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Content is nothing without context

By Philip Dodd

As the art world becomes broader and increasingly global, it needs to go deeper, too



Works by Nigerian sculptor Sunday Jack Akpan at 'Les Magiciens de la Terre' in Paris's Pompidou Centre, 1989

Even 25 years on, we can still feel the reverberations that accompanied the fall of walls in 1989. The demolition of the Berlin Wall promised a reunited Europe; in the same year, Tim Berners Lee first imagined a web that would connect the world; and with the release of some of the Rivonia trial prisoners, apartheid began to be dismantled. In Paris, during the same year, the Centre Pompidou staged *Les Magiciens de la Terre*, a much celebrated, much abused exhibition of more than 100 artists, half of whom were from beyond western Europe and the US. The aim of the show was – with the usual hyperbolic licence that museums adopt – to remedy an art world where “100 per cent of exhibitions ignore 80 per cent of the earth”, as curator Jean-Hubert Martin put it. Welcome to the global art world – such was the show’s implicit argument.

In one sense the show was visionary, and with our lust for anniversaries is being pored over in any number of publications and conferences. An art world that has a vastly wider scope is forming before our eyes. Museums in the west are eager to acquire art from non-Nato countries for their collections; archives are springing up to secure vital documents; international galleries now feel the need to represent at least a sprinkling of artists from beyond western Europe and the US. This month yet another art fair opens – ArtStage Singapore – just one of a number of fairs, east and south, where art from most quarters of the world can be seen.

But . . . if all is so global, why is it that there is so much excitement over the anniversary of *Les Magiciens*, yet apparently not a flicker of interest in an equally important exhibition whose 25th anniversary is also this year? *China Avant/Garde*, which announced the entrance of art from China as a force on the world stage, was the first exhibition of avant-garde art in China, organised by the artists themselves, at the National Museum of China. Performance, installation, painting and experimental ink painting all jostled together: 297 artworks from 183 artists, some of whom, such as Xu Bing and Zhang Peili, have become internationally celebrated artists, while others, such as Zhang Xiaogang, are now art-market darlings. The show even has a great media angle: it was initially closed after two hours when an artist, Xiao Lu, fired a gun during a performance

Partly the lack of interest is due to inherited curatorial ignorance in western museums, which only time and recruitment can cure (not the

least of the cunning passages of history is that Hou Hanru, who was involved in *China Avant/Garde*, has recently been appointed as director of the Maxxi Museum in Rome). Partly the lack of curiosity comes out of a traditional feeling of superiority. Just before Christmas I sat on a panel with the director of an important art fair who said that a Chinese collector had told him that all Chinese collectors were simply investors. He seemed to think that he needed to know no more.

It is this kind of attitude that causes offence and frustration. An Indonesian curator told me recently that he was weary of being told in New York that Asian artists rip off western ones. But he has no need to worry. If history is any guide and cultural or soft power continues to follow economic power, then the increasing economic might of the Bric countries and the Mint group (Mexico, Indonesia, Nigeria and Turkey) will further compel the attention of the western museums to art from these countries.

So a properly international art world is in formation, even in the west. The argument now has to be over its nature. And this is the point when we ought to bury not praise *Les Magiciens*. That exhibition amputated art from the cultures, traditions and histories that helped bring it into being. It was the art equivalent of J.G. Ballard's airports – a history-less show that felt it did not need to pay attention to cultures, a show where power was hidden and smoothed away in an immunised “creative” space, effectively a western tourist view of the world.

Among many other western institutions, Tate acknowledges that the western art world is no longer the centre of the earth and is busily acquiring new work from the Middle East, Africa, Latin America and Asia. But for any institution, a serious commitment involves letting a whiff of history into the acquisitions policy – showing the art traditions out of which this work was made, placing modern Islamic or Chinese calligraphy next to, say, an American abstract artist, recognising that all art is rooted and routed, and that art is made in particular cultures with sometimes turbulent and relevant histories. Visitors need to learn other ways of knowing as well as seeing.

Philip Dodd is the curator of 'Where Does it all Begin? Contemporary Abstract Art in Asia and the West' at Pearl Lam Galleries, Singapore, January 17-28. pearllam.com

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