Okwui Enwezor

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I’m not going to pull any punches: Okwui Enwezor was one of the few curators of contemporary art – if not the only curator of contemporary art – worth paying attention to. He not only had an original vision, but more importantly, he had a mission: to de-provincialise contemporary art by embracing the global south, especially the art and photography of Africa. This mission was backed up with intellectual voracity: a genuine curiosity for the work of scholars and theorists across numerous disciplines, resulting in catalogues and readers with more conceptual (and definitely more physical) heft than most. The art, however, always came first, and in this regard Enwezor was exemplary: never subjecting works of art to an overbearing curatorial rubric, but letting them determine the tone and substance of each exhibition. The urgency of his mission, his rapacious intellectualism and his curatorial responsibility are irreplaceable. It is staggeringly unfair that Enwezor, who accomplished so much, in so little time, and was planning so much more, has died so young, at age fifty-five.

I am not going to use this space to rehearse the course of Enwezor’s career – many others have detailed his upbringing in Nigeria, his move to New York in the early 1980s, his study of political science in New Jersey, his turn to poetry, and his gradual gravitation to art criticism and curating in the 1990s.¹ Nor will I provide a


Okwui Enwezor in the ‘Poetry Session’ of Thomas Hirschhorn’s Gramsci Monument, Forest Houses, Bronx, New York, 2013, courtesy of Thomas Hirschhorn, photo by Romain Lopez
detailed overview of his many accomplishments – co-founder of *NKA Journal of Contemporary African Art*, curator of numerous biennials (Johannesburg, Gwang-Ju, Seville, Beirut, Paris, Venice), and Dean of San Francisco Art Institute, 2005–9.\(^2\) Instead, I will focus on four overlapping ways in which his hugely influential output has indelibly marked the field of contemporary art history: his advocacy of African art, his support of lens-based practices, his theorisation of globalisation and exhibition-making, and his contribution to the emerging art historical field of global modernism.

While Enwezor was one of the few curators who could lay claim to having a ‘global’ knowledge of contemporary art, the centre of gravity to which he always returned was Africa. His first major exhibition, ‘In/Sight: African Photographers, 1940–Present’, at the Guggenheim Museum, New York in 1996, was largely responsible for propelling Sam Fosso, Seydou Keïta and Malick Sidibé, among others, to international prominence. His subsequent group shows were characterised by an ambition to move beyond the trend of what he called ‘deftly packaged multicultural exhibitions’,\(^3\) preferring to set a geographic focus against the historical facts of social and political upheaval: ‘The Short Century: Independence and Liberation Movements in Africa, 1945–1994’ (2001),\(^4\) for example, or ‘Rise and Fall of Apartheid: Photography and the Bureaucracy of Everyday Life’ (2012–13).\(^5\) The former proposed decolonisation as one of the most significant events of the twentieth century, as significant as the abolition of slavery in the nineteenth, while the latter presented apartheid not as ‘the past’ but as a system normalised in institutions and bureaucracy, whose legacy is still very much alive.\(^6\) As Enwezor acknowledged, such interdisciplinary projects require new methods, moving beyond art history as overarching disciplinary framework. In ‘The Short Century’, this necessarily impacted on the types of objects he selected to create his ‘critical biography’ of twentieth-century Africa: the displays included painting, sculpture and installation (as one would

\(^2\) Okwui Enwezor co-founded *NKA Journal of Contemporary African Art* in 1995 with Olu Oguibe, Chika Okeke-Agulu and Salah Hassan


\(^4\) Museum Villa Stuck, Munich; Martin-Gropius-Bau, Berlin; Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago; P.5.1 and Museum of Modern Art, New York (2001–2)


expect) but also photojournalism, album covers, book covers, documentary film, posters, music, theatre, television programmes, commemorative textiles and architectural plans.\(^7\)

In addition to organising such ambitious group shows exploring the ‘modern African imaginary’, Enwezor was a relentless champion of African artists and photographers – Santu Mofokeng, Meshac Gaba, David Goldblatt, William Kentridge, Huit Facettes, Wangeci Mutu, El Anatsui (the subject of Enwezor’s final solo show, at Haus der Kunst in Munich until July 2019), to name only a few.\(^8\) In essays and exhibitions, his advocacy for these artists always sought to elaborate the art historical stakes of their work. Enwezor also lent his support to more familiar Western blue-chip brands (Matthew Barney, James Casebere, Candida Höfer) as well as artists of the African diaspora (Lorna Simpson, John Akomfrah), so the totality of his output did important work in assimilating African art to the ‘global contemporary’. Indeed, Enwezor’s imprimatur as a curator and critic could be said to have accelerated the assimilation of many African artists into this expanding market. At the same time, he also acknowledged the difficulty of African art as a new market niche in publications that provided more synthetic, historical and ambivalent nuance, such as \textit{Reading the Contemporary: African Art from Theory to the Marketplace} (1999, co-edited with Olu Oguibe) and \textit{Contemporary African Art Since 1980} (2009, co-authored with Chika Okeke-Agulu).

Enwezor’s impact on the contemporary reception of African art is arguably overshadowed only by his impact on the discourse of photography. Prior to his landmark Documenta 11 (2002), photography had been present in museums and biennials primarily in what we might call the Cindy Sherman/Jeff Wall paradigm: large-scale, carefully lit photography that was often self-conscious in its staged artificiality and pictorialism. After Documenta 11, the door opened to documentary, not just in contemporary photography but also within the longer history of experimental film and video. (Famously, his Documenta included more hours of time-based media than one could see even if one stayed the full hundred days of the exhibition.) While this led to criticisms of the exhibition as a ‘CNN Documenta’ that privileged content over form, Enwezor was adamant that the primary point of


\(^8\) Enwezor describes his curatorial work from the early 1990s as being shaped around the ‘modern African imaginary’ (‘Rise and Fall of Apartheid’, op cit, p 18)
reference for work on the border of contemporary art and documentary was ethics: not just bearing witness to the pain of others, but turning the victim into the image of critical recall between the artist and spectator. Against the traditional mode of documentary as a non-negotiable presentation of blunt facts, he came to propose vérité as a space for ethical encounter between the spectator and the other.

The impact of Documenta 11 on artistic and curatorial practice, but also art history, cannot be overestimated. Almost overnight, mixed-media installation art ceased to be the default option for non-European artists seeking to overcome the perceived hurdle of modernist medium-specificity; now lens-based imagery was the universal lingua franca, enabling assimilation to global contemporaneity while providing evidence of (and sating curiosity about) unfamiliar contexts and controversies. From this point on, David Goldblatt became contemporary photography’s guiding spirit, not Jeff Wall: a socially and politically conscious practice supported by research and an ethics of witnessing. Documenta 11 gave impetus to the work of art historians, most notably T J Demos, whose book The Migrant Image (2013) takes up many of its problematics, and Terry Smith, with whom Enwezor co-edited the volume Antinomies of Art and Culture (2008), and who subsequently globalised his approach to accommodate postcolonial modernisms. Through his exhibitions and scholarship, Enwezor opened up the concept of African contemporaneity and made it seem less intimidating to a sector of mainstream Western academics.

In addition to its rerouting of photographic practice, Documenta 11 is known equally as a landmark intervention into the discourse of globalisation and exhibition-making. Enwezor began this intervention in the second Johannesburg Biennial, ‘Trade Routes: History and Geography’ (1997), by jettisoning national pavilions in favour of ‘contact zones’ that brought together artists from outside affluent Europe and North America. Such a model had more in common with the south-south mission of the Havana Biennial (1987 onwards) than with the dominant paradigm of shipping the world to the Western centre, seen every two years in Venice but most egregiously in ‘Magiciens de la Terre’ (Paris, 1989), touted as the ‘world’s first global art show’. It was characteristic of Enwezor’s optimism that he never criticised

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10 The hefty catalogue for ‘Trade Routes’ sets the tone of his future publications, with essays by scholars Paul Gilroy, Saskia Sassen, Julia Kristeva, and others.
‘Magiciens’ but saw it as a challenge to future curators: it was an exhibition that provoked and demanded to be improved. More than any other biennial, Documenta 11 was widely perceived to be the long-awaited critical antidote to ‘Magiciens’.

By the time Enwezor was appointed as the first non-European (and, to date, the only African) director of Documenta, ‘global contemporary’ had definitively displaced an earlier terminology of the ‘postmodern’ and the ‘postcolonial’. The latter labels were now fused and subsumed under this new rubric, which was indebted to the export of economic neoliberalism after the end of the Cold War and the new possibilities of networked communication. At the same time, the events of 9/11 had ushered in a more uncertain state of affairs, and it had become painfully evident that biennials were as much about city branding as benign exchange. Responding to this ambivalence, but seeking to hold on to the cultural possibilities of the biennial, Enwezor’s essay ‘Mega Exhibitions and the Antinomies of a Transnational Global Form’ remains a touchstone defence of the genre. His essay argues for the capacity of certain large-scale exhibitions, especially when viewed through Bakhtin’s idea of the carnivalesque, to resist the logic of global capitalism.

Although his own mega exhibitions would be more readily associated with sober gravity rather than the carnivalesque, Enwezor introduced structural innovations that proved of lasting influence on engaged exhibition-making: assembling a curatorial team whose expertise represents different parts of the world, deterritorialising the exhibition away from its ostensible base, and publishing ‘readers’ that offered windows onto a host of issues that exceeded the conventional rubric of an exhibition catalogue (in the case of Documenta 11, four volumes of conference proceedings on democracy, transnational justice, creolisation and urbanism).

Enwezor’s essay ‘The Postcolonial Constellation’ (2008) revisited the question of globalisation and exhibition-making in a more explicitly critical mode, and laid the

11 ‘There is a kind of romanticism that people have that there will always be a misunderstanding when you take on the work of other culture. Those do happen, but those misunderstandings can never be addressed unless you make an attempt, and this is what is really productive about Magiciens.’ Okwui Enwezor interviewed by Paul O’Neill, in O’Neill, ed., _Curating Subjects_, Open Editions, London, 2007, p 119.
13 Platform 1 (Democracy Unrealized) took place in Berlin; Platform 2 (Experiments with Truth: Transitional Justice and the Processes of Truth and Reconciliation) in New Delhi; Platform 3 (Creolité and Creolisation) in Santa Lucia; and Platform 4 (Four African cities: Freetown, Johannesburg, Lagos, and Kinshasa) in Lagos. The exhibition in Kassel was conceived as the fifth and final Platform.
groundwork for the next major exhibition he was developing in the months before his death.\textsuperscript{14} For Enwezor, the postcolonial constellation denotes an understanding of
globalisation after imperialism, and exists less as an ontological condition than as an
intellectual and ethical imperative. The fact that modernity was founded on ‘a savage
act of hermeneutic and epistemological violence’ demands a rethinking of modern art,
situated as it is between imperial and postcolonial discourses.\textsuperscript{15} Drawing on the work
of Michel Foucault and Edouard Glissant, Enwezor’s essay offers a searing critique of
Tate Modern’s opening exhibition displays, which he describes as ahistorical and able
to propose only a European model of modernity. He concludes by comparing art
history to an imperial enterprise, of which curators are only the ‘viceroys’. The essay
thus heralds a shift in Enwezor’s gaze: from interdisciplinary interests to the discipline
of art history, and from \textit{zeitgeist}-driven biennials to museum collection displays. This
narrowing of focus might come across as conservative, but what Enwezor had in mind
was nothing less than the dismantling and rebuilding of the Western intellectual model
upon which art history, and the museum itself, are founded.

‘The Postcolonial Constellation’ also augurs a change of focus from the global
contemporary and onto the emerging art historical paradigm of the ‘global modern’.
This nascent field seeks to complicate and displace Eurocentric narratives of modern
art by emphasising transnational exchange, intercultural reception and a pluralisation
of histories. One approach to this is exemplified by Enwezor’s last major exhibition,
‘Post-War: Art Between the Pacific and the Atlantic, 1945–1965’ (Haus der Kunst,
Munich, 2016–17), a revisionist history of the period between World War II and the
emergence of new artistic networks in the 1960s. Its target, fair and square, was
canonical art history: in Enwezor’s words, the exhibition sought to provincialise the
‘postwar art-history industry’ by recasting it across every continent and refracting it
through many voices.\textsuperscript{16} Unlike ‘The Short Century’, the exhibits in ‘Post-War’ were
conventionally art historical, privileging painting and sculpture, while the doorstep-
sized catalogue summoned a legion of art historians to fill its 845 pages.

Five years in the making, ‘Post-War’ exemplifies a mode of intellectual
curatorial endeavour that is increasingly uncommon in its historical ambition and

\textsuperscript{14} Enwezor, ‘The Postcolonial Constellation’, pp 207–234
\textsuperscript{15} Ibid, p 222
scope. Even rarer, it was conceived as the first of a trilogy of exhibitions at Munich’s Haus der Kunst, the second being ‘Postcolonial’ and the third ‘Postcommunist’. Enwezor’s thinking for the second of these exhibitions was due to be elaborated at my own institution, the Graduate Center of City University of New York, where we were in the process of scheduling his appointment as a visiting professor before his health deteriorated at the end of last year. In his proposal he wrote:

The next and second iteration of the three ‘Post’ exhibitions that I conceived as part of looking at global art history is The Postcolonial Constellation: Art, Culture, Sovereignty, 1960-1980. The exhibition will depart from the classical idea of the postcolonial as the process of disengagement from and decolonization from colonialism and the creation of the nation state. It will not be framed within the idea of the nation state as a central protagonist of social, political, and cultural emancipation. It will instead focus on the formation of non-state activities, namely the explosion of civic consciousness between 1960 to 1980. The focus would be how new claims to sovereignty by social groups created a network of response to the state and mega institutions that sought to colonize everyday life. These would include the rise of civil rights movements, anti-racist movements, ecological movements, feminist movements, queer liberation movements, anti-apartheid, indigenous movements, the rise of extreme leftist movements, often violent such as Red Brigade, RAF, Japanese Red Army, Shining Path, responses to military dictatorships in South America (Argentina, Brazil, etc), dissidents in the former Soviet Union, Minjung in South Korea, etc. As you can see, the global expanse is obvious.17

Enwezor’s ultimate goal was to develop a transversal model of research for Africa, where art history does not follow the European model. And here we find ourselves back to the problematic laid out in ‘The Short Century’: how to tell a history within and beyond the conventional tools of art history, yet simultaneously working on and revising the latter to accommodate objects and methods that currently remain beyond its purview. How his ‘Postcolonial’ research project (and beyond it, the ‘Postcommunist’) would have impacted upon the field of the global modern we can only speculate. It is now up to the next generation of art historians, curators and artists, who have still yet to digest the impact of Enwezor’s thinking, to pick up this baton and achieve his goal: a reinvigoration and rereading of modern art history through the

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17 Okwui Enwezor, email to Claire Bishop, 27 September 2018
frame of the post- and de-colonial, state and non-state institutions, and social movements that sought to transform the world to a more just place. Sadly, I can’t think of another curator working today with such a breadth of ambition and such profound ethical and political stakes. In an industry with no shortage of flashy charlatans with overinflated reputations, Okwui Enwezor was the real deal.

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