I have a friend who was trained as a social anthropologist. Now he is the chief curator of a major art museum, subject to periodic fits of status anxiety. During these moments he is given to lecturing me on the status of the museum as the home of "real" and "authentic" objects. Another friend and colleague compulsively told me over and over again that "People come to museums to see real objects, you know." Encountering metaphysical concerns over objects is a common enough experience among museum professionals. I want to argue in this paper that it is fueled by more than specialization and professional rivalries, by more than the friendly sniping between museums that emphasize objects and those that exhibit context and history.

The anxiety over the ontological status of material culture and even museum exhibits themselves plays out fundamental tensions and paradoxes that organize the museum experience itself. Concern for what is "real," "authentic," even "unique" is a hallmark of museums, which are equally concerned to distinguish the experiences they provide and the objects they collect and display from "fakes," "copies," and simulations. Yet the very nature of museum exhibits is that they are referential, mediated and subject to complex interpretations. They manifest an ideology of immediacy, presence and authenticity that customarily gives priority to the visual and material aspects of social experience, and, by implication, plays down the processes of mediation and interpretation out of which exhibits are made.

In this paper I will not discuss how museums define fakes or treat simulations. Instead I want to examine a type of exhibition in which the tension and paradoxical elements that organize exhibitions are played out in accentuated form. These are exhibitions that take objects derived from cultures unconnected in time and space to place them in a single setting, thereby putting them in the position of defining temporal, cultural or geographic distance and difference, even when this is not the primary goal of the exhibition. These exhibits are anthropological in the sense that the specific problems of mediation that they face have parallels with the experience of field anthropologists. But the demands of the exhibition and museum format, which stress the visual and material over the didactic, and the ways in which the narratives of specific exhibitions connect with the narrative of whole institutions are markedly different. What they show us is not something about the discourse of anthropologists, but anthropological discourse, narratives about cultural selves and others.

Museums are palaces designed for remembering. They insist that their visitors interpret their physical settings as spaces designed for visiting, reflecting and remembering, especially for remembering experiences the visitors may never have had. These settings contain collections of materials, displays and documents. All of these are devised to invoke a moment in time, perceived from a point of view, and often organized into a visual narrative about a sequence of points in time. Consider Jane Jacobs' evocative description of a Canadian Museum:

"On the high prairie in the Canadian province of Alberta is a museum called Smashed-in-the-Head Buffalo Jump. A visitor stands at the foot of a natural rock ledge running through the building, and confronts, above his head, a cluster of huge beasts, frozen at the instant they are about to plunge over the brink. Terrifying. Frantic, doomed, magnificent, pitiful. Other exhibits stir awe for the Indian buffalo hunters, so cunning, so courageous. They would mark out lanes on the plateau behind the ledge, as if with dotted lines, using clumps of buffalo dung, stones and brush. When the moment to start the death drive arrived, boys wearing coyote pelts howled at the fringes of dispersed groups of grazing buffalo, impelling the groups to draw closer together so the 'coyotes' could herd them into a lane. In the

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1 In "Wonder and Worth: Museums in Walt Disney's World" Ivan Karp and Corinne Kratz describe how the museum displays in Epcot Center insisted on using real objects in an overall setting that sold itself as a simulated experience.

2 In "Development and personhood" (Ivan Karp mss) I discuss the anthropological discourses as they relate to colonial ideas about cultural difference.
meantime other boys wearing buffalo-calf pelts bleated near the ‘jump’ end of the lane. That impelled the deluded mass of animals to rush forward to protect them. With the prairie-wolf howls at their rear and flanks and calf bleats to their fore, the herd stampeded to its doom.

“Coyote and calf skins are skimpy. Buffalo don’t have that good eyesight, but even so, these were masquerades for boys, not grown men. This particular jump, “Smashed-in-the-head,” memorializes a boy in calf dress who was caught in the onrush and swept over.”

“Which did you identify with?” asked Kate curiously. “The buffalo or the hunters?”

“At the time, alternately both. But in retrospect, to be honest I suppose I identify with the museum’s designers and with the descendants of those hunters who staff the museum.”

Crucial elements of the “museum experience” are contained within this short dialogue. Here is an exhibit that was designed to represent in the most realistic manner possible an activity and experience available only in memory. The content of the exhibit is derived from the memory traces of hunters and from stories told to their children. This exhibit, effective and emotionally appealing as it is, operates at temporal and cultural distance from its audience. There are no other choices; experience has to be mediated by exhibit makers and story tellers. The experiences the audiences have are necessarily second hand, stories told or seen but not uniquely experienced, yet none the less embodied in visual and textual forms that are intended to evoke proximity and authenticity. Exhibits are paradoxical forms for experiencing. They construct sense worlds whose primary points of reference exist outside of the immediate context and physical setting of the exhibit, but do so in a way that attempts to be experience near rather than experience far.

This is so even for museums that exhibit authentic objects and do not try to recreate a single point in time past, as Smashed-in-the-Head Buffalo Jump does. Take the paradoxes of the encyclopedic art museums. The great universal survey museums that aspire to exhibit the History of Art are the archetypes of such museums. They show and tell stories of changing styles and cultures. Often these are heroic narratives about artists and their workshops or the schools that surround them. The key items to be displayed are works of art, defined either as unique objects or as diagnostic of a style or school. The forms of display often combine these two incompatible goals. The great work of art is surrounded by lesser works that show the affinities between masters and their pupils, between one workshop and another. As often as not, the works of art are arranged in an array that is itself designed to refer to and evoke a set of circumstances external to the works of art themselves. No matter what the subject matter, no matter which objects, art museums face the same problems of translation and specification of context as do other museums. These have to be confronted if museum audiences are to find exhibitions intelligible.

Within museums translation, specification of context, mediation and representation should be examined in two sites. The first is the exhibition itself and the second is the museum as a whole. This paper focuses primarily on two prominent temporary exhibitions, and argues that the juxtaposition of objects taken from different cultural contexts inevitably draws exhibit makers into the domain of anthropological discourse. As I try to suggest below, the overall arrangement of museums, especially the large Art, Culture and Natural History Museums are not perceived as intentionally made by museum professionals. Yet the very ways that museums sort themselves into different genres and the ways in which they draw on their cultural authority lead audiences to expect that the narratives of exhibit halls is extended to the museum as a whole and vice versa.

The major museums, such as the MET, use elaborate installations, expend enormous sums on architecture in order to indicate to their audiences that as they move through the museum, they move across times and spaces. They set up sequences of time and

4 See Carol Duncan’s “Art Museums and the Ritual of Citizenship” in L Karp and S. Lavine, eds., Exhibiting Cultures: the Poetics and Politics of Museum Displays. Washington D.C., Smithsonian Institution Press, 1990. Few of the many readers who cite Duncan’s work note the performative element in her analysis. She does more than examine how museums tell nationalist narratives; she suggests that the exhibit makers and audience cooperate in turning the museum into a “ritual” that enacts membership in an imagined national community.
space which may seem haphazard to them and the audience, but they are sequential none the less.\(^5\)

Even when museum professionals protest that the sequence of exhibits is not designed to communicate messages and ideologies, members of the audience will find meanings in their experience of the museum. In the Smithsonian’s National Museum of Natural History, the entrance at one end of the Hall of African Cultures was at the end of the Ice Age Hall. The last display in the Ice Age Hall showed a Neanderthal Man standing in a cave, perhaps in a ritual posture. Even I thought he looked a bit apprehensive. His field of vision took in the doorway and he gazed directly into a diorama in the African Culture Hall, the interior of a circa 1950’s dwelling among the Himba of Namibia. The Himba in the house were dressed in customary dress, women’s clothing derived from late nineteenth century missionary dress, while the Neanderthal man was dressed in skins.

Neither the curator of the Ice Age Hall or the Curator of the Hall of African Cultures conspired with one another to make this transition. The halls were installed about 15 years apart. For twenty five years no audience member is recorded as having remarked that in the Museum the Ice Age ended at a point where African culture, circa 1955, seemed to begin. In the early 1990s, however, this remarkable sequence began to attract notice. At least the audience response began to be reported to the museum. The museum received letters from scholars and the public describing their dismay at finding Africa put one step above Neanderthal man in a scale of cultural evolution. One woman wrote of seeing a group of primary school students in which the black students were teased about their primitive status by the white students in their group. The staff of the museum protested that this was not their intention, that Africa didn’t have an Ice Age, that the halls in the museum had no logical or narrative sequence, that the halls had been installed at different times and with rather different intentions, and so on.

I made all of those protests myself. I think they are valid, particularly when a scholar as distinguished as Mieke Bal interprets the cultures halls of the American Museum of Natural History as if they were made at one point in time.\(^6\) But these protests ignore a fundamental feature of museums, that they provide ready made narratives for interpreting the objects and displays in them. No matter how pluralistic and relativising the curators of the Natural History Museum in Washington might be, they work in a display and research environment that is dedicated to illustrating the theory of evolution. It is a small step for its audience to extend the theory of evolution from natural species to cultures, which in a natural history museum setting are easily redefined as natural species. Eventually the Hall of African Cultures was shut down. The new Hall will have an entrance in the same place, but Neanderthal man will no longer gaze into his African future. Still I am not convinced that the narrative of the museum will not determine the audience’s interpretation. I once suggested that signs be put at the entrances of each of the culture halls stating “You are leaving the National Museum of Natural History and entering an evolution free space.” Would they have worked?

As I’ve just argued, the difficulties of representation entailed by showing and telling stories about sequences of events over time or space are no less daunting than those entailed in the task of capturing a moment in time. Problems of representation and mediation confront all museums and all exhibits and are exacerbated by the norms of showing and telling that museums set up for themselves, especially the norm that specifies that story telling must be a visual experience in museums.

About six years ago I was part of a group of museum professionals attending a Salzburg seminar on “Changing Museums.” Part of the task of each of the seminar leaders was to take the group through one of Vienna’s museums and make the implicit narrative of the exhibits explicit. My job was to interpret the ethnographic museum, which I had never visited before. It was a daunting task but fairly easy in the end. Each of the permanent installations was organized on a regional and sub-regional basis. The ethnographic museum has a large collection and in the New Guinea halls, for example, each case had an array of objects that displayed the same stylistic features. Shields and masks were carefully chosen to show the continuities within a sub-region, such as the Sepik River, and in contrast to another region, such as the Highlands. But I was simply amazed at the interpretation which Rudy Fuchs, a very distinguished art historian and museum director, made of the Kunsthistorisches Museum, and its halls of Italian Renaissance art. Rudy took us through an exhibit hall of Florentine paintings, filled with masterpieces that most of us had seen only in textbooks. The elaborate hanging, as it is called, of the

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\(^5\) At a Salzburg Seminar in 1991 I heard William Luers, the President of the Metropolitan Museum of Art describe how the MET had spent considerable sums on consultants who were asked to find the order behind the overall museum layout. Reacting to cultural critiques of the sort developed by Carol Duncan, Luers asserted that the MET and its consultants were simply unable to find any overall patterns of spatial arrangement and presentation. He attributed this haphazard quality to the autonomy and whims of the curatorial staff. When I described this presentation to members of the curatorial staff, they were astounded!


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hall included pictures mounted both vertically and horizontally in an enormous hall that contained well over fifty paintings. Fuchs showed how the sequence of paintings and moods conveyed in them told an elaborate story of growth and decay, with the plague as a central point in the social and artistic history of Florence. “Rudy,” I exclaimed, “what visitor to the museum knows enough to be able to understand this display.” “Ach,” he said, “These are only stories that curators tell to themselves.” I believe that the museum now has a new set of hangings.

Museums made Jim Boon sad. They seek to grasp what customarily evades all of us. They seek to capture an experience, a memory, a past; and often they seek to do so in terms of a rhetoric that claims a privileged perspective on reality. Yet, as museum curators ought to know, the stronger the claim to exhibit the real, the more entangled museums get in their own, sometimes very obscure, stories. A number of recent writers about museums have made parallel points about museum exhibiting. Stephen Greenblatt distinguishes between “in-situ” and “in-context” installations. This distinction takes as its starting point a central theme of this paper, that all displays use exhibiting devices to resolve the problems raised by the mediated nature of their representations. “In-situ” exhibits are performative; they mimic the museum building itself to grand historical narratives, such as the construction of imagined national communities. Yet there is an overlooked aspect to Greenblatt’s often cited article. “Wonder” is an indigenous category of the English Renaissance that was used to organize historically situated actors’ own experience of displays. Greenblatt sees wonder itself as referring to a changing configuration of meaning and experience over time.

In contrast to Greenblatt, Barbare Kirschenblatt-Gimblett distinguishes between “in-situ” and “in-context” installations. This distinction takes as its starting point a central theme of this paper, that all displays use exhibiting devices to resolve the problems raised by the mediated nature of their representations. “In-situ” exhibits are performative; they mimic the outside world in order to create the aura of the real. The logic of their rhetoric suggests that there is no need to refer to the world, that somehow the world of the exhibit is more real than the real world itself. This powerful concept recalls Eco’s account of hyperreality and Donna Haraway’s analysis of the use of dioramas in the American Museum of Natural History.9

“In-Context” exhibiting devices come close to reproducing Greenblatt’s trope of resonance. Through the use of labels, diagrams, maps, photographs and such, “in-context” exhibits and the devices they use draw in experiences and knowledges not invoked by the nature of the display itself. Of course these are ideal types, almost all exhibitions use both types of exhibiting devices. What these concepts sensitize us to, in different ways, is that no display or exhibit can stand alone. The efficacy of an exhibit, its success in relaying experiences or conveying knowledge depends on how well the acts of representing and mediating achieve their aims. At its core this is a semiotic process that takes the form of multiple metaphoric extensions — what is known is extended to the unknown to provide a structure for understanding the inchoate at the same time as knowledge external to the exhibit experience is used to predicate and organize experience of the exhibit itself.

Thus even the most immediate responses evoked by objects are culturally and historically mediated. But what happens when the objects themselves are taken from different cultures and different times? Are the problems of representation and mediation entailed by the crossing of cultural boundaries even more severe than those experienced within a single cultural space or historical trajectory? The literature on museums seems to think so.10 At the same time as museum professionals acknowledge the radical problems of translation and reference to context that exhibits of culturally and historically different objects pose, they argue for solutions to those problems that are designed to short circuit what anthropologists take as their stock in trade, the task of describing and interpreting otherness. Otherness may not be the subject matter of an exhibition; it was certainly not the dominant subject matter of the two exhibitions I examine below. But when objects from different cultures and spaces are made the subject matter of exhibitions, then the context of exhibiting raises issues about cultural, temporal and geographic distance and difference that will inevitably be addressed in the organization of the exhibit itself.

The debate over the Metropolitan Museum of Art’s notorious exhibition on Primitivism, the Affinity of the Primitive and the Modern provides a case in point.

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Primitivism is probably the best known example of a museum based art historical solution to problems of translation. The primitivism show demonstrated a range of relationships between works made by native artists in Africa, Oceania and the Americas and the origin of the modern avant-garde in painting and sculpture. These relationships ranged from influence to “affinity.” Objects that were used by Picasso and Braque, for example, were exhibited and discussed with the works that took off from them. A virulent debate resulted, in which William Rubin, the chief curator and his colleagues were accused of appropriating the primitive, of ignoring the intentionality of the non-western artists displayed in the exhibits, and of constituting these non-western artists as uncritical and unthinking producers of works that could only really be appreciated by western observers. This debate was not exhausted by critical articles and defensive responses. The debate was continued in exhibit form, through exhibits which were critical of Primitivism, such as Magiciens de la Terre, which I discuss below and the Hurd Museum’s Exotic Illusions, among others. Perhaps the most successful of these critiques were the series of satirical installation pieces performed and installed by Fred Wilson, including The Other Museum and Primitivism Now and then.  

Primitivism engendered its own anti-exhibit, the Pompidou Center’s Magiciens de la Terre, which asserted that, in some fundamental sense, all artists exist outside of the cultures and historical periods in which they live, that they all have a shared identity as “magicians,” agents capable of perceptions actions that cut through the veils of culture and history and uncover realities only dimly perceived by the rest of us.  

If Primitivism told us that there were only two kinds of cultures, the Western self critical same and the unselfconscious other, Magiciens asserted that there were two races who walk the earth, artists and others. The displays at Magiciens illustrated this theme. Unlike Primitivism, there was no search for historical connections, no concern for influences, no attempt to put an African mask next to the Picasso painting that utilized its formal devices or drew on what it thought were its cultural meanings and uses. Instead objects were juxtaposed that were presumed to exhibit the same artistic intentionality. Thus a Richard Long painting that showed his concern with basic elements such as the earth itself was set in front of an Australian Earth Painting to show how both objects were made by artists in touch with natural elements in a way that the rest of us were not.  

One could and should say that the florid romanticism of the Magiciens was as profoundly problematic in its lack of respect for culture and history as Primitivism, but for me the key issue is that both exhibitions were based on curatorial claims to insights not available to the audience. Yet the evidentiary basis for those claims could hardly be more different.  

In the catalog for Primitivism William Rubin, the chief curator, remarks that he selected only great works of African art for the exhibit. His evidence? Thirty years of viewing. Rubin’s eye and Rubin’s experience provide the means for discovering the works of duality to be placed in the exhibition and the affinities that organize the exhibit.  

When I first read this, I was appalled. On reflection, however, I found myself asking what else curators might have to rely on but their training and experience? At least Rubin takes responsibility for his curatorial choices. Nor does he claim that choices are their own evidence, as unadulterated connoisseurship does. Rubin’s methodology is interesting. He does not use the concept of affinity loosely, as some critics of the exhibition have claimed. While he does not invoke Max Weber and the German sociological tradition,14 Rubin clearly has in mind a kind of cultural and causal relationship that Weber calls an “elective affinity.”  

The concept of an “elective affinity” was used in nineteenth century chemistry to describe how elements in different compounds were thought to be so attracted to one another, that they could wrench themselves out of one form and join another.16 Rubin and his fellow curators see the modern moment in the history of Western art as exhibiting just that sort of reaction when it came into contact with African and Oceanian objects that had been taken out of their own contexts and

11 Wilson and I discuss the implication of these in a co-authored article — “Constructing the Spectacle of Culture in Musees” In Bruce Ferguson, Reesa Greenberg and Sandy Nairne, eds., Thinking about Exhibitions. London, Routledge. 1996 (rev. ed.).  
13 But note that Kirk Varnedou used a Richard Long from the same series in his essay on contemporary artists in the Primitivism catalogue (p.xx).  
16 Ref. as for note 15.
carried to another space, where they could provide the impetus for the rupture out of which modern art emerged. This was the influence part of Primitivism.

The rest of the exhibition was devoted to demonstrating the underlying universal "affinities" that made influences possible. In terms of the Weberian concepts I am using here, we might say that what Rubin calls an "influence" is actually an elective affinity, while what he calls "affinities" are actually what Rodney Needham might term "proclivities" that are universally available, but only emerge in specified contexts. Rubin wanted to show that there was a stock of formal solutions that were drawn on by primitive artist and modern artist alike, the first self-conscious and the second automatic. I don't think it accidental that the anthropologist most cited by Rubin is Levi-Strauss. Rubin's distinction between what he calls "influences" and "affinities" is profoundly structuralist.

How does this framework differ from the category of the "magicien" constructed by the Pompidou exhibition? This is a difficult question to answer. The world view of the curators of the Magiciens show is so different from that of Rubin and co-curators, I will argue, that it is virtually impossible to specify any shared concept of evidence. As far as I can discern the curatorial staff of Magiciens relied on intuition and sensibility to make their decisions, as did the staff of Primitivism. But the two exhibitions have little more in common. Magiciens established a relationship among objects that was stronger than the elective affinities and proclivities proposed in Primitivism. In the Primitivism show objects could only influence artistic practice if they had been known and used by the artist. Rubin's influences had to conform to constraints laid down by the limits of time and space. Picasso had to have bought, handled or seen the physical primitive object before Rubin would establish an elective affinity, an influence, between it and Picasso's artistic work.

In contrast Magiciens told the story of a world that obeyed a rather different set of physical laws. Instead of seeing artistic change as emerging out of artistic practice which tears itself out of one way of making art and merges with another, objects from any number of discrete and interconnected cultural and historical sites were shown to be examples of one single form and set of practices, not compounded and joined, but all variants of a single form, variations on a single theme, the art of the "Magiciens de la terre." Richard Long had no more need to see and know about Australian sand paintings than Australian Aboriginal artists needed to know about Richard Long. The world in which "Magiciens de la Terre" conduct their work is Platonic rather than Newtonian. The objects they make are far more shadowy examples of an ideal than objects that can have an influence on artistic practices.

In contrast to the highly contestable histories exhibited in Primitivism, I find it difficult to see how the objects and artists displayed in Magiciens can be said to have a history. They are merely material examples of what is unchanging and universal, available and present during all times and in all cultural spaces, but knowable only through its material manifestations. But if they have no history, are they subject to critical evaluation? Probably not. The curators of Magiciens made no claims based on connoisseurship and training. The catalog of Magiciens did not contain the elaborate and often illuminating examinations of specific objects that judged them to be more or less successful as did the catalog of Primitivism. This kind of discourse was especially prominent in Rubin's major contribution to the catalog, the chapter on "Modernist Primitivism," which abounded with judgements about exotic objects that deemed them to be artistically successful or not, based on how they resolved formal problems. There was no such examination of form evident in the Magiciens exhibition and catalog. The curators did not see themselves as cultural arbiters; they were not at all concerned with providing for their audience a basis for making aesthetic judgments. Instead their form of advocacy reminded me of the environmental movement. For Magiciens artists and their works are like endangered species; they risk disappearing in a world that no longer values what they do and obliterates the spaces in which they can thrive.

Where Rubin and the curators of Magiciens converged was in Rubin's assertions about the nature of contemporary tribal arts, that by and large they are "dead," devoid of creativity and the vitality that comes from connections to a living, vital tradition. This he attributes to the success of colonialism in destroying tribal life. My assertion that Rubin's judgements about the vitality of tribal arts shares something in common with the makers of Magiciens is surely odd. Primitivism's refusal to acknowledge that art could still be made beyond the boundaries of the Western imperium is the single most important thing that Magiciens was concerned to challenge. The refusal to see artistic and ethnographic validity in the ethnographic present is the sort of assertion that could never be derived from the sensibility of the curators of Magiciens. For them the dead culture is Western industrial society, which does not value artistry, does not know and cannot connect to the qualities of nature and does not seek to conserve anything derived from the preindustrial world.

Yet Rubin's judgements and the Romantic reaction of Magiciens share a significant assumption, that art must be more than formally successful; it must draw its sources of inspiration from a living tradition for it to qualify as great. In terms that are more popular today, we might say that all great art should have
"spirituality". The difference for them is not in the assumption of vitality or spirituality; it is in where they situate it spatially and temporally in their curatorial practices.

Even though Magiciens was conceived as the antithesis of Primitivism and though the cognitive claims of each curatorial team was very different, there is a way in which the curatorial practice that constructed Primitivism operated in the making of Magiciens. The number of actual primitive objects that can be shown to have been used by modern artists are very few. Rubin assembled a far larger collection that demonstrated what types of objects might have been available in early twentieth century Paris or Berlin. In addition Rubin described a number of affinities ranging from actual influence to reinvention. But he was always careful to describe whether or not there had been a context in which a type of object was known to an artist or not.

In contrast the curators of the Magiciens set themselves the task of assembling a world encompassing collection of objects that were examples of a type, perhaps the type of artistic practice. Each and every object had to be shown in a way that illustrated a facet of the practices of artists who were "magicians." Both Primitivism and Magiciens contained works of art that ranged from the modern to the contemporary and took from so-called tribal arts. But Magiciens was far more wide ranging. The Caribbean and India were presented alongside art from Poland and the U.S. Urban folk art, environmental art, protest art, myth and sacred art, were all represented in the exhibition. The specificity of each artistic production was granted space in the exhibit through the use of extensive labels, photographs and quotations. The audience was provided with a sense of what the artists intended, how their work emerged out of their biography and sometimes, whether or not there were other artists working in the same genre. The primary restriction in Magiciens was that the art had to be contemporary. Very few of the objects on display were culled from museum collections, and fewer still were historical. The emphasis here was on living artists, while most (not all) of the artists represented in Primitivism were dead or at least collected in museums.\footnote{Richard Long, and the same series of Long paintings at that, were represented in both shows.}

The Magiciens catalog did not carry with it the apparatus of scholarship that was magnificently displayed in the Primitivism books. The curatorial ideology has to be inferred more from the layout and selection of artists and objects than from textual assertions. But the short essay by Jean Hubert-Martin, the chief curator, contains some hints. Primitivism was organized as an exhibition of the "West and the Rest." The organizing thread was the history of the avant garde and the use made by it of exotic objects. "The Rest" figured in the exhibition only to the degree that it affected or shared attributes with the "West." Magiciens appeal to a global ecumene. The very first paragraph of Martin's preface invokes a "terrestrial globe" organized, mediated and peopled by the "humankind on the planet." No distinctions are made among non-Western cultures; they are all set in contradistinction to the West, but not to the West as a whole. Western artists and objects were included in the exhibition, but by and large they were not academically trained. Those artists who were academically trained, such as Richard Long, Lawrence Weiner or Ken Unsworth, Hans Haacke or Louise Bourgeois, all tended to use found objects to make their art, to situate their productions in natural settings, or to be critical of the effects of industrialization and commodification on peoples' lives. Many of these same themes were exhibited or presumed to be available in the work of artists from the non-West. Cheri Samba is an excellent example of the type of artist whose critical paintings seemed to fit the mould, just as the works of the Yuendumu people of Australia are excellent examples of art which fits into the mould.

In each of these exhibitions the problems of reference, mediation, context and translation among cultures demand solutions, even partial solutions, that made the exhibition possible. The claims that museums so often make, that they represent the real and the authentic, are challenged by the fact that all objects "belong" in some sense to another space, but no object challenges museum claims to experience more than an object that travels across cultures and times. The authentic and real is inevitably perceived as remote in time, space or difference from the taken for granted worlds of museum professionals and audiences. Because objects are defined as no longer connected to the contexts that either made them intelligible or which validated their authenticity, much of the organization and rhetoric of exhibitions goes into producing a convincing facsimile of the site of origin and authenticity.

I may seem to be describing those elaborate exhibits now characteristic of Natural History and History museums, such as the Field Museum's "Traveling the Pacific," in which whole complexes of domestic spaces and market scenes are reproduced in the museum. I think that this tendency is only an extreme form of the visual rhetoric that all museums assert when confronted with objects that travel. Primitivism and Magiciens also had to devise rhetorical solutions to the problems produced by
objects that travel across cultures. Primitivism devised a solution that bears an extraordinary resemblance to the strategies of ethnographic representation that Johannes Fabian describes in Time and the Other. The curator acts as a scientist might, taking objects and fragments derived from another context and assembling them into a pattern that not only shows some aspects of context, but also shows how the ethnographic object was a precursor to the modern object. Primitivism establishes relationships between the primitive and the modern that deny coevalness at the same time as they assert universality. The assertion of shared proclivities is matched by the denial of modernity, especially the key feature that modernity is deemed to own, the capacity for self conscious reflection. It is no wonder that Rubin believes that primitive art cannot survive the colonial confrontation with modernity.

Magiciens is more postmodern (antimodern?) in its attitudes. It still retains the distinction between the modern and the other, but inverts the values attached to the modern in a fashion that is less characteristic of some ethnographic strategies than an invocation of what Isaiah Berlin terms “the apotheosis of the Romantic will.” The great divide is situated between two classes of individuals, not really between cultures. Only those capable of certain creative acts have the capacity to connect to nature, and to one another. Magiciens sets up an aristocracy of artists who are not bound by the limits cultures create. Hence the need for the disciplines of context, ethnography and history, are eliminated. We are told a great deal about the art exhibited in Magiciens, but little about belief, function or social context. While the same might be said for Primitivism, there is a crucial difference. Primitivism is an exhibition about form, and quite intentionally eliminated artistic intentionality from its agenda. Intentionality, the artistic impulse, was a defining feature of Magiciens, which was as deliberate in its denial of the relevance of form. Yet this was an exhibit in which the concern for intentionality did not lead to any consideration of such aspects of culture as world view or specific goals imagined in ritual process. If Primitivism can be said to set up a hierarchy of cultures, then Magiciens can be said to eliminate a culture altogether, at least for artists.

I have kept my focus on the phenomenology of museums and exhibits, examining how the paradoxical nature of the museum experience shapes the problems of interpretation and mediation with which museums and exhibits grapple. Museums are specific sites with distinct claims to special experience. But they do not exist on another planet. They compete with other institutions that provide leisure and are only one form of what C. Wright Mills calls “the cultural apparatus,” the set of institutions that provide ready made models of culture and personhood. In addition museums and exhibits themselves are topics of cultural elaboration, and the anthropological discourses they make are adopted and used in other media. How vivid and immediate the circulation of images and ideologies between museums and other cultural forums can be was brought home to me in a Vanity Fair photographic essay that appeared two years after Magiciens de la Terre.18 The subject was wedding gowns and jewelry and the setting was South Africa, which was featured in that issue of Vanity Fair. The model was the Somali model and cultural icon Iman. Iman was photographed among the Ndebele people in a series of tableaux that featured their decorated homes. Many ethnographic and third world arts and artists were popularized by Magiciens. Cheri Samba, coffin makers from Ghana and Ndebele household painters acquired international reputations as a result of the Paris show. The Vanity Fair essay explicitly referred to the exhibition, and cited the Ndebele artists by name, in effect using the counter-hegemonic symbols of Magiciens, which protested against the cult of the anonymous tribal artist. Iman was shown modelling gowns and then being approached by a native Ndebele artist, who states “I want to paint you.” The next set of images displayed Iman unclothed, with the body being painted by the Ndebele artist.

The Vanity Fair article managed in short compass to combine the anthropological discourses of both Primitivism and Magiciens. In Primitivism objects derived from one kind of setting cross cultural boundaries to merge with their affines in another vastly different cultural setting. In Magiciens de la Terre objects move from the settings in which they were first made and appreciated to form a new category and setting. Vanity Fair uses the conventions of Magiciens to construct a set of representations more like Primitivism. The article tells us a great deal about Ndebele art, how it derives its imagery from urban experience, how it is “fragile” and endangered in the contemporary world. The primary vehicle for portraying relationships among cultures in the photo essay is a report of Iman’s interior dialogue, in which she is “excited” to meet the famous Ndebele artists whom she had heard of when she was a child in Somalia. The essay’s narrative structure shows a progressive merging of Iman and the Ndebele. In the last scene she is taken

18 “Visions of Ndebele”, Vanity Fair, 146(5140):63–74. There is no author listed. It was produced by Robert Downes Clark and Kristi M. Crawford.
away by her Ndebele friends. This ingenious set of representations manages to present all the forms of anthropological discourse I have been describing and more besides. Iman and the Ndebele artists merge into a tribal and artistic whole; Ndebele art is presented as ecologically endangered; the artists are instinctively rather than self consciously makers of art. In addition the essay reproduces in an inverted form the structure of Primitivism. Instead of Ndebele art travelling to the west, an object situated in the West, Iman’s body, travels to the Ndebele, clothed in Western ceremonial dress, wedding costume. But Iman’s body moves out of its costume in order to be assimilated to the primitive. It becomes a canvas for Ndebele painting. Of course, Iman’s body is only ambiguously Western. She is presented to her audiences as having been discovered by the American adventurer Peter Beard while herding cattle in Kenya. Hence the underlying act of election constituting an affinity also signals the return of an object, Iman’s body, to the site where it originated. But, but, the anthropologist in me wants to complain, Iman is not South African; Iman is Somali, and urban Somali at that. However, Vanity Fair, like many museums, deals in large categories, such as the West and the Rest.

I think that Iman’s adventures among the Ndebele provide yet another example of how the tensions inherent in the paradoxes of museum displays can be resolved. Two disparate cultures are juxtaposed in the article, and they seem to exhibit an unstable relationship not unlike the relationships of juxtaposed cultures in museum exhibits. Iman and the Ndebele are generalized Africans. In her interior dialogue Iman is reported to be “excited” about visiting the Ndebele of her childhood stories. Iman’s transformation from model to painting also entails a transformation from exotic Western object to authentic African object. The tensions and paradoxes posed by the act of juxtaposition are resolved by an act of repatriation. That may be the fate of many objects in Western museums.