



**Okwui
Enwezor**

Selected Writings

VOLUME 2

Curating the Postcolonial Condition

Edited by Terry Smith

Selected Writings, Volume 2

BUY

Okwui Enwezor

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Contents

ix		List of Illustrations
xv		Acknowledgments
i		Introduction: Magnificent Scale <i>Terry Smith</i>
19	1	The Unhomely Phantom Scenes in Global Society (2006)
26	2	Place-Making or in the “Wrong Place” Contemporary Art and the Postcolonial Condition (2008)
50	3	Archive Fever Photography between History and the Monument (2008)

DUKE

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PRESS

103	4	The Subversion of Realism Likeness, Resemblance, and Invented Lives in Lynette Yiadom-Boakye's Postportrait Paintings (2010)
125	5	Text, Subtext, Intertext Painting, Language, and Signifying in the Work of Glenn Ligon (2011)
150	6	Intense Proximity Concerning the Disappearance of Distance (2012)
182	7	From Screen to Space Projection and Reanimation in the Early Work of Steve McQueen (2012)
205	8	Rise and Fall of Apartheid Photography and the Bureaucracy of Everyday Life (2013)
246	9	On the Aesthetic and Political Language of Art A Conversation between Kendell Geers and William Kentridge (2013)
271	10	The State of Things (2015)
285	11	World Platforms, Exhibiting Adjacency, and the Surplus Value of Art (2015)

DUKE

UNIVERSITY
PRESS

309	12	The Judgment of Art Postwar and Artistic Worldliness (2016)
347	13	<i>Mappa Mundi</i> Frank Bowling's Cognitive Abstraction (2017)
405	14	<i>El Gran Espectáculo</i> Jean-Michel Basquiat, Modernity, Modernism (2018)
436	15	The Wreck of Utopia Alienation and Disalienation in John Akomfrah's Postcolonial Cinema (2018)
456	16	Landings Okwui Enwezor in Conversation with Massimiliano Gioni (2019)
473	17	Grief and Grievance Art and Mourning in America (2020)

477		Bibliography: Published Writings of Okwui Enwezor
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Compiled by Ilhan Ozan

DUKE

499

Index

**UNIVERSITY
PRESS**

Illustrations

2.1	Chris Ofili, <i>Afro Kaleidoscope</i> , 2002–3	38
2.2	Chris Ofili, <i>Afro Red Web</i> , 2002–3	39
2.3	Chris Ofili, <i>Afro Jezebel</i> , 2002–3	41
2.4	Julie Mehretu, <i>Stadia I</i> , 2004	44
2.5	Julie Mehretu, <i>Stadia II</i> , 2004	45
2.6	Julie Mehretu, <i>Stadia III</i> , 2004	46
3.1	From or by Marcel Duchamp or Rose Sélavy, <i>La boîte-en-valise (Box in a Suitcase)</i> , 1935–41	56
3.2	Gerhard Richter, <i>Atlas</i> , 1964–95	57
3.3	Andy Warhol, <i>Mechanical</i> (“ <i>The Dogs’ Attack Is Negroes’ Reward</i> ,” <i>Life Magazine</i> , May 17, 1963), 1963	69
3.4	Christian Boltanski, <i>The Reserve of Dead Swiss</i> , 1990	73
3.5	Eyal Sivan, <i>The Specialist: Eichmann in Jerusalem</i> , 1999	77
3.6	Glenn Ligon, <i>Notes on the Margin of the Black Book</i> , 1991–93	88
3.7	Sherrie Levine, <i>After Walker Evans: 7; [Kitchen Corner]</i> , 1981	89

DUKE

UNIVERSITY
PRESS

3.8	Zoe Leonard, <i>The Fae Richards Photo Archive</i> (detail), 1993–96	90
3.9	Vivan Sundaram, <i>Remembering the Past, Looking to the Future</i> , from the <i>Re-take of Amrita</i> series, 2001–2	93
4.1	Lynette Yiadom-Boakye, <i>Grammy</i> , 2003	110
4.2	Lynette Yiadom-Boakye, <i>The Officer of the Law</i> , 2010	116
4.3	Lynette Yiadom-Boakye, <i>Oral Chapters</i> , 2010	117
4.4	Lynette Yiadom-Boakye, <i>Any Number of Preoccupations</i> , 2010	118
4.5	Lynette Yiadom-Boakye, <i>Half a Dozen Dead</i> , 2010	121
5.1	Glenn Ligon, <i>Untitled (There Is a Consciousness We All Have . . .)</i> , 1988	128
5.2	Glenn Ligon, <i>Untitled (I Am a Man)</i> , 1988	136
5.3	Glenn Ligon, <i>Untitled (I Am an Invisible Man)</i> , 1991	136
5.4	Glenn Ligon, <i>Untitled (Black Like Me #2)</i> , 1992	141
5.5	Willem de Kooning, <i>Pirate (Untitled II)</i> , 1981	144
6.1	Timothy Asch and Napoleon Chagnon, <i>The Yanomamo Series</i> , 1973	152
6.2	Wifredo Lam, <i>Les carnets de Marseilles</i> , 1941	153
6.3	Claude Lévi-Strauss, <i>Femme caduveo au visage peint, Mato Grosso, Brazil</i> , 1935–36	155
6.4	Rirkrit Tiravanija, <i>untitled (fear eats the soul)</i> (graffiti version), 2011–12	172
6.5	Meschac Gaba, <i>Museum of Contemporary African Art—Marriage Room</i> , 2000–2009	175
7.1	Steve McQueen, still from <i>Bear</i> , 1993	186
7.2	Steve McQueen, still from <i>Five Easy Pieces</i> , 1995	189
7.3	Isaac Julien, <i>After George Platt Lynes (Looking for Langston Vintage Series)</i> , 1989/2016	191

7.4	Steve McQueen, <i>Drumroll</i> , 1998	195
7.5	Steve McQueen, <i>White Elephant</i> , 1998	197
8.1	Margaret Bourke-White, <i>21 April 1950: Young White Man Standing Next to Statue w. Protest GOD IS BLACK Chalked on the Base outside City Hall, Johannesburg, 1950</i>	217
8.2	Unidentified Drum photographer, <i>Stella Anthenifus from Mombasa—East Africa Beauty</i> , 1957	219
8.3	David Goldblatt, <i>Remnant of a Wild Almond Hedge Planted in 1660 to Prevent Livestock from Being Taken Out of the European Settlement in South Africa by the Indigenous Khoi. Kirstenbosch, Cape Town. 16 May 1993, 1993</i>	223
8.4	Peter Magubane, <i>Sharpeville Funeral, March 21, 1960, 1960</i>	230
8.5	Catherine Ross, <i>Protesters March and Toyi-Toyi around Hillbrow Hospital, Johannesburg, July 15, 1992, 1992</i>	232
8.6	Graeme Williams, <i>Nelson Mandela with Winnie Mandela as He Is Released from Victor Verster Prison, 1990</i>	237
9.1	Kendell Geers, <i>Counting Out Song (a.k.a. Tyre)</i> , 1988	249
9.2	Kendell Geers, <i>Brick</i> , 1988	254
9.3	William Kentridge, <i>Johannesburg: 2nd Greatest City after Paris</i> , 1989	256
9.4	William Kentridge, <i>Felix in Exile</i> , 1994	264
9.5	Kendell Geers, <i>Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man</i> , 1993	269
10.1	Chantal Akerman, <i>Now</i> , 2015	276
10.2	John Akomfrah, <i>Vertigo Sea</i> , 2015	277
10.3	Chris Marker, <i>OWLS AT NOON Prelude: The Hollow Men</i> , 2005	277
10.4	Isaac Julien, <i>KAPITAL</i> , 2013	280
10.5	Fabio Mauri, <i>I numeri malefici</i> , 1978	281

DUKE

UNIVERSITY
PRESS

10.6	Huma Bhabha, <i>Atlas</i> , 2015; Ellen Gallagher, <i>Dew Breaker</i> , 2015; Emily Kame Kngwarreye, <i>Earth's Creation</i> , 1994	283
12.1	Visitors at the Grosse Deutsche Kunstausstellung, Haus der Deutschen Kunst, Munich, 1937	311
12.2	Installation view of the exhibition <i>Entartete Kunst</i> (Degenerate Art), Hofgarten Arcades, Munich, 1937	311
12.3	Pablo Picasso, <i>Massacre in Korea</i> , 1951	315
12.4	Boris Taslitzky, <i>The Small Camp at Buchenwald</i> , 1945	323
12.5	Yōsuke Yamahata, <i>Nagasaki Journey, August 10, 1945</i> , 1945	324
12.6	Maruki Iri and Maruki Toshi, <i>The Hiroshima Panels (II): Fire</i> , 1950	326–27
12.7	Francis Newton Souza, <i>Untitled (Head)</i> , 1965	328
12.8	Ben Enwonwu, <i>Going</i> , 1961	329
13.1	Frank Bowling, <i>Mirror</i> , 1964–66	356
13.2	Frank Bowling, <i>Dan with Map</i> , 1967	366
13.3	Frank Bowling, <i>False Start</i> , 1968	367
13.4	Frank Bowling, <i>Barticaflats VII</i> , 1979	369
13.5	Frank Bowling, <i>Middle Passage</i> , 1970	375
13.6	Frank Bowling, <i>Night Journey</i> , 1968–69	377
13.7	Frank Bowling, <i>Mappa Mundi</i> , 2015	383
13.8	Frank Bowling, <i>Great Thames III</i> , 1989	386
13.9	Frank Bowling, <i>Untitled (Mother's House)</i> , 1966	391
14.1	Jean-Michel Basquiat, <i>Grillo</i> , 1984	408
14.2	Jean-Michel Basquiat, <i>Undiscovered Genius of the Mississippi Delta</i> , 1983	416
14.3	Jean-Michel Basquiat, <i>El Gran Espectáculo (History of Black People)</i> , also known as <i>The Nile</i> , 1983	416

DUKE

UNIVERSITY
PRESS

14.4	Jean-Michel Basquiat, <i>King of the Zulus</i> , 1984–85	424
15.1	John Akomfrah, still from <i>Transfigured Night</i> , 2013	437
15.2	Black Audio Film Collective (John Akomfrah, Reece Auguiste, Edward George, Lina Gopaul, Avril Johnson, David Lawson, Trevor Mathison), still from <i>Handsworth Songs</i> , 1986	441
15.3	John Akomfrah, <i>Purple</i> , 2017	445
15.4	John Akomfrah, <i>Testament</i> , 1988	448
16.1	Nari Ward, <i>Amazing Grace</i> , 1993	460
16.2	Nari Ward, <i>Landings</i> , 2002	467
16.3	Nari Ward, <i>Peace Keeper</i> , 1995/2020	469
16.4	Nari Ward, <i>Hunger Cradle</i> , 1996	471
17.1	Exhibition view of <i>Grief and Grievance: Art and Mourning in America</i> , New Museum, New York, 2021	474



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Introduction

Magnificent Scale

Terry Smith

THE ESSAYS IN THIS volume were published between 2006 and 2020, all but the last before Okwui Enwezor died in Munich on March 15, 2019, after an extraordinary career as an art curator, critic, historian, theorist, educator, and museum director. While his fame centered on his remarkable achievements as the artistic director of several mega-exhibitions, such as the 2nd Johannesburg Biennale: *Trade Routes: History and Geography* (1997), *The Short Century: Independence and Liberation Movements in Africa, 1945–1994* (2001), Documenta11 (2002), the 7th Gwangju Biennale: *On the Road/Position Papers/Insertions* (2008), the 56th Venice Biennale: *All the World's Futures* (2015), and *Postwar: Art between the Pacific and the Atlantic, 1945–1965* (2016), his work in the other, closely related art professions engaged him as deeply during the 2000s and was often of comparable significance. In possessing this range, he was far from unique. The visual arts exhibitionary complex grew exponentially at this time, requiring both multitaskers and specialists. Museums and galleries, public and private, were built in numbers, while existing ones expanded to accommodate vast increases in visitors and to show increasingly ambitious art. Biennials proliferated around the world, as did art fairs. Commercial gallery districts spread in many cities, while auction

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houses became shop fronts for the superrich. Alternative art spaces, informal art collectives, and art activists injected their deinstitutionalizing energies into this increasingly self-celebratory system, imagining it as essentially different. Enwezor participated in all but the commercial aspects of this ecology, energetically cooperating to build its multilayered infrastructure while continuing to push it toward the goal announced in the title of his editorial to the first issue of *Nka: Journal of Contemporary African Art*, published in 1994 (and the first chapter in volume 1 of these *Selected Writings*): “Redrawing the Boundaries: Towards a New African Art Discourse.”

The successful renewal of this discourse, accomplished by him and several others during the 1990s and early 2000s, led to the formation of a worldwide audience for contemporary African art. But Enwezor was driven to a greater ambition, one that is particularly evident in the essays in this volume. He passionately wanted a certain critical, Africanist, diasporic imagining of postcoloniality to become pervasive within global art discourse. With the help of many others, he worked constantly, and with considerable success, to bring this about.

Why this was so urgently necessary is made clear in the first essay in this volume, his introduction to the catalog for the 2nd International Biennial of Contemporary Art of Seville (BIACS2), *The Unhomely: Phantom Scenes in Global Society* (2006). He asks, “How might art take measure of the multiple mutinies and upheavals that currently beset global society?” Among the latter he names the “empire of secrets” being imposed by many governments, their use of total “war on terror” to increase their control over their peoples. He celebrates the response of artists who create “new zones of intimacy and social possibility” in defiance of these phantasmic scenarios. Responsible curating, he believed, faced the same challenge.

Curatorial Counterinsurgency

The second chapter in this volume, “Place-Making or in the ‘Wrong Place’: Contemporary Art and the Postcolonial Condition,” from the catalog of the 2008 exhibition *Diaspora, Memory, Place: David Hammons, Maria Magdalena Campos-Pons, Pamela Z*, revisits and updates the argument advanced in Enwezor’s classic 2003 text “The Postcolonial Constellation: Contemporary Art in a State of Permanent Transition,” published in volume 1. The shift from “Constellation” to “Condition” is telling. Five years later, “Westist” globalization had become pervasive. Yet its overall tendency was becoming increasingly

obvious, especially as the global financial crisis erupted: excessive rewards and no pain for the few, catastrophe for the many. In this context, international biennials had become “place-making devices for articulating the empirical evidence of the imaginative practices of contemporary art across the world, not just in Western centers of power,” occasions for curators to show how artists were responding to “the dispersal of the old hegemonic claims of cultural authority that did not recognize difference.”¹ For this reason, he consistently defended biennials against frequent criticisms that they had become vehicles of neoliberal globalization. In this essay his central examples of “imaginative practice” are Chris Ofili’s staging of the British Pavilion at the 50th Venice Biennale in 2003 as a lush, tropical African Garden of Eden, coded according to the colors of antislavery activist Marcus Garvey’s Back to Africa flag, and Julie Mehretu’s *Stadia* series of paintings (2004), with their evocations of “the event-places of global dispersion and congregation” that inhabit “the nexus between the postnational space and postcolonial place.”²

Enwezor speaks of his own practice as “rooted in the examination of artistic differencing through a form of curatorial counterinsurgency,” citing *The Short Century: Independence and Liberation Movements in Africa, 1945–1994* (2001)—chapter 10 in volume 1—as an example of his efforts to curate exhibitions that “function as a concatenation of places signaling the complexity of the contemporary grammar of the postcolonial multitude.”³ He sums up the role of art making and curatorship within the postcolonial constellation in these words:

Postcolonial practices do not inhabit a marginal place within the global stage; instead, they are central to understanding the critical relationships among artists of divergent experiences across cultures, national affiliations, institutions, and the historical intersection of identities in Western and in postcolonial societies found in the European and Islamic worlds. In artistic works and projects, the postcolonial world is a world of conjunctions, a place of intersections, the point at which one renegotiates dominant places of inclusion and exclusion. In fact, under the postcolonial condition, contemporary art is enlivened, seen to be both complex and accessible. Such art, as part of an engaged cultural practice, offers a perspicacious view into how dominant practices and the legibility of the counterpractices that have brought them to crisis coexist.⁴

Intense Proximity

It was Enwezor's "core recognition that postcolonialism and its transnational enunciation is at the very foundation of the contemporary" that inspired his commitment to "forms of cultural practice as the foundational instruments of insurgent action."⁵ These forms included all those found in this book: exhibitions that served as large-scale surveys of contemporary art and those that undertook major projects of historical and art historical revision, along with searching studies of the work of individual artists and intimate, reflective conversations with them. He also gave several interviews about his own practice and, with Chika Okeke-Agulu, published a groundbreaking art historical survey, *Contemporary African Art since 1980*.⁶ During this second phase of his career, having gained significant recognition and been appointed to influential roles within the international art world, Enwezor pursued each of these forms as energetically as ever, indeed, with increasing vigor during his final years.

If the 2nd Johannesburg Biennale: *Trade Routes: History and Geography* (1997), *The Short Century: Independence and Liberation Movements in Africa, 1945–1994* (2001), and Documenta 11 (2002) were the pivotal mega-exhibitions during the first phase, the 3rd Paris Triennale: *Intense Proximity* (2012), the 56th Venice Biennale: *All the World's Futures* (2015), and *Postwar: Art between the Pacific and the Atlantic, 1945–1965* (2016) were landmarks in the second. *Intense Proximity* focused on one core aspect of the postcolonial constellation, and *All the World's Futures* displayed it as the current world condition, while *Postwar* traced its historical unfolding.⁷

For the Paris Triennale in 2012, Enwezor curated focused displays across several venues in the city and published a comprehensive collection of existing writing on the topic of "*intense proximity as affect*, an index of our currently lived moment."⁸ Subtitled *An Anthology of the Near and the Far*, the catalog/book includes classic texts by anthropologists such as Marcel Mauss, Michel Leiris, Claude Lévi-Strauss, Clifford Geertz, and Johannes Fabian, along with the debates occasioned by the exhibitions "*Primitivism in 20th Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern*" (Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1984–85) and *Magiciens de la terre* (Centre Pompidou and Grand hall de la Villette, Paris, 1989). Commissioned essays include reflections by James Clifford on curating between cultures and by Simon Njami on French colonialism.

Enwezor's own contribution, chapter 6 in this volume, is subtitled "Concerning the Disappearance of Distance." He dwells on the contradic-

tions of Lévi-Strauss's journey to Brazil as described in *Tristes tropiques*.⁹ Is not the globe-trotting curator of today, Enwezor asks, caught in the same situation? Yes, but the destination is decolonizing itself, and the return home is not a return to the same place. We are all caught up in "cartographic disorientation."¹⁰ In the aftermath of colonialism, the colonized now occupy the centers, and thus what was far is now near, with the result that hostility and hospitality are in greater tension, both here and there. As well, the past now inhabits the present; modernity and contemporaneity coexist. While modern ethnography used aesthetic devices to consecrate knowledge of the far, contemporary art is about the "critical interrogation of social subjectivity in the intersection of the self and the other."¹¹ Hal Foster's oft-cited essay "The Artist as Ethnographer" is acknowledged but faulted for overlooking the achievements and potential of postcolonial, diasporic artists.¹²

Describing the origins of his conception of this exhibition, Enwezor cites the occasion when National Front members insisted on serving pork soup—a quintessential French dish—at a Paris soup kitchen located in a predominantly Muslim area. He acknowledges the carnivalesque nature of this gesture, which does not mitigate its despicable racism.¹³ His exhibition served antiracism back to this kind of French nationalism, quite literally, in two works by Rirkrit Tiravanija: his boldface, graffiti-like inscription of the words "Fear Eats the Soul" across the exhibition entrance at the Palais de Tokyo, and in *Soup/No Soup*, a participatory installation lasting twelve hours each day in which the artist served *tom ka* (chicken coconut) soup to anyone who wished to enter the cavernous spaces of the Grand Palais. More generally, *Intense Proximity* was also antiracist in its refusal to treat the Triennale as an occasion to celebrate the French contribution to global contemporary art. Instead, the exhibition called out the responsibilities flowing from the nation's history as a colonizer.

The State of Things, the World's Futures

As artistic director of the 2015 Venice Biennale, following his directorship of Documenta in 2002, Enwezor joined Harald Szeemann as the only people to direct both meta-exhibitions. In his introductory essay, "The State of Things," chapter 10 in this volume, Enwezor uses Walter Benjamin's famous (mis)reading of Paul Klee's 1920 watercolor *Angelus Novus* to evoke our current predicament: "Regardless of where in the world one lives, every waking hour is saturated with terrible news from elsewhere. . . . It is as if the entire global society—from the smallest hamlet to the most massive megacity—exists in

the long, interminable insomnia of rulers, and the endless days of vigil kept by protesters and citizens.”¹⁴ Noting that “at this moment the world is hungry not merely for insight into the contradictions of the human condition, but for meaning,” he sets out the goal of the exhibition: in opposition (citing Michel Foucault here) to “all forms of fascism whether already present or impending,” and, in his own words, against the “formalist rigor mortis” and money saturation of the contemporary art system, “to summon the imaginative and critical agencies of artists and thinkers to reflect on the current state of things.”¹⁵ He cites Chantal Akerman’s *NOW* (2015), John Akomfrah’s *Vertigo Sea* (2015), Chris Marker’s *OWLS AT NOON Prelude: The Hollow Men* (2005), and Marlene Dumas’s *Skulls* (2013–15) as exemplary art that opposes the “crude iconoclasm” prevalent at present.

All these works were shown in the Biennale, *Vertigo Sea* providing the epic culmination of the *parcours* through the Central Pavilion in the Giardini, a journey that began with the facade featuring Glenn Ligon’s neon sculpture *Untitled* (2013), which spelled the words “Blues,” “Blood,” and “Bruises” in negative outline, and Oscar Murillo’s *signaling devices in now bastard territory* (2015), twenty flags saturated with oil and dirt on canvas, hanging across the entrance—thus literally, heavily, unmistakably, blackening it. Several rooms offered resonant juxtapositions, not least one with works by three women artists: Huma Bhabha’s sculptures, including *Atlas* (2015); Ellen Gallagher’s evocations of a mythical Black Atlantic; and Australian Aboriginal artist Emily Kame Kngwarreye’s epic painting *Earth’s Creation* (1994), which represents her embodiment within the flows of her ancestral country. At the core of the pavilion, in an agora designed by David Adjaye and Isaac Julien, daily readings of Karl Marx’s *Capital* were given, anchoring a daily program of live performances, music, and discursive events.

We can see here an ambition—echoing that of DocumentaII—to occupy “the mother of all biennials” with the values, the strategies, and the personnel of the postcolonial biennials that Enwezor had created and championed since 1997. Several reviewers were, however, quick to pounce on the contradiction of art-world insiders consuming such a brazen critique of their privileged lives. Many complained about the challenges of taking in the work of 139 challenging artists from fifty-four countries. The universalizing optimism implied in the title was read as hubris.¹⁶ More considered reflections, such as that of N. J. Hynes in *Third Text*, acknowledged that “the preoccupation with current chaos—wars, migration, global capitalism, environmental and human degradation—was not a curatorial imposition: it reflected artists’ concerns.” Nevertheless, she felt that fifteen years after DocumentaII,

“Enwezor’s mining of the past to confront the future is not in itself ‘a new way of looking at the world.’ But it is, perhaps, a new way of looking at the Venice Biennale.”¹⁷ These comments pick up the sense in which Enwezor had striven, against its grain, to make the Venice Biennale do the kind of metadiscursive work that we had come to expect from Documenta—and, at the same time, to cause it to offer the experience of smaller-scale, politically focused, and localized biennials.¹⁸ Yet the venerable-seeming but actually quite chaotic institution, occurring every two years, always compiled in a rush, staged in surroundings of such operatic anachronism, haunted by the nightmares of nationalism, and so saturated with the subculture of the super-rich, was already working to erase this iteration of itself in preparation for the next.¹⁹

Thinking Historically in the Present

All the World’s Futures was Enwezor’s last attempt at a large-scale survey of contemporary art. During these same years, his most ambitious preoccupation was art historical: to bring about a wholesale revision of prevailing understandings of the world’s art since 1945, and thus of contemporary art, by highlighting its grounding in postcolonial modernity. He conceived a sequence of three exhibitions that would show how artists all over the world responded to the global shift from imperializing modernity to the current contemporaneity of multiple modernities, in three phases: postwar, 1945 to 1965; postcolonial, 1960 to 1980; and postcommunist, from 1980. Originating at the Haus der Kunst, Munich, of which he was by then director, the exhibitions would travel to other international venues. In preparation, international conferences of known experts but primarily younger scholars would share their latest research findings and debate their interpretations.²⁰

Postwar: Art between the Pacific and the Atlantic, 1945–1965, curated by Enwezor, US art historian Katy Siegel, and chief curator and deputy director Ulrich Wilmes, was presented at the Haus der Kunst in 2016. It differed from previous surveys, such as *Aftermath: France, 1945–54: New Images of Man*, held at the Barbican Centre, London, in 1982, in that it attended as much to the worldwide efforts—such as the 1955 Bandung Conference of Non-Aligned nations—to create an international community committed to peace, trade, and the exchange of ideas as it did to the devastating psychological impacts of world events from 1945 to 1965: the world war that had just concluded, the Cold War that was emerging, and the terrifying prospect of nuclear war. In scope, it was unprecedented: the work of 218 artists from over sixty countries,

and the networks connecting them, were highlighted as attempts “to come to terms with the dawn of a new contemporary era.”²¹ The exhibition sidelined art historical orthodoxies about the eclipse of the School of Paris by the New York-based “Triumph of American Painting.” It did the same for art critics who reduced complex negotiations over “conformity or individualism, subjectivity or collectivity, regionalism or internationalism, alignment or nonalignment” to merely aesthetic choices between “abstraction” and “realism.”²² While acknowledging the ways in which the United States consolidated its leading positions in both mass and high culture, *Postwar* foregrounded the ways in which artists in South America, Asia, Africa, the Middle East, eastern and central Europe, and Oceania developed “new and alternative modernities to mirror the changed terms of geopolitical dialogue across the world.”²³ An eight-hundred-page catalog, the largest Enwezor (or, to my knowledge, any curator) had produced, served as a comprehensive guide to the exhibition. As with his other major projects, it included lengthy essays on relevant social and political contexts, close examinations of the critical debates during the period, and searching discussions of the implications for a fresh understanding of the art of the time. Not least among these is Enwezor’s own essay, “The Judgment of Art: Postwar and Artistic Worldliness,” chapter 12 in this volume.²⁴ Plans for continuing the story through the next two exhibitions were curtailed by Enwezor’s illness and subsequent departure from the Haus der Kunst. His concept for the postcolonial show was set out in a proposal shared with colleagues:

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

DUKE

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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.²⁵

This vision echoed in the Sharjah Biennial 15, *Thinking Historically in the Present*, curated by Hoor Al Qasimi, which took up his call for such exhibitions to act as a “transnational nexus of global civic imaginaries,” while also acting as a significant “locus of enunciation” for artists of the Global South.²⁶

Practice and Pedagogy

During the 2000s Enwezor’s practice was also shaped by his substantial commitments as a teacher and educational administrator. As my colleague in the Department of the History of Art and Architecture at the University of Pittsburgh from 2003 to 2006, he taught graduate seminars on the practice and theory of contemporary art and curating. From 2004 to 2005, he was also a visiting professor at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign and at Columbia University, New York. From 2005 to 2009, he was dean of academic affairs and senior vice president of the San Francisco Art Institute, where he added a School of Interdisciplinary Studies to the traditional studio-based programs, along with several dedicated degree courses in both programs. He taught graduate seminars on the history and theory of contemporary art, as well as on museum and exhibition studies. His courses in each place were concentrated in intensive blocks, permitting time for his curatorial work, even during his time as dean at the San Francisco Art Institute.

Teaching a seminar requires the provision of overviews of a topic and bibliographies that map the history and current state of debate in a field, then charting a syllabus that enables student learning in successive stages, including the sharing of relevant experience by all involved. The ensuing discussions should identify the topic’s definitive themes, unresolved issues, probable outcomes, and future possibilities. The seminar should also encourage each interlocutor to find their own voice within the ongoing, larger discourse of which it is a part. I can attest that his seminars, at least those in Pittsburgh, exemplified these qualities. They were deeply appreciated by students, several of whom developed careers as curators, some working directly with him on his projects. He never taught in the curatorial studies programs that proliferated during this time, preferring the more academic context of universities for both teaching and recruiting young professionals.

Teaching had a reciprocal impact on his practice. While his writings, from the first, combined provocation with a desire to inform, during this period they also took on an educational and, at times, instructional tone.

In parallel, his contemporary art survey exhibitions became more experimental in form. The 7th Gwangju Biennale, *Annual Report: A Year in Exhibitions* (2008), was divided into three strands: “On the Road” collected and restaged entire traveling exhibitions curated by others throughout the world during the previous year; “Position Papers” put curators into dialogue; and “Insertions” (alluding to a famous intervention by Cildo Meireles) gathered works commissioned for this biennial. Between 2009 and 2011, he was artistic director of *Locus Agonistes: Forms and Logics of the Civic: Meeting Points 6*, a biennial of visual and performance art for the Young Arab Theatre Fund, Brussels, that took place in that city and in Beirut, Damascus, Amman, Cairo, Tunis, Tangier, Berlin, and Athens. In a different parallel to his pedagogical perspective, his historical exhibitions took on the character of reports from within large-scale research programs. We have seen that in the three-part project: postwar, postcolonial, and postcommunist. It is also present in his role as adjunct curator and curatorial adviser from 2005 to 2011 at the International Center for Photography, New York, at which he followed up *Snap Judgments: New Positions in Contemporary African Photography* (2006) with two other major exhibitions, *Archive Fever: Uses of the Document in Contemporary Art* (2008) and *Rise and Fall of Apartheid: Photography and the Bureaucracy of Everyday Life* (2013).²⁷ His essays from the latter two exhibitions are included in this volume.

A Place for Art’s Surplus

Enwezor became director of the Haus der Kunst, Munich, in 2011. He was the first Black director of a major art museum in Europe, a situation closely paralleled in the United States, with Lonnie G. Bunch III, then director of the to-be-built Museum of African American History and Culture, Washington, DC, and Thelma Golden at the Studio Museum, Harlem, among the few exceptions. For the next seven years, the Munich museum became the fulcrum of Enwezor’s continuing, ever-expanding activities. It became the leading contemporary art space in a city well endowed with art museums of many kinds yet the cultural capital of a conservative state. Enwezor unhesitatingly introduced a program that reflected his canon-shifting commitments to postcolonial critique. It prioritized major exhibitions—

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retrospectives, surveys, commissions—of individual women artists (Louise Bourgeois, Hanne Darboven, Ellen Gallagher, Sarah Sze, Haegue Yang), artists of color (Frank Bowling, James Casebere, Lynette Yiadom-Boakye, Vivan Sundaram, Oscar Murillo, and El Anatsui, this last with Chika Okeke-Agulu), while also showing a steady stream of well-known, midcareer, and emerging artists and architects from Europe and the United States (Georg Baselitz, Jörg Immendorff, David Adjaye, Matthew Barney, Anri Sala, Laure Prouvost). In these parenthetical lists, I have named only those artists for whose exhibitions Enwezor wrote a catalog essay or conducted an interview. He encouraged several in-house and visiting curators to stage other exhibitions of a similar type, encompassing also central and eastern Europe, aiming to fill the building with at least three substantial exhibitions at any time and to enliven it with film and video programs, public lectures, conferences, and educational outreach to schools. Experimental music was given close attention, notably that of Harun Farocki (2017) and that of the record label ECM (in *ECM: A Cultural Archaeology*, curated with Markus Mueller, in 2014), as was art from Asia and Latin America. Importantly, working against any prospect that the Haus der Kunst might forget its inglorious origins and early years, he dedicated a permanent gallery to archiving the institution's history and appointed a curator for that purpose. In our 2013 conversation, republished as chapter II in this volume, I characterized his vision as a kind of noncollecting museum, “a kind of house of art for the world, a house of the art of the world,” at which point he interrupted to add: “Based in Munich. A well-ventilated space, a layered set of platforms, open to the world, in order to show art's infinite capacity to generate surplus values.”²⁸

Throughout his career Enwezor served on the advisory boards of many biennials, from that of the Carnegie International in Pittsburgh to the Echigo-Tsumari Triennial in Japan; of many museums and galleries, from LAX Center, Los Angeles, through the Bauhaus Center (Museum of European Culture), Aachen, to the National Museum of African Art, Washington, DC; and on the juries of over thirty art prizes in locations all over the world, from the Arnold Bode Prize, Kassel, through the Sotheby's Prize for exhibitions, to the US\$1 million awarded by Nomura Holdings for an artist to realize a project otherwise unlikely to be funded. His own exhibitions regularly received awards, beginning with one from the International Association of Art Critics, US chapter, for his first exhibition, *In/Sight: African Photographers, 1940 to the Present*, at the Guggenheim Museum in 1996, and continuing through to the Deutsches Fotobuch Preis for *Rise and Fall*

of *Apartheid: Photography and the Bureaucracy of Everyday Life* (2013). As well, his overall achievements were acknowledged by him being made a fellow of the Royal College of Art and of the British Academy and being awarded an honorary doctorate by the University of Cape Town (2015); by many professional awards, among them the Frank Jewett Mather Award for art criticism from the College Art Association (2006), the Agnes Gund Curatorial Award from Independent Curators International, New York (2007), and the Bard College Award for Curatorial Excellence (2008); and, in Germany, by several civic ones, notably the Order of Merit of the Federal Republic of Germany, 1st class (2014), and the International Folkwang Prize by the Museum Folkwang, Essen (2017).

The Lifeblood

Throughout this period Enwezor remained focused on the creativity of individual artists and artist collectives—the lifeblood of curatorship, art criticism, and art history. His output of exhibitions, catalog essays, and interviews continued unabated. During the years in which the essays in this volume were published, he produced thirty-nine catalog essays and wrote five journal articles on artists while conducting eighteen interviews with them, outdoing his totals for the period covered by the previous volume, which were nineteen, four, and eighteen respectively. The essays selected for this volume—on Lynette Yiadom-Boakye, Glenn Ligon, Steve McQueen, Frank Bowling, Jean-Michel Basquiat, and John Akomfrah—reveal his close study of the development of their work over several years. They reflect his continuing emphasis on African artists and those of the African diaspora, not least African American artists. As well as the essays selected, during this period he also wrote at length about Chris Ofili, Seydou Keïta, Lyle Ashton Harris, Carlos Garaicoa, William Kentridge, Zwelethu Mthethwa, Santu Mofokeng, Pascale Marthine Tayou, Meschac Gaba, Wangechi Mutu, and Candice Breitz and conducted long interviews with Kentridge and Kendell Geers (in this volume), Jo Ractliffe, Sue Williamson, Touhami Ennadre, Gary Simmons, James Casebere, El Anatsui, Mohamed Bourouissa, Theo Eshetu, Cedric Nunn, and Samuel Fosso. His essays on Josephine Meckseper, Hanne Darboven, Cildo Meireles, Ken Lum, Fiona Tan, Alfredo Jaar, Thomas Ruff, Yto Barrada, Matthew Barney, Andy Warhol, and Katharina Grosse, and his interviews with Barney, Sarah Sze, Julie Mehretu, Georg Baselitz, and Thomas Struth, show a reach beyond Africa and the African diaspora. Nevertheless, Africanist postcoloniality remains a constant in nearly all

his writings: in an essay on Barney's *River of Fundament* (2014), he dwells on the Egyptian settings of one of Barney's key inspirations, Norman Mailer's book *Ancient Evenings* (1983).²⁹ And his essay on Warhol for the catalog of the 2018 Whitney Museum exhibition focused on the artist's *Race Riot* paintings from the early 1960s.³⁰

Given the central place within contemporary art of work by women artists, their lesser presence in Enwezor's publications is conspicuous. Over the years his exhibitions became more inclusive. As we saw, women artists were strongly present in programming at the Haus der Kunst. The essays on Ellen Gallagher and Lorna Simpson in the first volume of this collection typify his writing at the time: the first, for *Frieze* magazine, fits the genre of insider commentary, while the second is appropriately informative and evaluative for a monograph on the artist's oeuvre. During the period covered by this volume, he wrote essays on or conducted interviews with twelve women artists in contrast to forty-two male artists. The numbers for the period covered by the first volume, 1993 to 2006, are nine and thirty-five. Among the women artists whose work he discusses are Helen Evans Ramsaran, Ellen Gallagher, Antoinette Murdoch, Lorna Simpson, Carrie Mae Weems, Tracey Rose, Liisa Roberts, and Ahlam Shibli. When he did write about the work of these artists, he, however, devoted to its analysis the same degree and kind of thoroughness that can be found in his writings on male artists, as the essay on Yiadom-Boakye in this volume attests.

If fair and equal treatment of women artists was a blind spot he strove to address, Indigenous art remained all but invisible in his exhibitions and writings. Videos by Australian Aboriginal artist Destiny Deacon were shown in Documenta11, paintings by Emily Kngwarreye and Daniel Boyd in the 2015 Venice Biennale, and, at my suggestion, a historically significant bark painting by Wandjuk Marika in *Postwar*.³¹ At the time of his death, however, he was working on a concept for an exhibition to explore the conceptual dimensions of Indigenous art in relation to non-Indigenous conceptions of "the savage mind."

Grief and Grievance

In a conversation with Massimiliano Gioni on the occasion of the Nari Ward exhibition *We the People* at the New Museum, New York, in 2019, Enwezor was asked to recall the years around 1990 when he and the artist were part of the same scene. He replied, "I wasn't an artist or an art critic or a curator. I was a writer, or an aspiring writer, and a poet, you could say, doing the

rounds of poetry readings, art galleries, and museums. We haunted SoHo galleries and Lower East Side dives. We were intensely writing, reading, looking, and—in the jargon of the era—interrogating relations of power and domination. Those were halcyon days, but important for my formation thirty years ago.”³² He goes on directly to describe the joys and challenges of being part of “a group of engaged black practitioners in their twenties with a certain commitment to the production of ideas and to challenging the exclusionary context of the artistic milieu in New York—that is to say, White power structures. . . . We were not overly awed or impressed by what the art world was throwing up.” After a detailed accounting of their experiences and of the growth of Ward’s art, particularly pieces such as *Amazing Grace* (1993), *Iron Heavens* (1995), and *Peace Keeper* (1995), Enwezor shares his reflections on the presidency of Donald Trump, noting that it had brought to the surface of US polity a fateful conjunction of “black grief and white grievance” as expressed in the imagery of “mourning and the black body in contemporary American art.”³³ Gioni immediately invited him to curate an exhibition on this topic. *Grief and Grievance: Art and Mourning in America*, shown at the New Museum from October 2020 to January 2021, was the result. Its fulcrum, as Enwezor put it in a note in the catalog that is the final chapter in this volume, was “the crystallization of black grief in the face of a politically orchestrated white grievance,” of Black Lives Matter facing Trumpian white nationalism.³⁴

Okwui Enwezor’s penultimate exhibition, on view in the Haus der Kunst a few miles away from the hospital in which he died on March 15, 2019, was *El Anatsui: Triumphant Scale*, cocurated with his long-term colleague and friend Chika Okeke-Agulu. Those of us who were there were profoundly moved to witness him giving the last of his energies to an exhibition he could not see and to an accompanying book he could not finish writing.³⁵ In one sense, the circle had closed; he had returned to an Africa to which he remained committed, and to a Nigeria for which he never felt nostalgia but where he willed his body to be buried, among family at Calabar. In every other sense, however, his legacy remains an open work in progress, across multilayered platforms, for the many worlds to come, all of them postcolonial. The subtitle for the El Anatsui retrospective entirely befits the artist’s breakthrough achievement. I hope that the essays in this volume, and the exhibitions and the arts infrastructure building that accompanied them, might lead you to think that it also fits the practice of Okwui Enwezor.

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NOTES

- 1 Okwui Enwezor, "Place-Making or in the 'Wrong Place': Contemporary Art and the Postcolonial Condition," in *Diaspora, Memory, Place: David Hammons, Maria Magdalena Campos-Pons, Pamela Z*, ed. Salah M. Hassan and Cheryl Finley (Munich: Prestel, 2008), 114. Enwezor's embrace of the term *condition* indicates his debt to the writings of British cultural economist David Harvey.
- 2 Enwezor, "Place-Making," 127.
- 3 Enwezor, "Place-Making," 116. Implicit here is just one of several references to Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri's book *Empire* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001).
- 4 Enwezor, "Place-Making," 123.
- 5 Enwezor, "Place-Making," 129.
- 6 Okwui Enwezor and Chika Okeke-Agulu, *Contemporary African Art since 1980* (Bologna: Damiani, 2009). Outstanding among his interviews are the following: "The Second Johannesburg Biennale," interview by Carol Becker, *Art Journal* 57, no. 2 (Summer 1998): 101-7; "A Conversation with Okwui Enwezor," interview by Carol Becker, *Art Journal* 61, no. 2 (Summer 2002): 8-27; "Curating beyond the Canon: Okwui Enwezor Interviewed by Paul O'Neill," in *Curating Subjects*, ed. Paul O'Neill (London: Open Editions, 2007), 109-22; and "Curating the World," interview by Rex Butler, *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Art* 9, nos. 1-2 (2008/9): 14-21. Our conversation, "World Platforms, Exhibiting Adjacency, and the Surplus Value of Art," in Terry Smith, *Talking Contemporary Curating* (New York: Independent Curators International, 2015), 86-113, is included in this volume, based on his view that it was the most comprehensive.
- 7 Other aspects were explored in other exhibitions curated at this time, notably the 2nd Seville Biennial (2006).
- 8 Okwui Enwezor, "Introduction," in *Intense Proximity: An Anthology of the Near and the Far*, ed. Okwui Enwezor with Mélanie Bouteloup, Abdellah Karroum, Émilie Renard, and Claire Staebler { (Paris: Centre national des arts plastiques and Artlys, 2012), 13.
- 9 Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Tristes Tropiques* (1955), trans. John and Doreen Weightman (New York: Penguin Books, 1992).
- 10 Enwezor, "Introduction," in *Intense Proximity*, 21.
- 11 Enwezor, "Introduction," in *Intense Proximity*, 22.
- 12 Hal Foster, "The Artist as Ethnographer," in *Return of the Real: The Avant-Garde at the End of the Century* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1992), 170-203.
- 13 Enwezor, "Introduction," in *Intense Proximity*, 29-32.

DUKE

UNIVERSITY
PRESS

- 14 Okwui Enwezor, "The State of Things," in *La Biennale di Venezia, 56th International Art Exhibition, All the World's Futures*, ed. Okwui Enwezor (Venice: Marsilio Editori, 2015), 18. The phrasing is adapted from his correspondence with Raqs Media Collective, who showed major works in the Biennale.
- 15 Enwezor, "State of Things," 21, 18. The internal phrase regarding fascism is from Michel Foucault, "Preface," in Giles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Robert Hurley, Mark Seem, and Helen R. Lane (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983), xiii.
- 16 For a balanced response, see Roberta Smith, "Art for the Planet's Sake at the Biennale," *New York Times*, May 16, 2015, C1, <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/05/16/arts/design/review-art-for-the-planets-sake-at-the-venice-biennale.html>.
- 17 N. J. Hynes, "The 2015 Venice Biennale," *Third Text*, April 2016, <http://thirdtext.org/venice-biennale-review-2015>.
- 18 On these, see Panos Kompatsiaris, *The Politics of Contemporary Art Biennials: Spectacles of Critique, Theory and Art* (London: Routledge, 2019).
- 19 On the volatile history of the Venice Biennale, see Clarissa Ricci, "Breve Storia dell'Ufficio Vendite della Biennale di Venezia 1895–1972: Origine, funzionamento e declino," *Recherche di S/Confine* 8, no. 1 (2017): 1–20; and Caroline A. Jones, *The Global Work of Art: World's Fairs, Biennials, and the Aesthetics of Experience* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016).
- 20 In the event, only one was held, in preparation for the *Postwar* exhibition at the Haus der Kunst in May 2014. Papers from this conference are collected in Okwui Enwezor and Atreyee Gupta, eds., *Postwar Revisited: A Global Art History* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2025).
- 21 Okwui Enwezor, "Director's Foreword," in *Postwar: Art between the Pacific and the Atlantic, 1945–1965*, ed. Okwui Enwezor, Katy Siegel, and Ulrich Wilmes (Munich: Haus der Kunst and Prestel, 2016), 13. Katy Siegel gives insights into the curatorial process when interviewed by Romy Golan in "On Curating 'Postwar' at the Haus der Kunst," *ARTMargins* 8, no. 2 (2019), <https://artmargins.com/on-curating-the-exhibition-postwar-at-haus-der-kunst-artmargins-print-8-2/>.
- 22 Enwezor, "Director's Foreword," 14. I discuss the latter in my essay "Abstraction and Ideology: Contestation in Cold War Art Criticism," in Enwezor, Siegel, and Wilmes, *Postwar*, 238–45.
- 23 Enwezor, "Director's Foreword," 14.
- 24 The chapter originally appeared in Enwezor, Siegel, and Wilmes, *Postwar*, 20–41.
- 25 Claire Bishop cites the proposal in her excellent obituary of Enwezor for *Third Text*, May 16, 2019, <http://www.thirdtext.org/bishop-enwezor>.

- 26 Hoor Al Qasimi, "Curatorial Statement," in *Sharjah Biennial 15: Thinking Historically in the Present; Guidebook* (Sharjah: Sharjah Art Foundation, 2023), 15.
- 27 For an assessment of his work as a curator of photography, see Allison Moore, "African Photography Seen from the United States," *Africultures*, November 5, 2012, <http://africultures.com/african-photography-seen-from-the-united-states-11109/>.
- 28 Enwezor and Smith, "World Platforms," 113. His tenure was also marked by successful fundraising for the renovation of the museum by David Chipperfield. Meanwhile, controversies arose over the activities of a Scientist among the staff, and unproven accusations of overspending.
- 29 Okwui Enwezor, "Portals and Processions: Matthew Barney's *River of Fundament*," in *Matthew Barney: River of Fundament*, ed. Louise Neri (Munich: Haus der Kunst; New York: Skira Rizzoli, 2014), 232–53; Norman Mailer, *Ancient Evenings* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 1983).
- 30 Okwui Enwezor, "Andy Warhol and the Painting of Catastrophe," in *Andy Warhol: From A to B and Back Again*, ed. Donna De Salvo (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 2018), 34–41. Between 2007 and 2020, Enwezor published essays on or conducted interviews with sixteen African, six African American, seven Black British, two Caribbean, two Asian, three Arabic, and four Caucasian/white artists. The comparable numbers for 1993 to 2006 are seventeen, thirteen, six, zero, zero, one, and two.
- 31 Australian scholar Ian McLean speculates on the reasons for this blind spot in his "Modernism without Borders," *Filozofski Vestnik* 35, no. 2 (2014): 121–39.
- 32 Okwui Enwezor, "Landings: Okwui Enwezor in Conversation with Massimiliano Gioni," interview by Massimiliano Gioni, in *Nari Ward: We the People*, ed. Gary Carrion-Murayari, Massimiliano Gioni, and Helga Christoffersen (New York: Phaidon in association with the New Museum, 2019), 75. In his essay on Jean-Michel Basquiat in this volume, he abashedly describes himself at this early moment as "a failed poet and someone who stumbled into writing criticism by the sheer struggle of persistence." Okwui Enwezor, "El Gran Espectáculo: Jean-Michel Basquiat, Modernity, Modernism," in *Jean-Michel Basquiat*, ed. Dieter Buchhart in collaboration with Anna Karina Hofbauer (Paris: Fondation Louis Vuitton; Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 2018), 51, 114.
- 33 Enwezor, "Landings," 81.
- 34 Okwui Enwezor, "Grief and Grievance: Art and Mourning in America," in *Grief and Grievance: Art and Mourning in America*, ed. Massimiliano Gioni (New York: Phaidon in association with the New Museum, 2020), 7.
- 35 Okwui Enwezor and Chika Okeke-Agulu, *El Anatsui: The Reinvention of Sculpture* (Bologna: Damiani, 2022).