Okwui Enwezor

Selected Writings

VOLUME 1

Toward a New African Art Discourse

Edited by Terry Smith

Selected Writings, Volume 1

Okwui Enwezor

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Foreword

Hoor Al Qasimi,
President and Director, Sharjah Art Foundation

These two volumes of selected writings by the late Okwui Enwezor are one of the outcomes of the multiyear research project and curatorial initiative Thinking Historically in the Present. Coming together as a constellation of discursive and aesthetic experimentations centered around the thirtieth anniversary of the Sharjah Biennial, the volumes reflect, commemorate, and reaffirm Enwezor's influential thinking on the contemporary arts. My first encounter with Enwezor's line of inquiry was at Documenta11 in 2002, the many platforms of which reframed the experience of globalization and contemporary arts beyond the purview of Western colonial epistemologies. At the twilight of a century haunted by cultural wars and new global realities after the attacks of 9/11, Enwezor's corpus of work inspired curatorial models that abandon the nation and its ideology as a condition of human experience and its expression, emphasizing instead experiences of hybridity, multimodality, and creolization.

I extended Enwezor's exhibition making by questioning the Sharjah Biennial's existing embrace of the national-pavilion curatorial model, as had been established during its inauguration in 1993. Having grown up in Sharjah with the local biennial, first as a visitor and then as a participating

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artist, I curated the Biennial in 2003 by overhauling this existing model and brought together artists, practicing locally and globally, to propose new art modalities and solidarities, outside the prevailing status quo of national or ideological identities. The sixth edition of the Sharjah Biennial then paved the way for the consequent experimentation with the biennial format and for the founding of the Sharjah Art Foundation in 2009. This consolidated a permanent space in Sharjah as a non-Western center for the circulation of people and ideas, a place that could grow into a critical alternative to entrenched institutional thought.

In 2018 I invited Enwezor to curate the thirtieth edition of the Sharjah Biennial as an extended lens into this history of the Biennial and the evolution of his pedagogy. He wrote to me about his ideas for the Biennial in an email on October 26, 2018:

> I see the Sharjah Biennial and by extension, Sharjah Art Foundation as a product of a certain historical development, as a model with which to deal with the disruptive power of artistic multilingualism, but also as a horizon, a horizon of possibility, to conceive another theoretical space for thinking historically in the present. With that, I have said it and with further thinking to be done, my provisional idea is to use thinking historically in the present as the basis to develop Biennale 30. However, I'm not interested in doing just another middling contemporary art exhibition that just disappears. I want to engage your entire institution.

Before his passing, we agreed that given the personal and reflective nature of the fifteenth edition of the Biennial and the twenty years since its curatorial shift, I would curate and stage the concept of Thinking Historically in the Present through a contextual interpretation. The edition served as a vantage point for the Biennial to reflect on its cultural heritage and historical influence, the artistic possibilities it has enabled, and its role in linking Sharjah to transnational intellectual and artistic discourses. It took root in the three editions of the March Meeting from 2021 to 2023, Sharjah's annual convening of artists, practitioners, and thinkers, which occurs in addition to the Biennial exhibition of more than 150 artists, as well as performance, film, music, and publishing initiatives. Together, these projects and works pay tribute to postcolonial subjectivity, underrepresentation and auto-archival practices, the body as a repository of memories, processes of creolization and hybridization, the restitution of museumized objects, the racializing gaze,

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transgenerational continuities, global modernisms, Indigeneity, and decolonization in contemporary cultural practices. Not confined to the Sharjah Art Foundation, it also included discreet overlaps with our extended cultural network, such as with the sites of the Africa Institute and the Sharjah Architecture Triennial as well as the towns and cities of the Sharjah Emirate. Initiating relationships to Hamriyah, Al Dhaid, Kalba, and Khorfakkan through the biennial form, it echoed Enwezor's sentiments of bringing the civic engine of art to places where art is rarely seen—as he did when using the Electric Workshops in Johannesburg as the major venue for his 1997 exhibition, *Trade Routes*, the title of the 2nd Johannesburg Biennale.

In this joint collaborative project of the Sharjah Art Foundation, the Africa Institute, and Duke University Press, under the editorial leadership of Terry Smith, we deploy scholarship and cultural critique to highlight the necessary relationship between the arts. Readers are invited to journey through the evolution of Enwezor's thoughts, from 1993 through 2019, with one volume dedicated to Enwezor's body of work on the African arts, and the other his writing on postcolonial subjectivity. The selection of texts pays due heed to Enwezor's intellectual project and to his influences on exhibition spaces and curatorial models from non-Western and nonhegemonic perspectives. It brings together a selection of his most important writings, interviews with and reviews of the work of leading artists, and collaborative texts with peers.

The Sharjah Art Foundation, the Africa Institute, and Duke University Press are delighted to have initiated this collaboration that brings the subjects and visions of Enwezor's substantive practice to a wider audience. I would like to thank everyone involved in the realization of this publication; the editor, Terry Smith; and the Enwezor Estate for providing us with access and rights to the publication of these important texts. I have no doubt that these two volumes of selected writings by Enwezor will make his work more accessible and provide a vital contribution to the fields of visual culture and to the representational politics of contemporary art in cultural institutions, platforms, and organizations.

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Advisory Editors' Preface

Salah M. Hassan and Chika Okeke-Agulu

By the time our dear brother and colleague Okwui Enwezor died in March 2019 at fifty-five, he was a peerless presence and voice in the world of contemporary art. During a career that lasted only twenty-five years, he led the way, more than any other curator and critic, in reordering not just the landscape of contemporary art but also the ways we talk and write about it. The clarity and tenacity of his vision were remarkable, compelling, urgent, and necessary, and Terry Smith has made this utterly evident in this two-volume anthology of Okwui's important writings.

Okwui relished long-form articles and texts. However, he did not publish a single-authored monograph or a collection of his writings in his lifetime, but not because he could not stay with his subject matter in the sustained manner such publications require, or did not see the need for gathering his ideas in such a way that allowed for greater appreciation of the threads and lines connecting his prodigious and wide-ranging scholarship. In fact, he liked to talk with much enthusiasm about his rolling plans for collections of his writings on topics like African artists and the archive, photography, film, and the postcolonial condition, but he would change the topic when pressed for a schedule or timeline. In this, he was Okwui the procrastinator. But as his illness took its toll in what would be his last

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years, it became clear that we needed to make concrete plans for one or more anthologies of his published and unpublished writings in his absence. And when Okwui conveyed to us his wish to have Terry Smith serve as the editor of his published writings, we could not imagine a better choice. Not only had Smith established a sure reputation as a leading scholar and theorist of contemporary art's global contexts, but he was among the very few scholars who helped bring Okwui's work to the attention of academic art history and criticism in the United States. Moreover, he identified with the critical interventions Okwui made through his exhibitions and writings; in turn, Okwui counted him as a veritable intellectual ally, and their many collaborations testified to their mutual respect and admiration. With this two-volume anthology, Smith delivers what we believe will be an enduring collection of Okwui's most important texts. With his magisterial introductory essays, Smith illuminates the originality and progression of Okwui's ideas as critic and scholar, which we who witnessed their making from the closest range possible find truly refreshing.

Given his stellar record of accomplishments as a curator, critic, academic, and museum director, Okwui's unlikely journey from what were the margins of the art world to what would be its multiple nodal points is at once remarkable and telling. Years after leaving Nigeria as a young man in search of America's attractive opportunities, he realized, as did many among his generation of Africans who made similar journeys out of the continent, that to secure a place at the table, you must have the agentive power and confidence to fight for it. We still recall the clarity of the vision he articulated in his invitation to us and a few others working in Africa, Europe, and the United States in late 1993 to start a new journal through which we might, as he put it, redraw the boundaries of African art. That publication, *Nka: Journal of Contemporary African Art*, stands today as one of Okwui's most enduring intellectual legacies, and it was in the journal's pages that, from the onset, he insistently made the case for African and African diaspora artists' place in the global arena, but also for a rigorous critical discourse on their work.

Even so, Okwui was profoundly aware of the tough task he set for himself, all the more because of, in the first instance, pervasive resistance by the old guard Africanists to his call for reassessment of who and what constituted contemporary African art; and, second, the resounding lack of meaningful interest on the part of Western institutions in these artists and their work. The assertive and vigorous tone of his early writings on individual artists and groups, or on such art fields as African photography, is indicative of the seriousness with which he embarked on his critical enterprise. While it

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would take years for the full impact of his mission—along with the network of peers he mobilized through the journal and his curatorial work—to be manifest in scholarship and museums, the singularity of his voice as a commentator and theorist of contemporary art was groundbreaking. To track, across the two volumes of this anthology, Okwui's investment in anticolonial, postcolonial, diasporic, and global dimensions of contemporary African art and its intersections with the art worlds of the Global South and North is to witness the making of what has since become a veritably international art discourse in which African and Black artists now figure prominently. They testify, moreover, to the uniqueness and substance of his engagement with the politics of representation and with the long shadow that the age of systematic enslavement of Africans and the colonization of Africa has cast on contemporary art, its institutions, and the knowledge economy.

Allied with Okwui's insistence on the value and urgency of a vigorous critical discourse in support of the important yet largely ignored work of African and Black artists is his view of curating as groundwork scholarship needed for the emergence and consolidation of this vital field of contemporary art. Each exhibition, for him, was an opportunity to showcase the art and artists he identified with; even more important, it served for him as an occasion to engage deeply with existing and new ideas, theories, and critical discourses on his subject. As much as he was peerless—even legendary—in putting up a good show, with impeccably installed artworks, and in engaging collaboratively with his artists, he put as much value on the substantial introductory essay, convinced that curating is first and foremost scholarly and intellectual work. The reader of this anthology, we hope, will appreciate the vigor and sophistication of Okwui's critical and theoretical reflections on art, photography, and film in the service of exhibitions such as the 2nd Johannesburg Biennale (1997), *The Short Century* (2001), Documenta11 (2002), *Archive Fever* (2008), the 56th Venice Biennale (2015), and *Postwar* (2016), as well as the revelatory and insightful exploration of the work of individual artists. In fact, we cannot think of anyone, past or present, with a comparable record of sustained deployment of the art exhibition as an instrument and site of consequential and critical knowledge production.

In his last years, Okwui had several new and ongoing projects, despite his advancing illness. One of these was curating the 15th Sharjah Biennial, which the president of the Sharjah Art Foundation, our dear friend and colleague Sheikha Hoor Al Qasimi, had invited him to curate. As usual, Okwui planned to use the Biennial as the occasion to present the work of important artists from the Global South who explore the multiple contexts and histories

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of what he called the *postcolonial constellation* but also as a venue for convening new and existing scholarship on the subject. While he did not live to realize the Biennial, he entrusted its curation to Al Qasimi, who successfully delivered a momentous exhibition and program and gave her unflinching support for this anthology as part of the publications associated with the Biennial. We are truly grateful to her for giving Okwui the opportunity of conceiving the Biennial to articulate the artistic and exhibitionary manifestation of the idea of the postcolonial constellation that served as a theoretical armature for his late scholarship. While Okwui thought of the Biennial and the publication of an anthology of his writings as separate projects entrusted to us (his estate and circle of friends), conjoining these projects, as has happened, affirms the fundamental relationship between his scholarly and curatorial work. The resulting institutional and financial support of the Sharjah Art Foundation and its sister organization, the Africa Institute, eliminated what might have been multiyear delays in securing the requisite funding for major, dare we say hefty, publications such as these two volumes.

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Introduction

Okwui Enwezor's Diasporic Imagination

Terry Smith

Okwui Enwezor was born in Calabar, Nigeria, on October 23, 1963, and was buried there, in the family plot, shortly after he died in a Munich hospital on March 15, 2019, surrounded by members of his family, his partner, and some close friends. Between these plainly stated dates and facts occurred times of tumult and confrontation leavened by communality, as well as much hard work, many pleasures, occasional moments of peace, and, through all this, in a growing arc, a certain magnificence.

Enwezor's extraordinarily productive career is seen by many today as one trajectory among those traced by the "star curators" who emerged in the 1990s to set the agendas through which the global expansiveness of contemporary art is to be seen. Exhibitions such as the 2nd Johannesburg Biennale, titled *Trade Routes: History and Geography* (1997), *The Short Century: Independence and Liberation Movements in Africa, 1945–1994* (2001), Documenta11 (2002), the 56th Venice Biennale, titled *All the World's Futures* (2015), and *Postwar: Art between the Pacific and the Atlantic, 1945–1965* (2016), curated by brilliant teams under his artistic direction, fit this bill. Yet they also exceed it because, while they shared much with the exhibitions of his fellow curators in their pacing of aesthetic pleasures, their introduction of lesser-known artists, and their highlighting of new kinds of art, they also took on a larger

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task: to manifest, viscerally, for each viewer, the ways in which artists experienced the geopolitical transformations that have occurred throughout the world since World War II. Enwezor had no doubt that these experiences, in all their contradictions, had been at the heart of what it was to become modern and that they continued to be crucial to what it is to participate fully in contemporary life. Nor did he doubt that artists, along with certain thinkers, were at the forefront of registering these experiences and that exhibitions were a primary medium for sharing, and augmenting, their insights.

His grasp of these experiences was shaped by his own life, as a child of civil war in Nigeria (1967–70), as a student there (at the Government College, Afikpo, 1974–79), and, after moving to the United States in 1982, as a student of political science at New Jersey City University, from which he graduated in 1987. Enwezor received no formal training as an artist, art historian, or curator. A young poet living in the Bronx and Brooklyn during the late 1980s, he founded, with sculptor Nari Ward, Akadibia (Igbo for "hand of the seer"), an East Village–based group of poets, artists, writers, and activists committed to finding a voice for an "African imaginary" in that vital scene. *Nka* ("Art" in Igbo) was launched in 1994 as their intervention into the New York art world and into broader debates about creativity and identity. The essays in these two volumes are the outcome of his subsequent career as a critic, curator, educator, and thinker active around the world, including his final years as a museum director in Germany. His insights came from the critical, historical perspective that he took toward the ways of the world, the analytical grounding that underscored his practice in each of these fields. His essays as collected here reveal the emergence, the growth, and then the deepening of that understanding. It was exercised through a profession of writing that matched the ambition of his curatorial practice and was inseparable from it.

Enwezor is best known for curating large-scale exhibitions. Several are now recognized by his peers, scholars, and informed publics as landmarks in the history of art in general, and his own contribution is ranked as equaling, for the subsequent generation of curators, that of his predecessor Harald Szeemann. Yet his achievements as an art critic, art historian (especially of photography, particularly African), theorist of postcolonialism, and university-based public educator have received less acknowledgment. In a 2013 lecture to the British Association of Art Historians, he identified his "own particular area of competence" as "contemporary art and contemporary African art through my work as a curator and writer, but also as a director of a museum and of several major biennials and international exhibitions, and as the dean of a college of art."[1] Except for the last, educational administration,

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a topic on which he did not publish, the essays in these volumes have been selected to bring out this multiplicity.

Redrawing the Boundaries

All Enwezor's activities served a clearly stated, proudly held, combative agenda: to renew African art—its practice, its theorization, its reception, its institutionalization, and the writing of its histories (to use Michel Foucault's word, its discourse). By African, he meant art made on the continent but also that made by members of its diaspora, especially African American artists and Black artists in Britain, the Caribbean, and Europe. *The diasporic imagination* was a phrase he often used to mark the nature and scope of the psychosocial field within which contemporary African art was being made. Well versed in current theorizations of postmodernity, he constantly sought to ground them in the experience of the midcentury struggles for independence, and those against the legacies of slavery. He drew deeply on the theorizations of postcoloniality that emerged from those experiences. For him, these struggles were the most important drivers of modern history and continued to shape the contemporary present. They were, he believed, decisive for artists of the diaspora.

In his editorial to the inaugural issue of *Nka: Journal of Contemporary African Art*, Enwezor introduces himself as "a writer and poet" and as the "publisher/editor" of the journal. Titled "Redrawing the Boundaries: Towards a New African Art Discourse," the essay sets out, in no uncertain terms, the quest that he would pursue for the rest of his life, one that would inform every aspect of his work, no matter its ostensible topic.[2] The first chapter in this volume, it was one of Enwezor's first essays to appear in print, in 1994.[3] Launching in Brooklyn, New York, a journal devoted to African art, Enwezor begins precisely—and presciently—from inside this apparent contradiction. Close to the heart of power, provoked by a vacuum within it. "One of the problematic aspects of visiting museums, art galleries, and other sites of cultural valuation, in Europe and in the United States," he begins, "is the pervasive absence in these highly policed environments, of art by contemporary African artists."[4] The reasons were everywhere evident. He rages against attitudes such as those expressed by Susan Vogel when she writes that "contact with the West has been the determining influence . . . for African art in the 20th century."[5] William Rubin's (in)famous 1984 exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, *"Primitivism" in 20th Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern*, is slammed for dressing itself up as a "primitivist cultural festival." He is furious about the utter failure, in the West, to

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recognize that, in fact, the reverse had been taking place since "1906," alluding to Pablo Picasso's transformatory importation of African masks into his *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon*, routinely regarded as the breakthrough moment of twentieth-century modernism. He condemns in equal terms appeals by African artists and writers to "racial essentialism."[6] Instead, if "an artist like [El] Anatsui is insistent on representing African history via a multiplicity of signifiers such as Nsibidi and Uli symbols and ideograms, Akan and Adinkra symbols, Nok and Benin references, it is to say not only that the old European paradigms of representing history are grossly adequate, but also incapable of speaking with any resounding meaning to the malaise of our present ethical and philosophical consciousness."[7] Such speaking, he avers, is the primary purpose of art, of criticism, and of curating. An intense struggle to realize this worldly purpose was indeed taking place in "the field of contemporary African art"—a field that very much includes the artists of the diaspora—giving it, he insists, "an agency, a force, a vibrancy and equally a tension that is unequalled in any other regions of the world."[8]

Although he concludes the editorial with a gesture toward openness, saying, "We have no agendas. Nor do we speak for any special interests," the foregoing words make his determination clear. As does his direct characterization of the goals of *Nka*:

> At *Nka*, the artist who embodies the vision necessary to confront the complexities that face us in an age of change and ferment, yet is also able to carry us beyond established boundaries to other sites of significance and interest is one with whom we share a great affinity. We cherish those great examples of art and writing that harbor the highest degree of imaginative integrity; work that takes risks; that helps open doors once thought forever lost to mediocrity. *Nka* seeks and will support those forms of expression that arise out of the fulcrum of both individual and collective experiences. Work that is transformative, transgressive, visionary, curious, passionate, partisan, idiosyncratic, plainspoken, idiomatic, experimental, difficult, and open.

More specifically, he goes on to say, *Nka* would, "out of necessity," seek "to violate, destabilize, dislocate and unseat all the deep-rooted prejudices, and rote assumptions that pass themselves off as contemporary African art history." It would both "mine and work away from the received wisdom of postmodernist forms to modes of criticality." Finally, it "recognizes that any work that aspires to reach its fullest potential is done not in tiny pockets

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of imposed isolation or anonymity, but amongst people, in short amongst all humanity. Such work recognizes the necessity of contacts and bridges, and what they teach—like Wole Soyinka so clearly articulated in his poem *Ujamaa*—that 'earth is all people.'"[9] The new African art discourse, Enwezor fervently believed, would be based in locality and dislocation, would reach across cultures despite the evident barriers against so doing, and would address the world, whether it was ready or not. These values, and this attitude, would reverberate throughout his subsequent twenty-five years.

Enwezor did not simply issue rhetorical calls for the renewal of African art discourse. As a critic, he did the journeyman work that the profession demands: visit studios, conduct interviews, participate in roundtables, write reviews (in *Frieze*, *Artforum*), found journals (*Nka*), get involved in debates, write catalog essays, promote the artists you admire, join their cohort, become its spokesperson. His founding and long-sustained editing of *Nka* (with Salah Hassan and Chika Okeke-Agulu) is the major, and ongoing, testimony to this enterprise. The essays on Frank Bowling, Georges Adéagbo, Ellen Gallagher, Lorna Simpson, Lynette Yiadom-Boakye, Glenn Ligon, Steve McQueen, Jean-Michel Basquiat, John Akomfrah, and Nari Ward in these volumes represent a small sample from the sixty profiles of individual artists that Enwezor produced. In their insistence that cohorts of African, African American, and Black British artists are making art of aesthetic value and social import that parallels, even eclipses, that of their more celebrated contemporaries, his writings on artists are unabashedly canon building. The more general essays in these volumes frequently mention these artists, along with Isaac Julien, Chris Ofili, Julie Mehretu, and several others. As criticism, they adopt Charles Baudelaire's call for writing on art to be "partial, passionate, and political."[10] In its insightful evocations of artistic intent and lucid descriptions of how artworks work, as well as in the distinctive oratory that roundly registers the significance of this art, Enwezor's art criticism evolved to match that of many more celebrated writers on contemporary art. The conferral, by the College Art Association in 2006, of the Frank Jewett Mather Award, the major US-based honor in this field, affirms this judgment.

Among artistic mediums, Enwezor was drawn most to the study of photography. He was acutely aware of how important the documentary qualities of photographs were to the liberation movements in Africa, particularly the struggles against apartheid in South Africa. Images from those troubled times were a subject of research throughout his career. They were the basis of his first significant exhibition, *In/Sight: African Photographers, 1940 to the Present*, at the Guggenheim Museum, New York, in 1996. His introduction,

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with cocurator Octavio Zaya, is chapter 5 in this volume. His essay for *Snap Judgments: New Positions in Contemporary African Photography* (2006) concludes this volume (chapter 15). These essays, and several others in both volumes, demonstrate his keen interest in photography's expansion from documentary necessity to the transmediality required of it by the complexities of contemporary life. Enwezor traces photography as a performative practice, as an archive of social and personal memories, as a theater of sexualities, and as a precipitating medium for moving-image installations that explore these potentials.

For each of his "landmark" exhibitions—the 2nd Johannesburg Biennale: *Trade Routes: History and Geography* (1997), *The Short Century: Independence and Liberation Movements in Africa, 1945–1994* (2001), Documenta11 (2002), *Intense Proximity* (2012), the 56th Venice Biennale, titled *All the World's Futures* (2015), and *Postwar: Art between the Pacific and the Atlantic, 1945–1965* (2016)—Enwezor wrote catalog essays that are themselves landmarks in thinking about their topics. All are included in these volumes. In the early 2000s, based on his experiences in curating the first three of these exhibitions and reflecting on the proliferation of large-scale exhibitions that aimed to survey what was then called *global contemporary art*, he wrote the definitive essay on this phenomenon: "Mega-exhibitions and the Antinomies of a Transnational Global Form" (2002, chapter 13).

Breakthrough curating of this kind inevitably stirred controversy. Among those aroused by the writings and exhibitions featured in this volume, I note three. Setting the right ratio between local interests and international developments—in which everything is inherently complex, contested, and fluid—is a perennial problem for biennials. Better, it is an irresolvable problematic that attracts and frustrates all concerned, in unequal measure. Such dynamics may be found everywhere in contemporary art and are necessary to its worldliness. The organizers of the first Johannesburg Biennale in 1995 invited curators from several countries to make national exhibitions on the condition that they include South African artists. Rejecting this as a provincializing transposition of Venice's national pavilions to a peripheral city, Enwezor's second iteration, *Trade Routes: History and Geography* (1997), showed the work of 160 artists from sixty-three countries, including thirty-five South Africans. His introduction to the catalog is chapter 6 in this volume. He insisted on the priority of postnationalist perspectives as a response to what he saw as the current situation in both South Africa and the world at large: "The basis of *Trade Routes* was the idea of exchange, the flow of commodities, the flow of history, of contestation, of the range of

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ideas transmitted via the trade routes that opened after [Vasco] da Gama found South Africa. I wanted to use South Africa as a point of departure to reconnect South Africa, which had been separated from the rest of the continent during apartheid. I wanted to make part of the exhibition reflect on this history of transition, which we can say came to an end in 1994."[11] *Trade Routes* attracted criticism from some of its international visitors for celebrating postnationalism in a country that, in the immediate postapartheid period, was struggling to rebuild itself as a nation, and for imposing the most advanced models of the international mega-exhibition in a city that had been isolated by sanctions for decades and had just begun to build an arts infrastructure. Indeed, sessions of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission were being held in the same city at the same time.[12] Asked whether South Africa was ready for such an internationalist exhibition, Enwezor was unapologetic, responding that "on one level South Africa wants to be global while not taking responsibility for what an international practice could mean in terms of diluting its sense of particularity. . . . At the same time, even though this exhibition is one that the country is not really ready for, it is only possible to make such an exhibition in a place like South Africa."[13] He went on to praise works by Andries Botha and Santu Mofokeng in the Biennale (both illustrated in this volume) as among the few to fully manifest the nuances of this fraught situation. And to him, for all their differences, the Biennale and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission shared the same discursive space—an idea he was to elaborate in the "platforms" of documenta11, notably Platform 2, "Experiments with Truth: Transitional Justice and the Processes of Truth and Reconciliation," held in New Delhi in 2001.[14]

During these years, Enwezor was hyperalert to the challenges of representing African identity. In a review of africa95, a festival of exhibitions relating to the continent staged in London that year, he savaged the efforts of their curators, Black and white alike, for indulging in false positivity and stereotyping.[15] In related writings, he was particularly critical of white South African artists, such as Penny Siopis, Pippa Skotnes, and Candice Breitz, whose work at the time appropriated pseudoethnographic tourist postcards of Black Africans (in his description, "near-naked African women in a state of colonial arrest") and altered them to highlight the racist voyeurism of this popular form.[16] To Enwezor, this imposed a false, Western feminist presumption that the artists' and the subjects' shared status as women somehow overrode vastly different experiences resulting from race and class difference. In South Africa in particular, it served to assuage white liberal guilt by creating an imagery of a "Rainbow Nation." Focusing on the psychological

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dimensions of this imagery, as did much of his writing at the time, Enwezor acknowledges that the fantasy of creating a "Rainbow Nation" was deeply shared by many South Africans, both Black and white. He does not pretend that these dilemmas are readily resolvable, if at all. He concludes with reference to poet Aimé Césaire's call for a Black heterogeneity.[17]

In the conclusion to his essay introducing Platform 5 of Documenta11, the exhibition at Kassel (chapter 11 in this volume), Enwezor set out what he hoped the project might achieve:

> The collected result in the form of a series of volumes and the exhibition is placed at the dialectical intersection of contemporary art and culture. Such an intersection equally marks the liminal limits out of which the postcolonial, post-Cold War, post-ideological, transnational, deterritorialized, diasporic, global world has been written. This dialectical enterprise attempts to establish concrete and imaginative links with the various projects of modernity. Their impact, as well as their material and symbolic ordering, is woven through the procedures of translation, interpretation, subversion, hybridization, creolization, displacement, and reassemblage. What emerges in this transformation in different parts of the world produces a critical ordering of intellectual and artistic networks of the globalizing world. The exhibition as a diagnostic toolbox actively seeks to stage the relationships, conjunctions, and disjunctions between different realities: between artists, institutions, disciplines, genres, generations, processes, forms, media, activities; between identity and subjectification. Linked together the exhibition counterpoises the supposed purity and autonomy of the art object against a rethinking of modernity based in ideas of transculturality and extraterritoriality. Thus, the exhibition project of the fifth Platform is less a receptacle of commodity-objects than a container of a plurality of voices, a material reflection on a series of disparate and interconnected actions and processes.[18]

This is a succinct summary of the underlying goal of each of his large-scale exhibitions and of his hopes for mega-exhibitions more generally. Due to expectations built up over time, and the extraordinary resources available to them, the Venice Biennale and Documenta are felt to have special responsibilities in this regard. They are, in a word, meta-exhibitions, expected to take on a wider perspective toward contemporary art and to other contemporary art exhibitions, for which they are models.

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Enwezor's Documenta11 attracted criticism for hubris and overreach, a standard complaint in prepandemic times. More specific were the evaluations of its inclusion of several artists whose inspiration came largely from places outside Europe and the United States, "non-Western" versus "the West," in the parlance of those times. The message seemed obvious: not only had the art of the Rest of the World arrived in Europe, but it was also now setting the agenda for art everywhere, and that agenda was one of critical globality. A sure measure that this message got through was the trouble that many commentators took—after noting the Nigerian origins but New York base of the artistic director and similar profiles among the curatorial team—to count the birthplaces of the artists involved and then go on to chart where they now lived and worked. A *New York Times* report entitled "Documenta 11: The Retro-Ethno-Techno Exhibition: The Silence Is Broken" pointed out that "most of the show's Third World participants live in Europe or America and have frequently lent an exotic touch to international exhibitions."[19] Thomas McEvilley's "rough count" gave twenty-five from the United States, thirty-four from Europe, six from the former USSR, fourteen from Africa, sixteen from Asia, and nine from Latin America. Australian Aboriginal artist Destiny Deacon seems to have been ignored. As well, "some artist collectives are not counted because of ambiguities."[20] While most conceded that the representation from forty-five countries was unprecedented, this caviling over origins expresses concern about exactly the world changes that Enwezor highlighted in his introduction and his team constantly emphasized in their commentaries: most of these artists are members of diasporas—like Enwezor himself, their artistic imaginations were shaped by situations of travail. A more pertinent set of figures are provided by Ruth E. Iskin. Noting that the first Documenta included no artists from outside the West, she went on to observe that "the second (1959) included 3%; in documenta 11 (2002), 22% of the participants were artists living in non-Western countries and 43% were born in such countries."[21] Indeed, she credits Documenta11 with "establishing its own canon," one that "differs significantly from any Western canon of contemporary art."[22] Beyond these numbers, however, as reading the texts in these volumes will quickly show, a more interesting debate about the nature of the "non-Western" representation was taking place.[23]

The Postcolonial Constellation

In several of his most important essays, Enwezor's exceptional grasp of the key developments in global contemporary art is matched with a similarly insightful analysis of the current geopolitical situation, especially of its

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implications for the ongoing struggle against old and new kinds of colonization. These ideas arrive at their most complete expression in "The Postcolonial Constellation: Contemporary Art in a State of Permanent Transition" (2003), chapter 12 in this volume.[24] He calls on us to reject the view that the end of the Cold War meant that economist globalization led by Western multinational companies and their political allies would inevitably achieve total world economic, political, and cultural hegemony, that it would eradicate national and cultural differences, disable critique, and dominate artistic possibility. On the contrary, he urged, these globalizing forces were themselves elements within a larger, more complex set of "geopolitical power arrangements" that were "constellated round the norms of the postcolonial, those based on discontinuous, aleatory forms, on creolization, hybridization, and so forth, all of these tendencies operating with a specific, cosmopolitan accent."[25] Typically, he referenced Martinican philosopher Édouard Glissant's *Caribbean Discourse*, rather than any European or US author, to support this claim.[26]

In such complex conditions, he argued, "the legacy of the Western historical avant-garde seems inadequate to the job of producing a unified theory of contemporary art," not least because "the structure of contemporary art's relationship to history is more transversal, asynchronous, and asystematic in nature" than was modern art's relationship to modernity.[27] He highlighted five "effects" of the postcolonial constellation on curators, artists, and art worlds everywhere: first, the messy proliferation of exhibitionary forms (from blockbusters to biennials) and their constant mutation; second, the fraught and contradictory experiences of decolonization and of nation building that have obliged us to think about identity and tradition as operating in more layered, antinomic ways; third, the impact of heterogeneous art practices on the logic of the museum, which has managed to absorb many but not all of them; while, fourth, culture everywhere has been heavily mediated, indeed mediatized, turned into a provider of spectacular experiences. The fifth element, the most powerful, is the globalization of economies and cultures, and the digital revolution that has fused cultures with economies. The net outcome, he avers, is a state of *permanent transition*, in which the adjacency of difference, or "intense proximity," prevails as the most definitive contemporary experience.[28] Inevitably, this is the world that artists and curators are called on to reimagine.

These ideas are rehearsed in two other key essays from the late 1990s in which the concept of diaspora is developed in a rich and relevant way: "Travel Notes, Living, Working, and Travelling in a Restless World" (1997) and "A Question of Place: Revisions, Reassessments, Diaspora" (1997).

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"Between Worlds: Postmodernism and African Artists in the Western Metropolis" (1995–96) tests the relevance of postmodern thinking to the independent development of a diasporic imagination. These essays constitute chapters 6, 7, and 9 in this volume.

Enwezor's essays from the late 1990s and early 2000s stake out the early phases of a shift in perspective, one that is marked by the division of the essays into two volumes. While this has been done mainly for practical and chronological reasons, a change in his outlook can be discerned. It is less a matter of his adopting a different point of view than of expanding one that was realizing some of its initial purposes and needed to grow to face current challenges. By 2000 the metropolitan versus provincialist dynamics that framed his struggles to secure appropriate recognition by the New York art world of the achievement of African artists were being superseded by changes in the two fundamentals of his project. On the world historical, geopolitical scale, neoliberal globalization—a yet more totalizing kind of colonialism—was emergent as the dominant world picture, seemingly in all aspects of contemporary life. Yet, at the same time, African art discourse, alongside much other contemporary art practice and theory, was actively, and successfully, renewing itself by following its urge to globality, to a postnational cosmopolitanism—or, we preferred, a "worldliness" (*mondialité*)—within which localities were positioning themselves. This occurred in critical opposition to the top-down globalization everywhere apparent (including the upper reaches of an eager art market).

The first of these two volumes is centered around Enwezor's quest to renew African art discourse, to rewrite its histories and to insist on its contemporary relevance, in New York, in Africa, and then throughout the world. Its companion volume shows how this discourse became a vital component in the global discourse of contemporary art, not least because of his indefatigable efforts.

The essays presented in these two volumes have been lightly edited to use US spelling and punctuation and to correct some errors in names and other typos. In addition, a few small grammatical errors (for example, subject-verb agreement) were corrected where this could be done without changing the meaning or rephrasing the text, and the citation style has been updated and standardized. No changes affecting meaning or wording were made, and terms reflecting the usage of the time have been left as is (the published usage of African-American, African American, or black is retained, as are Enwezor's pronoun choices). As many of the original illustrations as possible have been found and reproduced. In a few cases, to assist readers who may be unfamiliar with the artists or the exhibitions discussed in the text, appropriate illustrations

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have been added to essays that were originally published unillustrated. All changes of this kind are noted in the brief paragraphs introducing each chapter.

A comprehensive bibliography of Okwui Enwezor's published writings concludes this volume (and the second). It was prepared by Ilhan Ozan as an essential component of the research for this project. It should be consulted for full references to the texts in these volumes and to gain a broader sense of the scope and depth of Okwui's enterprise, not least how he and the artists he admired grappled with the world's most pressing questions.

Okwui and I met while members of the curatorial team for *Global Conceptualism: Points of Origin, 1950s–1980s*, curated by Luiz Camnitzer, Jane Farver, and Rachel Weiss for the Queens Museum in 1999. At my invitation, he became a visiting professor at the University of Pittsburgh from 2003 to 2006, a highlight being the conference that we, with Nancy Condee, convened in 2004, which led to our jointly edited book *Antinomies of Art and Culture: Modernity, Postmodernity, Contemporaneity* (Duke University Press, 2008). He invited me to participate in some of his exhibitions, not least the second Bienal de Sevilla (2007) and *Postwar: Art between the Pacific and the Atlantic, 1945 to 1965* (2016), and in several other projects. We shared much of our work in progress. This constant contact enriched my thinking, and my life, immeasurably. During what turned out to be his fatal illness, we often discussed the fact that, despite his voluminous published writings (over a million words, I was to discover), there was no one place where a reader might go to gain a sense of the evolution of his main concerns and of the comprehensiveness of his thought. He asked me to bring such a place into being. Our hope is that these volumes will take you there.

NOTES

1 Okwui Enwezor, "From the Editor," *Nka: Journal of Contemporary African Art*, no. 33 (Fall 2013): 5. The contributions to the commemorative issue of *Nka* touch on these several aspects of his life and work: see *Nka: Journal of Contemporary African Art*, no. 48 (May 2021), https://read.dukeupress.edu/nka/issue/2021/48.

2 Okwui Enwezor, "Redrawing the Boundaries: Towards a New African Art Discourse," *Nka: Journal of Contemporary African Art*, no. 1 (Fall–Winter 1994): 3–7.

3 A draft curriculum vitae among Enwezor's papers lists a 1992 portfolio essay on the New York photographer Ross Bennett Lewis titled "Between Character and Essence: The Photographs of Ross Bennett Lewis," with no

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evidence that it was published. His poem "Tombs and Flowers" appeared in the *Portable Lower East Side* 10, no. 1 (1993), 68–70. In parallel with his articles for *Nka*, an article titled "The Skoto Gallery of Contemporary African Art," was published in *African Profiles International*, June–July 1994: 38–39, which may have been a review of works by two Nigerian artists, Ben Ajaero and Obiora Anidi, shown at the Gallery in September through November of 1993.

4 Enwezor, "Redrawing the Boundaries," 3.

5 Susan Vogel, introduction to *Africa Explores: Twentieth Century African Art*, edited by Susan Vogel (New York: Center for African Art, 1991), 14. Enwezor italicized "determining influence" in his citation of this sentence.

6 Enwezor, "Redrawing the Boundaries," 6.

7 Enwezor, "Redrawing the Boundaries," 5.

8 Enwezor, "Redrawing the Boundaries," 7.

9 Enwezor, "Redrawing the Boundaries," 7.

10 Charles Baudelaire, *Art in Paris, 1845–1862: Salons and Other Exhibitions*, trans. Jonathan Mayne (London: Phaidon, 1981), 44.

11 Okwui Enwezor, "A Conversation with Okwui Enwezor," interview by Carol Becker, *Art Journal* 61, no. 2 (Summer 2002): 13.

12 See Okwui Enwezor, "The Second Johannesburg Biennale," interview by Carol Becker, *Art Journal* 57, no. 2 (Summer 1998): 101–7.

13 Okwui Enwezor, "Interview with Okwui Enwezor," interview by Carol Becker, *Art Journal* 57, no. 2 (Summer 1998): 102. These challenges are explored in Anthony Gardner and Charles Green, "Okwui Enwezor's 2nd Johannesburg Biennale: Curating in Times of Crisis," *documenta studies*, no. 8 (March 2020), https://documenta-studien.de/media/1/documenta_studies__8_Anthony_Gardner___Charles_Green.pdf.

14 Okwui Enwezor, Carlos Basualdo, Ute Meta Bauer, Susanne Ghez, Sarat Maharaj, Mark Nash, and Octavio Zaya, eds., *Experiments with Truth: Transitional Justice and the Processes of Truth and Reconciliation* (Ostfildern-Ruit, Germany: Hatje Cantz, 2002).

15 Okwui Enwezor, "Occupied Territories: Power, Access, and African Art," *Frieze*, no. 26 (January–February 1996): 37–41. Also published in *Glendora Review: African Quarterly on the Arts* 1, no. 3 (1996): 29–34.

16 Okwui Enwezor, "Reframing the Black Subject: Ideology and Fantasy in Contemporary South African Representation," *Third Text* 11, no. 40 (Autumn 1997): 28.

17 Enwezor, "Reframing the Black Subject," 34–39. He was to modify his views of the subsequent achievements of these artists, including their work, in several exhibitions and articles.

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18 Okwui Enwezor, "The Black Box," in *Documenta 11, Platform 5 (Exhibition)*, edited by Okwui Enwezor, Carlos Basualdo, Ute Meta Bauer, Susanne Ghez, Sarat Maharaj, Mark Nash, and Octavio Zaya (Ostfildern-Ruit, Germany: Hatje Cantz, 2002), 55. For a fascinating discussion of the exhibition design of Platform 5, see Mark Nash and Wilfried Kuehn, "Exhibition Staging: Notes and Queries," *Platform 6, Documenta11*, posted April 29, 2021, https://www.documenta-platform6.de/exhibition-staging-notes-and-queries/. On the same site, I offer an extended review of the exhibition; see Terry Smith, "Exhibiting the Postcolonial Constellation," https://www.documenta-platform6.de/exhibiting-the-postcolonial-constellation/, posted April 29, 2021.

19 David Galloway, "Documenta 11: The Retro-Ethno-Techno Exhibition: The Silence Is Broken," *New York Times*, June 15, 2002, https://www.nytimes.com/2002/06/15/style/IHT-documenta-11the-retroethnotechno-exhibition-the-silence-is-broken.html.

20 Thomas McEvilley, "Documenta 11," *Frieze*, September 9, 2002, https://frieze.com/article/documenta-11-1. Fourteen artists are missing in this count.

21 Ruth E. Iskin, *Re-envisioning the Contemporary Art Canon: Perspectives in a Global World* (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2017), 9. The subsequent documenta, no. 12 in 2007, rated even better, as Iskin goes on to note on the same page that "46% of the artists were living in non-Western countries and 56% were born outside the West." Iskin, *Re-envisioning the Contemporary Art Canon*, 9.

22 Iskin, *Re-envisioning the Contemporary Art Canon*, 26.

23 For a range of views, see Massimiliano Gioni, "Review: Documenta 11," *Flash Art*, no. 225 (July–September 2002): 106–7; Rasheed Araeen, "In the Heart of the Black Box," *Art Monthly*, no. 259 (September 2002): 17; Sylvester Okwunodu-Ogbechie, "Ordering the Universe: Documenta 11 and the Apotheosis of the Occidental Gaze," *Art Journal* 64, no. 1 (Spring 2005): 80–89; and Anthony Gardner and Charles Green, "Post-north? Documenta 11 and the Challenges of the 'Global' Exhibition," *OnCurating* 33 (2017): 109–21.

24 Okwui Enwezor, "The Postcolonial Constellation: Contemporary Art in a State of Permanent Transition," *Research in African Literatures* 34, no. 4 (Winter 2003): 57–82. Also published in *Antinomies of Art and Culture: Modernity, Postmodernity, Contemporaneity*, ed. Terry Smith, Okwui Enwezor, and Nancy Condee (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008), 207–34. Subsequent citations are from this version.

25 Enwezor, "Postcolonial Constellation," 208–9. Documenta11 had already shown what this constellation looks like when artists respond to its demands.

26 Édouard Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse: Selected Essays*, ed. J. Michael Dash (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1989).

27 Enwezor, "Postcolonial Constellation," 222.

28 Enwezor, "Postcolonial Constellation," 222–28.

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