

PARADOXES OF PRIMITIVISM

NOTES ON AESTHETICS

AND ANTHROPOLOGY

I

From Nolde to Beuys, the history of primitivism left its mark on the art of the last century. It seems that a new road, of which *Partage d'Exotismes* gives an account, is now being traced out. To understand this, it is necessary to go back to primitivism itself, and to look once more at its premises, its implications and its paradoxes.

Starting with the avant-gardes, art tended to move away from the domain that had traditionally been allocated to it. Artists' work had nothing more to do with the domain of the "beautiful" exclusively, but took on board questions of an entirely different nature. These questions were, for example, ontological (Duchamp: what is the nature of so-called "art" objects, and what is their relationship to the object-category?), epistemological (Mondrian: what is the nature of perceptual knowledge?), historical and political (Beuys: how is one to think about an aesthetic democracy?).

These questions are also relevant to a number of other domains, as the work of artists has demonstrated many times. It would be pointless to draw up a list of them here, but we will elaborate on one particular point: a certain number of modernity's essential features have been moulded in the domain of art, and in the research of which art is the vector. One of these features, certainly, is the dialogue that was embarked on with non-Western cultures, which took place outside of all academic discipline, and adopted the name "primitivism". But since the time of its birth as a poetic choice of modernity (a birth that it is very easy to recount as a myth¹), propagating outward from the domain of artistic practice to other levels of our culture, this concept has produced two effects.

The first of these effects is paradoxical in nature. While making possible, for the first time, an articulation (almost a reciprocal interpretation) between the arts known as "primitive" and the Western aesthetic tradition, a certain primitivism has for long cultivated a deep suspicion of any anthropological knowledge of art. In fact, the perception of plastic works produced by non-Western civilisations has given rise to interpretations which, while accommodating themselves to a very fuzzy set of definitions of what "primitive art" may be, have raised up obstacles to its comprehension. In fact, it is a question of ethnocentric evaluation (of which the model is still Ruskin's dictum: "Nothing that resembles art has ever existed outside Western civilisation"), and its apparent negation, i.e. the primitivist aesthetic. In effect, the ethnocentric point of view reserves the term "art" for the Western tradition alone, and contests the idea that the plastic or pictorial productions of so-called "primitive" societies could reflect an attitude comparable to that of a European artist. A certain primitivist aesthetic, on the contrary, postulates the absolute universality of artistic language, the idea that any art object can be understood independently of the significance that it takes on in the society in which it was created. In the primitivist universe, it has commonly been stated (as Guillaume and Munro did in a work that became very famous²) that the interest of the connoisseur of African sculpture should focus solely on the "plastic qualities of the figures – their effect of line, plane, mass and colour – apart from all associated facts. The ethnological background tends to confuse one's appreciation of the plastic qualities in themselves".

Where Ruskin's ethnocentrism turns away from the universality of art, the primitivist aesthetic turns away from the anthropological point of view of the artistic work. In neither view does the anthropology of art have any place.

This opposition between aesthetics and anthropology is doubly misleading. On the one hand, anthropologists' research has brought out the fact that any comprehension of works from other cultures, far from being able to make do without aesthetic scrutiny, cannot but involve the restoration and study of indigenous aesthetics. On the other hand, Western artistic research has long

gone beyond the limits of aesthetics. The most astute art historians have, for their part, recognised that the age of the "distinguished reaction of the aesthete" to the work of art, in Hans Belting's fine formula, belongs only to a very specific period of art history. And this is one basic reason for calling into question the concept of primitivism.

II

The first paradox of primitivism thus has to do with the relationship between aesthetics and anthropology. The second concerns the nature of primitivism itself as a phenomenon. For long considered as one of the roots of modernism in art, and profoundly linked to borrowings from non-Western forms, primitivism is still far from moribund despite the fact that figurative borrowings no longer take place.

Vlaminck, Derain, Matisse, Picasso, Nolde, Kandinsky, Marc, Carrà, etc. – the works of those artists known as primitivists are lined up, in our museums and Art Histories, with all the force of obviousness: the literal transfer of such and such detail, or such and such profile of an object, which turns out to be taken from an African mask or an Oceanic sculpture, often operates as an unexpected revelation. These transfers of image may cause some surprise, but the evidence is convincing: the borrowings exist, undeniably. This fact was definitively established by the work of W. Rubin and his team at the Museum of Modern Art in New York: the catalogue which accompanied the exhibition where they did so contained a series of proofs of this profound "affinity" – as Rubin put it – which had grown up between the Primitive and the Modern. All the same, the nature of the affinity, as soon as one tries to go deeper into some of its aspects, proves difficult to grasp. We know that for Goldwater, who was the first to study it (1938), primitivism was a relatively transient phenomenon, an episode in artistic research that could be considered as already having come to an end at the time when he was writing.

For the organisers of the exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, on the other hand, the list of primitivist artists, which was already long, kept on

having new names added to it. In fact, the choice of positioning oneself face to face with extra-European arts as though in the presence of a source of direct inspiration has clearly not finished producing new works, and it forces us to abandon the historian's viewpoint in order to follow, and try to understand, research carried out by contemporary artists. In sum, primitivism refuses to leave the stage, and does not allow itself to be filed away in the archives of this century's art. It is forging ahead at the present day, as it did a century ago. It thus finds itself in a state of complete mutation, which makes the delineation of its profile, and the comprehension of its nature, somewhat difficult. There still remains a certain degree of indeterminacy, to be left for future developments.

III

This impression of uncertainty not only concerns the present and the future of primitivism, but also strikes at its historical origins. Where does primitivism come from? When and how did it become one of the most striking moments of modern art? We may have the feeling that we know the answer. One of the most common theses in the histories of primitivism is that the origin of the movement is to be sought in the work of Gauguin, an artist who turned towards primitive life. According to the great majority of historians, it is to Gauguin's aspiration to go beyond the limits of our civilisation that we owe the "discovery" of primitive art. At the same time, when one turns from the biographical register to an examination of the works themselves, one cannot help observing, as Rubin did, that there is nothing which really justifies such an assertion: "the Polynesian works of art", as Rubin quite correctly writes, "functioned for Gauguin more as symbols and decorative devices than as agents of influence on his style"³.

What was "primitivist" in Gauguin was more a lifestyle project than any construction built up within the work as such: "it would not be farfetched to consider Gauguin's visual account of his 'island paradise' a somewhat

desperate example of life imitating literature, in effect, a mimetic reenactment of the 'myth of the primitive'⁴.

Goldwater, who was the first to publish a study of the primitivist movement, generally took a completely different stance from that of Rubin, but concurred with him on this point. For him too, Gauguin's works tended towards primitivism, but never fully expressed it. For Gauguin, primitivism was still a mixture of romanticism and Jugendstil, and this gave his figures an intensity, often erotic, "which tries to, but never succeeds in dominating the emotional tone of his pictures. Grace still properly belonged to Gauguin's conception of the primitive, and to the pictures which were its result, but only in spite of himself"⁵.

If Gauguin was a primitivist, therefore, he was so in an almost-involuntary way. And if primitivism, in the strict sense of the word, is a poetic choice – and it matters little whether this implies a conscious borrowing of forms or some other way of establishing the kind of relationship to the primitive arts that would be capable of influencing a style – the fact is that it does not have its birthplace in Gauguin's work.

When and where, then, was primitivism born in modern art? It seems as though the search for its historical and conceptual origins – if one wants to go beyond the personal memories of the protagonists, the legendary accounts, and the episodes that have so often been discussed by art historians⁶ – has to confront a set of different logics. When was primitivism born? This is a complex question, and one which it is difficult to answer because it seems to imply two questions of different types: one is chronological in character, the other conceptual. It appears to us beyond doubt that, whatever the circumstances in which something like "primitivism" in art was born, this birth cannot be conceived of without the notion of a backdrop, an episteme which grew up slowly around objects that were being incorporated into European collections from the start of the 15th century onward. It is naturally impossible for me to recount this entire history, whose major outlines I have summarised in other works⁷. Here, the important thing is to focus on another question, which is

concerned with issues of contemporaneity: how did primitivism survive the end of modernism, and why is it still alive?

IV

In modern art, the search for the sublime and the search for origins have tended to coincide. For the modern artist – though primitivist poetic choices have often differed a great deal from one another – the primitive was a new figure of the Antique. The search for the archaic coincided (for Picasso as for Nolde, for Kandinsky as for Barnett Newman) with a quest for a profound stratum of artistic activity, which could not but be common to all history and all culture. "The First Man was an Artist", wrote Newman in 1946, and in this formula one can read all the universalist ambition that has fuelled the primitivist arts of the West. The author who represents this primitivism in the most intense manner must certainly be Carl Einstein. It is in his writings that modern primitivism reveals, with great clarity, its real nature: that of a new search for the sublime.

"Just a few years ago", wrote Einstein in 1915, "we experienced a decisive crisis in France. Thanks to a prodigious effort of consciousness (...) Some painters had enough force to turn away from an activity that they had been exercising mechanically. Once detached from the usual procedures, they examined the elements of perception of space in order to find out what might have engendered it. At the same time, they discovered Negro sculpture, and recognised that in its isolation it had cultivated the pure forms of the plastic."⁸

To abandon the frontal, pictorial illusion, for Einstein, meant apprehending the pure form in its foundation, and creating, mentally, the omnidirectional space in which the form appeared. But this mental apprehension of which African sculpture (and cubist painting) provide the most consummate examples is above all, if one follows the argumentation put forward in Negerplastik, a means of intensifying the image. The cubist image is, of

course, from the point of view of its construction, independent of the point of view of the observer as a unique point marked in a space. It no longer conforms to the spectator, but disdains the fiction of a profundity that is feigned, or simply suggested by pictorial means. It no longer calculates the optical arrangements according to "frontality and distance"⁹. In fact, the African cubist image constructs, in its eyes, a multiplicity of points of view, and thus shows what Einstein calls the "logical consequences of plasticity" – the deployment, if not the analysis, of the process of perception itself. For Einstein, in fact, as for Hildebrand, it is only when an image (a "particular realisation") perfectly seizes a law of perception that a true form appears: "Form is this perfect identity between the perception and the particular realisation [the work] which, by virtue of their structures, coincide perfectly."¹⁰

Within this deployment process, the deciphering of profundity, though set free from the frontal position and its illusory character, still occupies a crucial position. It is indeed, for the eye, a question of identifying the invisible part that is conveyed by the image; and it is really in this invisible part that the efficacy of the image resides. On this point, Einstein's analysis shows itself to be extremely acute: "Sculpture has nothing to do with the naturalistic mass, but only with the organisation of the form. The point is to show, in the visible areas, the invisible areas in their formal function [...] and the volume, the coefficient of profundity as I would prefer to call it, [so that] each part may attain autonomy and be deformed in such a way as to absorb the profundity."¹¹

This deciphering of the coefficient of profundity, by creating the space as totality and as perfect identity between individual perception and perception in general, brings to light the true nature of the plastic work. For Einstein, the form thus transforms the observer's experience into a particular case (of perception) of absolute intensity¹². The model of this intensity, for Einstein, is the African mask. Inhuman, impersonal, caught in its own fixity, the mask may appear indifferent. But this, in Einstein's view, would imply that one had completely failed to understand its nature, and had grasped nothing of its

intensity: "The fixity of the African mask is none other than the final degree of intensity of expression, freed from any psychological origin."¹³

This means that the African mask is not a vehicle for indifference. Quite the contrary, it should be considered as a model of cubist creation, precisely because, in Einstein's words: "The elaboration of a purified structure 'engenders there' a state of immobile ecstasy."¹⁴

This reading of Einstein's text (which I mention here, intentionally, by contrast with contemporary primitivism) leads to two conclusions. On one hand, it shows how the reciprocal interpretations of African and cubist art simultaneously produce an aesthetic of the modern image and a poetics of the perception of African art. On the other hand, this interpretation (which is meant to be rigorously founded on the recognition of pure formal relations) also shows itself, with great clarity, to be another modality of the affective intensification of the image. The path to the immobile ecstasy which Einstein indicates, and which constitutes what is really at the heart of the cubists' primitivist borrowings, presupposes the utopia of an omnidirectional gaze, liberated from all perspective – a finally-immobile eye in which all the dimensions that define the very existence of space are brought together in a sort of sublime point of sensitivity.

African art, in this sense, becomes the apotheosis of Hildebrand's utopia, and his theory of form. It brings about the emancipation of sculpture, or rather that of plasticity as the pure thinking of space, of any pictorial aspect – and thus any optical appearance. The primitive speaks of the limits of the modern, and simultaneously also brings into existence its utopia.

V

Today, primitivism has changed its nature. The great majority of primitivist artists have abandoned the domain of the sublime. What dominates, in this domain, and by the same token in *Partage d'exotismes*, is the multiplied image of a frontier, a conflict which opposes cultures and societies: the

cartoon-like imitation of the appearances of the lives of ordinary people, and of valuable objects (commercial, religious or political), as residues; idols (as other people's divinities are commonly termed), and, sometimes, shredded bodies, put on view as testimonies, relics, and on occasion even manifestos of means of political action, or as ritual devices within what one might call a figurative messianism, where each person stages a cartoon image of one another.

Some attempts to carry on the search for the sublime do, however, persist. Several years ago, for example, James Turrell came up with a plan to transform a volcano in Arizona according to the strictest laws of an Amerindian aesthetic: everything that was to be found on the surface of the earth, and even under the surface, was to be thought through in relation to what appeared in the sky. This, as Turrell certainly understood, was one of the major axes in the aesthetic thinking of many Amerindian societies. Basing himself on a certain reading of the Hopis' indigenous poetics, he sought a transcendence, a form of absolute that would bring his work closer to the immobile ecstasy that Carl Einstein saw in African art. Here too, the utopia of an omnidirectional eye reappears, projected beyond its physiological limits onto an infinite landscape.

And yet the two situations are in reality very different. For Einstein, primitivist inspiration was explicit – as their reading of African arts was for the cubists. In the preparatory drawings for Turrell's still-incomplete work, the expression "hopi kiva" (Hopi underground temple) clearly referred to the interior of the volcano. Since then, despite the fact that Turrell's work is not yet accessible to the public, this Amerindian word has disappeared. So it will be a kiva – a space designed by a primitivist artist – that does not bear its name. This is a primitivism that thinks of itself as maintaining the search for the sublime, but which is ashamed of its name.

Within the work, an Amerindian name, kiva – the very name that marked the borrowing – has been obliterated. It is a complex and contradictory image of a cultural frontier that remains impassable, even as contact between cultures

is becoming inevitable. It is also a sign of what primitivism is currently capable, or not, of being.

1. Jack Flam, "Primitivism and the Fauves" in W. Rubin, 20th Century Art Primitivism, New York, Museum of Modern Art, 1984.
2. Guillaume and Munro, Primitive Negro Sculpture, New York, Harcourt and Brace, 1926, p. 7.
3. W. Rubin, 20th Century Art Primitivism, op.cit, p. 7.
4. Ibid.
5. R. Goldwater, Primitivism in Modern Art, Cambridge (Mass.), Harvard University Press, 1986 (1938), p. 256.
6. For a long time, the history of this discovery of the primitive arts was drawn from an autobiographical text, the *Mémoires de Maurice Vlaminck*. The episode is dated 1906, and took place in Argenteuil; see J. Flam, op. cit. It should however be pointed out that since Goldwater's work appeared we have found out that the discovery of the primitive arts was made almost simultaneously in France and Germany, where, as early as 1904, Kirchner and the Die Brücke group recognised the value of the African and Oceanic objects that were exhibited in the museum of Dresden. They were soon followed by the Blaue Reiter artists (Goldwater, op. cit., p. 105 ff.).
7. C. Severi, "Art", in Dictionnaire de l'anthropologie et de l'ethnologie, Paris, PUF, pp. 81-85; "Vestiges, merveilles et chimères. Sur la collection ethnographique", in Annales du Centre d'Art contemporain du château de Kerguelennec, tome 1, 1994; "Oggetti Magici e oggetti del pensiero. Primitivismi a confronto", in Dalla meraviglia all'arte della meraviglia, conference proceedings, Modena, Museum of Contemporary Art, 1998, p. 35-53.
8. Carl Einstein, Negerplastik, p. 348-349.
9. Carl Einstein, Negerplastik, ibid., p. 350.
10. Ibid.
11. Ibid., p. 351.
12. Ibid., p. 350.
13. Ibid., p. 353.
14. Ibid.