13 "… And Those Who Expect to Return to the Source Will Find Fog": Resonances of Prehistory in Modern Art

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Abstract

Since the authentication of Paleolithic cave paintings at the beginning of the twentieth century, modern artists have approached deep-time remnants (including images, tools, and traces of all sorts) in three main ways: they have either represented them, imitated them, or made them resonate conceptually and emotionally in their own artwork. In general, these attitudes—representation (or contextualization), imitation (or reenactment), and resonance (or meditation)—are at the core of modern 'primitivism'. They have shaped the different ways of dealing with aesthetically-distant artworks and the quest for supposedly authentic origins in them. Within this 'primitivist' framework, I argue in this chapter that modern artists have a specific kind of relation with 'prehistoric art', one that privileges time rather than space. I suggest that what has attracted them is the "dark abyss of time" and, in particular, the shocking contrast between the sheer materiality of 'prehistoric art' (see, for instance, the freshness of a number of rock images) and the immesurable temporal lapse that separates these images from us. To be more precise, I will show how, at least in modern art, the 'quest for the origins' (so popular in the field of archaeology) has somewhat been substituted by a fascination for the unaccountability of time. In this context, I argue that modern and contemporary artists did not only react to new discoveries and interpretations in the archeological field but, moreover, they have actively contributed to promoting a relationship to prehistory that is more conceptual than factual and, therefore, producing a globalized concept of 'prehistoric art' that has been with us for many decades.

Keywords

Archaeologism · Historicism · Immemorial · Memory · Modern art · Primitivism

13.1 Conceptualizing Deep-Time Art: 'Archaeologism' *Versus* 'Primitivism'

In 1926, Christian Zervos founded the art journal *Cahiers d'art*, which became the main avant-garde art journal in Paris during the inter-war period (Derouet 2006). It sought to present the most recent trends in contemporary art together with the artistic new discoveries "from other civilizations" (Rivière 1926, 177; Rivière 2004, 179). Zervos delegated to Georges-Henri Rivière, then a young jazz critic, the task of writing about archaeological and ethnographic artworks. Rivière's first paper in the journal was accompanied by reproductions of African and Oceanic sculptures from the collections of the *Musée d'ethnographie du Trocadéro*, the leading museum of ethnography in France, of which Rivière was to be appointed Assistant Director in 1928 (Peltier-Caroff and de Sevilla 2017; Calafat and Viatte 2018). In connection with these images, one would have expected a text on what was then praised as "primitive" art (Goldwater 1938; Rubin et al. 1984). Rather than referring to 'primitivism', however, Rivière coined the word "archeologisms" as a title for his paper (Rivière 1926; Schnapp et al. 2004, 6–8). Both terms ('primitivism' and 'archeologisms') share a similar etymology (one from Latin, other from Greek) that refers to a quest for origins. That said, while the idea of 'primitivism' suggests the desire for a direct identification with cultures often seen as 'primeval', Rivière's notion of "archaeologism" designates a sympathy for the *movement of thought* that leads to investigating these allegedly original worlds, digging them out, whatever they are. The objective is no longer to value an origin as such, but rather to develop a questioning of the quest for origins, which constitutes the

"Et ceux qui croiront remonter aux sources trouveront le nuage".

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foundation of the archaeological approach. The use of the plural accentuates this de-essentialization of the modern taste for the primeval, leading, at the end of Rivière's text, to an explicit criticism: "… And those who expect to return to the source will find fog" (Rivière 1926, 177; Rivière 2004, 179). Given the impossibility of finding an original 'source' or 'origin' of meaning, he suggests that modern artists should, in fact, reflect on the temporal difference that separates 'primitive' artwork from our contemporary world. For him, to replace 'primitiveness' with archaeology and, especially, 'primitivism' with "archaeologism", was mainly to replace the musings on a primeval essence with a self-critical reflection on temporality.

It is in this conceptual framework that the reference to 'prehistory' takes all its significance, as Rivière himself points out in his paper when he writes that the modern poet or artist should look at Paleolithic decorated caves instead of visiting museums: "If [the writer] Louis Aragon and [the artist] Jean Lurçat visited Madrid, I am sure that they would neglect El Prado and, instead, they would go in search for Altamira" (*ibid*.). Indeed, the temporal distance makes the 'prehistoric' reality, specifically, a fundamentally nebulous or "foggy" field, whose meaning seems destined to remain forever indistinct. Here the discontinuity appears maximal between the material presence of the objects or images, and the indecipherability of their 'original' meanings.

In this chapter, I suggest that the *tension* between the intense material presence of 'prehistoric' artifacts and images (revealed by archaeologists since the nineteenth century), and the extreme—though hardly determinable—temporal distance of deep-time remnants is at the core of the attraction that many contemporary artists have experienced for 'prehistoric art' in general and Paleolithic images in particular. In other words, the history of the relationships between modern art and the so-called 'prehistoric art' is the story of the different ways in which artists and art critics have conceptualized the tension between (A) the materiality of 'prehistoric art' and (B) its intangible temporality. To illustrate this point, I will examine different artistic conceptualizations of deep-time images.

For this purpose, in a volume mainly devoted to archaeologists, a few clarifications are in order. In the first place, from an art-historical perspective, the term 'primitivism' typically refers to "the interest of modern artists in tribal art and culture, as revealed in their thought and work" (Rubin et al. 1984, 1). At least, this is the way in which art critics and historians used this term during the twentieth century, notably since Robert Goldwater published the first version of his seminar *Primitivism in Modern Painting* (Goldwater 1938). In this setting, one must of course distinguish between the notions of 'primitive art' and 'primitivism'. If the use of the term 'primitive art' can be traced back to the early nineteenth century, referring, among others, to a number of non-Western arts, it has been under growing attacks since the mid-twentieth century, for its ethnocentric and colonial meanings. On the other hand, the notion of 'primitivism' does not refer to Indigenous or non-Western arts themselves, but "to modern Western interest in it" (Rubin et al. 1984, 4) and is still in use in art history, in particular in the history of reception, in order to characterize this long-lasting Western "preference for the primitive" (Gombrich 2002).

In the second place, 'primitivism' ordinarily refers to the allure of both 'prehistoric' (i.e., those objects and images made in remote times) and 'exotic' (i.e. those objects and images made in distant places) arts among modern artists. In this setting, it was traditionally assumed that some contemporary non-Western Indigenous arts shared a number of cultural and figural structures with European 'prehistoric' art—the first to be identified, much before the evidence of non-Western 'prehistoric' art was established. While 'prehistory', for a while, was considered exclusive to Europe, most Indigenous arts were considered 'prehistoric' in a structural sense. Both assumptions are problematic. First, what we used to call 'prehistoric art' is by no means exclusive to Europe, as it became obvious from the 1930s on, in particular in Northern and Southern Africa, and ever more later (see, for instance recent discoveries in Sulawesi and Borneo). It is important to keep in mind that, as early as the early 1930s, avant-garde circles were aware of North and South Africa rock arts through highly influential exhibitions (by the Frobenius Institute) and publications (like the special issue on "L'Afrique préhistorique" in *Cahiers d'Art*, 1930). At the end of the 1930s and 1940s, similar exhibitions and publications took place in the USA (Frobenius and Fox 1937) and the UK (ICA, London, 1948–1949). Second, more recent Indigenous arts can by no means be systematically compared to what was called 'prehistoric art' among modern artists, who mainly referred to European Paleolithic art (with some additional knowledge of African rock paintings and engravings).

Finally, in this chapter, I use the term 'prehistoric art' in its original normative sense in the field of art history (i.e. to refer predominantly to the Paleolithic images and objects that archaeologists have found in Europe since the end of the nineteenth century). It should not be ignored, however, that the term 'prehistory' itself assumes different meanings in Europe or elsewhere in the world, notably in South Africa (MacDonald and Mazel 2021), Australia and the USA (Moro Abadía and Palacio Pérez 2021), where it was first applied to Aboriginal and Indigenous peoples. This is why it has been subjected to intense criticism in archaeology, because it historically served to exclude these peoples from history. More generally, a long-lasting criticism against the word 'prehistory', since its invention in the nineteenth century, has been part of a typically positivist cult for 'history'—be it "deep" or "shallow" (Shryock et al. 2011, 5)—among archaeologists. In this context, it is important to note that I

recognize the problematic character of the term 'prehistory' (see, for instance, MacDonald and Mazel 2021). and that I am not using it in a pejorative sense, when I try to identify its dialectical agency in the distinctively modern Western fascination for historical sciences.

13.2 Representation, Imitation, Resonance

Since the mid-nineteenth century, the question of artistic creation has been placed at the center of the reflection about the first human societies. It was already present in the reveries of Jacques Boucher de Perthes, one of the 'founding fathers' of "antediluvian" archaeology, as he used to say, about what he called "*pierres figures*" (Boucher de Perthes 1847, 478–480; 1864, 481) or stones that he wrongly interpreted as intentional artwork (Schlanger 2015; Cohen and Hublin 2017; Labrusse 2022). Almost at the same time, together with the English banker Henry Christy, Édouard Lartet discovered Paleolithic figurative artifacts in the cave of Aurignac (Lartet 1861) and in other sites of South-Western France (Lartet and Christy 1864). The two men immediately proclaimed their aesthetic admiration for these 'works of art', something that greatly contributed to consolidate the idea of a "truly extraordinary development of the culture of the arts" among the "Cave-dwellers of Cro-Magnon" (Lartet and Christy 1865, 121).

Soon after, contemporary modern artists (including painters and sculptors) began to represent these "first artists" (Dagen 1994; Pfisterer 2007, 33–41). These representations transform early archaeological evidence into a sort of "imaginary prehistory" (Ducros 2000); creating a context for interpreting the so-called 'primitive art' that was inspired by a number of ethnological or pseudo-ethnological accounts (Moro Abadía 2015). In doing so, these modern European artists adopted the formal academic language of 'mimesis' that they praised for its supposed capacity to make visible, in full color, not only a global depiction of the past (whose material traces remain rare and never explicit), like in a landscape, but also specific events and actions, such as hunting or art-making which did not have a material form and were therefore entirely imagined like in a theatrical representation. Prehistory was then 'objectified' as if it were faithfully unveiled by an omnipotent observer. In fact, it was reinterpreted through the lenses of European contemporary life.

These early representations are not just recreational fancies. On a deeper level, they can be considered as a form of coping—more or less unconsciously—with the amazement, not to say the trauma caused by the discovery of 'prehistory' in general and 'prehistoric art' in particular. In fact, Lartet and Christy's discoveries expanded human history in immense (and immeasurable) periods of time and, therefore, they revealed both the incommensurability of time and the incomprehensibility of these remote cultures. This could not but create a veritable shock among late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Europeans (as it still does for us today), who needed to incorporate these new findings and ideas into their worldview. In this setting, illustrating 'prehistoric' scenes as if they were perfectly well known, up to the smallest detail, by the painter-observer, was a way to reduce the dizzying impact of this new temporal perspective and to repress, so to speak, the shock it had provoked and that was to come to the surface only progressively in the Western modern mind. Early illustrations of 'human prehistory' played a fundamental role because they seemed to be able to make visible what was, in fact, invisible. These efforts to control what was actually out of control are particularly obvious in Paul Jamin's painting of a group of 'prehistoric' people admiring the making of cave art during the Magdalenian. This painting, which was first presented in the 1903 academic *Salon de la Société nationale des beaux-arts* in Paris, was inspired by the discovery of the Paleolithic paintings and engravings of the Font-de-Gaume cave. Jamin was a friend with many prehistorians of his time, especially Louis Capitan who, together with Henri Breuil and Denis Peyrony, discovered the caves of Font-de-Gaume and Les Combarelles in 1901 (Capitan 1903). In Jamin's painting, the accuracy of his reproductions of some animal motifs in Font-de-Gaume parallels the vivid, but utterly fictitious reconstruction of the scene that he imagines. These Paleolithic people looking at paintings (fallaciously transposed from the walls of the cave to its threshold, in the daylight) resemble modern connoisseurs, contemporary visitors of an art gallery. This has less to do with the suggestion that 'prehistoric' art was the result of a pure aesthetic impulse (de Mortillet 1885, 411–422)—a thesis that was still defended by some prehistorians at that time—than with the desire to equate 'prehistoric' life with our own and thus to ward off its enigmatic character. But there is more to the point. Evidently, one cannot but feel a sense of humor in Jamin's representation. A kitschy tone clearly reveals the artist's disbelief in the 'historical' faithfulness of his own image, a disbelief that he shares with his beholders. Both the artist and us are made aware of the deliberate anachronism of the image seen; concurrently, we are led to feel that under this fancy, intentionnaly unfaithful evocation of 'prehistoric' rock art function, something else, something unknown if not uncanny, is still lurking.

At the turn of the twentieth century, the authentication of cave paintings and engravings inaugurated a number of 'magical' interpretations about the meaning of rock art (Reinach 1903) and prompted its wide media dissemination, henceforth increasingly embedded into a sort of superior, almost sacred, meaning. At the same time, new images of prehistoric art began to circulate under different formats, especially in books and journals. Those were meant to be

copies of actual rock art images. These alleged reproductions, however, erased the materiality of the underground support, isolated the different motifs, stylized the shapes and, consequently, greatly diminished the singularity and diversity of deep time images by somewhat assimilating them to modern drawings and/or paintings. Additionally, a growing process of iconization encouraged the reproduction of a reduced number of "favored images" (Conkey 2010, 273) and rendered a few portable objects—such as some of the so-called 'Venuses' (Cook 2015)—and sites world-famous, culminating in the 1940 discovery of the cave of Lascaux, the so-called "Versailles of prehistoric art" (Ichac 1941).

These reproductions, rather than the originals, reached the contemporary artworld and inspired imitations. We find one of the first instances of this formal imitation of Paleolithic art in modern art in the animal figures sketched on the right side of Matisse's 1906 painting, *Bonheur de vivre*. While there is no documentary evidence of this influence, an article was published in the mainstream magazine *L'Illustration* in which the editors mocked the artists of the *Salon des Indépendants* (the group exhibition in which Matisse's painting was displayed) for bowing "before the unknown ancestors who engraved on the stone of the caves the rudimentary images of plants [*sic*] and animals" (*L'Illustration* 1906).

'Prehistoric art' copies multiplied after the First World War, a period during which avant-garde art magazines regularly published reproductions of Paleolithic objects and images, including the already mentioned *Cahiers d'art*, Le Corbusier and Amédée Ozenfant's *L'Esprit nouveau*, or Georges Bataille's *Documents* (Di Stefano 2019). In addition, some artists also possessed plaster casts of 'prehistoric' artifacts, like the two versions of the Venus of Lespugue in the Picasso's collection (Loreti 2019; Coquet 2021). Others, although few in number, went to see real 'prehistoric' places, including the visits of Amédée Ozenfant to the Périgord sites in 1927 (Ozenfant 1931, vii–xiv), Henry Moore or Nicolas de Staël to Altamira in 1934–1935 (Di Stefano 2021, 158, 197), or Willy Baumeister to the caves of the Swabian valley of the Lone river (Floss 2020). These visits became even more frequent after 1945, stimulated by the discovery of Lascaux, which was opened to the public from 1948 until 1963. Most of the time, however, modern artists' knowledge of 'prehistoric art' was largely informed by the (selective) photographic reproductions that circulated in Europe at that time. This was the case of the sketches of Paleolithic animal or human figures by Ernst Kirchner, Henry Moore, Pierre Bonnard or Alberto Giacometti, among many others, made after photographs seen in books or art journals of the time (Labrusse 2019, 158). These documentary studies sometimes resulted in the insertion of 'prehistoric' motifs in modern art compositions. For instance, Joan Miró, in his famous series entitled *Constellations* from 1939–1941, reused "schematic signs (…) as in the prehistoric figurations" (in his own words) that he saw reproduced in historical textbooks (*ibid*., 166). This new visual familiarity with prehistoric art, biased as it was, also inspired a number of aesthetic reflections, like the observations of Giacometti in a notebook in 1946, before visiting the caves of Périgord: "Drawings of caves, caves, caves, caves. There and only there, the movement is successful. To see why, to discover its possibilities, yet doubt" (Dufrêne 2020, 83).

We will reflect upon this "doubt" expressed by Giacometti, a doubt that may evoke his skepticism about the possibility of authentically connecting Paleolithic and contemporary art. At this stage, however, it should first be noted that these different forms of imitating 'prehistoric art' were part—and, in fact, only a small part—of the modern 'primitivism', considered as a quest for supposedly authentic origins. Without a doubt, reference to 'prehistoric art' (e.g., the Paleolithic cave paintings and engravings) were less numerous than references to the Indigenous arts from Africa, America or Oceania. A number of factors can explain the relatively modest role played by 'prehistoric art' in the broader context of Western primitivism. First, its impact was limited by the scarcity of objects (compared to the wealth of works plundered in the Non-European countries under colonial pressure) and the remote or impossible access to the caves. Second, Paleolithic 'art' was perceived as focused on 'animalistic' motives, whereas the presence and meaning of animals tend to fade away from modern artistic representations that emerged within the framework of a modern industrial culture in which nature becomes increasingly alien. Third, and most significantly, the style of some iconic artifacts (such as animal representations on bones or ivory) and rock art sites (such as Altamira or Niaux), as it seemed to be highly naturalistic to a modern eye (Morales et al. 2013), did not fit well with the project of many avant-garde artists of exploring new artistic languages beyond mimetic representation. Finally, by their predominantly European location, these 'prehistoric' works of art lacked the geographical exoticism which was part of the craving for authenticity so characteristic, at least in artistic terms, of a modern Western culture always anxious to search for more essential origins outside itself.

For all these reasons, formal imitations of 'prehistoric' art' have remained a minority within the more general framework of modern primitivism. However, the admiration of modern artists for 'artistic' testimonies considered as 'prehistoric' has always been widely spread. As I have argued elsewhere (Labrusse 2019), this modern fascination for deep-time images rests thus on other reasons, not stylistic or iconographic in the first place, but conceptual. From this point of view, there is a fundamental difference between the modern artistic interest in Indigenous non-European arts and in 'prehistoric art'. In the first case, what can be called ethno-

graphic primitivism could easily give rise to formal appropriations—most obvious in cubism around 1907–1910 (Laude 2006) –, given the abundance of objects spoiled all around the world and their non-mimetic character. This may also have prompted artists to enhance their personal aura by presenting themselves as the heirs of 'primitive' sacred values, which they fantasized from ethnographic or pseudo-ethnographic data collected and popularized in the West since the nineteenth century: this was the case of surrealist circles, as when Max Ernst was dreaming of assimilating the function of the modern artist to that of a "shaman" (Ernst 1948, 93). Nothing of the sort is possible in relation to 'prehistory'. First, the main element of fascination is no longer the distance in space but in time: the geographical exoticism is replaced by an archaeological enigma. Second, this archaeological context is so poor and fragmentary that questions and uncertainties largely predominate over positive assertions, and this makes appropriation behaviors difficult, if not impossible.

Certainly, the primitivist exoticism has sometimes converged with the attraction for the idea of 'prehistory'. From 1914 onwards, in particular, German traveler and ethnographer Leo Frobenius and his team revealed the antiquity of rock art in Africa in their Saharan and South-African expeditions (Hélène et al. 2016). When the corresponding tracings were exhibited in Europe and the United States in the 1930s, these monumental images of African 'prehistory' prompted the artworld to bring together colonial primitivism and prehistoric "archaeologism", using Rivière's term. But even in these instances, the deep-time and, therefore, enigmatic dimension remained dominant for the presentation of images identified as 'prehistoric'. In 1946, Alfred Barr, then advisory director of the Museum of Modern Art in New York, still referred to the 1937 exhibition of Frobenius' copies of rock art from all around the world under the motto "Modern Art, 5,000 Years Ago" (*ibid*., 151–152). And in 1948, art writers Herbert Read and Roland Penrose highlighted again the temporal dimension in the title of their exhibition at the Institute of Contemporary Art in London: "40,000 Years of Modern Art. A Comparison of Primitive and Modern Art" (Read 1948), which included copies lent by the Frobenius Institute alongside other 'prehistoric' images, 'ethnographic' ones and contemporary works of art (Stavrinaki 2019, 254–265).

In a word, in relation to 'prehistory', the focus on the "dark abyss of time" (Rossi 1984, Olivier 2008, after Buffon) naturally connected the penchant for Paleolithic artifacts with the extreme depth of geological time, as revealed by natural sciences. It induced a specific type of relationship, one in which formal copy or anthropological imitation were substituted for philosophical, poetical and/or existential meditation, with a particular fascination for the indistinctness provoked by this thickness of time. This is most likely the reason why Giacometti, in the abovementioned quotation, connected prehistory with a position of existential "doubt," which counteracts his initial project of technically studying "movement" in prehistoric carvings, engravings or paintings and of using their formal possibilities in his own drawings and sculptures. It is as if the imitation process was blocked or, at least, undermined by the inner resonance, in the artist's mind, of an unaccountable temporal depth which rendered Paleolithic images enigmatic and, so to speak, aesthetically indomitable. The prevailing, aporetical speculation on this unaccountability of time, bringing together geology, fossils and 'prehistoric' human productions, is as much obvious in the case of Joan Miró who, in the 1920s, painted canvases like the 1925 *Birth of the World*, where disassembled irregular geometric forms float on a muddy chaotic diluvial ground, shortly before he declared in 1928 that "painting was in decadence since the Ice Age" (Tériade 1996, 143).

But there is more to the point. If cave 'art', specifically, became such a central, reiterative reference for a number of modern artists, in the global framework of their fascination for deep-time, it was certainly because of the intrinsic expressive power of these images, but also because of the clash, within them, of two opposite temporal regimes. These archaeological remains were not univocal witnesses of infinitely distant times; they manifested rather the complexity, the dialectical nature of the regimes of temporality inherent in human perception. On the one hand, the exceptional state of conservation of some of these works—namely those that were the most widely reproduced and admired—and traces—in particular the hand, finger and footprints –, caused by the specific conditions of an underground environment, made of them something fully alive in the *present*. On the other, these images irremediably evoked an indescribable remoteness in time, an impression provoked by the motifs of extinct species (or those then confined to far-northern areas of the planet) and, more fundamentally, by the impenetrable enigma of these arrangements of animals, humans or semi-humans, abstract motifs and bodily marks within the cave. Looking at Pleistocene 'cave art', the Western observer inevitably feels the merging of two temporalities: an archaeological one, based on scientific knowledge, and an embodied one, so to speak, based on the observer's physical experience (that is not so intense, but still exists, in the contemplation of photographs and drawings). Both temporal perceptions are undermined by their opposites: the scientific ambition to clarify the chronology of prehistory runs up against a number of technical and epistemological obstacles; in turn, the impression of presence (as if images and marks had been made just before the visitor came) is somewhat challenged by the intellectual certitude of the antiquity of what we see and by its mysterious, uninterpretable quality for our modern mind. This deeply conflicting temporal structure of perception inevitably produces a questioning of the controlled rep-

resentation of time as a measurable depth and a blurring of the categories of the past and the present, all the more so because the measures of 'prehistoric' times often remain approximate, even from a scientific point of view, and difficult to integrate subjectively: while we can quite easily imagine durations of a few centuries, tens or hundreds of millennia, on the other hand, defy our capacities of representation. This is best expressed by the notion of 'thickness', rather than by the depth of time. While the notion of 'deep time' still suggests the possibility of some measurement, a *thick* period of time evokes something that is impenetrable. In other words, time in a 'prehistoric' context is experienced not so much as an enigma, asking for intellectual clarification, but as an irreducible abyss, causing a sense of existential anxiety.

13.3 Overlappings

So far, we have examined three artistic modes of artistic expression (i.e. representation or contextualization, imitation or reenactment, and resonance or meditation) that have shaped the different ways of dealing with a 'prehistoric' dimension. In this section, I will examine how many times these different dimensions coexist and overlap in modern images and artworks.

The theatrical representation of the context of creation in prehistory that was prevalent during the second half of the nineteenth century has been perpetuated until now in popular representations (Semonsut 2013), such as movies (Schefer 2021), cartoons, videogames, and pedagogical illustrations. These have been often inspired, in their style and composition, by the academic paintings of the nineteenth century, to complement the paucity of archaeological data and to recreate them visually. As for the direct or indirect imitation of Paleolithic artifacts and traces, it has continued from the first decades of the twentieth century to the present day (Lippard 1983; Pique et al. 2013; Labrusse and Stavrinaki 2013–2014). Recent contemporary artistic allusions to graffiti-like signs, handprints, humans and even animal representations from the Paleolithic reflect, among other possible reasons, a sort of nostalgia for a proximity to natural life, a celebration of tactility prior to any image-making, or a desire to revitalize public urban spaces by assimilating them to prehistoric painted caves (see, for instance, street artist Banksy's famous panel *Whitewashing Lascaux* in 2008). Finally, the third mode of expression of a modern artistic relation to 'prehistory' (i.e. the reflection about deep time and the radical questioning of narrativity in the image), that this reflection involves, cannot be considered only as an outcome that would have been preceded by phases of representation and imitation. Even if this inner resonance of 'prehistory' seems to be particularly important in modern and contemporary art from the 1930s onwards, some early instances can be traced back to the end of the nineteenth century. This is the case, for instance, of Paul Cézanne who, in the 1890s, sought to manifest in his landscapes of Mont Sainte-Victoire the feeling that "the red earth is coming out of an abyss" (Gasquet 1978, 113), drawing on the lessons in prehistory that his childhood friend, geologist, naturalist, and archaeologist Antoine-Fortuné Marion, had taught him in the late 1860s (Athanassoglou-Kallmyer 2003, 149–184; Causey 2020). Based on then-recent geological, paleontological, and paleoanthropological discoveries made in Aix-en-Provence, the meditation on deep time had profoundly transformed the painter's relationship to his environment, permeated by a metaphysical anxiety. Shaken by this sensation of prehistory, so to speak, Cézanne's ontological meditation became the source of a radical reconfiguration of his conception of the image in general and of landscape painting in particular, as if an indescribable temporal vibration were now introducing its chaotic energy into the deep structure of appearances.

In general, imitative processes lie at the hinge between representation and resonance. Resorting to the imitation of 'prehistoric' rock art motives can certainly be instrumentalized in distanced, contextualizing reconstitutions, like the motives of the panels of Font-de-Gaume in Paul Jamin's previously mentioned canvas. But it can also serve to reinforce a feeling of inner resonance, as it happens in Miró's *Constellations*, where the female motifs, in the form of two facing triangles, borrowed from Neolithic rock paintings in Spain, contribute to expressing the forever indecipherable character of signs, floating on a nebulous background as if illegibility were the fate of all meaning engulfed in the abyss of time. Rather than telling the story of a fake myth, so to speak, as one could expect from a primitivist attitude, Miró's composition reveals the fragility of any signifying superstructure, which cannot subjugate the material thickness of a perpetually moving 'fog' underneath. And this is exactly the lesson he seems to have drawn from the idea of 'prehistory', in his own aesthetic vision.

Interestingly, representation, imitation, and resonance are sometimes intertwined in the artist's creative process. During the 1960s and 1970s, this was the case of Robert Smithson (Tsai and Butler 2004; Labrusse 2019, 177–185), who illustrated our prehistoric fancies in his collages of intermingled dinosaurs and pin-ups (these images actually being second degree representations, alluding to prehistoric scenes in B-movies and academic paintings). Concurrently, he imitated 'prehistoric' procedures by erecting stone monuments *in situ,* like his *Spiral Jetty* (1970) or *Broken Circle* (1971), both evoking Neolithic cairns or megalithic structures. And throughout his career, he unfolded a poetics of time, within which the melancholy idea of a "future [that] tends to be prehistoric" (Smithson 1996, 194) resonates. In this case, 'prehistoric' means 'inhuman', referring to a state of the Earth where human species had not yet developed, since, for

Smithson, the modern world of mechanization fossilizes, so to speak, humanity's own agency and expels us from our history, thus echoing the early days of a Nature without humans. In fact, both his reconstruction of pseudo-Neolithic monuments using bulldozers and his kitsch images incorporating cut-outs of popular illustrations of dinosaurs serve to make a global idea of prehistory resonate as a nihilistic allegory of a universal law of 'entropy' (a concept that Smithson (*ibid*., 10–23) made the axis of his work), confronting the human with its own lack of substance and programmed disappearance.

With regards to 'prehistory', modern visual cultures can certainly use images as way of repressing the fundamental anxiety provoked by the thickness of time. But this ontological anguish can also be reversed by a creative power, and this is the case of the most authentic artistic creations of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, when referring to a perception of deep time. By transforming the haunting resonance of the idea of prehistory into a force, at once inspiring and destabilizing, within the creative process, these works make us realize that the revelation of the 'dark abyss of time', using Buffon's famous expression, is not the result of an external event but of an inner collective desire, inherent to our invention of the idea of prehistory. In other words, artists do not passively echo a notion of prehistory whose conceptual substance would have been already established, they also contribute to *produce* it in all its intellectual and emotional complexity.

13.4 'Prehistory' and the Immemorial Present

Since its invention in the nineteenth century, the idea of 'prehistory' is an ethnocentric term that reflects the intellectual categories and spiritual needs of modern Western societies. In this setting, this idea has a symbolic dimension, allegorizing a new and conflicting relation to time and history. In this section, I define the terms of this complex, dialectical relation to historicity, of which 'prehistory' has become the allegory. Then, I will seek to show how modern and contemporary artists did not only appropriate 'prehistory's symbolic dimensions but how they actively participated in their definition.

As many authors have pointed out, nineteenth-century scholars proposed different labels to designate 'prehistory' both as a period and as a science. For instance, Boucher de Perthes used the term '*antédiluvien*' to refer to the time before the biblical Flood. Similarly, a number of scholars used the term 'paleoethnology' to refer to the scientific study of the 'prehistoric' periods (Blanckaert 2017). Besides this diversity, the fact remains that, in places such as England and France, terms 'prehistory' and 'pre-historical' quickly became the dominant terminology, not only in scientific circles but also in popular culture.

This is related to what Claude Blanckaert has called the "historicist turn of human sciences" (2011, 79) and, more broadly speaking, a "formidable call for history since the nineteenth century", when philologist Ernest Renan defined history as "the necessary form of the science of everything that is governed by the laws of the ever-changing and successive life" (Renan 1852, II–IV). This 'historization' of Western societies has a scientific dimension and a rhetorical one, which are closely interdependent. The scientific dimension means that all things are transformed into *objects* under analytical observation, as on a theater stage where the spectator can see them playing their role. The narrative dimension establishes that these objects are considered only in their capacity to evolve, to appear and to disappear. The dream of nineteenth-century history was to fuse together these two dimensions and to develop a number of *rational narratives* (from geology to archaeology and history) in which storytelling and demonstration, succession in time and causal consecution would converge. As historian and theoretician Hayden White (2006, 30) has put it, "one cannot historicize without narrativizing, because it is only by narrativization that a series of events can be transformed into a sequence, divided into periods, and represented as a process in which the substance of things can be said to change while their identities remain the same." In other words, objectivation and narrativization went hand in hand in the over-arching process of historicization specific to modern Western societies. At this stage, we can already note that there is a contradiction at the core of this twofold process, between the desire to define the unchanging identity of things and the awareness of their insuperable relativity in time. The result can only be a conflicting relation to history itself, mixing together faith and melancholy, or to put it into philosophical terms, progress and nihilism.

In this setting, what was the role played by the notion of 'prehistory'? At first sight, paleontology and 'prehistoric' archaeology can be considered as an achievement of the historicist approach. They sought to provide a total scope to the historical view of reality—of which the very expression of 'natural history,' used interchangeably with that of 'natural science,' is an eloquent example. In short, 'prehistory', or 'prehistoric archaeology', has been presented from the very beginning as a form of 'hyper-history'. In the context of encyclopedic positivism, the prefix "pre-" sought to demonstrate that *everything* could virtually belong to history. One of the founding 'fathers' of prehistory as a science, Gabriel de Mortillet, expressed this idea as early as 1867: "One can say that everywhere, in time as in space, humans followed the same global evolution in their industrial and moral development" (de Mortillet 1867, 186). This need to extend history to the beginnings of time and to the comprehension of all phenomena has been perpetuated until now in scientific circles. For instance,

Daniel Lord Smail has recently proposed a theory of "deep history" according to which "there is an urgent need to recuperate the history of Paleolithic peoples, to bring them into the purview of historical studies in the same way that we have brought in Incans, Africans, peasants, and all the peoples who have been denied historicity." (Smail 2010, 10).

However, prehistory as a subject of study seems to exert an extraordinary resistance to this process of 'historicization'. First, from a scientific perspective, we know very little about this vast period of time, since most of the materials employed by 'prehistoric' people have disappeared. Second, from a syntactic point of view, the facts emanating from deep time are somewhat difficult to fit with the structure of our historical discourse, which requires a combination of demonstration and narration. The cognitive capacities of the "synthesis of the heterogeneous" that, according to Paul Ricœur (1983, 128) constitutes the condition of any narrative, are incompatible with the long duration. As already mentioned, it is not only difficult, but structurally impossible to construct a narrative, with its chain of events, referring to thousands even millions of years. Two main solutions were proposed at the end of the nineteenth century to overcome this difficulty. First, some denied the epistemological specificity of deep time, and they implicitly reduced this long duration to the usual measures of the historical discourse, as if one could think about thousands of years as one thinks about centuries or decades, in order to transform 'prehistory' into a *story*. Second, others conceptualized time as an abyss and they suggested that 'prehistoric' facts or events were simply unknowable and lost forever, i.e. lay not only before but *outside* history.

In other words, together with the project of historizing deep time, 'prehistory' emerged in Europe as the harbinger of a radical questioning of the historical project. This widespread questioning, which philosopher and sociologist Ernst Troeltsch (1922) famously called "the crisis of historicism", was evident in Nietzsche, Bergson, Husserl and others' philosophical critiques of the historical understanding of the real, as well as in the aesthetic attacks against 'historical painting' in advanced art debates. This reveals a collective concern about the fact that historicism was at the same time culturally contingent, epistemologically contradictory, and existentially constraining, and it also reveals the emergence of a need to explore alternative forms of understanding reality. The invention of the idea of 'prehistory' reflects in many ways the tension between these two poles. On the one hand, it expressed the scientist's desire to react to anti-historicist criticism by pushing their historicist project to the extreme. On the other hand, the same idea seemed to escape its own inventors, so to speak, and, whether they liked it or not, marked the relativity, if not the irrelevance of any process of historicization whatsoever.

Prehistoric archaeologists were certainly aware that the crisis of historicism was at the foundation of their field of research. This explains why they either tried to close the debate by asserting one single 'historical' interpretation of the collected archaeological data, against their challengers, or, in other cases, they melancholically recognized the empirical limits of their own approach without calling into question its epistemological principles for all that. This was the case, for instance, of Ernst Grosse (1894, 21) who argued that storytelling lacked scientific relevance in terms of the study of the "beginnings of art," and that "the answers are uncertain and often contradict each other, so that, after studying dozen of most famous works on prehistoric art, we close the last one with the sad conviction that prehistory is the fiction of sociology". Similarly, almost a century later, André Leroi-Gourhan (1965, 27) recognized that "prehistoric science was well-equipped to give certain precisions as to the direction in which one piece of ochre was used in prehistoric art, but it remains silent to understand the meaning of such a gesture.". Even Max Raphael, one of the scholars who most passionately committed himself to a (Marxist) historicization of prehistory recognized (and regretted) in the late 1940s that "in the best of cases we conceal the indistinctness [*Unerkennbarkeit*] of the Quaternary *Homo sapiens* under a series of illusions which contradict each other and constitute what we call 'progress of knowledge'" (Raphael 1993, 124). Instead, Raphael (1968, 205) proposed to rely on an "empirical theory of art," that would take into account the fact that "no matter how far back in history we go, the birth of art immediately escapes any purely historical explanation" (Raphael 1933, 172). Certainly, he dreamed that this "empirical theory" or "science of art" [*Kunstwissenschaft*]—based on a strictly formal analysis of the images and their mutual relations in space—could allow a precise understanding of Paleolithic art and, therefore, of Paleolithic societies in all their religious, political, and social dimensions. But he also recognized the irreducible part of obscurity which characterized prehistoric artistic creation. It was precisely this darkness or "indistinctness" that was at the center of the exploration of avant-garde artists, with whose works Raphael had long been familiar.

It was indeed to be the task of visual arts and literature to offer a creative response to the revelation of deep time as the reverse of history. While a number of popular and academic representations have contributed to reinforce the historicist narrative, since the end of the nineteenth century, some artists and writers have been engaged in a struggle against the supremacy of the narrative logic as such and meditated the idea of prehistory in this perspective. The example of Picasso can illustrate this point. André Malraux remembered a conversation in which the artist wondered about his attraction to *Venus of Lespugue,* of which he owned two plaster-casts: "Why do I like my prehistoric Venus? Because nobody

knows anything about her (Malraux and Picasso 1974, 123)." For the artist, the interest of 'prehistoric' artifacts lies in the vastness of their possible meanings, in their structurally enigmatic nature which calls no elucidation but, on the contrary, establishes semantic indeterminacy as such, as the object of a paradoxical knowledge, of existential order. Certainly, this lesson was based on a consideration of 'prehistory' in general. However, the reference to material things, considered as artwork, was central, insofar as the experience of art allows specifically for the reversal of historical temporality, shifting the intellectual knowledge into an emotional experience involving a physical presence, a paradoxical feeling of 'here-and-now' in front of real objects.

We have seen how the resonance of Paleolithic art in modern art was not mainly related to the primitivist mode (seeking to recreate a mythical universe) but it was more mainly fueled by an attraction for the silent material presence of the artifacts and rock images, including bodily imprints (particularly the negative or positive hands), digital tracings, the illegible chaos of superimposed outlines, and what Georges Bataille (1955, 90–91) called "unintelligible figures": "We will have to confess finally not to know anything. […] The more we feel overwhelmed, the further we are likely to go into the secrets of this [prehistoric] world that has disappeared forever." We also saw that the resulting aesthetic experience is rooted in the tension between two temporalities, producing this contradictory feeling of extreme presence (or extreme materiality) and extreme distance (or extreme unintelligibility). This is what allowed the photographer Brassaï (1933, 6) to notice, when he compared Parisian graffiti and Paleolithic engravings, that "living analogies establish vertiginous connections through ages, *by a simple elimination of the temporal factor*." It should be noted that the "temporal factor" to which Brassaï refers is that of the historical time, i.e., the time that is chronologically organized and thus connected to the present by the consequential and narrative means of history. On the other hand, what manifests itself more strongly than ever in these connections between the present and the deep past is a temporal thickness, something which we might call a non-discursive density of time.

In the act of perception, the sense of the thickness of deep time can be defined as one of the forms of experience of the immemorial. Perceiving something as immemorial (i.e. as originated in the deep, or *thick* past) does not mean that it belongs to an abstract timelessness, but that it is endowed with a non-discursive temporal dimension, which confers it a particular aura. Memory shapes the past in a narrative form, and oblivion creates a clear cut discontinuity between the present and the past. Between memory and oblivion, the immemorial designates a relationship to the world saturated of time that is not informed by history. We often feel this sense of the unfathomable temporal thickness of our surroundings without being able to formulate it explicitly. Yet the relation with 'prehistoric' artifacts and, even more specifically, with cave 'art' allows us to give an explicit form to this feeling, a form originated by the clash between the fascinating impression of a recent action and the indecipherable enigma of its meaning, lost in time forever. It is as if the lack of meaning were releasing the direct perception of an ever-present human gesture, in all its power. Immediacy and distance are thus tied together in our experience in the most disturbing manner. When contemplating these images, even under the form of pictures, the tension between the past and the present can no longer be synthetized in a narrative interpretation. One could say that history is forcefully unplugged. But this does not erase our time-related feelings. On the contrary, the uncertainty of interpretations and the suspension of any definite content leaves the field open to them: the *question* of time is coiled on itself, so to speak, with no answer to it, so that this immemorial thickness which tinges so many of our perceptions without being formulated, is violently brought to the fore and invades our consciousness in the species of the uncanny. An analogous sensation of non-historical temporal clashes is grounded on a number of modern artistic and literary creations, haunted by the desire to get rid of the historical narrative that orders (and makes sense of) time, and it is this analogy that feeds their attraction for a 'prehistoric' dimension, through the encounter with deep time artifacts and images.

We cannot underestimate the global cultural impact of these powerful artistic expressions of deep time, all the more so because they correspond to one of the driving forces that presided over the invention of the idea of prehistory, even if it was inevitably held back in scientific elaborations. In fact, the world of prehistoric science and that of modern art have always been in contact. For instance, some of the founders of rock art studies, such as Henri Breuil and Leo Frobenius, were well aware of the experiments of avant-garde artists in France and Germany, which they discovered in publications such as *Cahiers d'art* in Paris (Breuil and Frobenius 1930), or in museums such as the Museum of Modern Art in New York (Frobenius and Fox 1937). Signs of this influence can be observed in the stylistic evolution of the drawings of French, Spanish, and South African sites that Breuil made in the 1930s and 1940s. And the same can be said about the monumental African compositions copied in the 1930s by Leo Frobenius' team, composed partly of students from German progressive art schools (Hélène et al. 2016). Conversely, some relevant commentators about prehistoric art in the 1940s and 1950s, such as Max Raphael (1993), Georges Bataille (1955), or Siegfried Giedion (1957), belonged to different literary and artistic avant-garde circles. Even if they cannot be considered academic prehistorians, they devoted a number of works to prehistoric art and they had an impact in a relatively large audience during the post-

war period. This attraction between the contemporary art world and the world of prehistoric archaeology has continued to this day, occasionally leading to meetings and collaborations between individuals belonging to these two different fields, like that of the Chauvet cave (Dallaporta et al. 2016; Barceló 2019). In this context, we must not resort to a simplistic cultural determinism, seeing these conjunctions as the sole source of recent important changes in prehistoric studies, such as an increased sensitivity to the materiality and the indeterminacy of meaning in Paleolithic works. Still, it is appropriate to note the persistent connection between these two different kinds of relations with 'prehistory', one based on objectification and historicization, the other oriented towards subjective integration and poeticization (something which has nothing to do with the invention of arbitrary fantasies). Although contradictory, these two tendencies are inseparable, as they are the two major factors in the development of the idea of prehistory in the Western world since the mid-nineteenth century. By appropriating all that remains enigmatic in the data of prehistoric archaeology and exalting it, modern artists transform an epistemological challenge into a poetic truth. It favors a complex process of de-objectification and internalization of the prehistoric dimension, which is more potent than ever in our present time.

At a moment in which human societies perceive themselves, rightly or wrongly, at a turning point, the aesthetic confrontation with the paradoxical *presence* of deep time images is particularly relevant. Their resonances are diverse: they can embody a reserve of concrete wonder, spurred by the physical strangeness of the caves, in a materialistic age; they can feed a meditation on the evanescence of humans—just a scratch in the infinite reconfigurations of matter—and on the imminence of the catastrophe which would make the near future a counterpart of the Earth before humans; they can also incite the re-initiation of the links between art and life, through a renewed participation in the natural world and the physical engagement of the body with its material environment. Wonder, catastrophe, new beginnings: all these stances unfold the creative power of an inner 'prehistoric' dimension, of which deep time images have always been privileged intercessors, continuously giving shape to our present.

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