

The “Primitive” Unconscious of Modern Art

HAL FOSTER

At once eccentric and crucial, *Les Femmes d'Alger* (1907) is the set piece of the Museum of Modern Art: a bridge between modernist and premodernist painting, a primal scene of modern primitivism. In this painting a step outside the tradition is said to coincide with a leap within it. Yet one wonders if this aesthetic breakthrough is not also a breakdown, psychologically regressive, politically reactionary. The painting presents an encounter in which are inscribed two scenes: the depicted one of the brothel and the projected one of the heralded 1907 visit of Picasso to the collection of tribal artifacts in the Musée d'Ethnographie du Trocadéro. This double encounter is tellingly situated: the prostitutes in the bordello, the African masks in the Trocadéro, both disposed for recognition, for use.¹ Figured here, to be sure, are both fear and desire of the other,² but is it not desire for mastery and fear of its frustration?

In projecting the primitive onto woman as other, *Femmes d'Alger* less resolves than is riven by the threat to male subjectivity, displaying its own decentering along with its defense. For in some sense Picasso did intuit one apotropaic function of tribal objects—and adopted them as such, as “weapons”:

They were against everything — against unknown threatening spirits.
. . . I, too, I am against everything. I, too, believe that everything is
unknown, that everything is an enemy! . . . women, children . . . the

1. As is well known, an early study included two customers of the *Femmes d'Alger*, a medical student and a sailor, and was thus distanced as a narrative; with these surrogates removed, the painting becomes a direct address to its masculine subject. As for the Trocadéro, Western man, its source of projection, is absent from it: “What was not displayed in the Musée de l'Homme was the modern West, its art, institutions, and techniques. Thus the orders of the West were everywhere present in the Musée de l'Homme, except on display.” (James Clifford, “On Ethnographic Surrealism,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, vol. 23, no. 4 [1981], p. 561).

2. See William Rubin, “Picasso,” in *Primitivism in 20th Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern*, ed. Rubin, New York, MOMA, 1984, pp. 252–254. Hilton Kramer, who celebrates the ability of bourgeois culture to negate the primitive “assault,” finds this important connection between primitivism and “fear of women” “trivializing” (“The ‘Primitive’ Conundrum,” *The New Criterion* [December 1984], p. 5).

whole of it! I understood what the Negroes used their sculptures for. . . . All fetishes . . . were weapons. To help people avoid coming under the influence of spirits again, to help them become independent. Spirits, the unconscious . . . they are all the same thing. I understood why I was a painter. All alone in that awful museum with the masks . . . the dusty mannikins. *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon* must have been born that day, but not at all because of the forms; because it was my first exorcism painting—yes absolutely!³

Apart from a (bombastic) avant-gardism, Picasso conveys the shock of this encounter as well as the euphoria of his solution, an extraordinary psycho-aesthetic move by which otherness was used to ward away others (woman, death, the primitive) and by which, finally, a crisis in phallogocentric culture was turned into one of its great monuments.

If, in the *Demoiselles*, Picasso transgresses, he does so in order to mediate the primitive in the name of the West (and it is in part for this that he remains the hero of MOMA's narrative of the triumph of modern art). In this regard, the *Demoiselles* is indeed a primal scene of primitivism, one in which the structured relation of narcissism and aggressivity is revealed. Such confrontational identification is peculiar to the Lacanian imaginary, the realm to which the subject returns when confronted with the threat of difference.⁴ Here, then, primitivism emerges as a fetishistic discourse, a recognition and disavowal not only of primitive difference but of the fact that the West—its patriarchal subjectivity and *socius*—is threatened by loss, by lack, by others.

Les Demoiselles d'Avignon was also the set piece of the recent MOMA exhibition-cum-book "*Primitivism*" in *20th Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern*,⁵ in which the painting was presented, along with African masks often proposed as sources for the demoiselles, in such a way as to support the curatorial case for a modern/tribal affinity in art. (The argument runs that Picasso could not have seen these masks, that the painting manifests an intuitive primitivity or "savage mind.") This presentation was typical of the abstractive operation of the show, premised as it was on the belief that "modernist primitivism depends on the autonomous force of objects" and that its complexities can be revealed "in purely visual terms, simply by the juxtaposition of knowingly se-

3. Quoted in André Malraux, *Picasso's Mask*, trans. June and Jacques Guicharnaud, New York, Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1976, pp. 10–11.

4. My discussion of primitivism as a fetishistic colonial discourse is indebted to Homi K. Bhabha, "The Other Question," *Screen*, vol. 24, no. 6 (Nov./Dec. 1983), pp. 18–36.

5. The show, sponsored by Philip Morris, Inc., included some 150 modern and 200 tribal works, most often set in pairs or comparative ensembles. Curated by William Rubin, Director of the Department of Painting and Sculpture, in collaboration with Kirk Varnedoe of the Institute of Fine Arts, it claimed to be "the first exhibition to juxtapose tribal and modern objects in the light of informed art history." MOMA also published a two-volume catalogue with nineteen essays by sixteen scholars on diverse aspects of "primitivism."

lected works of art."⁶ Though the exhibition did qualify the debased art-historical notion of causal influence (e.g., of the tribal on the modern), and did on another front demolish the more debased racist model of an evolutionist primitivism, it did so often only to replace the first with "affinity" (in the form of the family of *homo artifex*) and the second with the empty universal, "human creativity wherever found."⁷

Based on the aesthetic concerns of the modern artists,⁸ the "Primitivism" show cannot be condemned on ethnological grounds alone. Too often the contextualist rebuke is facile, a compensatory expression of a liberal-humanist remorse for what cannot be restored. It is, after all, the vocation of the modern art museum to decontextualize. (Lévi-Strauss describes anthropology as a *technique du dépaysement*:⁹ how much more is this true of art history?) And in the case of the tribal objects on display, the museum is but one final stage in a series of abstractions, of power-knowledge plays that constitute primitivism. Yet to acknowledge decontextualization is one thing, to produce ideas with it another. For it is this absolution of (con)textual meanings and ideological problems in the self-sufficiency of form that allowed for the humanist presuppositions of the show (that the final criterion is Form, the only context Art, the primary subject Man). In this way the show confirmed the colonial extraction of the tribal work (in the guise of its redemption as art) and rehearsed its artistic appropriation into tradition.¹⁰ No counterdiscourse was posed: the imperialist precondition of primitivism was suppressed, and "primitivism," a metonym of imperialism, served as its disavowal.

This abstraction of the tribal is only half the story; no less essential to the production of affinity-effects was the decontextualization of the modern work. It, too, appeared without indices of its contextual mediations (i.e., the dialectic of avant-garde, kitsch, and academy by which it is structured: it is, incidentally, the excision of this dialectic that allows for the formal-historicist model of modernism in the first place). The modern objects on view, most of which are preoccupied by a primitivist form and/or "look," alone represented the way the primitive is thought. Which is to say that the modern/tribal encounter was mapped in mostly positivist terms (the surfaces of influence, the forms of affinity)—in terms of morphological coincidence, not conceptual displacement. (The "trans-

6. Kirk Varnedoe, "Preface," in *Primitivism*, p. x.

7. *Ibid.*

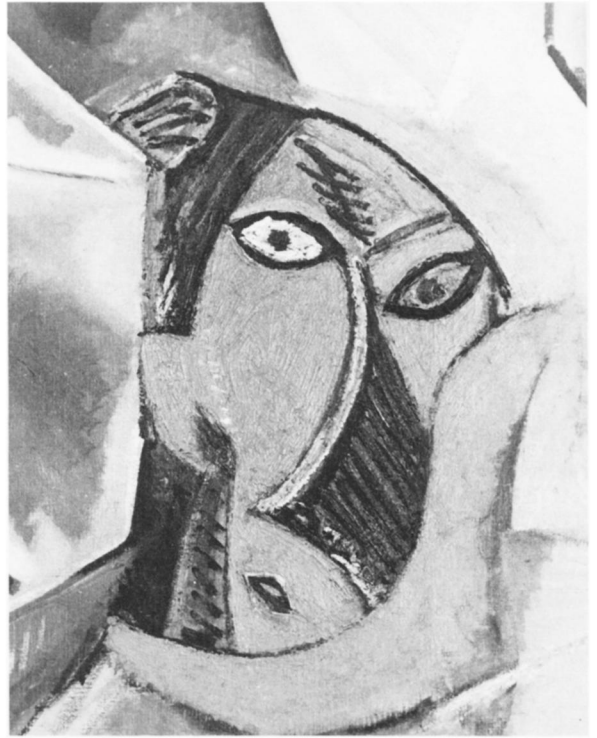
8. On the one hand, this is a legitimate restriction: to focus on the "appreciation" of tribal art by modern artists, who "generally did not know its sources or purposes" (exhibition pamphlet). On the other hand, it is a curatorial alibi that obscures the ideology of primitivism.

9. Claude Lévi-Strauss, "Archaism in Anthropology," in *Structural Anthropology* (Vol. 1), trans. Claire Jacobson, New York, Basic Books, 1963, p. 117.

10. "We owe to the voyagers, colonials, and ethnologists the arrival of these objects in the West. But we owe primarily to the convictions of the pioneer modern artists their promotion from the rank of curiosities and artifacts to that of major art, indeed to the status of art at all" (Rubin, "Modernist Primitivism: An Introduction," in *Primitivism*, p. 7).



Mbuya (sickness) mask. Pende. Zaire.



Pablo Picasso. Les Demoiselles d'Avignon. 1907.

gressivity” of the encounter was largely disregarded, perhaps because it cannot be so readily *seen*.) In this way, the show abstracted and separated the modern and the tribal into two sets of objects that could then only be “affined.” Thus reduced to form, it is no wonder they came to reflect one another in the glass of the vitrines, and one is tempted to ask, cynically enough, after such a double abstraction, such a double tropism toward modern (en)light(en)ment, what is left but “affinity”? What part of this hypothesis-turned-show was discovery (of transcultural forms, innate structures, and the like) and what part (modernist) invention?

*Elective Affinities, or
Impressions d’Afrique (et d’Océanie)*

For William Rubin, director of the “Primitivism” show, the idea of “elective affinity” between the tribal and the modern arises from two oracular pronouncements of Picasso: one to the effect that this relationship is similar to that between the Renaissance and antiquity; the other that his own tribal objects were “more witnesses than models”¹¹ of his art. Innocuous enough, these state-

11. Quoted by Rubin, “Introduction,” p. 17.

ments nevertheless suggest the way primitivism is conceived as absorbing the primitive, in part via the concept of affinity. The renaissance of antiquity is an intra-Western event, the very discovery of a Westernness: to pose it as an analogy is almost *ipso facto* to inscribe the tribal as modern-primitivist, to deny its difference. Moreover, the analogy implies that the modern and the tribal, like the Renaissance and antiquity, are affined in the search for "fundamentals." Argued particularly by codirector Kirk Varnedoe,¹² this position tends to cast the primitive as primal and to elide the different ways in which the fundamental is thought. The second Picasso testimonial, that the tribal objects were witnesses only, sets up in the disavowal of influence the notion of affinity. Yet, if not direct sources, "the Negro pieces" were not, on account of this, mere secret sharers: they were seen, as Picasso remarked to Malraux, as "mediators,"¹³ that is, as *forms for use*. If the Renaissance analogy poses the tribal as falsely familial, here recognition is contingent upon instrumentality. In this way, through affinity and use, the primitive is sent up into the service of the Western tradition (which is then seen to have partly produced it).

The exhibition commenced with displays of certain modernist involvements with tribal art: interest, resemblance, influence, and affinity proper—usually of a roughly analogous structure and/or conception.¹⁴ In the inspired pairing of the Picasso construction *Guitar* (1912) and a Grebo mask owned by him, Rubin argues that the projective eyes of the mask allowed Picasso to think the hole of the guitar as a cylinder, and thus to use space as form, a surrogate as sign (a discovery proleptic of synthetic cubism). Such affinity, "conceptual ideographic,"¹⁵ not merely formal, is argued in the juxtaposition of a Picasso painting (*Head*, 1928) of superimposed profiles (?) and a Yam mask with the same element for eyes, nose, and mouth. In both works the "features" appear more arbitrary than naturally motivated. The two do share an ideographic relation to the object, and it is true that different signifieds may be informed by similar signifiers. But the works are affined mostly by virtue of the fact that they differ from another (Western "realist") paradigm,¹⁶ and the arbitrariness of the sign (at least in the case of the tribal object) is largely due to its abstraction from its code.

Otherwise, the affinities proposed in the show were mostly morphological—or were treated as such even when they appeared metaphorical or semiological (as in certain surrealist transformations wrung by Picasso). These formally

12. See in particular his essay on Gauguin in "Primitivism," pp. 179–209.

13. Quoted in Malraux, p. 10.

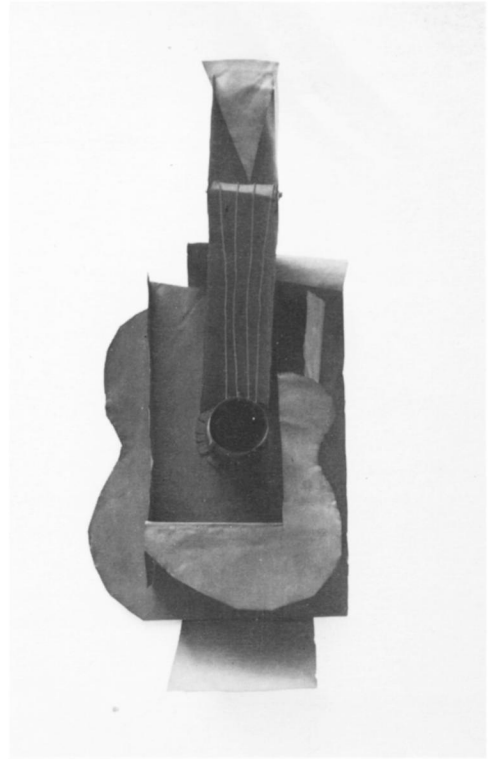
14. To claim affinity, the curators must disprove influence or direct contact—an "argument from silence," which, as others have pointed out, is difficult to make.

15. Rubin, "Introduction," p. 25.

16. See James Clifford, "Histories of the Tribal and the Modern," *Art in America* (April 1985), p. 166.



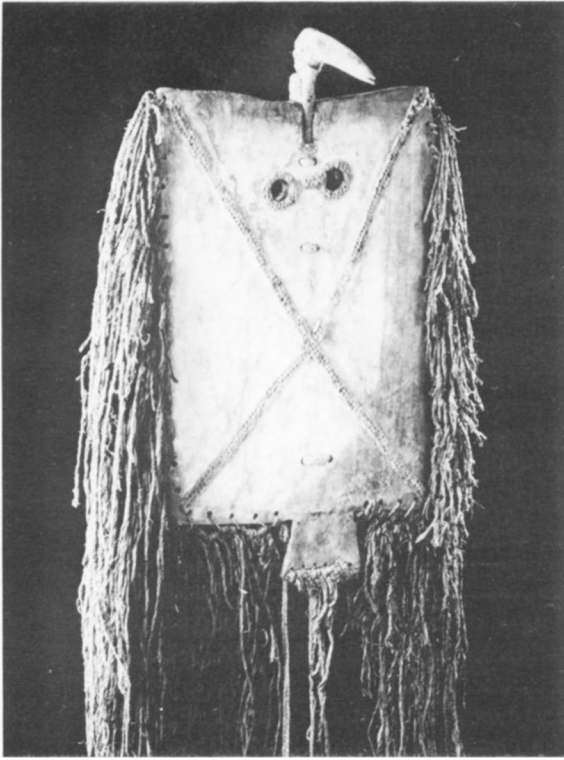
Mask. Grebo. Ivory Coast or Liberia.



Pablo Picasso. Guitar. 1912.

coincidental affinities seemed to be derived in equal part from the formalist reception of the primitive read back into the tribal work and from the radical abstraction performed on both sets of objects. This production of affinity through projection and abstraction was exposed most dramatically in the juxtaposition of a painted Oceanic wood figure and a Kenneth Noland target painting (*Tondo*, 1961), a work which, in its critical context at least, is precisely not about the anthropomorphic and asks not to be read iconographically. What does this pairing tell us about “universals”?—that the circle is such a form, or that affinity is the effect of an erasure of difference. Here, universality is indeed circular, the specular image of the modern seen in the mask of the tribal.

Significantly, the show dismissed the primitivist misreading par excellence: that tribal art is intrinsically expressionistic or even psychologically expressive, when it is in fact ritualistic, apotropaic, decorative, therapeutic, and so forth. But it failed to question other extrapolations from one set of objects, one cultural context, to the other: to question what is at stake ideologically when the “magical” character of tribal work is read (especially by Picasso) into modern art, or when modern values of intentionality, originality, and aesthetic feeling



Mask. Tусуаn. Upper Volta.



Max Ernst. Bird Head. 1934–35.

are bestowed upon tribal objects.¹⁷ In both instances different orders of the socius and the subject, of the economy of the object, and of the place of the artist are transposed with violence; and the result threatens to turn the primitive into a specular Western code whereby different orders of tribal culture are made to conform to one Western typology. (That the modern work can reveal properties in the tribal is not necessarily evolutionist, but it does tend to pose the two as different stages and thus to encompass the tribal within our privileged historical consciousness.)¹⁸

17. The “tribal artists” are also called “problem-solving” (Rubin, “Introduction,” p. 25). Though this term imputes an almost formalist orientation, it also suggests a possible “affinity” — of art and artifact as an imaginary resolution of social contradiction. This definition leads one to wonder what contradiction modernist “primitivism” resolves.

18. “Bourgeois society is the most developed and the most complex historic organization of production. The categories which express its relation, the comprehension of its structure, thereby allow insights into the structure and relation of production of all the vanished social formations out of whose ruins and elements it built itself up, whose partly still unconquered remnants are carried along with it, whose mere nuances have developed explicit significance with it, etc. Human anatomy contains a key to the anatomy of the ape. The intimations of higher development among the subordinate species, however, can be understood only after the higher development is already known” (Karl Marx, *Grundrisse*, trans. M. Nicolaus, London, Pelican, 1973, p. 105).

No less than the formal abstraction of the tribal, this specular code of the primitive produces affinity-effects.¹⁹ For what do we behold here: a universality of form or an other rendered in our own image, an affinity with our own imaginary primitive? Though properly wary of the terms *primitive* and *tribal*, the first because of its Darwinist associations, the second because of its hypothetical nature, the curators used both as “conventional counters”²⁰—but it is precisely this conventionality that is in question. Rubin distinguished primitive style from archaic (e.g., Iberian, Egyptian, Mesoamerican) *diacritically* in relation to the West. The primitive is said to pertain to a “tribal” socius with communal forms and the archaic to a “court” civilization with static, hieratic, monumental art. This definition, which excludes as much as it includes, seems to specify the primitive/tribal but in fact suspends it. Neither “dead” like the archaic nor “historical,” the primitive is cast into a nebulous past and/or into an idealist realm of “primitive” essences. (Thus the tribal objects, not dated in the show, are still not entirely free of the old evolutionist association with primal or ancient artifacts, a confusion entertained by the moderns.) In this way, the primitive/tribal is set adrift from specific referents and coordinates—which thus allows it to be defined in wholly Western terms. And one begins to see that one of the preconditions, if not of primitivism, then certainly of the “Primitivism” show, is the mummification of the tribal and the museumification of its objects (which vital cultures like the Zuni have specifically protested against).

The founding act of this recoding is the repositioning of the tribal object as art. Posed against its use first as evolutionist trophy and then as ethnographic evidence, this aestheticization allows the work to be both decontextualized and commodified. It is this *currency* of the primitive among the moderns—its currency as sign, its circulation as commodity—that allows for the modern/tribal affinity-effect in the first place. The “Primitivism” show exhibited this currency but did not theorize it. Moreover, it no more “corrected” this primitivist code than it did the official formalist model of modernism. This code was already partly in place by the time of the MOMA “African Negro Art” show in 1935, when James Johnson Sweeney wrote against its undue “historical and ethnographic” reception: “It is as sculpture we should approach it.”²¹ Apart from anti-Darwinist motives, the imperative here was to confirm the formalist reading and newfound value of the African objects. With the African cast as a specifically plastic art, the counterterm—a pictorial art—was institutionally bestowed upon Oceanic work by the 1946 MOMA exhibition “Arts of the South Seas,”

19. “Affinity” seems at once a cultural concept and a natural (or at least transcultural) property—a logical scandal, as Lévi-Strauss said of the incest prohibition. But just as Derrida argued that Lévi-Strauss’s “scandal” was an *effect* of his own structuralist system, so might the modern/tribal “affinity” be an effect of its formalist presentation at MOMA.

20. See Rubin, “Introduction,” p. 74.

21. James Johnson Sweeney, *African Negro Art*, New York, MOMA, 1935, p. 21.

directed by René d'Harnoncourt. Although this exhibition did not mention the surrealists directly, it noted an "affinity" in the art with the "dreamworld and subconscious."²² It then remained for Alfred Barr (in a 1950 letter to the *College Art Journal*) to historicize this purely diacritical, purely Western system as a "discovery":

It is worth noting, briefly, the two great waves of discovery: the first might be called cubist-expressionist. This was concerned primarily with formal, plastic and emotional values of a direct kind. The second wave, quasi-surrealist, was more preoccupied with the fantastic and imaginative values of primitive art.²³

The "Primitivism" show only extended this code, structured as it was around a "Wolfflinian generalization"²⁴ of African tactility (sculptural, iconic, monochromatic, geometric) versus Oceanic visuality (pictorial, narrative, colorful, curvilinear), the first related to ritual, the second to myth, with ritual, Rubin writes, "more inherently 'abstract' than myth. Thus, the more ritually oriented African work would again appeal to the Cubist, while the more mythic content of the Oceanic/American work would engage the Surrealist."²⁵ This aesthetic code is only part of a cultural system of paired terms, both within the primitive (e.g., malefic Africa versus paradisaical Oceania) and within primitivism (e.g., noble or savage or vital primitive versus corrupt or civilized or enervated Westerner), to which we will return. Suffice it to say here that the tribal/modern affinity is largely the effect of a decoding of the tribal (a "deteritorializing" in the Deleuzian sense) and a recoding in specular modern terms. As with most formal or even structural approaches, the referent (the tribal socius) tends to be bracketed, if not banished, and the historical (the imperialist condition of possibility) disavowed.²⁶

Essentially, the OED distinguishes three kinds of "affinity": resemblance, kinship, and spiritual or chemical attraction ("elective affinity"). As suggested, the affinities in the show, mostly of the first order, were used to connote affinities of the second order: an optical illusion induced the mirage of the (modernist) Family of Art. However progressive this may once have been, this election to *our* humanity can now be seen as thoroughly ideological, for if evolutionism subordinated the primitive to Western history, affinity-ism recoups it under the sign of Western universality. ("Humanity," Lévi-Strauss suggests, is a modern

22. René d'Harnoncourt, preface to *Arts of the South Seas*, New York, MOMA, 1946.

23. Alfred H. Barr, Jr., letter in *College Art Journal*, vol. 10, no. 1 (1950), p. 59.

24. Rubin, "Introduction," p. 47.

25. *Ibid.*, p. 55.

26. The process is strangely reminiscent of *Impressions of Africa* in which, by a code of his own, Raymond Roussel produces an "Africa" which totally occludes Africa — but nevertheless makes us aware of Western myths of Africa as he does so.

Western concept.)²⁷ In this recognition difference is discovered only to be fetishistically disavowed, and in the celebration of “human creativity” the dissolution of specific cultures is carried out: the Museum of Modern Art played host to the Musée de l’Homme indeed.

MOMAism

MOMA has long served as an American metonym of modern art, with the history of the one often charted in terms of the space of the other. This mapping has in turn supported a “historical-transcendental”²⁸ reading of modernism as a “dialectic” or deductive line of formal innovations within the tradition. Now in the decay of this model the museum has become open to charges that it represses political and/or transgressive art (e.g., productivism, dada), that it is indifferent to contemporary work (or able to engage it only when, as in the “International Survey of Recent Painting and Sculpture,” it conforms to its traditional categories), that it is a period piece, and so on. In this situation, the “Primitivism” show could not but be overdetermined, especially when billed as a “significant correction of the received history of modern art.”²⁹ What history was corrected here, and in the name of what present? What would be the stake, for example, if MOMA had presented a show of the modern encounter with mass-cultural products rather than tribal objects? Could it map such a *topos* and not violate its formal-historicist premises? Could the museum absorb art that challenges official modernist paradigms as well as institutional media apparatuses as it incorporated primitivist art? More important, did MOMA in fact pose a new model of modernism here, one based not on transformation within but on transgression without — an engagement with an outside (tribal traditions, popular cultures) that might disrupt the order of Western art and thought?

The conflicted relation of “Primitivism” to the modern and the present was evident in its contradictory point of view. At once immanent and transcendent, mystificatory and demystificatory, the show both rehearsed the modern reception of the tribal “from the inside” and posited an affinity between the two “from above.” It reproduced some modern (mis)readings (e.g., the formal, oneiric, “magical”), exposed others (e.g., the expressionist), only to impose ones of its

27. See Lévi-Strauss, “Race and History,” in *Structural Anthropology* (Vol. 2), trans. Monique Layton, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1976, p. 329.

28. “The historical-transcendental recourse: an attempt to find, beyond all historical manifestation and historical origin, a primary foundation, the opening of an inexhaustible horizon, a plan which would move backward in time in relation to every event, and which would maintain throughout history the constantly unwinding plan of an unending unity” (Michel Foucault, “History, Discourse, and Discontinuity,” *Salmagundi* 20 [Summer/Fall 1972], p. 227).

29. Rubin, “Introduction,” p. 71. The exclusion of neo-expressionism from the contemporary section of the show appears almost as a disavowal of one of its subtexts. The work in this section, though not traditional in medium, is so in the way it fashions “the primitive” as an ahistorical process or as a primitivistic look.

own (the intentional, original, "aesthetic," problem-solving). The status of its objects was also ambiguous. Though presented as art, the tribal objects are manifestly the ruins of (mostly) dead cultures now exposed to our archeological probes — *and so too are the modern objects*, despite the agenda to "correct" the institutional reading of the modern (to keep it alive via some essential, eternal "primitivism"?). Against its own intentions, the show signaled a potentially postmodern, post-tribal present; indeed, in the technological vacuum of the museum space, this present seemed all but posthistorical.

But the exhibition did more than mark our distance from the modern and tribal objects; it also revealed the epistemological limits of the museum. How to represent the modern/tribal encounter adequately? How to map the intertextuality of this event? Rather than abstractly affine objects point by point, how to trace the mediations that divide and conjoin each term? If primitivism is in part an aesthetic construct, how to display its historical conditions? In its very lack, the show suggested the need of a Foucauldian archeology of primitivism, one which, rather than speak from an academic "postcolonial" place, might take its own colonialist condition of possibility as its object. Such an enterprise, however, is beyond the museum, the business of which is patronage — the formation of a paternal tradition against the transgressive outside, a documentation of civilization, not the barbarism underneath. In neither its epistemological space nor its ideological history can MOMA in particular engage these disruptive terms. Instead it recoups the outside dialectically — as a moment in its own history — and transforms the transgressive into continuity. With this show MOMA may have moved to revise its formal(ist) model of the modern now adjudged (even by it?) to be inadequate, but it did so only to incorporate the outside in its originary (modern) moment as primitivism. Meanwhile, except for the token, misconstrued presence of Robert Smithson (and perhaps Joseph Beuys), the transgressive in its transfigured (contemporary) moment — in all its disruptions of aesthetic, logocentric categories — was not acknowledged, let alone thought.

This recuperation of the primitive has its own history, which Varnedoe in various essays narrates: from "formal quotation" (e.g., the appropriations of most fauves and cubists) to "synthetic metaphor" (the universal languages of several abstract expressionists) to "assimilated ideal" (the primitivism of most of the artists in the contemporary section), the primitive has become primitivist.³⁰ Reduced to a ghostly affinity outside the tradition, the primitive now becomes an "invisible man"³¹ within it. This absorption allows the primitive to be read

30. See in particular his "Abstract Expressionism," in *Primitivism*, pp. 614–659.

31. In his "Preface" Rubin terms primitive art the "invisible man" of modern art scholarship, a trope that exceeds his suggestion that its minor status in the MOMA history of art is corrected by this show. For not only does it call to mind another repressed figure, the invisible woman artist, it also suggests that the "correction" of primitive art occurred long ago, when via "cultural production" and artistic incorporation it was first rendered a ghostly presence, an invisible man, within the modernist tradition.

retroactively almost as an effect of the modern tradition. Cultural preparation — that “the primitive” was also achieved from within modern art — is claimed. This is the basic argument of the classic *Primitivism in Modern Art* (1938, 1966) by Robert Goldwater; its first sentences read: “The artistic interest of the twentieth century in the productions of primitive peoples was neither as unexpected nor as sudden as is generally supposed. Its preparation goes well back into the nineteenth century. . . .”³² This, too, was essentially the argument of the “Primitivism” show: that modern art was “becoming other” prior to the 1907 Picasso visit to the Trocadéro. Thus the heroes of the show were artists who “prepared” the primitive (Gauguin) and/or incorporated it (Picasso) — artists who turned the “trauma” of the other into an “epiphany” of the same.³³

That the primitive was recognized only after innovations within the tradition is well documented: but what is the effectivity here, the ratio between invention and recognition, innovation and assimilation? Is the primitive to be thought of as a “*robinsonnade* of a constitutive constituent dialectic”³⁴ within Western tradition, or as a transgressive event visited upon it, at once embraced and defended against? For surely primitivism was generated as much to “manage” the shock of the primitive as to celebrate its art or to use it “counterculturally” (Rubin). As noted, the show argued “affinity” and “preparation”; yet here, beyond the abstraction of the first and the recuperation of the second, the primitive is *superceded*: “the role of the objects Picasso saw on this first visit to the Trocadéro was obviously less that of providing plastic ideas than of sanctioning his even more radical progress along a path he was already breaking.”³⁵ This retrospective reading of the primitive “role” tends not only to assimilate the primitive other *to* tradition but to recuperate the modernist break *with* tradition, all in the interests of progressive history. (As the very crux of MOMAism, analytic cubism in particular must be protected from outside influence; thus tribal art is assigned “but a residual role”³⁶ in it.) What, apart from the institutional need to secure an official history, is the motive behind this desired supercession? What but the formation of a cultural identity, incumbent as this is on the simultaneous need and disavowal of the other?

Generally perceived as primal and exotic, the primitive posed a double threat to the logocentric West, the threat of otherness and relativism. It also

32. Robert Goldwater, *Primitivism in Modern Art*, New York, Vintage Books, 1966, p. 3.

33. See Rubin, “Picasso,” in *Primitivism*, pp. 240–343. “The changes in modern art at issue were already underway when vanguard artists first became aware of tribal art” (Rubin, “Introduction,” p. 11).

34. Lévi-Strauss, “History and Dialectic,” in *The Savage Mind*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1966, p. 264.

35. Rubin, “Picasso,” p. 265.

36. *Ibid.*, p. 309. A residual role but perhaps a real “affinity”: for it could be argued that cubism, like some tribal art, is a process of “split representation.” See Lévi-Strauss, “Split Representation in the Art of Asia and America,” in *Structural Anthropology* (Vol. 1), pp. 245–268.

posed a doubly different artifact, more "immediate," more "magical." We know how the early moderns reclaimed this artifact as art, abstracted it into form; how, also, the "Primitivism" show mitigated its otherness, projected it as affinity. Here we may see how this otherness was further recouped by a reading of the tribal artist that served to recenter the modern artist, rendered somewhat marginal or academic by mass culture, as a "shamanistic" figure. Meanwhile, the tribal object with its ritual/symbolic exchange value was put on display, reinscribed in terms of exhibition/sign exchange value. (Could it be that the "magic" perceived in the object was in part its difference from the commodity form, which modern art resisted but to which it was partly reduced?) In this way, the potential disruption posed by the tribal work—that art might reclaim a ritual function, that it might retain an ambivalence of the sacred object or gift and not be reduced to the equivalence of the commodity—was blocked. And the African fetish, which represents a different social exchange just as the modern works aspire to one, became another kind of fetish: the "magical" commodity.



Georges Braque in his studio, Paris. 1911.

In the “Primitivism” show, a transgressive model of modernism was glimpsed, one which, repressed by the formalist account, might have displaced the MOMA model—its “Hegelian” history, its “Bauhausian” ideals, its formal-historicist operation (e.g., of abstraction achieved by analytic reduction within the patriarchal line: Manet . . . Cézanne . . . Picasso: of the Western tradition). This displacement, however, was only a feint: this “new” model—that the very condition of the so-called modern break with tradition is a break outside it—was suggested, occluded, recouped. With transgression without rendered as dialectic within, the official model of modern art—a multiplicity of breaks reinscribed (by the artist/critic) into a synthetic line of formal innovations—is preserved, as is the causal time of history, the narrative space of the museum.

Seen as a genuine agenda, the show presents this conflicted scenario: MOMA moves to reposition the modern as transgressive but is blocked by its own premises, and the contradiction is “resolved” by a formalist approach that reduces what was to be pronounced. Seen as a false agenda, this cynical scenario emerges: the show pretends to revise the MOMA story of art, to disrupt its formal and narrative unity, but only so as to reestablish it: the transgressive is acknowledged only to be again repressed. As suggested, that this “correction” is presented now is extremely overdetermined. How better, in the unconscious of the museum, to “resolve” these contradictions than with a show suggestive on the one hand of a transgressive modernism and on the other of a still active primitivism? Not only can MOMA then recoup the modern-transgressive, it can do so as if it had rejected its own formalist past. This maneuver also allows it at once to contain the return of its repressed and to connect with a neoprimitivist moment in contemporary art: MOMAism is not past after all! In all these ways, the critique posed by the primitive is contravened, absorbed within the body of modern art: “As if we were afraid to conceive of the Other in the time of our own thought.”³⁷

Primitivism

Historically, the primitive is articulated by the West in deprivative or supplemental terms: as a spectacle of savagery or as a state of grace, as a *socius* without writing or the Word, without history or cultural complexity; or as a site of originary unity, symbolic plenitude, natural vitality. There is nothing odd about this Eurocentric construction: the primitive has served as a coded other at least since the Enlightenment, usually as a subordinate term in its imaginary set of oppositions (light/dark, rational/irrational, civilized/savage). This domesticated primitive is thus constructive, not disruptive, of the binary *ratio* of the West; fixed as a structural opposite or a dialectical other to be incorporated,

37. Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, New York, Harper and Row, 1972, p. 12.

it assists in the establishment of a Western identity, center, norm, and name. In its modernist version the primitive may appear transgressive, it is true, but it still serves as a limit: projected within and without, the primitive becomes a figure of our unconscious and outside (a figure constructed in modern art as well as in psychoanalysis and anthropology in the privileged triad of the primitive, the child, and the insane).

If Rubin presented the art-historical code of the primitive, Varnedoe offered a philosophical reading of primitivism. In doing so, he reproduced within it the very Enlightenment logic by which the primitive was first seized, then (re)constructed. There are two primitivisms, Varnedoe argues, a good, rational one and a dark, sinister one.³⁸ In the first, the primitive is reconciled with the scientific in a search for fundamental laws and universal language (the putative cases are Gauguin and certain abstract expressionists). This progressive primitivism seeks enlightenment, not regressive escape into unreason, and thinks the primitive as a "spiritual regeneration" (in which "the Primitive is held to be spiritually akin to that of the new man"),³⁹ not as a social transgression. Thus recouped philosophically, the primitive becomes part of the internal reformation of the West, a moment within *its* reason: and the West, culturally prepared, escapes the radical interrogation which it otherwise poses.

But more is at stake here, for the reason that is at issue is none other than the Enlightenment, which to the humanist Varnedoe remains knightlike; indeed, he cites the sanguine Gauguin on the "luminous spread of science, which today from West to East lights up all the modern world."⁴⁰ Yet in the dialectic of the Enlightenment, as Adorno and Horkheimer argued, the liberation of the other can issue in its liquidation; the enlightenment of "affinity" may indeed eradicate difference.⁴¹ (And if this seems extreme, think of those who draw a direct line from the Enlightenment to the Gulag.) Western man and his primitive other are no more equal partners in the march of reason than they were in the spread of the word, than they are in the marketing of capitalism. The Enlightenment cannot be protected from its other legacy, the "bad-irrational" primitivism (Varnedoe's dramatic example is Nazi Blood and Soil, the swastika ur-sign), any more than the "good-rational" primitivism (e.g., the ideographic explorations of Picasso) can be redeemed from colonial exploitation. Dialectically, the progressivity of the one is the regression of the other.

Varnedoe argues, via Gauguin, that "modern artistic primitivism" is not "antithetical to scientific knowledge."⁴² One can only agree, but not as he in-

38. See Varnedoe, "Gauguin," pp. 201–203, and "Contemporary Explorations," pp. 652–653.

39. *Ibid.*, p. 202.

40. *Ibid.*

41. Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. John Cumming, New York, Seabury Press, 1972.

42. Varnedoe, "Gauguin," p. 203.

tends it, for primitivism is indeed instrumental to such power-knowledge, to the “luminous spread” of Western domination. On the one hand, the primitivist incorporation of the other is another form of conquest (if a more subtle one than the imperialist extraction of labor and materials); on the other, it serves as its displacement, its disguise, even its excuse. Thus, to pose the relation of the primitive and the scientific as a benign dialogue is cruelly euphemistic: it obscures the real affiliations between science and conquest, enlightenment and eradication, primitivist art and imperialist power. (This can be pardoned of a romantic artist at the end of the last century who, immersed in the ideology of a scientific avant-garde, could not know the effectivity of these ideas, but not of an art historian at the end of this century.)

Apart from the violence done to the other in the occlusion of the imperialist connection of primitivism and in the mystification of the Enlightenment as a universal good, this good/bad typology tends to mistake the disruption posed by the primitive and to cast any embrace of this disruption—any resistance to an instrumental, reificatory reason, any reclamation of cognitive modes repressed in its regime—as “nihilistic,” regressive, “pessimistic.”⁴³ (It is thus that the transgressive primitivism of such artists as Smithsonian is dismissed.) We are left where we began, locked in our old specular code of ethical oppositions. But then we were told all along that the issue was “human creativity wherever found”:

This is the extreme of liberal thought and the most beautiful way of preserving the initiative and priority of Western thought within “dialogue” and under the sign of the universality of the human mind (as always for Enlightenment anthropology). Here is the beautiful soul! Is it possible to be more impartial in the sensitive and intellectual knowledge of the other? This harmonious vision of two thought processes renders their *confrontation* perfectly inoffensive, by denying the difference of the primitives as an element of rupture with and subversion of (our) “objectified thought and its mechanisms.”⁴⁴

There is a counterreading of the primitive precisely as subversive, to which we must return, but it is important to consider here what cultural function primitivism generally performs. As a fetishistic recognition-and-disavowal of difference, primitivism involves a (mis)construction of the other. That much is clear. But it also involves a (mis)recognition of the same. “If the West has

43. See, for example, Varnedoe, “Contemporary Exploration,” pp. 665, 679.

44. Jean Baudrillard, *The Mirror of Production*, trans. Mark Poster, St. Louis, Telos Press, 1975, p. 90. The reference is to Lévi-Strauss’s claim, in *The Raw and the Cooked* (trans. J. and D. Weightman, New York, Harper and Row, 1969, pp. 13–14), that “it is in the last resort immaterial whether in this book the thought processes of the South American Indians take place through the medium of my thoughts, or whether mine take place through the medium of theirs. What matters is that the human mind, regardless of the identity of those who happen to be giving it expression, should display an increasingly intelligible structure. . . .”

produced anthropologists," Lévi-Strauss writes in *Tristes Tropiques*, "it is because it was tormented by remorse."⁴⁵ Certainly primitivism is touched by this remorse, too; as the "elevation" of the artifact to art, of the tribal to humanity, it is a compensatory form. It is not simply that this compensation is false, that the artifact is evacuated even as it is elevated (the ritual work become an exhibition form, the ambivalent object reduced to commodity equivalence), that finally no white skin fond of black masks can ever recompense the colonialist subjection detailed in Fanon's *Black Skin White Masks*. To value as art what is now a ruin; to locate what one lacks in what one has destroyed: more is at work here than compensation. Like fetishism, primitivism is a system of multiple beliefs; an imaginary resolution of a real contradiction:⁴⁶ a repression of the fact that a breakthrough in our art, indeed a regeneration of our culture, is based in part on the breakup and decay of other societies, that the modernist discovery of the primitive is not only in part its oblivion but its death. And the final contradiction or aporia is this: no anthropological remorse, aesthetic elevation, or redemptive exhibition can correct or compensate this loss *because they are all implicated in it*.

Primitivism, then, not only absorbs the potential disruption of the tribal objects into Western forms, ideas, and commodities, it also symptomatically manages the ideological nightmare of a great art inspired by spoils. More, as an artistic coup founded on military conquest, primitivism camouflages this historical event, disguises the problem of imperialism in terms of art, affinity, dialogue, to the point (the point of the MOMA show) where the problem appears "resolved."

A counterdiscourse to primitivism is posed differently at different moments: the destruction of racial or evolutionist myths, the critique of functionalist models of the primitive socius, the questioning of constructs of the tribal, and so forth. Lévi-Strauss has argued most publicly against these models and myths in a culturalist reading that the "savage mind" is equally complex as the Western, that primitive society is indeed based on a nature/culture opposition just as our own is. Other ethnologists like Marshall Sahlins and Pierre Clastres have also countered the negative conception of the primitive as a people without god, law, or language. Where Lévi-Strauss argues that the primitive socius is not without history but thinks it as form, Sahlins writes that paleolithic hunters and gatherers, far from a subsistence society, constitute the "first affluent" one, and Clastres (a student of Lévi-Strauss) contended that the lack of a state in the primitive socius is a sign not of a prehistorical status, as it may be thought

45. Lévi-Strauss, *Tristes Tropiques*, trans. J. and D. Weightman, New York, Atheneum, 1978, p. 389.

46. This definition of art (see note 7) was developed by Lévi-Strauss in relation to a tribal form, Caduveo face painting; see *Tristes Tropiques*, pp. 196–197.

in a Western teleology, but of an active exorcism of external force or hierarchical power: a society not without but *against* the state.⁴⁷

Such a theoretical displacement is not simply an event internal to ethnology: it is partly incited by anticolonial movements of the postwar period and by third world resistance in our own; and it is partly affirmed by a politicization of other disciplines. For if primitivism is denial of difference, then the countermeasure is precisely its insistence, “opening the culture to experiences of the Other,” as Edward Said writes, “the recovery of a history hitherto either misrepresented or rendered invisible.”⁴⁸ Finally, no doubt, a counterdiscourse can only come through a countermemory, an account of the modern/primitive encounter from the “other” side.⁴⁹ But lest this recovery of the other be a recuperation into a Western narrative, a political genealogy of primitivism is also necessary, one which would trace the affiliations between primitivist art and colonial practice. It is precisely this genealogy that the MOMA show does not (cannot?) attempt; indeed, the issue of colonialism, when raised at all, was raised in colonialist terms, as a question of the accessibility of certain tribal objects in the West.

As for a cultural counterpractice, one is suggested by the “primitive” operation of *bricolage* and by the surrealist reception of the primitive as a rupture. Indeed, the dissident surrealists (Bataille chief among them) present, if not a “counterprimitivism” as such, then at least a model of how the otherness of the primitive might be thought disruptively, not recuperated abstractly. It is well known that several of these surrealists, some of whom were amateur anthropologists, were not as oblivious as most fauves and cubists to the contexts and codes of the primitive, that some politicized rather than aestheticized the primitivist-imperialist connection (in 1931, Aragon and others organized an anticolonial exhibition to counter the official *Exposition coloniale* in the new Musée des Colonies). And when these “ethnographic surrealists” did aestheticize, it tended to be in the interests of “cultural impurities and disturbing syncretisms.” Which is to say that they prized in the tribal object not its *raisonnable* form but its *bricolé* heterogeneity, not its mediatory possibilities but its transgressive value. In short, the primitive appeared less as a solution to Western aesthetic problems

47. See, in general, Marshall Sahlins, *Culture and Practical Reason*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1976; and Pierre Clastres, *Society Against the State*, trans. Robert Hurley, New York, Urizen Books, 1974.

48. Edward W. Said, “Opponents, Audiences, Constituencies, and Community,” in *The Anti-Aesthetic*, ed. Hal Foster, Port Townsend (WA), Bay Press, 1983, p. 158.

49. As for a Western text that involves this “other” account, an example is provided by the Jean Rouch film *Les Maîtres Fous*, a documentary of the trauma of imperialist subjection ritually worked through by an African tribe. In a trance the tribesmen are one by one “possessed” by the white colonial figures, the Crazy Masters—an exorcism that inverts the one in the *Demoiselles*. Here, though, the image of the other is used to purge the other, and the objectification is reversed: it is the white man who appears as the other, the savage, the grotesque. At the end the tribesmen return to the colonial city and once again assume subject-positions—in the army, in road crews, in the “native population.”

than as a disruption of Western solutions. Rather than seek to master the primitive—or, alternatively, to fetishize its difference into opposition or identity—these primitivists welcomed “the unclassified, unsought Other.”⁵⁰

It is most likely excessive (and worse, dualistic!) to oppose these two readings of the primitive—the one concerned to incorporate the primitive, the other eager to transgress with it—and to extrapolate the latter into a counterpractice to the former. (Again, such a counterpractice is not for the West to supply.) However, *bricolage*—which Lévi-Strauss, influenced by the surrealists, did after all define as a “primitive” mode—is today posed in the Third World (and in its name) as such a resistant operation, by which the other might appropriate the forms of the modern capitalist West and fragment them with indigenous ones in a reflexive, critical montage of synthetic contradictions.⁵¹ Such *bricolage* might in turn reveal that Western culture is hardly the integral “engineered” whole that it seems to be but that it too is *bricolé* (indeed, Derrida has deconstructed the Lévi-Strauss opposition *bricoleur*/engineer to the effect that the latter is the product, the myth of the former).⁵²

One tactical problem is that *bricolage*, as the inversion of the appropriative abstraction of primitivism, might seem retroactively to excuse it. Indeed, the famous Lévi-Strauss formula for *bricolage* is uncannily close to the Barthes definition of appropriation (or “myth”). In his definition (1962) Lévi-Strauss cites Franz Boas on mythical systems: “It would seem that mythological worlds have been built up, only to be shattered again, and that new worlds were built from the fragments’”; and adds: “In the continual reconstruction from the same materials, it is always earlier ends which are called upon to play the part of means: the signified changes into the signifying and vice versa.”⁵³ Compare Barthes on myth (1957): “It is constructed from a semiological chain which existed before it: it is a *second-order semiological system*. That which is a sign . . . in the first system becomes a mere signifier in the second.”⁵⁴ The difference is that myth is a one-way appropriation, an act of power; *bricolage* is a process of tex-

50. Clifford, “On Ethnographic Surrealism,” p. 564.

51. This strategy was posed by Abdellah Hammoudi at the symposium (Nov. 3–4, 1984) held at MOMA in conjunction with the show.

52. Jacques Derrida, “Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences,” in *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1978, p. 285. In *Of Grammatology* (trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Baltimore, The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976, p. 105), Derrida writes of Lévi-Strauss: “At once conserving and annulling inherited conceptual oppositions, this thought, like Saussure’s, stands on a borderline: sometimes within an uncriticized conceptuality, sometimes putting a strain on the boundaries, and working toward deconstruction.”

53. Lévi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind*, p. 21.

54. Roland Barthes, “Myth Today,” in *Mythologies*, trans. Annette Lavers, New York, Hill and Wang, 1972, p. 114. In *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign* (trans. Charles Levin, St. Louis, Telos Press, 1981, p. 96), Jean Baudrillard writes: “This semiological reduction of the symbolic property constitutes the ideological process.”

tual play, of loss and gain: whereas myth abstracts and pretends to the natural, *bricolage* cuts up, makes concrete, delights in the artificial — it knows no identity, stands for no pretense of presence or universal guise for relative truths. Thus, if it is by a “mythical” reduction of content to form that the primitive becomes primitivist, by a mythical abstraction of signified into signifier that African ritual objects, customs, *people* become “Africanity” — if it is by myth that one arrives at affinity and universality — then *bricolage* may well constitute a counterpractice. For in *bricolage* not only may the primitive signified be reclaimed but the Western signified may be mythified in turn, which is to say that primitivism (the myths of the African, the Oceanic, that still circulate among us) may possibly be deconstructed and other models of intercultural exchange posed. However compromised by *its* appropriation as an artistic device in the West (superficially understood, *bricolage* has become the “inspiration” of much primitivist art), *bricolage* remains a strategic practice, for just as the concept of myth demystifies “natural” modes of expression and “neutral” uses of other-cultural forms, so too the device of *bricolage* deconstructs such notions as a modern/tribal “affinity” or modernist “universality” and such constructs as a fixed primitive “essence” or a stable Western “identity.”

*The Other Is Becoming the Same;
the Same Is Becoming Different*

Below, I want briefly to pose, to collide, two readings of the primitive encounter with the West: that of its progressive eclipse in modern history and that of its disruptive return (in displaced form) in contemporary theory. The first history, as we have seen, positions the primitive as a moment in the “luminous spread” of Western reason; the second, a genealogy, traces how the primitive, taken into this order, returns to disrupt it. The difficulty is to think these contrary readings simultaneously, the first aggressively historicist, the second historically enigmatic.

If the identity of the West is defined dialectically by its other, what happens to this identity when its limit is crossed, its outside eclipsed? (This eclipse may not be entirely hypothetical given a multinational capitalism that seems to know no limits, to destructure all oppositions, to occupy its field all but totally.) One effect is that the logic that thinks the primitive in terms of opposition or as an outside is threatened (as Derrida noted in the work of Lévi-Strauss or as Foucault came to see within his own thought, such structural terms can no longer be supported even as methodological devices).⁵⁵ In the second narrative,

55. See Derrida, “Structure, Sign, and Play,” and Foucault, “History, Discourse, and Discontinuity.” Frederic Jameson has suggested in this regard that one “referent” of French deconstruction may well be American capital. See his “Pleasure: A Political Issue,” in *Formations*, ed. Victor Burgin, et al., London, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1983.

this "eclipsed" or sublated primitive reemerges in Western culture as its scandal — where it links up genealogically with poststructuralist deconstruction and politically with feminist theory and practice. In this passage the primitive other is transformed utterly, and here in particular its real world history must be thought. For the historical incorporation of the outside might well be the condition that compels its eruption into the field of the same as difference. Indeed, the eclipse of otherness, posed as a metaphysical structure of opposites or as an outside to be recovered dialectically, is the beginning of difference — and of a potential break with the phallogocentric order of the West.

This genealogy is not as conjectural as it may seem: connections between certain "ethnographic surrealists" and poststructuralists are there to be traced. The intermediary figures are Lacan, Lévi-Strauss, and, above all, Bataille, whose notions of *dépense* and *la part maudite*, developed out of Mauss's theory of the gift, have influenced Baudrillard, and whose notion of transgression has influenced Foucault and Derrida. On this reading, if the early moderns sublated the primitive into reason, the dissident surrealists thought it transgressively; but it was left to poststructuralism and feminism to theorize it, however transformed in position and effectivity. As Rosalind Krauss has suggested, the poststructuralist and feminist deconstruction of phallogocentric oppositions is related to the "collapse of differences" — i.e., of *oppositions* between natural and unnatural forms, conscious and unconscious states, reality and representation, politics and art — that is at the heart of surrealist scandal.⁵⁶ It is this transgressive enterprise that is dismissed as "arbitrary" and "trivial" in postwar American formalism in which, in a neomodernist moment, crisis is once more recouped for continuity. Indeed, this collapse or rupture is not thought deeply again till the art of the generation of Smithson, in which formalist criteria give way to a concern with "structure, sign, and play," in which, with such devices as the site-nonsite, the form of the exhibition work with expressive origin and centered meaning is displaced by a serial or textual mode "with a concept of limits that could never be located."⁵⁷

On the one hand, then, the primitive is a modern problem, a crisis in cultural identity, which the West moves to resolve: hence the modernist construction "primitivism," the fetishistic recognition-and-disavowal of the primitive difference. This ideological resolution renders it a "nonproblem" for us. On the other hand, this resolution is only a repression: delayed in our political unconscious, the primitive returns uncannily at the moment of its potential eclipse. The rupture of the primitive, managed by the moderns, becomes our postmodern event.⁵⁸

56. Rosalind Krauss, "Preying on 'Primitivism,'" *Art and Text*, no. 17 (April 1985).

57. *Ibid.*

58. Such "delays" are common enough: for example, the critique of representation, initially undertaken in cubism and collage, that returns in a different register in postmodernist art.

The first history of the primitive encounter with the West is familiar enough, the fatalistic narrative of domination. In this narrative 1492 is an inaugural date, for it marks the period not only of the discovery of America (and the rounding of the Cape of Good Hope) but also of the renaissance of antiquity. These two events—an encounter with the other and a return to the same—allow for the incorporation of the modern West and the instauration of its dialectical history. (Significantly, in Spain, 1492 also marks the banishment of the Jews and Arabs and the publication of the first modern European grammar; in other words, the expulsion of the other within and the encoding of the other without.)⁵⁹ This, too, is the period of the first museums in Europe and of “the first works on the ‘life and manners’ of remote peoples”—a collection of the ancients and “savages,” of the historically and spatially distant.⁶⁰ This collection only expands, as the West develops with capitalism and colonialism into a world-system. By the eighteenth century, with the Enlightenment, the West is able to reflect on itself “as a culture *in the universal*, and thus all other cultures were entered into its museum as vestiges of its own image.”⁶¹

There is no need to rehearse this “dialectic” here, the progressive domination of external and internal nature (the colonization of the outside and the unconscious), but it is important to note that this history is not without its representations and contestations in modern theory. Indeed, in 1946 Merleau-Ponty could write:

All the great philosophical ideas of the past century—the philosophies of Marx and Nietzsche, phenomenology, German existentialism and psychoanalysis—had their beginnings in Hegel; it was he who started the attempt to explore the irrational and integrate it into an expanded reason, which remains the task of our century.⁶²

There is, however, an obvious paradox here: the Western *ratio* is defined against the very unreason that it integrates; its dialectical identity requires the very other that it absorbs, disavows, or otherwise reduces to the same. It is this paradox that the notion of transgression, as elaborated by Bataille amidst discussions of both “the end of history” and the otherness of the primitive, addresses. (Bataille attended the lectures on Hegel given by Alexandre Kojève in the ’30s; he was also, of course, the principal theorist of the primitive as transgressive.) In his essay on Bataille—an essay in which the surrealist concern with the other may be linked to the poststructuralist concern with difference—Foucault op-

59. See Tzvetan Todorov, *The Conquest of America*, trans. Richard Howard, New York, Harper and Row, 1984, p. 123. Todorov argues that the conquest of America was from one perspective a “linguistic” one.

60. Todorov, p. 109.

61. Baudrillard, *The Mirror of Production*, pp. 88–89.

62. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Sense and Nonsense*, trans. Hubert and Patricia Dreyfus, Evanston, Northwestern University Press, 1964, pp. 109–110.

poses the transgressive to the dialectical as a way to think through the logic of contradiction, as a "form of thought in which the interrogation of the limit replaces the search for totality."⁶³ Yet if transgression challenges the dialectic, the end of history, and the incorporation of the primitive other, it also presupposes (or at least foreshadows) them. Which is to say that the transgressive appears as a stopgap of the dialectical; it recomposes an outside, an other, a sacred, if only in its absence: "All our actions are addressed to this absence in a profanation which at once identifies it, dissipates it, exhausts itself in it, and restores it in the empty purity of its transgression."⁶⁴ Transgression is thus bound by a paradox of its own: it remarks limits even as it violates them, it restores an outside even as it testifies to its loss. It is on the borderline between dialectical thought and the becoming of difference, just as the structuralism of Lévi-Strauss is on the borderline between metaphysical oppositions and deconstruction.

There is no question that today we are beyond this border, that we live in a time of cancelled limits, destructured oppositions, "dissipated scandals"⁶⁵ (which is not to say that they are not recoded all the time). Clearly, the modern structures in which the Western subject and socius were articulated (the nuclear family, the industrial city, the nation-state) are today remapped in the movement of capital. In this movement the opposition nature/culture has become not only theoretically suspect but practically obsolete: there are now few zones of "savage thought" to oppose to the Western *ratio*, few primitive others not threatened by incorporation. But in this displacement of the other there is also a decentering of the same, as signalled in the '60s when Foucault abandoned the logic of structural or dialectical oppositions (e.g., reason/unreason) in favor of a field of immanent relations, or when Derrida proclaimed the absence of any fixed center or origin, of any "original or transcendental signified . . . outside a system of differences."⁶⁶ It was this that led Foucault to announce, grandly enough, the dissolution of man in language. More provocative, however, was his suggestion, made at the same moment (1966), that "modern thought is advancing towards that region where man's Other must become the Same as himself."⁶⁷ In the modern episteme, Foucault argued, the transparent, sovereign *cogito* has broken down, and Western man is compelled to think the unthought. Indeed, his very truth is articulated in relation to the unconscious and the other; thus the privilege granted psychoanalysis and ethnology among the modern human sciences. The question returns then: What happens to this man, his

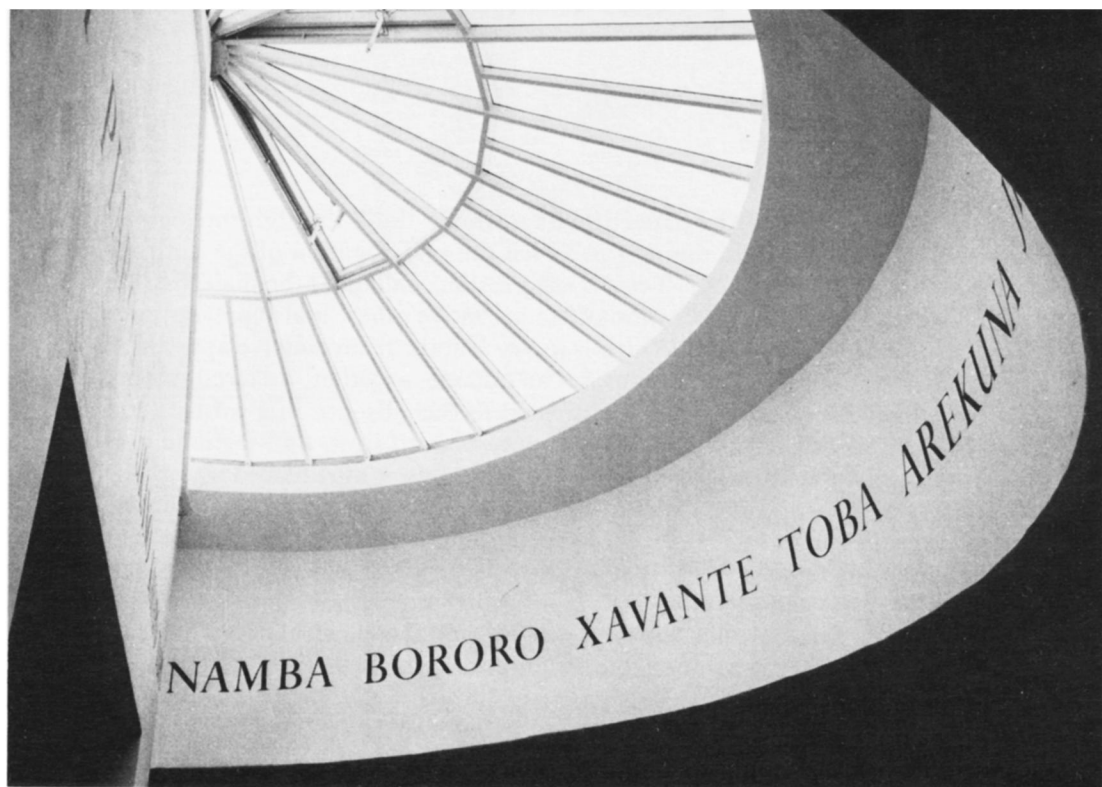
63. Foucault, "A Preface to Transgression," in *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice*, ed. Donald F. Bouchard, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1977, p. 50.

64. *Ibid.*, p. 31.

65. The phrase is Robert Smithson's; see *The Writings of Robert Smithson*, ed. Nancy Holt, New York, New York University Press, 1979, p. 216.

66. Derrida, "Structure, Sign, and Play," p. 280.

67. Foucault, *The Order of Things*, New York, Vintage Books, 1970. p. 238.



Lothar Baumgarten. Monument for the Indian Nations of South America. 1982.

truth, when the unconscious and the other are penetrated — integrated into reason, colonized by capital, commodified by mass culture?

Tellingly, it was in the '30s and '40s, after the high stage of imperialism and before the anticolonial wars of liberation, that the discourse of the other was most thoroughly theorized — by Lacan, of course, and Lévi-Strauss (who, in *Tristes Tropiques*, pondered “the ethnological equivalent of the mirror stage”)⁶⁸ but also by Sartre, who argued that the other was necessary to the “fusion” of any group, and Adorno and Horkheimer, who elaborated the role of otherness in Nazism. I mention these latter here to suggest that, however decentered by the other, the (Western) subject continues to encroach mercilessly upon it. Indeed by 1962 (when Lévi-Strauss wrote that “there are still zones in which savage thought, like savage species, is relatively protected”),⁶⁹ Paul Ricoeur could foresee a “universal world civilization.” To Ricoeur, this moment was less one of the imperialist “shock of conquest and domination” than one of the shock of disorientation: for the other a moment when, with the wars of liberation, the

68. Catherine Clément, *The Lives and Legends of Jacques Lacan*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer, New York, Columbia University Press, 1983, p. 76.

69. Lévi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind*, p. 219.

"politics of otherness" had reached its limit, and for the West a moment when it became "possible that there are just *others*, that we ourselves are an 'other' among others."⁷⁰

This disorientation of a world civilization is hardly new to us today. In 1962 Ricoeur argued that to survive in it each culture must be grounded in its own indigenous tradition; otherwise this "civilization" would be domination pure and simple. Similarly, in our own time Jürgen Habermas has argued that the modern West, to restore its identity, must critically appropriate its tradition — the very project of Enlightenment that led to this "universal civilization" in the first place.⁷¹ Allegories of hope, these two readings seem early and late symptoms of our own postmodern present, a moment when the West, its limit apparently broached by an all but global capital, has begun to recycle its own historical episodes as styles together with its appropriated images of exotica (of domesticated otherness) in a culture of nostalgia and pastiche — in a culture of implosion, "the internal violence of a saturated whole."⁷²

Ricoeur wrote presciently of a moment when "the whole of mankind becomes a kind of imaginary museum."⁷³ It may be this sense of closure, of claustrophobia that has provoked a new "primitivism" and "Orientalism" in recent theory: e.g., the Baudrillardian notion of a primitive order of symbolic exchange that "haunts" our own system of sign exchange, or the Deleuzian idea of a "savage territoriality" now deterritorialized by capital; Barthes's Japan cast as the "possibility of a difference, of a mutation, of a revolution in the propriety of symbolic systems," or Derrida's or Foucault's China seen as an order of things that "interrupts" Western logocentrism.⁷⁴ But rather than seek or resuscitate a lost or dead other, why not turn to vital others within and without — to affirm *their* resistance to the white, patriarchal order of Western culture? For feminists, for "minorities," for "tribal" peoples, there are other ways to narrate this history

70. Paul Ricoeur, "Universal Civilization and National Cultures," in *History and Truth*, trans. Charles A. Kelbley, Evanston, Northwestern University Press, 1965, p. 278. Also see Frederic Jameson, "Periodizing the Sixties," in *The Sixties Without Apology*, ed. Sayres, Stephanson, et al., Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1984, pp. 186–188.

71. See Jürgen Habermas, "Modernity — An Incomplete Project," in *The Anti-Aesthetic*, pp. 3–15.

72. Baudrillard, "The Beaubourg Effect," trans. Rosalind Krauss and Annette Michelson, *October*, no. 20 (Spring 1982), p. 10.

73. Ricoeur, p. 278. What clearer sign of this implosion — when mankind is treated as a museum of the West — can there be than the "Primitivism" show? If the "universality" of the Enlightenment positioned the West in a transcendental relation to the primitive, then the "globality" of multinational capital (as represented by Philip Morris) may put us in a transcendental relation to our own modernity.

74. See Baudrillard, *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign*, passim; Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*, trans. Hurley, Seem, and Lane, New York, Viking Press, 1977, pp. 139–271; Barthes, *The Empire of Signs*, trans. Richard Howard, New York, Hill and Wang, 1982, pp. 3–4; and Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, pp. 77–93.

of enlightenment/eradication—ways which reject the narcissistic pathos that identifies the death of the Hegelian dialectic with the end of Western history and the end of that history with the death of man, which also reject the reductive reading that the other can be so “colonized” (as if it were a zone simply to occupy, as if it did not emerge imbricated in other spaces, to trouble other discourses)—or even that Western sciences of the other, psychoanalysis and ethnology, can be fixed so dogmatically. On this reading the other remains—indeed, as the very field of difference in which the subject emerges—to challenge Western pretenses of sovereignty, supremacy, and self-creation.