The term “carambolage”—which means *carom* or *cannon* in English—is a reference to the game of billiards; it describes “a shot in which the cue ball contacts one object ball and then the other.” This is the underlying mechanism of the *Carambolages* show, curated by Jean-Hubert Martin at the Grand Palais, in Paris, in which “each work leads to the next by association of ideas or forms.”

The opening room features a small acrylic case in which one of the walls of the exhibition, located on the second floor, is recreated along with precise miniature reproductions of the works on display. In front of this miniature wall, on what would be the floor of the exhibition space, a set of dominoes function as a didactic visual cue of what the exhibition intends to do and how the public should view it. The idea is apparently simple: “185 works of art from different eras, styles, and countries are presented in an exhibition designed like a game of dominoes.”

The wall text encourages the public to forge their own interpretations of what is called the “visual thought” presented in the “innovative artistic path” of the show. The aim is said to be to “stimulate knowledge” through “entertainment.” As demonstrated by the image chosen for the promotional material—a satirical sixteenth-century Flemish diptych showing a man pulling a face—*Carambolages* is intended to be a play with images in which the viewer is invited to play along.

The exhibition itself, however, doesn’t make it easy for the viewer to join the game. Indeed, it begins with a photographic reproduction of panel 79 from Aby Warburg’s *Mnemosyne Atlas* (1924-1929), which contains reproductions of works of art, newspaper clippings, and publications; it is part of Warburg’s investigation into the transhistorical expression in images of what he considered a collective original orgiastic experience. Warburg’s panels of images comprise a complex, unfinished project that requires a didactic discourse—they are difficult to understand even for an informed viewer. Anne and Patrick Poirier’s *Mnémomyse* (1991-1992) maquette and project drawings, which present the human brain as site of memory, in the architectural form of a mystical city, and two plates from William Hogarth’s *Analysis of Beauty* (1753) project, which suggest analogies of form between such completely disparate phenomena as architectonic ornaments and facial expressions, are similarly complex. It seems as if the curator wants to disorient viewers with works that require complementary information, and to persuade them to favor their senses over their reason—an hypothesis confirmed by a neon sculpture of Maurizio Nannucci’s which reads “Listen to your eyes” and is used to prompt viewers to proceed to the exhibit’s next section.
Figure 1. Poster for the exhibition *Carambolages* at the Grand Palais, 2016.

Figure 2. Exhibition view, *Carambolages*, Exhibition Design: Hugues Fontenas Architecte. © Rmn-Grand Palais / Photo Didier Proux, Paris 2016
The design of the exhibition is strikingly minimalist: the off-white or grey walls contain no text beyond the opening gallery. Objects are presented on short parallel walls such that the public must slalom between them, as if zigzagging through corridors, with small arrows designating the direction in which the works should be viewed. Another disorienting aspect of the installation is the lack, except on slide shows playing on flat screens located at the end of each corridor, of any basic information about the objects. Each slide contains the name of the artist (where there is one), the title, the origin, and the date of the object. Viewers must wait and even queue, at times, to know what they are looking at. (This constraint, however, is somewhat compensated for by a free app containing basic information about the works.)

The works themselves are, at times, connected in ways that can be amusing and surprising. For example, one sequence leads viewers from an Albrecht Dürer watercolor of a stag head pierced by an arrow to an early twentieth-century decorated skull from the South Pacific, a Katsushika Hokusai engraving of a phantom holding down a mosquito net, and a curious sixteenth-century Italian painting of the Holy Family, in which a trompe l’œil canvas is painted over the real one. Although the first three objects are related to the subject of death, the variation of the connecting element (an arrow becomes decoration, a skull becomes the skeleton of a ghost, a mosquito net becomes a painted veil) yields a very dynamic and fascinating thread. Another passage connects a contemporary moped case by Wim Delvoye and an Indian Siddhapratima Yandra statue with a cut-out image: in one case the “container” conceals; in the next it reveals. Elsewhere, an eighteenth-century French gutter constructed in wood and metal has a peculiarly asymmetric curve, the form of which is echoed precisely in a sixteenth-century Hungarian shield decorated with colorful polka-dots resembling those of the sun, the moon, and the constellations in a nineteenth-century Korean drawing. In these cases, it seems to me that the alternation between thematic and formal links and the diversity of the objects create the kind of visual surprise and uninformed pleasure that Martin intended.

However, the show has its problems. My main criticisms can be linked to two points: one is related to the choice of objects and the other to how the underlying mechanism of the show was carried out. In both cases, a review of Martin’s professional history would shed light on the methodological nuances of Carambolages, as he is best known for the controversial exhibition Magiciens de la Terre, which was presented at the Centre Pompidou in 1989. This show brought together living producers of art and religious objects from all continents, with most works commissioned specifically for the exhibition. Not having seen Magiciens myself, I will not go into detail about that exhibition, but only bring forth those aspects that are relevant to my reading of Carambolages. Magiciens gave rise to a great amount of debate, some of it solicited by Martin himself. In general, it is seen as a very contradictory show, both because of the choice of artists/producers (or “magicians,” as Martin called them), and because of its Western-centered concept of art. Indeed, by neglecting to choose non-European or non-North American artists formed in the Western modernist canon, and favoring makers of traditional art or religious objects from those regions, Martin reproduced the primitivist prejudice which refuses to accept the claim of “other” cultures to modernity and seeks to find in those “others” some sort of original (“primitive”) purity. In addition, by giving these objects no contextualization, and
showing them for their aesthetic effect alone, Martin reinforces the bourgeois conception of art while silencing the underlying economic and political interests it supports and the struggles it helps to subdue.

*Carambolages*, of course, is informed by Martin’s personal taste and free associations: it’s only logical that it brought together the same types of art works and objects included in his previous shows. They fall mainly under the heading of what Western museums have long considered high art, decorative art, or ethnographic art. There is little contemporary art, and there is nothing of mass culture. If Martin’s intent was to reach a larger public and transcend the traditional framework of museums, why didn’t we see any comics, TV, magazines, animation, toys, or other such cultural products? As before, there is limited representation of women artists and of artists of color in the Western world, despite their critical interventions in the traditional discourse of art and art history in the late twentieth century.

Instead, the selection made for the show seems to have more in common with the tradition of the Renaissance *Wunderkammer*, or cabinet of curiosities. This has been noted before in regard to other exhibitions curated by Martin, and *Carambolages* seems to subscribe to the encyclopedic idea of bringing together objects from all parts of the world and all time periods, especially objects which are droll or intriguing, such as the aforementioned Flemish diptych; a nineteenth-century goblet in form of the breast of Pauline Borghèse; or the ancient Egyptian sarcophagus of a shrew. As with the cabinet of curiosities, one can criticize the ethnocentric distancing and decontextualization of the objects, which has the effect of aestheticizing and therefore “othering” and depreciating them, pointing back to the criticism that *Magiciens* received.

My second criticism is related to the idea behind the exhibition, which Martin had already described in 2013. He refers to it as a path in which each work is determined by the previous one and announces the next, based on the model of a French musical game known as “*marabout, bout de ficelle*.” He is referring to a French children’s song with variable content in which the last syllable of the last word forms the first syllable of the first word, and so on indefinitely. It is a discourse, but a nonsensical one, for which there exist models in French literature.

It seems that one of Martin’s preferred models is Surrealism. In the first gallery, for instance, Martin positions Surrealism at the origin of the show by presenting a reproduction of an eighteenth-century engraving that André Breton once retitled *L’ange anatomique*; it is displayed strategically in the acrylic box which demonstrates, using dominoes, how the exhibition should be understood. Indeed, the Surrealists’ practice of free association and their interest in the fortuitous or uncanny encounters between disparate images or terms both find echo in *Carambolages*. However, the show seems to be less about fortuitous encounters than about visual connections between unexpected things, and it is rather Breton’s *studio* that Martin is trying to adapt, as he himself explained in 2013: “(...) I realized that he [Breton] was able to bring together artworks from completely different horizons and that it provoked beauty and emotion. All this confirmed my idea that there was no hierarchy between cultures.” There is, of course, a link between Breton’s studio and the cabinet of curiosities, and it can
have the effect of reestablishing, rather than destroying, hierarchies. As Maureen Murphy points out with regard to *Magiciens*, Martin seems nostalgic for these previous practices and movements, and, in this sense, he brings with it the same type of bias as found in the Museum of Modern Art’s 1984-5 exhibition “Primitivism” in 20th Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern, in which cultural objects from non-Western regions were shown alongside Western modern art purely for their formal aspects, thus validating the primitivist view. Therefore, despite the show’s questioning of the standard thematic, chronological or geographical criteria of museums, it could be said to uncritically reaffirm certain of these discourses. Martin is well aware of the problem, as he himself states: “We have to keep in mind however that this is an exhibition, not a discourse. Yet I know that exhibitions cannot claim innocence, and our project will be critical and visual at the same time.”

The question is, therefore, to know whether he managed to achieve this.

The discursive nature of the exhibition is further reinforced by the display: the objects are presented in a strict linear sequence. Viewers are not granted the freedom to make their own connections and, because only scant information about the objects is given, Martin seems to underestimate their capacity to choose, think, and know for themselves. The public is thus left with only two criteria to make its associations: form and subject matter; as such, the show reiterates the exoticizing gaze of the *Wunderkammer*, and, of course, of *Magiciens*.

Figure 3. Exhibition view, *Carambolages*, Exhibition Design: Hugues Fontenas Architecte. © Rmn-Grand Palais / Photo Didier Plowy, Paris 2016
Yet it seems to me that there could have been other criteria to enrich the chain: support, function, origin, reception, meaning, genre, size, title, period, sound, state of conservation, owner, etc. Instead, there are sequences that seem to turn in a circle, as in a series of seven different hands (for example, a Thai sculpture of a hand from the fifteenth-sixteenth century is connected to a bronze sculpture of a glove which was reproduced in Breton’s Nadja, then to a Farid Belkahia sculpture of a hand), followed by a series of feet. Like a broken record, the visual discourse seems stuck and simply offers diverse images of the same thing. These sequences are not convincing, unexpected, or informative.

Ultimately, Martin’s underlying ambition to circumvent art-historical discourse and transgress museum practices, however justified his critique of their oppressive nature, is not merely unattainable, but counterproductive, because he is still, necessarily, located within and thereby reinforcing these frames. As Rasheed Araeen asserted, with regard to Magiciens, “There is no harm in one’s idiosyncratic understanding of things, but if it is not located, both theoretically and historically, within the specificity of the discourse called art, then one is not really serious about one’s intentions.” Indeed, in Magiciens, Martin himself was transparent about the subjective nature of his choices, stating, “I intend to select these objects from various cultures according to my own history and my own sensibility.” In the case of Carambolages, Araeen’s critique still holds true: if the exhibition hinges on Martin’s own engagement with a variety of cultural references, this should have been made more clear.
By recuperating Surrealist practices and ideas without historicizing them, Martin associates himself with the pernicious effect of the art market and the “wider market of lifestyle” in which the emancipatory projects of a previous time are emptied of their subversive potential.\textsuperscript{19} Surrealism, a movement that sought to liberate desire and the unconscious within bourgeois society, is here reduced to Martin’s “bringing together [of] artworks from completely different horizons” for the sake of provoking “beauty and emotion.” As Araeen puts it, an ideological struggle is replaced with a certain “cultural eclecticism” or “anything goes” attitude.\textsuperscript{20}

Martin might have benefited from taking into account some of the critiques that\textit{Magiciens} received. In “From the Outside In—‘Magiciens de la Terre’ and Two Histories of Exhibitions,” for instance, Pablo Lafuente proposes an alternative, non-hierarchical, object-based approach to exhibitions as a means to explore “the limits of the art system’s ability to deal with what is not conceived within or for it.”\textsuperscript{21} Based on the notion of “migration of form,” such a model would establish “an alternative historical thread that might shed light on the possibilities of the system of art, no longer to secure visibilities and shape identities, but to develop ways to understand how cultural objects and cultural producers (from anywhere) might relate to each other.”\textsuperscript{22} According to this strategy, no objects would be privileged because “nothing actually belongs,” and “because of this, objects and people (artists, curators and others) enter into relations, according to and against their will.” There are some installations that seem to experiment in this way, such as that of the collection of the Louvre-Lens.\textsuperscript{23} Lafuente asserts that\textit{Magiciens}, with “its insistence on form and its belief in the equal availability of artistic practice,” was stepping closer to this goal, even if unintentionally.\textsuperscript{24}

\textit{Carambolages} did not, in my opinion, achieve this, because of its forced and oversimplified display; because of, its unstated assumptions; and because of its failure to historically and theoretically situate itself. As Lafuente suggests, objects may be able to speak for themselves, but not if someone is already speaking for them.\textsuperscript{25} Nonetheless, I feel the exhibition was an attempt to explore an alternative path that may give rise to much debate as well as to new explorations.

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\section*{Notes}
\begin{enumerate}
\item \textsuperscript{2}Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{3}Ibid.
\end{enumerate}
4 Translations are my own. The actual expressions in the show were: « vos interpretations, »
« pensée visuelle, » « promenade artistique novatrice, » « stimuler le savoir, » and
« divertissement. »

5 For more information, see Aby Warburg, L’Atlas Mnemosyne (Paris: L’écarquillé – INHA, 2012),
56.

6 It is not a coincidence that the only other wall text in Carambolages concerns this reproduction; it
suggests that the images in Warburg’s project illuminate, through analogy, the survival and renewal
of ritualistic forms.

7 The exhibition took place in 1989, at the Centre Pompidou and the Grande Halle at the Parc de la
Villette, and was curated by Martin in collaboration with Mark Francis. For more information, see
the catalogue, Magiciens de la terre, ed. Jean-Hubert Martin (Paris: Editions du Centre Pompidou,
1989). The exhibition was revisited in a 2014 project, see Magiciens de la terre: retour sur une
Xavier Barral: Éditions Centre Pompidou, 2014); and for an overview of some of the debates that
characterized the original exhibition, see Benjamin Buchloh and Jean-Hubert Martin, “‘The whole
earth show,’” Art in America 77.5 (May 1989): 150-151.

8 See, for example, Rasheed Araeen, “Our Bauhaus Others’ Mudhouse,” and Jean-Marc Poinsot,
“Review of the Paradigms and Interpretative Machine, or, The Critical Development of ‘Magiciens

9 Rasheed Araeen makes this point very clearly in “Our Bauhaus Others’ Mudhouse,” 239. It seems
me extremely important to emphasize, however, that this refers more specifically to the African
continent. In cases such as Brazil and India, for example, Martin invited artists that were very much
inserted in the Western canon. See also Poinsot, “Review of the Paradigms and Interpretative
Machine, or, The Critical Development of ‘Magiciens de la Terre,’” 105. The fact that a lot of the
criticism did not realize this demonstrates how deeply rooted the prejudice actually is.

10 See Buchloh and Martin, “The Whole Earth Show,” 154, wherein which Buchloh points out that,
in Magiciens, Martin presented “only objects of high culture, even though modernist avant-garde art
was in fact constituted in dialectic relationship with mass culture from its beginnings.”

11 See Maureen Murphy, « Des Magiciens de la terre, à la globalisation du monde de l'art : retour
sur une exposition historique, » Critique d'art 41 (printemps/été 2013): 3 (accessed June 19, 2016),
http://critiqueudart.revues.org/8307 and JHM : hors catégorie for an example of prior comparisons of
Martin’s work to cabinets of curiosity.

The “encyclopedic drive” can also be connected to Warbur’s Mnemosyne Atlas, as well as to other
projects of the beginning of the twentieth century, such as Walter Benjamin’s Arcades Project.

12 Jean-Hubert Martin, “Il n’y a pas de hiérarchie entre les cultures” [Entretien avec N.

13 This has often been noted. For example, see Murphy, « Des Magiciens de la terre, à la
globalisation du monde de l’art : retour sur une exposition historique, » 3.

14 Martin, “Il n’y a pas de hiérarchie entre les cultures,” 30 (my translation).

15 Buchloh and Martin, “The whole earth show,” 213.

16 I’m thinking of art exhibitions that corroborate a linear historical narrative neatly organized in
terms of periods and styles, great masters, smaller masters, and smooth passages between
phases.


Lafuente, “From the Outside In—‘Magiciens de la Terre’ and Two Histories of Exhibitions,” 22.

At the Louvre-Lens, objects of all types and regions are shown together in one big hangar-like room where there are no walls, only clusters of diverse objects around which the public can walk without a set path to follow; the unifying discourse is chronological, but in the form of a discrete timeline that makes it clear when there are distensions or accelerations in time, for example concerning antiquity and the Middle Ages.

Lafuente, “From the Outside In—‘Magiciens de la Terre’ and Two Histories of Exhibitions,” 22.

Ibid, 19.