big exhibitions are necessary and useful because they convey this feeling of contradiction and complexity that may be lacking in smaller exhibitions where visitors can always classify the few items in given categories.

The cupboard hosts *La pharmacie bretonne* (The Brittany Drugstore) of **Daniel Spoerri** (born 1930). It follows logically the assemblages and found objects of *Magie à la noix* (Peanut magic) that he had gathered on the island of Simi (1966–67). Water protects and cures, baptism celebrates the entry into Christianity and the sources have magic power. The 117 bottles, duly classified, originate from sources and wells in Brittany (Bretagne). They all possess specific curative and prophylactic virtues. A map allows the viewer to locate them. Their history and special skills



Daniel Spoerri: *La pharmacie bretonne*, 1977. Wooden box, glass bottles and water

have been consigned in a book. Kept in the closed cupboard, the precious waters are not reachable for those who would like to test all of them and get a total cure.

Based on the description of their patient's ailments, **Gera** (1941–2000) and **Gedewon** (born 1939), two traditional Ethiopian doctors, make drawings of figures in their own personal style to treat the specific sickness. At the beginning of the 1970s, Jacques Mercier, a researcher at the Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique, Paris, discovered their talismanic drawings. As a result of the encounter, the two Ethiopian scholars decided to become artists as well. Following are extracts from two articles by Jacques Mercier:

The Ethiopian religious authorities always looked at medicine with suspicion, accusing it of being mistrustful of God. Gera nonetheless practiced it, more or less in secret, apart from his religious studies. He communicated with the spirits; he treated the sick with plants, prayers and talismans. He learnt from a monk that the talismanic art is a secret from Heaven, revealed by angels and demons to a few "sages": Enoch, Solomon, or again Alexander the Great. The prototype of the talismans is the seal of God the Father. As a form of writing before the invention of writing as such, they are the origin, no longer understood, of all known forms of writing. The Ethiopian talismanic art reveals a body of "wisdom" which, historically, draws on the same sources as the Jewish Cabbala and Arabic Alchemy. (...) It owes its extraordinary development to the local cultural context, in which the image has become emancipated from the Christian dialectic, and where possession is a favoured interpretation of sickness. Talismans are not illustrations of



Gera *Untitled*, 1995. Oil, Rabbit skin glue on canvas 70.5 x 22.5 inches

prayer, but act by themselves on the spirit through the eyes of the possessed person.

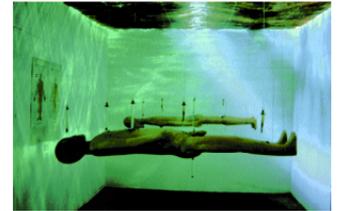
Gedewon situated his talismans firmly in the contemporary world, describing them as "study and research talismans". He filled a notebook with drawings of talismans for me in 1975, just as Gera was starting to use coloured inks to draw the double lines of his talismans. (...) He set out the classic themes of talismans to the Names of God and of certain angels. (...) As to his drawing style it is strictly talismanic, in that it consists only of faces incorporated into a more or less complex architecture of double lines. (...) "What you have to do, he says "is to ask the sick person to describe the contacts and visions he had when he fell ill, and to inscribe these colours and forms in the talisman, accompanied by suitable Names of God. The demons take on changing appearances: bees, flies, birds, arms, eyes, flowers, stones, etc." (...) The aggressive spirit, seeing its own appearances in the talisman, will cry out and flee, as through burned. By proceeding in this way, he is prevented from gaining access to the human body. The talisman is a prohibition. And its form has to do with a strategy of tension. (...) Gedewon's talismans are surfaces that proliferate to infinity, frontiers that bring into being spaces which they simultaneously separate.

Cai Guo-Qiang (born 1957), a Chinese artist living in New York, has shown, like his friend Huang Yong Ping, a great interest in traditional Chinese pharmacy. His huge installation *Cultural melting bath: Pharmacy for the 20th century* invites the visitor to bathe in a pool of water containing medicinal herbs with therapeutic properties. The sculptures of *Moxacautery – For Africa*, 1995 were made by an African artist. This



Gedewon *Untitled 17*, 1996. Ink on paper 21.25 x 30 inches

piece symbolizes therapy for the society by applying moxibustion to specific points on two human figures (one male and one female). Furthermore, the points are also used as the symbol of social problems that trouble the African continent. The moxa sticks consist of a certain therapeutic herb that has very similar effects as marijuana. They are good for treating headaches and itchiness and can tranquilize as well as enhance male sexual potency (accelerating the vitality of sperm when applied to the genitals). Being seduced and provoked by smelling the fragrance from the burning moxa sticks, the audience will also experience the relaxation.



Cai Guo-Qiang *Moxacautery – For Africa*, 1995

Using anthropology to interpret art allows a larger scope encompassing material culture from other continents. It could help possibly also to question some of the dogmas of actual Western contemporary art like critical distance or deconstruction. A similar set of delayed communication, which is fundamental for art, can then be found in works from different cultures.

Jean-Hubert Martin
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The title of the exhibition refers to Jacques Mercier *Art That Heals: The Image as Medicine in Ethiopia* (New York: The Museum for African Art, 1997). Title credited by Jacques Mercier to Suzan Vogel.