

## “We are all Demoiselles d’Avignon” or the Breaching of the Dominant Gaze

As we have seen, the consequences of Steinberg and the evolution of art history and critique from the 1960s were characterised by the fragmentation of the discourse on modern art. In the presence of these approaches from the 80s, those affiliated to the *New History of Art*, especially those, who in the 21<sup>st</sup> century belonged to the *Global History of Art*, presently active, took up positions.

The *New History of Art* label (close to the proposals that have also been called social, radical or critical history of art) began to be regularly used from 1982 as Jonathan Harris explains. This referred to a history at odds with the hegemonic approaches of formalism and iconology, and committed to semiotic, Marxist, feminist and psychoanalytic points of view. The new art historians, opposed to the iconological and formalism methodologies they considered passive, uncritical or commonplace, had been offering proposals, in principle linked to left-wing political activism. The routine procedures of an art history as traditional as it was powerful, in the international academic sphere, centred on monographs of prominent male artists—the *Great Male Creative Artist-Genius*—was about to suffer the thrashing by a posture critical of the glorification of the proper name (masculine), his biography or his insight; a posture critical of the course of an iconological discourse that, while born out of the brilliance of its pioneers, in the hands of some of its less wise followers, was falling into an anodyne vacuity. The frames of reference of this new art history, centred on social, political, feminist or psychoanalytic questions, moved the centre of gravity of the author or creator to the spectator; from the producer to the recipient, as artistic practice had been doing at least since the historic avant-gardes.

In this sense, *Les Demoiselles d’Avignon* can be seen exactly as an authentic methodological laboratory, a sort of privileged battle field of these tussles be-

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Maite Méndez Baiges, “*We are all Demoiselles d’Avignon*” or the Breaching of the Dominant Gaze. © Author(s), CC BY 4.0, DOI 10.36253/978-88-5518-656-8.07, in Maite Méndez Baiges, *Les Demoiselles d’Avignon and Modernism*, translated by Diana Mathieson, pp. 67-101, 2022, published by Firenze University Press, ISBN 978-88-5518-656-8, DOI 10.36253/978-88-5518-656-8

tween the institutionally dominant art history and the new art histories. As we have seen, the interpretations generated about this work, elevated to the category of a canon of Modernism, have converted it in an ideal case study of the debates taking place in the heart of the art history discipline.

We must remember that, as Jonathan Harris, or female historians like Griselda Pollock explained, institutional or traditional art history has a code of subjects that are well-worth studying. And, as a result, the legitimate ways of studying them and a series of forms and contexts that are able to maintain this code should also be considered. In fact, one of the ways in which the discipline has been renewed since 1970 has been the inclusion in the teaching, as well as in research, of objects of study that will not be recognised within the canon or code. We shall have the opportunity of seeing examples of the methodological propositions of this New Art History from the feminist and post-colonialist theories applied to *Les Demoiselles*. This perspective has been extended recently by the addition of the *Global History of Art*, created from the concept of globalisation, coined at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. It departs from the intense interconnection of the world and is concerned about the relations, connections, transfers, exchanges and appropriations between the different cultures on the planet. On the strength of their theses, the encounter between *Art nègre* and Modernism constitutes one of the favoured objects of study.

Before beginning the examination of the new gazers who emerged in the 1980s it will be helpful to consider the convergence of Steinberg's proposals and certain premises of the semiotic theory, or more in general, that of post-structuralism. Even before Steinberg, the problematics of this relation between art and spectator were being discussed; a relation that had up till then always seemed neutral and natural, and not in the least determined by the myriad constraints between the work and the spectator.

From this perspective, and confronting the traditional points of view, the gender, race, social position, *habitus* or cultural endowment of the spectator are considered constraints that will determine different readings and interpretations of works of art. Even on the sidelines of semiotics, Erwin Panofsky and the sociologist Pierre Bourdieu had made crucial contributions on the impossible existence of a neutral or naive spectator, capable of seeing or judging a work of art without his cultural baggage affecting his appreciation and his sociocultural conditioning affecting his taste. From the semiotic perspective, Cubism was perceived as launching an auto reflexive conscience on the systems of meaning. That is to say, on the codes and languages used by different visual representations and that these codes or languages are linked with the knowledge, social class and gender of the spectator in question. It is clear that this perspective has much to say about a painting such as *Les Demoiselles* where the protagonists' gaze inevitably involves the spectator.

#### "Nothing for women in this Game", the Feminist Perspective

If we are to believe Steinberg's hypothesis on the crucial role played by the spectator of *Les Demoiselles*, who we must presume to be masculine and hetero-

sexual since he is the client of a brothel that offers female merchandise, many questions as to how gender affects the gazes directed at this canvas will necessarily arise. In fact there is another photograph of the board of the MoMA before the painting that we saw in the introduction. In it all the board members who we saw looking at the painting, have turned their backs and are posing for the cameras. However, the lady who before turned her back on the *Demoiselles*, has now turned towards them with a furtive glance of, perhaps, complicity. I would like to reveal her name: it is Mrs. John Sheppard. What was Mr. John Sheppard's wife seeing and thinking as she gazed at *Les Demoiselles*? This image suggests the need to ask what happens when the person looking at the painting is a heterosexual woman. Is her gaze different to that of the male spectator? And if it is, in what way does it differ? Is it plausible and timely to propose a reading of *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon* from a feminine standpoint? And is it appropriate to offer a feminist interpretation? For example, what kind of relation does a heterosexual female spectator establish with a painting like this, brimming with prostitutes and therefore rendered extremely sexual? Feminist critics, especially Carol Duncan, Anna Chave and Tamar Garb have tried to answer this type of question. Tamar Garb (2001) in particular, tackles the study of Gertrude Stein's reactions. She was the first well-known woman spectator to see the painting and, apparently, she did find it particularly distasteful; a reaction in contrast to that of her male colleagues.

The feminist critique implicitly proposed the exclusion of the woman in a painting full of women. Or to be precise, the history of Modernism's masterpiece had never taken into account the feminine point of view. There is growing suspicion that women have always been redundant in this type of game. "Nothing for women in this game" could be the feminist critique's watchword.

We must frame these questions within the epistemological renewal of the history of art discipline that came into being in the 70s and 80s, in the heat of which the feminist position, characteristic of gender studies, would force its way into the historical-artistic narratives. Feminist art historians led from the premise that history is always created from a particular stand point, using a situated knowledge in a precise cultural, political, ideological, gender and racial context. Thus, they encouraged legitimacy of the subjective, a form of "fixed awareness" and would bring to light, or rather, would decry the fundamental negativity of the script for figurative painting in the West for women (as part of the structural sexism of institutional art). They also recognised that the supposed avant-garde rupture of the first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century only served to perpetuate this masculine domination. We are now on course towards a head-on collision between Feminism and Modernism, based on the argument that the latter is a biased narrative built on masculinist and patriarchal foundations. In the context of this enmity, one of the most evident oppositions will be the clash between the feminist and gender theses with an art history that revolved around the preeminence of painting over other types of artistic productions (collage, assemblage, photography, design etc.), and the white man as the true culprit of these artistic products by the uncritical assumption of the idea of a "genius". Thus the circum-

stances of the victim of this narrative, the woman artist, would be revealed: the woman artist invariably relegated to subaltern, to a subordinate role, when not totally invisible. And all this, despite the vanguard supposedly no longer exalting the figure of the genius nor underestimating applied arts in favour of fine arts, a fact that should have favoured the development of a historiography disposed towards the role of women vanguard artists.

Before presenting the specific feminist point of view on *Les Demoiselles*, formulated by Chave, we must pause and consider Carol Duncan's articles that openly express this feminist complaint, motivated by the exclusion of the woman as a subject from the discourse on modernist or vanguard art. We are referring especially to the explicitly titled article "The MoMA's Hot Mamas", written in 1989 (171–78), in which we are witness to the start of the vanguard feminist criticism through the confirmation of history as a narrative of exclusion, told by the white heterosexual male descendent of Europeans for an audience who answers to this same description. The article, that begins by examining the position occupied by the woman in the temple to modern art that is the Museum of Modern Art in New York, warns that although, in theory, museums are public spaces devoted to the spiritual formation of their visitors, in practice they are prestigious and powerful ideological machines that affect, among other things, questions of gender identity. The authority exercised during decades by the MoMA cannot and should not be underestimated when the moment comes to establish the wording of the discourse on 20<sup>th</sup> century art.

Duncan's text starts by asking this question. How is it possible to reconcile the articulation of a lineal and formalist history of modern art defended and exhibited by the MoMA in 1989<sup>1</sup> with the abundant presence of female figures, especially nudes, flaunted by this same art? In keeping with this historical narrative one would imagine that modern art had incurred in the gradual rejection of the iconic in favour of acquiring the purity of artistic language. We could also put Duncan's question in a different way: the prevailing narrative of Modernism, clearly summarised by Clement Greenberg in "Modernist Painting", a teleological narrative that has as its objective the purification of the arts of all heteronomous elements, does not appear to leave much leeway for the presence of any feminine themes. Or we could say, the articulation and preservation by the MoMA of the orthodox narrative of Modernism appears in principle to be in disaccord with themes such as naked women. Furthermore, portraits of women with a name do not appear. Generic anonymous women do appear, identified only by their social origins, from the lower classes since the majority are prostitutes or models. For this reason, Carol Duncan asks, with barely feigned sur-

<sup>1</sup> We should also take note that it continued to do so in the 21<sup>st</sup> century despite a "proposed amendment" that took shape in a spectacular remodelling by Yoshio Taniguchi and a profound museographic reorganisation at the beginning of the century. I have written about this (Méndez Baiges 2006), and there is also an article by López Cuenca (2005). In 2019, a new remodelling of the building and the installation of the collection granted entrance to women and artists from non-western nations.

prise: Why then did art history render no accounts of this massive presence of women in vanguard works, of this intense preoccupation with socially and sexually available female bodies? What have naked bodies and prostitution to do with the relinquishing of their representation by modern art? And why is this iconography identified with the greatest possible of artistic ambitions? Clearly feminist criticism consisted, above all, of asking a handful of apparently pertinent questions. And although asking suitable questions at the appropriate moment is a way to provoke the transformation of our historic narratives, Duncan did not restrict herself to this. As one might imagine she was ready with the answers.

The explanation stems from the fact that the recurring images of sexualised female bodies are a way of masculinising the museum, thus organising it around the fears, fantasies and desires of men. And it implies that the spiritual transcendence, on the one hand and the obsession with the sexualised female body, on the other, in reality constitute a whole. Often the images of women in modern art speak of masculine apprehension as they almost always have a dangerous aspect, a potential castrator and devourer. Duncan came to consider the MoMA's collection of monstrous, threatening women as fabulous; among them naturally, apart from De Kooning's *Women*, *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon*, one of the backbones of this collection, tells the hegemonic story of Modernism.

But this still does not explain the supposed contradiction existing between the impulse towards abstraction, characteristic of vanguard art, and the huge number of female nudes in this art. Duncan is of the opinion that there is a perfect compatibility between rejection of the representation and the desire to flee from the spiritual image of the woman and her earthly domination, apparently rooted in childhood notions about the mother. The threatening women would be seeking justification for the spiritual or mental flight; they are darkness and long to escape towards the light. Only the representation of Woman is necessary. As an artist her presence would distort the story (the author also alleges this to explain why so few works of women artists are exhibited in the MoMA and its ilk). In fact there are representations of men but while the women appear represented as sexually available bodies, men are portrayed as physically and mentally active beings, shaping the world and pondering its meaning. Both the *Demoiselles* and De Kooning's *Women* are essential linchpins in the exhibition because they efficiently serve to keep the museum a masculine enclave.

Duncan concludes her article stating that *Les Demoiselles* was conceived as an ambitious declaration of the significance of the woman. Thus, finally the mystery that Picasso reveals about women is a lesson in art history. The women in the painting are not only present-day prostitutes: they go back to an old and primitive past. So Picasso would be using art history to support the following theory. "The awesome goddess, the terrible witch and the lewd whore are but single facets of a many-sided creature, in turn threatening and seductive, imposing and self abasing, dominating and powerless—and always the psychic property of the male imagination" (Duncan 1989, 76). This also implies that authentic art is always the exclusive property of the macho. And the museum installation amplifies all this. In its final state the painting bestows on men and women alike

the privileged status of the male spectator, although only the men may receive the impact of its revelation. Women are allowed to observe from a distance but they may not enter the arena of high culture. *Nothing for women in this game*, as we said earlier. The museum installation underlines the fact that “true art” has always been an exclusively masculine dominion.

“MoMA’s Hot Mamas” gave rise to an interesting correspondence between the author and Leo Steinberg, compiled by *Art Journal* in 1990, the year Duncan published the article. The debate between the two authors of the epistolary exchanges catches our attention because we are frontline witnesses to one of the most representative chapters in the breaching of the universalist discourse on modern art.

Carol Duncan is of the opinion that, according to the assumptions of “The Philosophic Brothel” by Steinberg, women would not be anatomically prepared to experience the painting. Steinberg regrets her opinion, to which Carol Duncan replies that, in her opinion, it is a generalised fact that male critics try to conceal the questions of gender that certain masterpieces like *Les Demoiselles* contain. And she adds that Steinberg’s article was groundbreaking precisely because it brought to light in great detail the phallocentrism of the work, albeit in an unscientific and somewhat unconscious way. If Steinberg reproached Duncan for being unable to imagine herself as a man when she viewed *Les Demoiselles* (as he is able to imagine himself living the imaginary life of a millionaire) Duncan in her turn asked Steinberg to make another effort: “to ponder on what was obscene and degrading about these ‘Demoiselles’ that could repel and irritate a woman”.

Apart from the clash of the feminist gaze with an opposing point of view, the universality of the gaze lies beneath the dispute between Duncan and Steinberg. At the time of their correspondence and as a result of the semiotic studies and because of post-structuralism in general, this universality had been challenged. In *Thousand Plateaus* Deleuze and Guattari (2004, 8) expressed this idea, associated with that of the rhizome, in the following manner:

A rhizome would ceaselessly establish connections between semiotic chains, organizations of power and circumstances relative to arts, sciences, and social struggles [...] there is no language in itself, nor are there any linguistic universals, only a throng of dialects, *patois*, slangs, and specialized languages. There is no ideal speaking-listener, any more than there is a homogenous linguistic community. Language is, in Weinreich’s words ‘an essentially heterogeneous reality’. There is no mother tongue, only a power by a dominant language within a political multiplicity.

Both in her article and in the correspondence referred to, Duncan defends, tooth and nail, the nonexistence of one unique gaze on a work of art and the irremediable conditioning of social, economic, political, historical, ethnic, gender and *habitus* indicators. There is no ideal spectator-viewer who will capture the same message from the *Demoiselles*, irrespective of their gender because there is no universal subject speaking in this work. In fact, as paradoxical as it may seem, the “other criteria” considered by Leo Steinberg to alter the interpretation

of this painting in such a revolutionary way, implied in themselves the type of standpoint that interpreters such as the feminist Duncan defended. Feminism is one of the consequences of applying these new criteria, one might say.

The truth is that suspicion about the hardly neutral character of “culture” was not something that was coming into being here and now. It came from afar, as far back as Europe at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, 1911 to be exact, when the sociologist George Simmel argued soundly in “Feminine Culture” that what the West calls just plain “culture” is in fact masculine culture even though it has been clothed with an appearance of neutrality on the subject of genders. Simmel continues:

It must be confirmed, to start with, that the culture of humanity, even in its purely material content, is not lacking in sex and its objectivity goes no further than a man and a woman. On the other hand our objective culture is, with the exception of very few sectors, predominantly masculine [...] that we believe in a purely “human” culture that does not ask after the man or the woman for the same reason that denies its existence: to the ingenuous identification of “human being” and “man” which, in many languages, have the same term for both concepts. (Simmel 1999, 177).

Furthermore, at the time Duncan was writing, many other institutions were unmasking the idea of the “eternal feminine” as one of the symbolic ways of domination, no less oppressive for being symbolic. This masculine domination is based fundamentally on passing itself off as something natural, practically part of an essential and immutable order. Bourdieu warns that any dominant social group harbours the pretentiousness of universality and objectivity of its own values and ideological assumptions (Bourdieu 1988).

It is precisely this pretentiousness that was being killed at this time and that can be seen in the feminist critique. The need to deconstruct the hegemony of the narrative was one of the driving forces for questioning and substituting these arguments for other discourses based on points of view previously silenced, principally the feminist, closely allied with dominant or subaltern ethnic groups. It is important to understand that this hegemony is the capacity to give the appearance of “natural” or “common sense” to the ideology and values of the dominant class; the idea behind the prevailing historic-artistic narrative. This had been proposed since the 70s by the first feminist art historians like Linda Nochlin, Whitney Chadwick, Griselda Pollock and Rozsika Parker in their research on women artists and their theoretical proposals on the ways in which the criticism and the newly created feminist historiography should be undertaken. This is how alternative discourses created by the dispossessed, both men and women, were shaped.

Using Carol Duncan’s established terms, Anna C. Chave wrote an article on understanding *Les Demoiselles d’Avignon* in feminist mode (1994, 597–611). She also began with a skeptical question: Why have art historians converted this insulting image of five bizarre prostitutes, lying in wait for clients, in the decisive example of the current visual regime? Chave starts by warning that in the re-

search by Steinberg, Rosenblum or Max Kozloff, the painting is invariably interpreted as a female attack. In the case of Kozloff, a massacre, a wave of female aggression according to Steinberg or for Rosenblum, an attack of the erotic fluids of the five nudes.

If we return to this crisis of the universalist gaze, evident in Duncan's article, Chave states that all the critics who have taken an interest in *Les Demoiselles* have not only assumed the unquestionable: that the hypothetical spectator is heterosexual and macho. They also decided to consider only the experience of this spectator, as if nobody else had ever gazed on this painting before. Chave condemns these proposals of critics who have stated that *Les Demoiselles* "tell us about our desires", thus raising male heterosexual desire to the category of universal and naturalising it, as if the painting were a surface especially prepared to receive it.

Thus, we can vouch that *Les Demoiselles* has received sexist, heterosexist, racist and neocolonialist interpretations. This is what Chave proposed demonstrating in her article by articulating an alternative reading that would have room for heterosexual women's points of view. So, the author warns—and it is important to note the use of the first person she adopts here— *I cannot identify with the observer-client because I am a female, feminist heterosexual viewer. And although I am not a prostitute there are fundamentals that allow me to identify with the protagonists. For instance I share with them the female experience of walking through the streets and being "molested" by strangers who dwell on some aspect of my anatomy and expect me to smile. They may not be mistaking me for a prostitute but the idea that in every woman there is something of a prostitute, and vice versa, clearly lies beneath. Through similar experiences to these, Chave continues, I can look on *Les Demoiselles* with empathy; to me they show, and show up, the patriarchal stereotypes of femininity. I, and all of us women, understand that they feel part of the make-believe, part of the masquerade that they and I know is behind the mask. For women, the price of this strategy is a profound sense of alienation. "The masquerade [...] is what women do [...] in order to participate in man's desire, but at the cost of giving up (their own)" (to quote Luce Irigaray) (Chave 1994, 599).*

The use of the first person in a historic-artistic discourse is essential to understand the change criticism of Modernism is undergoing. It puts into relief the activating of what has been called *situated knowledge*, an epistemological posture that we owe to Donna Haraway and that has extended widely to feminist criticism. According to this she openly recognises that the subject of knowledge and all its determining factors have an irreparable effect on the paths of knowledge. Situated knowledge goes hand in hand, naturally with the breaching of the universal, objective, scientific and neutral subject that is its immediate and logical consequence. It is as if Heisenberg's principle were to be applied to social sciences and humanities. But in addition, in the critical feminist discourse the awareness that all knowledge is situated knowledge will be accompanied by the development of the idea of a rational as well as an organic understanding, through the bodies, one might say. In the art history sphere this knowledge of bodies plays a fundamental role in the interpretations of works of nude female



subjects, as in our case, that produce different results in the bodies of the subject, depending on their gender, sexual orientation or sexual identity.

Anne Chave also expresses the suspicion that *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon* lost their status as mothers of modern art, the honour of representing the commencement of Cubism, when the critics began to pay attention to the content and openly recognised that they were prostitutes. Admitting that the mothers of Cubism were a handful of trollops meant that the father was unknown and, far worse, given the *negro* content of the painting, Cubism was converted in a black bastard, since it has always been recognised that in this cradle of Cubism, the women in the painting were dark-skinned.

To sum up, for Chave masculine criticism absorbed "*les demoiselles*" as a species of menacing *femme fatale* that had to be understood as a symptom of men's fear of feminism. At the start of the 20<sup>th</sup> century the image of this menace challenged the patriarchal order, established the demands of women and, the very presence of "black" in Europe filled the hearts of the Western male with fear and anxiety. Groundless fears Chave confesses that she is amused at the nervous response to this feminine brazenness (of the *demoiselles*) shown by her art historian colleagues. One of the ways of neutralising the menacing aspect that the female sex represents for many men is to stop concealing it and bring it out to the light. Courbet did this in his *Origine du monde* and we could add, as Picasso himself did so in some of his drawings and paintings. Feminist artist themselves also did this from a different viewpoint in the 70s when they embarked on a "Cunt Art." This entailed giving total visibility to the female genitalia and also the use of this noun, considered totally taboo or at least having degrading connotations, and was done with the intention of neutralising and reversing the negative effects of these connotations. From this moment on, a vaginal iconography began to develop in contemporary art. Instead of keeping the Furies hidden, feminist art proposed exposing the female interior, bringing it out to the light in an attempt to dissolve its potentially menacing character.

It is hard to say if women in general are alarmed by these other women, the *demoiselles*. Probably many women have never felt intimidated or threatened by them and nor do they find them monstrous, ugly, dirty or deformed; on the contrary perhaps women see them more as comrades. Certainly we are more likely than most men to follow the indications proposed in the artistic project *Surviving Picasso* which we shall discuss further on: "We are all *Demoiselles d'Avignon*". I personally find some of the young ladies really beautiful, with their placid coon eyes and tired gazes and also extremely funny in their masks redolent of childhood games where a familiar adult dressed up to make us frightened. Estrella de Diego has even compared them affectionately with fairground oddities like those portrayed by Diane Arbus or the stars of the film *Freaks*.

For the last two decades the neutral critical reviews (in the eyes of the feminists, basically masculine and not neutral) insisted over and over again on considering *Les Demoiselles* as essentially threatening subjects, capable of frightening, ferocious, savage and unhealthy. They have also been associated with the spreading of terrible venereal diseases. And as we have seen earlier in Rubin's

text, their deformations have been linked to syphilis, and a fear of degeneration and regression to barbarism. According to Chave, underlying all this is the fear of a time and circumstances where the hegemony of the male would tumble; a time when their primacy, even their viability and usual ways of perceiving and understanding would begin to appear, not just as something merely dubious but even as something that was no longer welcome.

According to Chave, *Les Demoiselles* represents a danger for the male sex because it shows a group of experienced working women who apparently are not intimidated by nor revere the men that come close; “women whose independence is clearly threatening” (as Daix says). Chave identifies the fear that the *demoiselles* normally cause not only with the fear of a woman and her independence (and thus the crisis of masculinity that was beginning to spread at this moment in Western history) but also of the African, of the “blacks”, who in the colonialist imagination are associated normally with a surcharge of savage and uncontrolled sexuality. This is the real threat referred to by the critics, but obviously only as a veiled hint.

And of these two fears, the greater is the fear of the other, of its growing power, autonomy and liberation. Chave believes this is the principle content of the painting. *Les Demoiselles* is a symptom of Western man’s fear of losing his hegemony, felt because since the 19<sup>th</sup> century it is the “realisation and displeasure that the West was being threatened by loss, deprivation and by others” as Hal Foster (1993, 69–102) put it. For this Picasso referred to them as an exorcism; and for this the critics had given them an apotropaic value because it was exorcising this fear of women and by the same token, of blacks. This would explain why Picasso denied this over and over again in a refusal to recognise the presence and power of this threat that was glimpsed on the horizon of Western masculine domination.

So, in Chave’s reasonings we perceive how she conciliates the feminist critical discourse with the post-colonial discourse. The feminine and the African, or non-European, appear to be destined inevitably to intermingle in the criticisms of this work. This also peeks out in Duncan who had already pointed out that in the context of the ideology transmitted in the Museum of Modern Art’s collection, *Les Demoiselles d’Avignon* exhibits the use of African art not as a homage to the primitive but as a way of confining and fencing off, to keep the “other” whose animal savagery opposes civilized man, under control.

Briefly, all the epithets directed at *Les Demoiselles* by male critics involve matters of gender as well as race. This gives rise to the post-colonial reading of the work that investigates this fear of the other, or of the non-Western other and even, on occasions, considers the possibility of its assimilation. The post-colonial theory examines the critical discourse on Modernism from the perspective that concurs with the intellectual climate of the research being carried out; from an anthropological and historical viewpoint, in an attempt to fathom out the role played by “tribal art” by vanguard artists at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. It enquires as to the specific type of impact that “the blacks” had in the works of these artists. It asks what was the overriding attitude to the African continent in Europe at the height of colonialism; or what factors and ideology might condition the reception of non-Western, African or Oceanic art by these artists and their immediate circle.

Summing up, female sexuality and Africa are converging territories. In the end both appear in *Les Demoiselles* in the guise of depravity, irrationality, horror, magic and intuition. When examined closely, all these depictions, rather than describing women, the African or the primitive, appear to expose this fear of “the other” and the mentality of the white men in colonial Europe of the 20<sup>th</sup> century; this was the attitude in which *Les Demoiselles* was painted and interpreted. This is one of the deductions that the deconstruction of the discourses on this painting led to. Clearly both the feminist and the post-colonial approaches are militantly critical, but, in the end, just as ideological as the one they are trying to oppose however much the latter is always clothed in an alleged neutrality. The difference would stem from the hegemonic gaze that shelters the desire for universality and objectivity while that of the “others” does not because they are identified as fruit of a situated knowledge. In any case, a curious paradox might arise from the examination of the critical response to *Les Demoiselles* as Hal Foster pointed out. The phallic, Eurocentric culture may have become the image of its own crisis in one of its great monuments.

#### The Colonial Question and the Debate on *Art Nègre*

The militant criticism by women would be only the first warning of a frontal attack on the hegemonic interpretive trench of *Les Demoiselles* and would serve as an incentive for a type of analysis that would weigh more heavily on European men’s problem with “the primitive, “the other”, the Non-European, non-Western other. Remember that African and Oceanic sculpture in Paris at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was commonly referred to as “The Negroes”, “Negro sculpture” or *Art nègre*.

In the first chapter we mentioned one of Picasso’s comments on his experience of visiting the Trocadero Ethnographic Museum in 1907 while he was painting the picture. Now I would like to present another part of the comment not included above. It comes at the start and reads thus: “When I visited the Trocadero, it was loathsome. The Flea Market. The smell. I was completely alone. I wanted to leave. But I didn’t go. I stayed. I stayed. I understood that it was very important, something was happening to me, wasn’t it? The masks were definitely not just any old sculptures. They were magical things”. They are comments to André Malraux (1974, 17).

He continues, as we have seen, referring to the materialisation of the picture and states that *Les Demoiselles* was his first exorcism painting. Certainly in the majority of Picasso’s quotes and comments on his encounter with “negro sculpture”, or the role played in the direction taken by his painting from 1907, we will only find denial of the formalist influence of this type of art.<sup>2</sup> This is not just his famous reply in a poll to various artists on the matter: “*Art nègre? Je ne connais*

<sup>2</sup> See different texts and comments on various occasions, compiled by Marie-Laure Bernadac and Androula Michael (1998: 93, 116, 134, 136, 138 and 140).

*pas!*" (Fels 1920, 25), one of his *boutades* from my personal point of view, with which he was merely expressing tedium for a style that had become excessively fashionable. This is not the only example. Picasso reiterated on various occasions that the possible impact of *Art nègre* on *Les Demoiselles* or his art was always marked by a spiritual and emotional side and had something of a superstitious character. This art would have signified an invisible influence more than a visual influence. In some of these comments he even marked the difference with the way Matisse or Braque had received the African aesthetic. According to the Spanish painter they viewed the small figures as an artistic phenomenon, simply as sculptures while he himself could not help trembling before them, or better still perhaps, before what they transmitted, before their symbolic meaning or function. "That is what separated me from Braque," Picasso admitted. "He liked the 'Negros' because they were good sculptures. They never frightened him in the least. He was not interested in exorcisms" (Fels 1920, 17).

The presence of African art is one of the most complex and controversial aspects when it comes to analysing *Les Demoiselles* and the one that has attracted most attention from recent criticism. At present the controversy as to whether or not there is *art nègre* in Picasso's work is still current. As we have seen in previous chapters some specialists on the painter roundly deny this. To a large extent the complexity of the matter arises from the opinions generated by Picasso's encounter with "the others" in 1907 and affects not only Picasso but has repercussions in the characterisation of what we call "primitivism" in modern or avant-garde art as a whole. Our definition and vision of modern art is altered depending on how we define (and value) this encounter. In other words, if we bear in mind that Picasso, Vlaminck, Braque, Derain or Matisse looked upon the "primitive art" of non-Western cultures with the dominant gaze of colonialism because they shared the prejudices of the majority of Europeans of the time, then, modern art as a whole is under suspicion of harbouring racial prejudice.

Although we have already seen the opinions of some art historians on the encounter between primitivism and modern art in *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon* (see especially the chapter devoted to William Rubin) it is befitting now to present a synthesis of the debate on the presence and impact of "tribal art" on the eclosion of European avant-garde art. We do this in order to place it within its true dimensions and above all, try and identify the ideological prejudices, the assumptions or common areas that might, or might not, be muddying the understanding of this encounter. Examination of the very nature of African and Oceanic art must be at the centre of the theoretical debate and with it, whether the influence of "the primitive" in the renewal of the European visual order achieved by the avant-garde would have had a preeminently formal and artistic character or was, on the contrary, fundamentally magical, instinctive or apotropaic. It is important to ascertain at what point the preference of art historians for one or the other option depends on certain ingrained values and ideas. Studying the interpretations made on the relation between primitive art and European art at the start of the 20<sup>th</sup> century is a way of analysing the discourse on Modernism (the "orthodox narrative of modernism") that can contribute to a much deeper

understanding of the avant-garde artistic phenomenon as a whole. And, when we refer to the discourse, we do so in the Foucaultian sense, understood as the collection of relations and interests inserted among images and text and their inherent power.

We are aware that Picasso's declarations about the part played by *art nègre* in the gestation and, of course, final result of his famous brothel seem to confound rather than clarify the matter. A summary of those we have quoted earlier produces a confusing, even contradictory, result. There are testimonies where the painter undoubtedly denies any influence whatever of *art nègre* in *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon*: "It has been said that *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon* was influenced by black art but that is not true", (Souchère 1960, 133), while admitting (in his famous comments to Malraux) that in his encounter with this art, he discovered objects with apotropaic properties that played a relevant role in converting the work in an exorcism painting. His comments ranged from describing the small figures from Africa and Oceania that he saw in the Trocadero as "witnesses" and not models for the work (Fels 1923, 4) to denying any knowledge of *Art nègre* in a survey carried out by the magazine *Action* in 1920 among numerous artists and writers of the moment (Picasso et al., 1920, 25). As we have mentioned, Picasso's reply "*Art nègre*, don't know it" quite possibly was a way to distance himself as one of the happy few who had discovered the virtues of black culture before the 1920s when it became a prevailing or mainstream trend from which the painter wished to disengage himself. We could add to this the answer he had given to Tugenhold who was visiting the painter's studio with its "black idols from the Congo". Tugenhold asked Picasso if he was interested in the mystical quality of these sculptures to which the painter replied "Not a bit. I am captivated by their geometric simplicity (*Apollon*, 1914)" (Flam and Deutch 2003, 63–4).

When reading these comments we must consider the historiographical line that we have been examining up till now, one which weaves along a path that denies or undervalues the impact of African art in *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon* and even the whole Cubist movement. This path later opened the way for some formalist historians we have seen mentioning the formal relation between Cubism and Primitivism. Kahnweiler did not tackle the matter directly from the painting but he did come to the point of confirming that non-European art shed light on the anti-illusionist path of the avant-garde. "It was negro sculpture that allowed the Cubist painters to see the problems that the European art evolution was embroiled in and gave them the liberty they sought" (Kahnweiler 1963, 232) to find a solution that avoided any illusionism and created symbols that renounced any imitation of volumes. During the period of relevant formalism, *Les Demoiselles* was always considered the cradle of Cubism and was still associated with African or "Negro" art in general as well. From this standpoint, as Rosenblum suggests, African art plays a formal role since familiarity with it offered Picasso an example of liberty to distort anatomy with the aim of creating a rhythmic structure that melded solids and voids to try new forms (Rosenblum 2001, 15). In other words, it would have offered modern art an extremely useful model of anti-naturalism with which to create equivalents rather than copies of

reality. In this regard Alfred H. Barr Jr, director of the MoMA spoke of a black period in Picasso's work, and *Les Femmes d'Alger* as its masterpiece, mentioning stylistic or formal affinities between the two young ladies on the right and some masks from the former French Congo and Ivory Coast (Barr 1939, 60). That is to say he recognised an inspiration in African art rather than in the Iberian sculptures, contrary to what Picasso himself had categorically stated: the presence of *negros* in *Les Femmes d'Alger* was impossible because his discovery of this type of art was made after he had painted the picture. However, Barr also pointed out that Picasso had recently mentioned that the two figures on the right were finished a little later than the rest of the composition and therefore could have dated from after his seeing the African sculptures. The American critic speculated that one could not rule out Picasso having forgotten retouching the two heads on the right after his seeing these sculptures because this influence was far more evident than the Iberian in this part of the painting.

Christian Zervos, Pierre Daix and William Rubin were the next authors, three great Picasso specialists, who attempted to clear the negationist path. In 1942 Zervos would categorically deny any African-Oceanic influence in *Les Femmes d'Alger*, alleging that Picasso himself had assured him he had been unaware of *Art nègre* in 1907 and that the figures did in fact come from Iberian art (Barr 1946, 56). Zervos' crucial work did leave an abundant legacy of authors who, like Pierre Daix, another expert on Picasso's work, denied the presence of African art in *Les Femmes d'Alger*. In fact, Daix (1970) actually wrote an article entitled "Il n'y a pas d'art nègre dans *Les Femmes d'Alger*". His contribution served to moderate the terms of the debate by stating that when Picasso told Zervos he was unaware of African art when he was painting *Les Femmes d'Alger*, this must be understood as unawareness of it as art but knowledge of one or two isolated pieces. He considered that the commotion surrounding *Les Femmes d'Alger* and its connection to African art stems from the confusion its savage aspect caused in visitors to Bateau Lavoir. Picasso's brutal formal simplifications led them to detect "something barbaric" that they automatically interpreted as "Negro" (Daix 1991). Briefly, Daix stated that the misunderstanding spread because despite Picasso's denial and Zervos and Maurice Raynal's reaffirmation of the absence of *Art nègre* in the painting, in the end, Barr's opinion prevailed. It was only later that William Rubin demonstrated that the Congolese masks presented by Barr as Picasso's models had not even arrived in Europe in 1907. The confusion was no doubt fuelled by Picasso himself who gave people to understand that he neither knew *Art nègre* nor had he visited the Trocadéro until after he had finished the painting, in spite of his sketchbooks showing black subjects in June of 1907. Daix insists, however, that these were in preparation for other projects like *Nu à la draperie* and not *Les Femmes d'Alger*.

This section is completed with William Rubin's monograph on the painting in his essay on Picasso in the catalogue for the exhibition *Primitivism in 20<sup>th</sup> century Art* (1984). In fact the so-called "negro problem" is one of the key themes in both texts. One might say that once again it revealed itself as a problem. In them Rubin applies his energies to showing that any formal similarity between

the demoiselles and the Oceanic or African masks was purely coincidental, and really a problem of conceptual affinities, not the result of pictorial, visual or visible conventions. For Rubin, Picasso’s visit to the Trocadero played a crucial role in the rendering of *Les Demoiselles d’Avignon* because it was not merely a passing glance at tribal statues in the homes of friends. Here, in an ethnographic museum, these tribal objects were seen for their place in ritual or cultural functions in their original contexts, far from a state of aesthetic contemplation. Picasso would have contemplated these objects, seeing them as religious rather than artistic in a new light that allowed him to perceive the powers of exorcism, intercession or magic that they apparently possessed. Rubin did not deny the impact of “black” in the painting but he would not admit the artistic influence in formal terms. As we can see from his investigation in the corresponding chapter, it contains a meticulous formal analysis of each of Picasso’s prostitutes and their successive transformations, accompanied by proof that supposedly would serve to reject the possibility of any morphological similarities between them and the African or Oceanic masks. It also gave details of the four types of masks that the historiography has linked to the young women in the work and points out that they have no reasonable resemblance with the young women, nor could they have been seen in Europe in 1907 because they simply had not arrived there.<sup>3</sup> The masks would be, above all, depositories of magical forces and throughout Rubin’s texts, the young ladies that the bibliography has always considered Africanised, are continually linked with disease, death, threats or monstrosity. In a nutshell, they were linked with Picasso’s fear of death, related as we have seen, with his terror of syphilis. Here it would be timely to repeat the quote introduced in the chapter on Rubin where he states “We sense the thanatophobia in the primordial horror evoked by the monstrously distorted heads of the two whores on the right of the picture, so opposite to those of the comparatively gracious Iberian courtesans in the centre [...]” (1984, 254). In all his arguments, and this quote speaks for itself, a chain of ideas can be detected that leads to the notion of the African being monstrous and gruesome and at the same time, to sex, venereal diseases and the idea of the female being a destructive force.

In any event, in Rubin’s opinion, the violence transmitted by the most Africanised of the faces hints at woman as a destroyer—a vestige of the *femmes fatales* of the Symbolists—that in the end conspires to something that transcends our sense of civilised experience, something ominous and heinous, described by the author as what Kurtz discovered in Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* (Rubin 1984, 254) and we have to imagine it referred naturally to “the horror, the horror”. This was because Picasso sought to transmit these primordial terrors that served as a source of inspiration directly and not because tribal art supposedly offered a Protocubist morphology. The masks he saw in the Trocadero were useful to him in his search for plastic variables to exorcise his personal psychologi-

<sup>3</sup> Rubin (1984: 262 and foll.) rejects one by one the masks that past historiography had presented as possible models for the faces of the three young women.

cal demons but he never copied nor painted any tribal object in *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon* or in any other drawing.

Rubin also points out that neither Picasso nor his colleagues differentiated clearly between the Oceanic and the African. For them there were different connotations because the Oceanic was closer to the myth of the primitive that had inspired Gauguin and suggested carnality in a natural environment while the African connotations evoked something more fetishist, magical and above all something potentially evil, closer to Conrad. It is strange to see that when Rubin refers to the Conradian horror, he is referring to Africa itself, rather than the ravages caused by the European colonization of the Black Continent (something that, incidentally, is conspicuously and systematically absent in Rubin's texts).

Briefly, Rubin admits that the pioneers of modernity's affinities with the African masks reflect a deep identity of spirit with the natives as well as a generic absorption of the principles and character of their art but never any intrinsic formal or artistic assimilation.

Frankly, his arguments could not have contained more controversial elements. They immediately attracted a wrathful protest and rejoinder from the feminist post-colonialist critics whose dissection at once revealed many racial and gender prejudices in a historical-artistic discourse that, in principle, was supposed to gather together the guarantees of asepsis, neutrality and objectivity appropriate in any scientific discourse worthy of its name.

Thanks to these well studied "negationist" authors, the encounter between the *Demoiselles* and Africa continues to be a real problem of difficult resolution. The most recent feminist, post-colonialist and contextualist critics have begun to entertain suspicions on the neutrality and even the asepsis of the technical analyses, to wit, the formal, that have been able to detach the *Art nègre* from the modern and consequently have decided to undertake the task of clarifying what ideological meanings are buried below the historiographical negationist line. We are therefore witness to the birth of a group of studies that, among other things, are devoted to disentangling the African connection from modern art, preferably in two ways. One way is historical research on the prevailing idea of Africa in colonialist Europe at the start of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and the other, deconstruction of a modernist narrative that shows so much reticence towards the idea of artistic influence of that continent's art at the time of the birth of modern European art.

So, recently, in the present century a contextual type of historical and anthropological investigation has begun the exploration, and finally, connection of the presence of "the negroes" and the primitive in *Les Demoiselles* to the political and colonialist mentality of Europe in the first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, from the moment of questioning if this work of Picasso is the testimony of an integrating attitude or discrimination of the "other" she or he. We must consider the research by Patricia Leighton (2001, 77–103) and David Lomas (2001, 104–27), both interested in clarifying the social, political and ideological conditions responsible for the meaning given to the confluence between prostitution and the idea of Africa in *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon*.



For both researchers the association between horror and the primitivising aspect of the work is the key. They do, however, go beyond the male spectator/client of the brothel, imagined by Steinberg or the traumatised Picasso depicted by Rubin to focus on the association between the idea of the primitive and the matter of prostitution discovered in the ideology and mental imagery of the era. From this perspective the general disposition held in France in and around 1907 about prostitution and Africa is vital. Both Leighten and Lomas agree that the opinion of the average European at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century with colonialism in fully spate, was reductive and generalised, tending to mix everything up and quite disposed to admit any perturbing or frightening aspect as part of the notion of "the others".

Patricia Leighten's painstaking study of the political context of the colonialism that produced the ideas and image of Africa in France at the beginning of the century underlines the negative implications of the racial prejudices based on the stereotype of the African savage. She then continues with the hypothesis that *Les Demoiselles* suggested a powerful anticolonialist criticism, quickened in Picasso by the cruelty and brutal exploitation of the natives in the Congo and reported in the newspapers and magazines of the time. Someone like Picasso could not remain indifferent to this situation. Furthermore this colonial abuse was severely condemned in some magazines with the same anarchist leanings as Picasso, as Leighten has shown in her other research on the painter (1989), and in which Picasso's close friend Juan Gris regularly published his illustrations.

According to Leighten the supporters of colonialism saw France as having a civilizing mission to fulfill in Africa while the vanguard anarchists considered that African culture and art had the mission to render Europe primitive. This historian's theory proposed that Picasso had decided to Africanize the prostitutes in an attempt to identify them as victims of colonialism and modern society. It was, so as to speak, a way of showing his solidarity with the anticolonial campaigns of the revolutionary left that intensified in 1905 when Belgian brutality in the Congo became known. Both from stylistic and content points of view the "African" figures in *Les Demoiselles* are not only showing antipathy for established European art and lifestyle, they are showing their open enmity, according to Leighten, because at the last resort "the primitivism of Picasso, just like all primitivism, subverts the aesthetic canons of beauty and order in the name of authenticity". For Picasso and other anarchists this was a way of calling into question the rational and liberal political order in which they found themselves. The deliberate ugliness of *Les Demoiselles*, within a self-satisfied modern culture that would prefer to exclude such unpleasant realities, confirms the persistence of the unsightly. The imagery confirms that the "culture of such 'savages' has a power and beauty all its own" (Leighten 2001, 94–5). In essence Picasso reveals a firm anti-colonialism defence together with the ambiguities typical of modern society. The African appears as a grotesque "other" but that does not signify an assumption of the negative stereotypes about the colonised because the artist aligns himself and identifies with this "other" and his aesthetic and ideological canons opposed to "civilized Europe". This was quite appropriate

for an avant-garde artist to do at that time, particularly if he was a supporter of anarchism like Picasso.

Admittedly, at the time some members of Picasso's intimate circle, like André Salmon, maintained that the way of representing nudity in *Les Femmes d'Alger* was a way to oppose the classic or dominating criterion in the European aesthetic manner. It was a counter-criterion that acted as a disruption of the hierarchy of Western aesthetic values (Green 2001a, 142).

On the other hand David Lomas's stance is almost diametrically opposed to that of Leighton as he attributes the assumption by Picasso of the colonialist prejudices against "the other" in *Les Femmes d'Alger*. He does not admit, so as to speak, that these prejudices be subjected to Picasso's political filter of anarchism and vanguardism. Instead he considers that the painter adjusted feminine nudity in *Les Femmes d'Alger* to a "canon of deformity" that would be the result of transposing the dominating prejudices about other cultures, considered inferior, in colonial France at the time. Lomas believes and wishes to demonstrate that this criterion fundamentally coincides with the 19<sup>th</sup> century anthropological and criminological portrayal of *dégénérescence* (reverse evolution) or degeneration of Westerners.<sup>4</sup> To curb this danger, medical and anthropometric studies provided the punishment of criminals, prostitutes or non-Western persons with an apparently scientific justification. Traits that evidenced this racial degeneration were summarised as different height, different shaped ear-lobes, a certain cranial measurement, features showing sexual ambiguity and provided a simple yardstick for social stigmatisation. The thing is that according to Lomas, Picasso's young prostitutes showed many of the features considered degenerative traits by the anthropology of the time.

Consequently, Lomas starts out, as did Leighton, by studying the context and the anthropological ideas of the time with the regard to the African and prostitution. He then concludes that the canon of deformity used by Picasso for his Iberian and African prostitutes and the way these deformities suggest, albeit unintentionally, hideousness, are perfectly aligned with the deeply disparaging stereotypes in vogue at the time. Lomas' text contains a strong condemnation as he considers that "at the level of visual representation, Picasso is as guilty of complicity in this process of scapegoating as physical anthropology was" (Lomas 2001, 122) because he indiscriminately applied the array of physical features that the anthropologists of the time were using to define otherness and the abhorrent. He demonstrates through his articles that the transgressive way used to portray the body in *Les Femmes d'Alger* concurs with the deeply disparaging features in the iconography of the prostitute formulated by 19<sup>th</sup> century anthropology, moved by a true fear of debasement. Ultimately Picasso would have been,

<sup>4</sup> Eugenio Carmona has disputed this deformity criterion referred to by Lomas and has also noted coincidences, in Picasso's sketch book 7, with Greek and Hellenistic art in the semi-reclining figure (second on the left), that Steinberg described as a recumbent dejected figure or in relief "Album 7: Cahier de dessins de Monsieur Picasso" (Carmona 2010).

despite himself, a creature of his time, defined by the rules of his time, defined by the dominant cultural conventions. And the horror his painting roused in its first spectators has to do with fears generated not just by the idea of Africa and its savage fetiches but with the devastating conjunction of negative ideas associated with the Black continent. These fears culminated in a physical fear of the degeneration and debasement of the body, in an alarm focused on the hypothetical threat Picasso's prostitutes posed to the European ideal of beauty. The work would be, then, fruit of the fear of degeneration mixed with a dread of sexually transmitted diseases and their terrible physical consequences.

For the feminists Picasso had violated the classic ideal and opted for a composite likeness of woman according to the misogynistic attitudes of the time. For Lomas this violation led, involuntarily but fatally, to the fabrication of a mirror that registered the pathological, negative and threatening consideration of the "other" held by the Western man in a world colonised by him where the system was starting to show both symbolic and physical fractures. The medical and anthropological discourse would have provided him with the perfect excuse for concealing his contempt of science and using this scientific knowledge to spread out his vigilance and control over what he considered a threat to the prevailing social order.

The feminists' analysis and the one focusing on the non-European other at the height of colonialism both conclude that the painting portrayed elements feared by Europe at the time that threatened the end of its established order. If the feminist criticism cast doubts on male domination and its way of constructing a symbolic universe, the criticism that studied the colonialist mentality of white Europeans at the start of the 20<sup>th</sup> century questioned the hegemony of the Western white man's point of view. Today this discourse not only sounds reductive and limiting but worse still, oppressive and ineffectual. It also lacks any consideration of other cultures, other worlds, other points of view, the views of those who have always been seen as inferior, subaltern, but who, sooner or later, the West would have to learn to treat as equals and listen to carefully, for their own good.

#### Post-colonial Criticism and the Question of the Subalternity

The perspective that takes into consideration these other points of view or other sensibilities developed by those thought of as subalterns is what we could call strictly or militantly post-colonialist. It goes beyond the detailed study of the colonial question at the time *Les Demoiselles* was painted to propose the urgent need to "give Africa a voice" in this thread of the critical discourse of Modernism. The feminists, in much the same way, gave the floor to the female spectator with the aim of understanding not merely the essence of the painting but all the preceding interpretations seen up till now.

None of the research on the presence of African art in *Les Demoiselles* examined so far has been done by an African or African descent author. In none of the research has a person of African origin or with a personal link to African

culture expressed their point of view of the encounter between the art of their particular region on the continent and modern art. This may sound strange to a Western art historian's ears. However it is less strange if we propose an inverted approach, as the post-colonial authors did. The crucial encounter between modern and African art at the start of the 20<sup>th</sup> century had only been examined until now by white, Western Europeans or North Americans, heirs to this modern art and unfamiliar with the cultures of the African continent. In their proposals post-colonialists pleaded for the "African voice" but this would be one of the greatest omissions in the critical discourse on the presence and impact of primitivism in the proposals on modernity. This omission has only just begun to be corrected now, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Study of the African elements in *Les Femmes d'Alger* from the post-colonial standpoint clearly shares the political and impassioned aspect with the feminist focus. This is evident in the essay by Simon Gikandi, a Kenyan born academic working at US universities (Princeton) entitled "Picasso, Africa and the Schemata of Difference" (2003, 455–80). In his opinion only when the floor is given to Africa and especially African or Afro-american women, will the prejudices present in the different interpretations made of this work and Modernism itself for the last century begin to crumble. Probably the whole discourse on modern art (Modernism) rests on the gag that covers the mouths of the subalterns, be they women or Western ethnic minorities and hence Gikandi proposes and partly achieves the need for its deconstruction.

His article begins with an anecdote from which it is possible to extract predictable consequences although ones completely unknown before his study was published. It concerns a meeting between Picasso and Aubrey Williams, the Guyanese artist and prominent representative of Afro-Modernism and black Abstractionism that took place in the mid 1950s, thanks to the good offices of the writer Albert Camus. The artist would later comment that meeting the Malaga-born painter had no special significance for him; he disliked him and then, to add insult to injury, Picasso showed interest in his "fine African head" and said he would like to paint it. Gikandi believes that this demonstrated that Picasso was not considering Williams as an artist but merely as an object that he could make use of in his painting. The bad impression Williams had of Picasso is due in part to this experience of feeling himself treated as an object worthy of being represented on a canvas and not as a subject capable, among other things, of painting a canvas. His disillusionment was increased because Aubrey Williams considered Picasso to be the leading light of primitivism, the "artistic movement where the Other, almost always brown or black, became the catalysts of modern art". Thus greater respect for the cultures and bodies that made it possible would have been expected. Gikandi asks how else could someone convert other cultures and subjects in sources of his art, in the agents of the ruptures that we associate with Modernism, if they do not value the people who produce this art.

It is worth pointing out that in post-colonial criticism, as we can see, "bodies" begin to be spoken of in a more physical sense than before. If, with the exception of feminism, criticism of *Les Femmes d'Alger* had referred to the bodies as

problems of shapes or form in Western painting, from now on the bodies would be important as subjects. We are entering, as it were, into the orbit of a critical discourse of embodiment.

Gikandi uses the anecdote and his deductions from it to give support to his perspective. The present awareness of the relation between Modernism and the "other" is much more complicated than that of several decades ago. Picasso's interest in the "fine African head" makes it perfectly clear that his relation with Africa, or his idea of Africa "was a meticulous attempt to separate Africa's art from his or her body, to abstract, as it were, those elements of the art form that would serve his purpose at crucial moments in his struggle with established conventions of Western art" (Gikandi 2003, 456). Picasso formed relationships with black objects but not with the people. He was not interested in them as human beings and creators of culture. The fundamental proposal of Gikandi's article is to show that this disassociation between bodies and artistic models was the way to strip the African of its inherent danger and allow it to enter in what Aaran affectionately calls the "citadel of Modernism".

One important point before we continue: both the militant feminist and the post-colonialist criticism conducted the deconstruction of the Modernism narrative put together during the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries. Its centre of attention was no longer the possible interpretation of *Les Femmes d'Alger* but a critical examination of the discussions it had generated during its century of existence. This is what in this book we are calling the critical discourse of modernity (or Modernism *tout court*). Gikandi's study thus becomes something more general, an analysis of the control or the censure that historiography has systematically exercised on the role played by the Black in the emerging vanguard movements. And what he condemns is that criticism of Modernism has systematically relegated or minimised the role of Africa in the configuration of modern art. From the moment that Picasso was canonised as the most important painter of that period, the "interpretive institutions" anxiously took it on themselves to minimise the role of the African, the relation between the black objects surrounding him and his own works. Gikandi asserts that where the influences are evident they are redefined as "convergences" (Kahnweiler), "affinities" (Rubin) or "connotations" (Bois). Gikandi's arguments run parallel to the feminists' affirmation that the very fact of recognising the *demoiselles* as prostitutes, weakens the conviction that the painting was the origin of the modern, namely of the Cubist movement. In fact, as we have said earlier, there is more than one link between the feminist and the post-colonialist criticism quantifying "the other" both as the female and black. Ultimately we have before us an "other" that is both things at the same time. Actually, it appears the very recognition of the authentic relation of the other and Modernism is under threat.

The Schemata of Difference of Modernism are tangible in the discourses of various critics. For example, in that of William Rubin, who, always according to Gikandi, despite recognising the affinities between the modern and the tribal, harboured the secret intention of minimising the role of the other in the emerging vanguard art. While he recognised that Africa was a source of certain

unconsciously powerful forces, he minimised the significance of the continent as a source of artistry worth emulating. Basing his perception on Picasso's comment that the tribal objects "were more witnesses than models", Rubin sees a radical difference between Picasso's relation with European painting and with tribal sculpture. While Picasso would have assimilated the Western pictorial tradition, African art did not enjoy the same treatment. Gikandi points out here that this type of discourse tends to relegate African objects to the role of formal models, only considered for their psychological significance, unconsciously or magical, as instruments to highlight motives of sexuality and death: "something more of a fetish, magical and above all, potentially evil" (Rubin's quote). Rubin's theory that the African objects did enter Picasso's subconscious but never became formal models, reflects more than any other a fundamental characteristic of Modernism in its relation with the Other, an essential part of its schemata or interpretive parameters. Both Rubin and Modernism categorically refused to admit tribal influences of any formal kind, an artistic standard absolutely crucial to the identity of modern.

This would mean that the canonical discourse of the modernism only admits the presence of the African, or of the Other, unconsciously. This means that its presence is acknowledged but not its visibility. In other words, artistic status is not conferred on African art. Its objects are considered artefacts, tribal items, only capable of psychological influence but incapable of being appreciated as sources of a formalised aesthetic. Gikandi is of the opinion (and with this opinion, he is taking up, perhaps unconsciously, the earliest discourse on the relation of modern Western art and African art) that Picasso preferred these works because they suited his interests and aesthetic sensibilities. His preference for objects over bodies fitted his clear idea of which shapes would be most valuable for him to copy. Gikandi does not just accuse the canonical narrative of the modern of merely identifying the primitive with emotions linked to fear and repulsion. He also maintains the doubtful assumption that the unconscious or subconscious influences are incompatible with the formal. Added to this is the paradox of his avowal that the discovery of African and Oceanic art made Modernism possible and his refusal to admit that these works played a significant part in the shaping of modern art.

Gikandi is convinced that the modern artists and patrons are part of an aesthetic ideology, Modernism, moved by the desire of encountering "the Other" in its ugliness and terror in order to purify it in such a way as to make it suitable to enter modern art. And Picasso is at centre stage in the modernist narrative because he would have been an expert in neutralising this "other".

One can see in Gikandi's arguments just how the idea that Modernism as an ideology came to light, according to a viewpoint that has lately been ushered in by other thinkers. Terry Eagleton, for instance, in *The Ideology of the Aesthetic* debates the markedly ideological and political character of the formalist aesthetic that sinks its roots in Kant's third critique.

As we have mentioned, Gikandi's arguments lead to the conclusion that the moment had come for this Other to show itself above the presence of the Afri-

can in the constitution of Modernism for until its voice is heard the narrative will remain incomplete. He follows Farris Thompson who in 1988 criticised the arrogance of historians of Western art for never considering that Africans had something intellectually meaningful to say on the matter. Thompson assures us that the definition of Africa and Oceania’s impact on modern art will continue to be incomplete until photographs of works by Picasso, Braque and others are taken to Africa and the comments and reaction of the native Africans are heard and listened to. We do not have these comments. In the few cases where there have been some, they have been denied authority. Similarly, African studies of the mask, and especially the importance of its movement, would be very helpful for understanding and clarifying the role of the African in modern art. I personally believe that at the present time it is vital to add an account of the criticism generated by recent exhibitions of Picasso’s work in Africa (subsequent to Gikandi’s article) and particularly South Africa or, for that matter, the *Picasso Primitif* exhibition at the Quai d’Orsay museum in Paris in 2017. We will return to the controversies arising from these proposals.

In Gikandi’s opinion the role of the Other must now be reconsidered in the creation of modern art outside the ideology of *Modernism*. And to do this, not only must Africans be given a voice but this reconsideration must also transcend the established *doxa* responsible for telling us that “mythic method” or the “mystic mentality” inherent in primitivism made modern art possible. Gikandi is reluctant to identify the African with the mythical and mystical. He even asks himself from whence came the idea, that nobody has questioned nor appears to question; that primitive art emerged from a mystic, preconscious idea and found its ideal expression in the myth. Why, he asks, did the idea of the African fetish dominate Picasso’s comprehension of the primitive African in this initial encounter in the Trocadero in 1907? The work of the ethnographers Levi-Bruhl and Sir William Fraser on the primitive mind and its influence on modernist ideology is familiar but little was known about their sources. Supposedly their thoughts came through native informants but this was not so. The primary sources behind the idea of the African primitive were not academic ethnographers. They were a group, who Gikandi calls surrogates of the native informers, made up of European adventurers, missionary ethnographers, and colonial administration officials. They were the first Europeans to write about African cultures and consider art essential to understanding the primitive mind. These surrogates also considered their work to be of extremely vital importance to colonial governability. Basing their authority on the ability to reach sources untouched by foreign ideas, they were the first to spread the notion that the primitive mind was mystical and mythical, untouched by the Western manner of rationalisation and that it was impossible to understand the native mentality or any aspect of their religion or society without understanding the role of the fetish. These very cohesive surrogates reinforced the idea of the existence of a set of uniform beliefs everywhere on the continent and as their very coherent Western discourse was well-received, although Picasso might have questioned colonialist practices, he reproduced the colonialist model of African societies. And this, Gikandi concludes, is the discourse that is brought

out when no-one questions the idea of Africa in modern art; when for example, we forget the brutality behind the arrival of African artefacts in the West or the many bodies destroyed in order to bring these objects safe and sound to a museum in Europe. What the post-colonialist posture condemns about the Eurocentric vision of Africa is its fetishes about native wisdom and its exclusion from history; the obsessive idea of African culture, supposedly never subjected to the onslaughts of history and evolution. This very fact is condemned in some of his Western anthropologist colleagues (Amselle 2020). Incidentally, this also lies at the root of the present-day mystic tourism, devoted to the consumption of psychotropic substances in non-Western countries.

There is no doubt that Gikandi's article on *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon* presents some interesting challenges to future research. We can state that, until now, this discourse on the presence of tribal art in modern Western painting has hardly ever been expressed although there is one Afro-American voice that has stated some kind of opinion. But, it is not a purely verbal opinion. It is visual and verbal at the same time. I refer to the presence of *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon* in the work of the artist Faith Ringgold with whom we shall begin to examine the artistic reinterpretations of the work in the following chapter. In fact Gikandi does ask himself what would happen if *Les Demoiselles* were exhibited next to *Picasso's Studio* by Faith Ringgold instead of next to a traditional mask. We shall bring about this encounter in a moment, with a warning. The most recent reform of the expositive discourse of the Museum of Modern Art of New York, in 2019, brought *Les Demoiselles* face to face with a work by the Afro-American Ringgold and a work by Louise Bourgeois, another woman artist. This would seem to show how the expositive institutions are echoing the shifts in the Modernism critique, specifically in the feminist and post-colonialist proposals. The MoMA also segments in this way the work of the habitual Cubist companions to assume the new postulates of the critique.

Before continuing, we feel it is absolutely necessary to comment on Gikandi's arguments. His deconstructionist arguments are extremely interesting but from my point of view, we can legitimately ask ourselves why the author made no mention of the formalist narrative of Modernism in his text, which contrary to someone like William Rubin, had admitted African objects in Modernism only because of their formal character. If it is true that in Rubin's discourse the ideological reasons detected were brought to light by Gikandi's deconstruction, by the same logic we have to admit that the formalist critics and theorists of Modernism (those who really configured this *High Modernism* discourse so criticised by Gikandi) were more benevolent. That is to say, they contemplated the formal conceptual influence of the African presence in the eruption of Modernism much more than those others contaminated by post-modern trends' own postulates. And these are the ones that have been persistently applied to the task of avoiding any formalist argument like the plague and among other reasons, for refusing to accept the existence of specific African models in the eclosion of Modernism or in *Les Demoiselles* themselves. We must remember that Barr and Golding had indeed presented specific examples that could have served as mod-



els for the masks in *Les Demoiselles* and that it was the later historiography—the post-modern from Leo Steinberg onwards—that insisted on scientifically demolishing these suppositions.

We must point out that there have been authors within the narrative of the modern who did conceive a Picasso-like version of tribal art untarnished by terror. We need to return to the first comments on the work to remind us of André Salmon's words on *Les Demoiselles* (1912): there were formal problems that may have instilled some fear but that "those who see in the masks the dark arts, symbolism or mysticism run the risk of never being able to understand it", words worthy of even Gikandi's blessing. Along the same line, James Johnson Sweeney's text in the catalogue of the MoMA's *African Negro Art* exhibition in 1935 also vindicated the formalist vision of African art in addition to the historical.

Gikandi's post-colonialist arguments, fruit of postmodern thought, are in fact directed against postmodern artistic criticism and not against the previous criticism of the modern. This is one of the numerous paradoxes of postmodernism. Probably Gikandi would align himself with the orthodox—formalist—narrative of Modernism rather than the critical postmodern discourse, despite its deconstruction only being possible from postmodern postulates.

In any case, returning to the thread of Gikandi's article, let us retain the idea of this postcolonialist author convinced that the only way to reinstate a different reading of the primitive, not assimilated in the hegemonic discourse of Modernism and less distorted than usual, is to allow the "other" to voice their opinion on the African presence in the constitution of Modernism. Until this voice can be heard, until the other is given the floor, this narrative will continue to be incomplete.

In this regard, we can confirm that his approaches do not stop with the mere postcolonialist analysis. They can be linked specifically with some of the fundamentals of *Subaltern Studies*.<sup>5</sup> The declared intention of this discipline was "to produce a historical analysis in which the subaltern groups were seen as subjects of their own history" (Chakrabarty 2000, 472) to obviate the design of an elitist history written exclusively from the colonizers' point of view and where there was no room for a version of the historical narrative told by the colonized.

In the field of *Subaltern Studies*, conceived to be applied to the history of colonial India, authors like Chakrabarty upheld a history based on the idea that subalterns would not have remained in a pre-political state that removed them from any historical action. They would have taken part "to forge their own destiny," or in other words, they would have been agents of their own history. Obviously, the problem is that there are no documents from the subalterns in the archives (a good reason for Foucault to ask what is an archive and how did one create an archive). For this reason the design of this history has to be searched for in other disciplines like economics, sociology and anthropology where the

<sup>5</sup> For history and nature of *Subaltern Studies* see Chakrabarty 2000a: 451-466; Chakrabarty 2000b; and Spivak 2010.

subaltern's experiences can be found without passing through the dominant rulers' filtered version.

In the same way, in the case of *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon*, the history that we are aware of and the documents that support it is the history of the "dominators" and it is difficult to reach the perspective of the subalterns: in this case the African women represented in the painting, because of this, are condemned to be for ever the objects, never the subjects of this story. As we have already had occasion to see, in the context of the critical discourse of the modern, *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon* would be one of the means of triggering the very existence of the difference. It would be an image that served to construct and also perpetuate the feminine and the African as two categories different to those of the dominant subject. The problem lies in how to give a voice to the subaltern as Gikandi demands, how to make room for other gazes. Perhaps we shall find the answer if we allow ourselves to be inspired by the solution Subaltern Studies found on turning to other disciplines. However, in our case we do not propose exactly to turn to other theoretical disciplines but instead, move out of the theory and history of art field and into the field of artistic practice. From there it will be possible to hear this voice of the "others" in a multitude of alternative versions of the work, including the ironical and the critical, created by artists like Faith Ringgold, Rafael Agredano, Equipo Crónica, Caulfield, Bidlo, Prince, Rogelio López Cuenca and Elo Vega, Francis Alÿs and many more between the end of the 20th and start of the 21st centuries. In fact, it might be expedient to examine these artists because their proposals appear powerful enough to shift the focus of the gaze. As we shall see immediately we might say that they explore ways to destabilize and decentralize the dominant viewpoint; perhaps this might contribute to centering the rest of us. We shall in any case see how the artists unravel this record of the difference that used the painting itself as one of its tools. But before we move on we must pause at one crucial episode in this story — Picasso in Africa.

#### *Ex Africa semper aliquid novi: Picasso in Africa*

Let us return to Gikandi's observation on how the definition of the African or Oceanic impact on modern art would remain incomplete until works by Picasso, Braque and others were taken to Africa and the comments and critical reaction of its people heard. Certainly, now in the second decade of the 21st century this has been done. Picasso's works have been taken to Africa and we now have an approximation of the "African" point of view about the much discussed encounter between Modernism and tribal art.

In 2006 the exhibition *Picasso and Africa*, curated by Laurence Madeline, of the Picasso Museum in Paris and Marilyn Martin, collections director of the South African National Gallery in Cape Town, was held in Johannesburg and Cape Town. Some eighty works by Picasso and some thirty African sculptures, similar to those that were part of the artist's own collection, were shown. *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon* was not on show but several of his preparatory sketches and coetaneous paintings and drawings were included. It was claimed to be the

first monographic exhibition entirely devoted to the African influence in Picasso and it took place precisely on African soil.

However in 1972 another African country, Senegal, held an exhibition on Picasso in the Musée Dynamique de Dakar and justly holds the honour of being the first exhibition of the artist on this continent. The then Senegalese president, the poet and intellectual Léopold Sédar Senghor was behind this initiative. He had had the opportunity of meeting Picasso and other Spanish painters in Paris during the Occupation. It was not exactly a retrospective centred on the links between sub-Saharan Africa and the Spanish painter's work but, naturally, this was the centre of attention and Léopold Sédar Senghor referred to it in his inaugural speech in April of 1972 (Senghor 2006, 145–48). There is an extremely interesting three-minute long video in which Sédar Senghor relates how Picasso recounted his opinions on primitive African art. The video also contains testimonies about Picasso's work from half a dozen visitors who attended the exhibition. Sédar Senghor also vouched that Picasso had spoken to him of primitive African arts during one of the visits made to the crowded studio in Rue des Grands Augustins, in the company of Pedro Flores who he mentions as an Andalusian painter. "He had an opportunity tell me how much inspiration Negro art had brought him," adding that he remembered one occasion when Picasso was reminding him and Flores once again of the strength of *art nègre* when he turned to Flores and said "*il faut que nous restions des sauvages*" (we must remain savages) (INA 1972), a comment as intriguing as it was perhaps enlightening.

The final part of the video gives us some brief impressions of the Senegalese public in front of Picasso's work. Some use the words admiration and inspiration but the most interesting might be one spectator who confessed his admiration for Picasso's ability to see the reality, exclaiming "*c'est la réalité même!*" ("it is the real truth"). When asked if he had seen other works by Picasso he replied that he was familiar with the *Guernica* "*un tableau, selon moi, très réaliste qui peigne tout ce qu'il y a de l'horreur dans la guerre*" ("a very realistic painting, in my opinion, that paints all the horror of war"). The observations of the Senegalese who saw this pioneer exhibition in the 70s on the whole detected the transmission of African art to Picasso's art and the undoubted realism of his painting. *Les Demoiselles* were not on show in this exhibition nor in the other that we shall mention below but at least the presence of works by Picasso on African soil contributed to partially reinstating the demands of the post-colonialist critique: a rapprochement at least to the African point of view of Picasso's painting and, *in extenso*, on the decisive encounter of Western modern art with the art of that continent.

We must remember, before continuing, that before these proposals were created in the present century in the Western world, there had been two important exhibitions in the last decades of the 20th century on modern/contemporary art and African art. The first of these was *Primitivism in 20th Century. Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern*, at the MoMA in New York in 1984, curated by William Rubin who, as we have already seen, despite curating this exhibition in which 150 vanguard works were contrasted with more than 200 works from Africa, Oceania and North America, ruled out any formal influence of primitive art on modern

art. As a result of this some of the tribal objects on show were even denied their prestige as art. The second exhibition *Magiciens de la Terre* held in the Pompidou in Paris in 1989 and curated by Jean-Hubert Martin was a turning point in the important exhibitions or biennales of contemporary art held subsequently from the 90s. It marked the beginning of globalisation in the field of contemporary art and, in its attempt to correct some of the ethnocentric errors of the MoMA exhibition, it appeared to auspiciate a new attitude towards non-Western art by Western intellectuals. Its goal was to rectify the unfair situation where 100% of the exhibitions in the world ignored 80% of the planet. In spite of the good intentions it became the target of a certain type of criticism by the vestiges of a colonialism that could still be seen, starting with its name *Magiciens of the Earth* that appears suggestive of the generalised pre-rational state that the Western subject tends to attribute wrongly to non-Westerners. The combination of magic and earth (instead of world) seems to perpetuate the idea of the African culture detained in a natural state previous to all civilisation, closer to a savage state than a culturally developed one. We have seen from Gikandi's accusation that these types of assumptions are recurrent stereotypes in the European vision of the African. Prejudices, we must point out, that blossom every time a Westerner tries to escape into the dream of these primitive paradises, vaguely situated in Africa, gardens of Eden and Promised Lands that supposedly will cure the wounds inflicted on him by modern neuroses.

These two important African art exhibitions were complemented by two others held at the end of the last century. One was *Seven Stories about Modern African Art*, curated by Clémentine Deliss for the Whitechapel Gallery in the 90s and the 1991 exhibition in New York (and two years later shown at the Tapiès Foundation in Barcelona): *Africa Explores: 20th Century African Art* curated by Susan Vogel. Both wanted to present contemporary African art in its true context without passing through the Western filter, with artists being themselves and not introduced by the European institutions that usually depersonalise and objectify them.

Let us return for a moment to Picasso's South African exhibition of 2006 and look closely at the points of view presented in the 21st century around the debate on the relationship between Western Modernism and African art. Laurence Madeline the European curator of the exhibition said at the press conference: "We have to spell out Picasso's name when we talk to the South African press. They have no idea how valuable a painting like *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon* is for art history and even less that that canvas is the outcome of Picasso's discovery of the fetishes from the Congo or the Dogon sculptures" (Martí 2006). This is a comment worthy of our attention because it shows the crumbling of the dominant gaze referred to on several occasions. Perhaps the Western subject was overcome with incredulity on discovering that in the 21st century the names of Picasso and *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon* had to be spelt out to the South Africans. This shows, however, that the measure of the encounter of the artist whom the West considers universal with the continent that probably furnished the fundamental inspiration for the modern aesthetic revolution is still a pending matter.

It should not merely be atoned for but, as the post-colonial critique suggests, listened to what the non-Western points of view could offer to this encounter.

The specialist in African and Afro-American art, Julie McGee wrote a review that presents an interesting state on the matter of the critics' reception of Picasso's South African exhibition. Among other things it highlighted that narrative of the double-headed French and South African curatorship differs and at times even contradicts, or at least do not support each other. Her article opens with a sentence that could serve as a motto for the present debate: "classical African art and Modernism have been intertwined in a more confusing way than perhaps any other entities in art history" (McGee 2007, 161–67).

McGee considers that the inversion of the normal order of centre and periphery in the installation was an excellent idea as having the central area occupied by African art and Picasso's works situated on the margins was a meaningful way of reversing the normal order of historical artistic discourse. Even so she criticised other aspects of the exhibition, especially the fact that while the aesthetic muteness of African art, inspirational for the painter, was present, the active role it would have played was not clear. There is a basic dichotomy that is often repeated in this type of exhibitions or discourses where Picasso's work is compared with anonymous African art (often with no chronology). In this way the encounter unbalances the intended dialogue between both parties and I believe there is a need to clear up some misunderstandings. First of all there is the presumption that anonymous art is inferior to a recognised work by a well-identified author especially one who is considered a hallowed genius. The history of Western art encompasses centuries, or millenia, of anonymous art without detriment to its quality (consider the Greek temples scattered the length and breadth of the Mediterranean).

Apart from this McGee also offers a couple of reproaches that recur in post-colonialist critique. On the one hand she dislikes the semantic field used by the European curator of the exhibit to refer to the art of Picasso inspired in Africa which includes the expression "primitive style" or terms belonging to the semantic field of savagery. And on the other, she rebukes the exhibition for perpetuating a discourse that does not recognise African art as an agent of European art, implicitly denying its capacity to affect Western art: "Here the 'primitive' did not appear to be an active subject, engaging in defining and changing the course of modern art history," she wrote (McGee 2007, 162). This viewpoint is shared with African critics, like Corrigan, for whom this exhibition not only did not contribute to situating African art as one of the main actors of the modern movement, but for whom it would only serve as a painful reminder of just how insignificant African artists were for Europeans (McGee 2007, 163).

For her part, the African curator's text would have been focused on three matters: reinforcing Leighten's theory that Picasso was a critic of colonialism, calling attention to the racist version that the art history discipline had often maintained in the face of African art and lastly, reaffirming the belief that the history of Africa will continue to be "a European narrative" until there is more support for the work of Africans working within Africa to renarrate their own history.

The press cuttings devoted to the *Picasso and Africa* exhibition confirmed that it was a huge success with the public but they are also proof of the bitter controversy that can arise from this type of initiative and thus, reflect accurately the tension that still today is apparent. The extent of the controversy can be seen in the somewhat alarmist headlines of *The Telegraph* of 12 March 2006: "Picasso stole the work of African artists," the accusation made by Sandile Memela, a member of the government no less, spokesperson of the South African Department of Arts and Culture, in a letter addressed to the *City Press* newspaper, upbraiding the persons responsible for exhibition for underestimating Picasso's debt to the artists of the continent. Memela's letter was eloquently titled "Unmasking Picasso and finding Africa beneath" and was inspired, among other things, by the signatory's opinion that the Europeans believed themselves to be the only authority to talk of art. In this letter Memela claimed among other things that "Picasso is one of the many products of African inspiration and creativity who lacked the courage to admit its influence on his consciences and creativity;" or "The work itself, especially the African masks makes a very profound statement that says there is a profound and strong connection between African art and Picasso;" or "At the Standard Bank Gallery in Johannesburg, the truth hangs naked that Picasso would not have been the renowned creative genius he was if 'he did not steal' and adapt the work of anonymous (African) artists" (Kleynhans 2018).

These accusations, made in the climate of the so-called "African Renaissance" demands, had a clearly political slant that involved the government's own actions and were answered by other voices who slated them as black Fascism. The idea of the African Renaissance must be included as one of the key phases of post-colonial Africa which, at that time, was part of the South African president Thabo Mbeki's political and ideological agenda of external affairs policies (between 1999 and 2008). Mbeki was known as the "philosopher king" and was implicated in several questionable matters of political corruption. On his agenda was an incentive campaign to recover Africa's collective self-esteem and self-confidence after centuries of slavery and colonialism, involving the promotion of a political, economic, social and cultural renewal of the continent to strengthen its own identity. Thabo Mbeki started his speech before the United Nations quoting Pliny the Elder "*Ex Africa semper aliquid novi*" ("Africa always brings something new"): an emphatic declaration of principles.

The arguments of this dispute also reveal just how some Africans felt Picasso's denial of the African was an open wound, abetted, as we have seen, by part of Western critics who stood firm by their perfectly scientific, and therefore true convictions, irrefutable with rational arguments exempt of ideology. Unsurprisingly, some web sites at the time presented the debate as a genuine confrontation between African chauvinism and European arrogance.

There was no lack of voices who, given the openly hostile and political tone of the debate, tried to restrain these feelings, arguing that rather than bewailing that Picasso had appropriated African culture, the exhibition offered a golden opportunity for a productive use of Eurocentric deconstruction as a way of African self-affirmation, as was explained by Goniwe (McGee 2007, 166).

Ultimately, as McGee (2007, 166) stated "Among the exhibition's flaws was believing that Picasso's relationship to or with Africa countered a history of continental disparagement by Europe, or that such provided a genuine reappraisal of African art, South African art or a significant paradigm shift in the modernist art discourse." However, for my part I believe we should ask ourselves if all this, more than a defect in the focus of the exhibition, was an error in its reception, in the expectations it could have created in its recipients or its visitors. Furthermore, we need to consider if all this could have been resolved in the context of an exhibition on Picasso and Africa or if it should be addressed in a wider and more complex way in a different arena.

Nevertheless, there is still much to be said in this debate on primitivism and 20th century art. And in this sense I concur with Jack Flam's point of view. He maintained that although in the last decades Modernism had been considered a monolithic entity that functioned as a mirror of colonialism, it must be remembered that we are now more conscious than ever of the extremely hybrid, varied and diverse face of modernity. Even accepting its faults, not always exempt from racial prejudice, one cannot ignore that the first moderns were those who opened our eyes to the art of the dispossessed of the world (Flam and Deutch 2003, 20).

In any case, the controversy created by this presence of Picasso in Africa gives us the measure of its complexity, of how any understanding of "the primitive" in art affects both the question of artistic dynamics as well as relations of domination and power (Amselle 2003, 974–88). The desire to reduce the merely aesthetic or artistic terms may today be no more than a chimera. The controversy surrounding this exhibition does, however, allow us to hear the voices of the subalterns silenced for so long. As we see, one of the reproaches is the inherent problem of the disparaging connotations of the notion of "the primitive," inevitably charged with ideological prejudice and the accusation of the West permanently leaving the "Other" on the outside of history.

Recently, in 2017, the exhibition *Picasso primitif*, curated by Yves Le Fur was held at the Musée du Quai Branly in Paris where visitors could see the most up-to-date and best documented exploration of the painter's relations with non-Western and not just African art but art from Oceania, the Americas and Asia in an attempt to decipher a relationship based on admiration, respect and trepidation in equal parts that the museum offered in its presentation. The exhibition that included detailed documentation of these links through photographs, letters and objects tried to avoid the past excesses of Eurocentrism by showing Picasso's works and the works of non-Western artists on the same level of intensity with the aim of demonstrating that their problems were the same (nudity, sexuality...) and that they solved them in the same way through parallel plastic solutions (disfiguring or destructuring of the body, for example). In this way "the primitive is understood not as a state of non-development but as the access to the deepest, most intimate and basic levels of humanity" (Declaration of intent, *Picasso Primitif* 2017). The most striking feature of this catalogue, compared to others is, effectively, the unbiased treatment of the images. The African, Oceanic and American works bear their authors names when these

are known, and the dates, lifting them out of the historical limbo and generic character where they had been confined in Western publications for decades. The catalogue itself showed works from different periods of Picasso's work simultaneously with works from the cultures of those other continents, organised by subjects, themes, concerns or technical problems (including the body, sex, techniques of mixing objects and different materials) that gave a clear idea of its formal affinities and its content. It is clearly an exhibition that heeded previous errors and had no desire to repeat them and finally, I would say, acknowledged the critics' reasons against Eurocentrism that previous proposals had acquired. Ultimately it is a critical discourse that frankly admitted the inherent ideological weight of all historic-artistic discourses and decided to put aside European arrogance and condescension towards others to become more encompassing and thus, more unbiased. One might say that this was a discourse made to the measure of our time. A time that sometimes, nevertheless, can look back to recover the best of its legacy.

#### Carl Einstein Revisited

The need for an integrated discourse without the habitual arrogance and condescension had been perceived by a far-sighted Carl Einstein, no less than in 1914, in the opening lines of his *Negerplastik*, written in that year and published in 1915. He admitted quite frankly that the study of "African art" by Europeans was impossible and stated:

Perhaps there is no other art that Europe approaches with so much wariness as African art. First of all it is denied the category of "art." With this it marks a distance between these creations and the European position, showing a lack of consideration that, in its turn, has given rise to a derogatory terminology. This distance and the prejudices arising from it, make any aesthetic appraisal difficult, even impossible because, in the first place, such an appraisal presupposes a certain familiarity. From the start black people are considered to be inferior beings who should be treated without consideration and their proposals are condemned *a priori* as insufficient (Einstein 2002, 29).

Georges Didi-Huberman, who raised this question, explained that these words of Carl Einstein went beyond a mere condemnation of the European colonialist prejudices. Just as we have seen in Gikandi's post-colonialist theory, they were aimed at the epistemological bases of the ethnography of the time that had established their exclusively functional and ritual character, thus obviating their inclusion in the art history discipline (Didi Huberman 2000). The challenge proposed by Einstein was to admit African art as art and part of history, presenting the problem that either of these facets was a challenge to the legitimate and prevailing notions of art and history in Western epistemology. Avant-garde art presented the same challenge in the first decades of the 20th century. A new idea of art, a new idea of history, a new idea of art history were the new imperatives (Einstein 2002, 30) that loomed over European culture of that moment.



So, it is the discipline of art history that must be revised. And, in fact, perhaps it is time to return to the moment in its history when authors like Carl Einstein and other German intellectuals were constructing it on foundations that tragically would crumble a few years later. Had they not been overcome by a fatal destiny, they would have shown their power in supporting the arguments the "subalterns" would brandish against the indulgence and European prejudices a century later.

One of Einstein's convictions governs our book: that the judgement passed on the black races and their art defines he who judges more than the object of his judgement. It must be remembered that it was contemporary art, works like *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon*, that brought about a new and more scrupulous rapprochement to the art of the African peoples and gave rise to the first collections of African art as art in Europe. There is so much truth in the saying "when something acquires historical importance it has always been an activity of the immediate present" (Einstein 2002, 31).

Einstein is, therefore an excellent reference for this post-colonialist condemnation of the Eurocentric vision of Africa (expandable to other latitudes) for his fetishism of native wisdom and its exclusion from history; for his fixed notion of African culture, supposedly unyielding to the assaults of history (Amselle 2020). He makes two alternative points of view that contribute to correcting the Westerners' bias. A bias that should immediately take a note of Kalama's explanation in "Le paradigma 'Art africain': de l'origine à sa physionomie actuelle" (Kalama 2018, article 3). He explains that an African art does not exist, or again, that the notion is based on the invention of Africa by Western culture, or likewise again, the African continent is not a geographic reality but more like an idea with its corollary of stereotypes and clichés, determined by its supposedly uncivilised character, determined by its colonial past and its origin in a continent that is also considered "under-developed."

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