

The Black Box, 2002

Okwui Enwezor

Introduction

Although preparation and research began nearly four years ago, it is nonetheless permissible to say that the discursive drive of Documenta11 will never see its conclusion in the spectacular spaces filled with art projects that the exhibition offers to visitors to Kassel. The exhibition, despite its ambition, scale, and complexity, and the sheer heterogeneity of the forms, images, and positions that encompass its far-reaching vision, is not to be understood as a terminus for understanding the wide-ranging disciplinary models spelled out in the first four Platforms of conferences, debates, and workshops that preceded it in five locations: in Europe (Vienna and Berlin), Asia (New Delhi), the Americas (St. Lucia), and Africa (Lagos). Built into interlocking constellations of discursive domains, circuits of artistic and knowledge production, and research modules, the parameters that have shaped the organization of this project are to be found in the complex predicaments of contemporary art in a time of profound historical change and global transformation.

The careful examination and analysis of contemporary art, visual culture, and its spectatorial regimes, as well as other material orders of representation, should also be understood in relation to those other changes taking place across disciplinary and cultural boundaries that inform today's artistic procedures. The horizon of Documenta11's project and the full scope that its five Platforms occupy are twofold: first, there is the spatial and temporal dimension; the second is historical and cultural in nature. The full measure of Documenta11's critical procedure, then, is to be sought not only within the optics and visual logic of contemporary art. Thus the entire scope of the project inverts the logic that the exhibition's centrality is what defines the proper meaning of the artistic and intellectual possibilities of its procedures.

To construct an exhibition, the curator is always confronted with the double displacement of space and time. If the function of the artwork and the story it tells in an exhibition is to be understood primarily through the nature of its presentation, or by calling upon the context of the exhibition system to restore the temporal displacement that a work is often pressed into through the empirical logic of one thing standing next to another, this would also mean to establish the artwork's limits as such. Another observation is to see an exhibition as a kind of meta-language of mediation that constructs a tautological system in which the artwork is bound up in its own self-referentiality through the relationships established between mediums, objects, and systems. This would be particularly true when calling upon the work of art to present for scrutiny all its constitutive formal, conceptual, and analytical relations to the language of the exhibition's ideology. Under such a condition there is no life for the artwork outside the system of art, no autonomy outside the framework of an *art exhibition*. The artwork – which, in any case, is understood a priori to be extraterritorial to an exhibition's logic – functions as time spatialized, but only inside the space in which it is corseted, which does not refer to an external world. However, there is another less formal route to penetrate the logic of the exhibition's viewpoint; this is through methods that are manifested in a range of social, political, and cultural networks that have incessantly marked the limit and horizon of global discourse today and that present a different context for working on a project such as Documenta11. As such, this exhibition could be read as an accumulation of passages, a collection of moments, temporal lapses that emerge into spaces that reanimate for a viewing public the endless concatenation of worlds, perspectives, models, counter-models, and thinking that constitute the artistic subject. The description offered above,

however, proves inadequate to fully capture the interrogations to which Documenta11 has subjected current contexts of artistic production and reception. As an exhibition project, Documenta11 begins from the sheer side of extraterritoriality: firstly, by displacing its historical context in Kassel; secondly, by moving outside the domain of the gallery space to that of the discursive; and thirdly, by expanding the locus of the disciplinary models that constitute and define the project's intellectual and cultural interest.

In fact, if the larger intellectual and curatorial scope of Documenta11 is to be placed in proper perspective it is in the idea that there are no overarching conclusions to be reached, no forms of closure, and that no prognosis can be derived from the critical task it set out to examine and question, namely the idea that the means and approach taken by an exhibition is necessarily fully encrypted into the result of what it displays and the forms it recuperates for artistic posterity. What, then, is the task of this exhibition project if it is not the tacit assumption that it will show the critical orientation of all engaged contemporary forms of visual production (images, objects, architecture, non-images, etc.) as they are arrayed before us today? In the past, the use of institutional forms of exhibition practice such as Documenta to form a narrative, and from thence to posit a unified vision of art or to draw conclusions about its formal distinctiveness from all other kinds of practice, was central to the understanding of the institutional parameters of modern and contemporary art. In other cases, a different kind of conclusion was sought through critical departures from such a unified vision: this strategy of disarticulating critical art from its institutional support for the most part resides in the history of the avant-garde.

Yet, in a sense, the avant-garde and formalist art share a common assumption in the completeness of their vision, which is to say: to secure the past and maintain tradition, or to depart vigorously from the past and renovate tradition. According to Guy Debord, institutional formalism in the name of tradition and the avant-garde through its lofty invocation of innovation are locked in "[t]he struggle between tradition and innovation, which is the basic principle of the internal development of the culture of historical societies, [and] is predicated entirely on the permanent victory of innovation. Cultural [artistic] innovation is impelled solely, however, by that total historical movement which, by becoming conscious of its totality, tends toward the transcendence of its own cultural presuppositions – and hence towards the suppression of all separations."¹

The five Platforms that form the project of Documenta11 share in no such presupposition. If the animating intellectual and artistic quests of past Documentas have been to prove such conclusions were possible, Documenta11 places its quest within the epistemological difficulty that marks all attempts to forge one common, universal conception and interpretation of artistic and cultural modernity. We begin with a rather direct questioning of the efficacy of the institutionalized discourses that have attended the dissemination and reception of so-called radical art; especially one that insists upon and promulgates the notion that art, especially radical art, in its conflictual relationship to bourgeois society (in spite of all attempts to bring its full measure into the ethical–political space of culture), remains autonomous from all political and social demands. But this is hardly the case today. We are today confronted with a singular predicament; one in which we would ask: What could be Documenta11's "spectacular difference" if viewed from the refractory shards thrown up by the multiple artistic spaces and knowledge circuits that are the critical hallmarks of today's artistic subjectivity and cultural climate?

At the turn of an already less than promising century, Documenta is confronted by and placed in the challenging situation of declaring what its spectacular difference will be, without shielding its past triumphs and successes from the transhistorical processes that shake the ground of every ontological pronouncement about artistic uniqueness. That spectacular difference proceeds not simply from the

difficult-to-sustain notion of art's eternal autonomy from all domains of socio-political life, but from the view that art's proliferating forms and methods, histories and departures, conditions of production and canons of institutionalization call strongly for a forum from which to announce its critical independence from the conservative academic thinking that has taken possession of art's place in life and thought. Therefore, one claim that can be made for Documenta11's spectacular difference is that its critical spaces are not places for the normalization or uniformization of all artistic visions on their way to institutional beatification. Rather, through the continuity and circularity of the nodes of discursivity and debate, location and translation, cultural situations and their localities that are transmitted and perceived through the five Platforms, Documenta11's spaces are to be seen as forums of committed ethical and intellectual reflection on the possibilities of rethinking the historical procedures that are part of its contradictory heritage of grand conclusions.

What is an Avant-Garde today?

The Postcolonial Aftermath of Globalization and the Terrible Nearness of Distant Places

One feature of most definitions of globalization is the degree to which the term is constantly brought into the phenomenological orbits of spatiality and temporality in order to be disciplined inside the cold logic of the mathematical analysis of capital production and accumulation, and economic rationalization (a point made so deftly by Maria Eichhorn's project in the exhibition). Another point about globalization gives rise to the thought that its cumulative effects and processes are to be understood as mediations and representations of spatiality and temporality: globalization is said to abolish great distances, while temporality is at best experienced as uneven.

In his essay "At the Edge of the World: Boundaries, Territoriality, and Sovereignty in Africa", Achille Mbembe makes the case clear by evoking Fernand Braudel's monumental study of capitalism and the world system. Mbembe writes:

*"If at the center of the discussion on globalization we place three problems of spatiality, calculability, and temporality in their relations with representation, we find ourselves brought back to two points usually ignored in contemporary discourses, even though Fernand Braudel had called attention to them. The first of these has to do with temporal pluralities, and we might add, with the subjectivity that makes these temporalities possible and meaningful."*²

Such temporal plurality could be understood, according to Mbembe, by the distinction Braudel drew between "temporalities of long and very long duration, slowly evolving and less slowly evolving situations, rapid and virtually instantaneous deviations, the quickest being the easiest to detect"³.

Whatever definition or character we invest it with, it is in the postcolonial order that we find the most critical enunciation and radicalization of spatiality and temporality. From the moment the postcolonial enters into the space/time of global calculations and the effects they impose on modern subjectivity, we are confronted not only with the asymmetry and limitations of globalism's materialist assumptions but also with the terrible nearness of distant places that global logic sought to abolish and bring into one domain of deterritorialized rule. Rather than vast distances and unfamiliar places, strange peoples and cultures, postcoloniality embodies the spectacular mediation and representation of nearness as the dominant mode of understanding the present condition of globalization. Postcoloniality, in its demand for full inclusion within the global system and by contesting existing epistemological structures, shatters the narrow focus of Western global optics and fixes its gaze on the wider

sphere of the new political, social, and cultural relations that emerged after World War II. The postcolonial today is a world of proximities. It is a world of nearness, not an elsewhere. Neither is it a vulgar state of endless contestations and anomie, chaos and unsustainability, but rather the very space where the tensions that govern all ethical relationships between citizen and subject converge. The postcolonial space is the site where experimental cultures emerge to articulate modalities that define the new meaning- and memory-making systems of late modernity.

In the analysis of postcoloniality we witness a double move: first through the liberatory strategy of decolonization. Decolonization – that is to say, liberation from within – as the political order of the postcolonial is not only counter-normative and counter-hegemonic but also tends toward the reproduction of the universal as the sign of the rupture from imperial governance. Decolonization is also understood here by what Mbembe and Janet Roitman call a “regime of subjectivity”, which they describe as:

“... a shared ensemble of imaginary configurations of “everyday life,” imaginaries which have a material basis and systems of intelligibility to which people refer in order to construct a more or less clear idea of the causes of phenomena and their effects, to determine the domain of what is possible and feasible, as well as the logics of efficacious action. More generally a regime of subjectivity is an ensemble of ways of living, representing, and experiencing contemporaneity, while at the same time, inscribing this experience in the mentality, understanding, and language of historical time.”⁴

Postcoloniality’s second lesson is that it exceeds the borders of the former colonized world to lay claim to the modernized, metropolitan world of empire by making empire’s former “other” visible and present at all times, either through the media or through mediatory, spectatorial, and carnivalesque relations of language, communication, images, contact, and resistance within the everyday. Two decades ago, a number of theorists would have called this double move postmodernism’s saving grace. But postcoloniality must at all times be distinguished from postmodernism. While postmodernism was preoccupied with relativizing historical transformations and contesting the lapses and prejudices of epistemological grand narratives, postcoloniality does the obverse, seeking instead to sublimate and replace all grand narratives through new ethical demands on modes of historical interpretation.

In this regard, it could be said that the history of the avant-garde falls within the epistemological scheme of grand narratives. What, then, is the fate of the avant-garde in this climate of incessant assault upon its former conclusions? Seen from this purview, all economic, social, cultural, and political questions that emerged in the last half century, and the vital relations of power that attend their negotiations, have had the distinctive historical impact of abolishing all the claims that the former European avant-gardes made for themselves. Nowhere is this historical termination more visible than in the recent drive by global capitalism to frame a new optics of spatial and temporal totality that forms the project of neo-liberalism after the demise of the crudely managed and regulated Soviet Communist system. To understand what constitutes the avant-garde today, one must begin not in the field of contemporary art but in the field of culture and politics, as well as in the economic field governing all relations that have come under the overwhelming hegemony of capital. If the avant-gardes of the past (Futurism, Dada, and Surrealism, let’s say) anticipated a changing order, that of today is to make impermanence, and what the Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben calls *aterritoriality*,⁵ the principal order of today’s uncertainties, instability, and insecurity. With this order in place, all notions of autonomy which radical art had formerly claimed for itself are abrogated.

Calculating the effects of these uncertainties within the new imperial scheme of "Empire", Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri inform us of the features of a new type of global sovereignty which, in its deterritorialized form, is no longer defined by the conservative borders of the old nation state scheme. If this Empire is materializing, hegemonizing, and attempting to regulate all forms of social relations and cultural exchanges, strong, critical responses to this materialization are contemporary art's weakest point. In their thesis, Empire is that domain of actions and activities that have come to replace imperialism; whose scope also harbors the ambition to rule not just territories, markets, populations, but most fundamentally, social life in its entirety.⁶ Today's avant-garde is so thoroughly disciplined and domesticated within the scheme of Empire that a whole different set of regulatory and resistance models has to be found to counterbalance Empire's attempt at totalization. Hardt and Negri call this resistance force, opposed to the power of Empire, "the multitude"⁷. If Empire's counter-model is to be found in the pressing, anarchic demands of the multitude, to understand what sustains it historically returns us yet again to the move by postcoloniality to define new models of subjectivity. In postcoloniality we are incessantly offered counter-models through which the displaced – those placed on the margins of the enjoyment of full global participation – fashion new worlds by producing experimental cultures. By experimental cultures I wish to define a set of practices whereby cultures evolving out of imperialism and colonialism, slavery and indenture, compose a collage of reality from the fragments of collapsing space.

Ground Zero or Tabula Rasa: From Margin to Center

"But we have precisely chosen to speak of that kind of tabula rasa which characterizes at the outset all decolonization. Its unusual importance is that it constitutes, from the very first day, the minimum demands of the colonized. To tell the truth, the proof of success lies in a whole social structure being changed from the bottom up. The extraordinary importance of this change is that it is willed, called for, demanded. The need for this change exists in its crud estate, impetuous and compelling, in the consciousness and in the lives of the men and women who are colonized. But the possibility of this change is equally experienced in the form of a terrifying future in the consciousness of another 'species' of men and women: the colonizers."

Frantz Fanon⁸

As in the early years of decolonization and the liberation struggles of the twentieth century, radical Islam has today come to define (for now) the terms of radical politics in the twentyfirst century. Also, following the strategies of the liberation struggles of the last century, the program of political Islam today is based on an agonistic struggle with Westernism; that is, that sphere of global totality that manifests itself through the political, social, economic, cultural, juridical, and spiritual integration achieved via institutions devised and maintained solely to perpetuate the influence of European and North American modes of being. Two chief attributes of this integration are to be seen in the constitution of the first and second phases of modernity: firstly, in the far-reaching effects of the world system of capitalism and the state form; and secondly, in the perpetual interpretation of what a just society ought to be, pursued through the secular vision of democracy as the dominant principle of political participation. The main political rupture of today is properly caught in the resistance struggles being initiated by a host of forces (whether Islamic or secular) in order to prevent their societies from total integration into these two phases of the Western system.

If we are to have a proper analysis by which to interpret the fundamental rationale for such resistance, we must try to understand that processes of integration proper to the idea of Westernism rest somewhat on what Jürgen Habermas calls “boundary-maintaining systems”⁹, which are also systems of conceptual appropriation of socio-cultural processes schematized in his distinction between society and lifeworld. One way of touching on this distinction is communicated by a view that sees non-Western societies in evolutionary stages of movement towards integration: from tribal to modern society; feudal to technological economy; underdeveloped to developed; theocratic and authoritarian to secular democratic systems of governance. In his classic study on the colonial discourse around Africa, V. Y. Mudimbe writes about the colonial system “as a dichotomizing system [with which] a great number of current paradigmatic oppositions have developed: traditional versus modern; oral versus written and printed; agrarian and customary communities versus urban and industrialized; subsistence economies versus highly productive economies”¹⁰. This evolutionary principle of integration returns us to Braudel’s notion of “temporalities of long and very long duration, slowly evolving and less slowly evolving situations”. In every stage of this evolutionary scheme, Westernism’s insistence on the total adoption and observation of its norms and concepts comes to constitute the only viable idea of social, political, and cultural legitimacy from which all modern subjectivities are seen to emerge. As I shall argue later, the social and political struggles of today have their roots in the flaws inherent in the two concepts on which Westernism is based.

Within the field of art, the concepts of the museum and art history rest on a similar unyielding theology that founds the legitimacy of artistic autonomy, canons, and connoisseurship upon the same interpretive pursuit of modernity, which would also formulate the historical and formal understanding of all artistic production for all time. In the specific instance of large-scale international exhibitions, Gerardo Mosquera has proposed the view that Western modernism’s theology of values turns into a moment from which to gauge the asymmetry in the relationship between those he calls “curating cultures” and those others who are “curated cultures”¹¹. In hindsight, the top-down view of curating contemporary art operates similarly within the frame of artistic and canonical integration and totalization that grounds the principle of Westernism as such. The horizon of artistic discourses of the last century, regardless of claims made for the affinities between the tribal and modern, is neatly described by the cleavage that defines the separation between Western artistic universalism and tribal object particularities and peculiarities which also define their marginality. While strong revolutionary claims have been made for the avant-garde within Westernism, its vision of modernity remains surprisingly conservative and formal. On the other hand, the political and historical vision of the Western avant-garde has remained narrow. The propagators of the avant-garde have done little to constitute a space of self-reflexivity that can understand new relations of artistic modernity not founded on Westernism. The foregoing makes tendentious the claims of radicality often imputed to exhibitions such as Documenta or similar manifestations within the exhibitionary complex of artistic practice today. What one sees, then, in Documenta’s historical alliance with institutions of modernism is how immediately it is caught in a double bind in its attempt to negotiate both its radicality and normativity.

The events of September 11, 2001, in the United States have provided us with a metaphor for articulating what is at stake in the radical politics and experimental cultures of today, while opening a space from which culture, qua contemporary art, could theorize an epistemology of non-integrative discourse. The metaphor of September 11 is to be found in the stark notion of Ground Zero. But what does Ground Zero mean at that moment it is uttered? Where do we now locate the space of Ground Zero? What constitutes its effects on the nature of radical politics and cultural articulations today? Is Ground Zero the space of the kind of antagonistic politics in which the enemy always appears the same, undifferentiated, making his annihilation all the more justifiable? Or is it to be found in the terrible pile of molten steel, soot, broken lives, and scarred, ashen ground of the former World

Trade Center in downtown Manhattan? In Gaza, Ramallah, or Jerusalem? In the ruins of Afghan cities? Or is Ground Zero the founding instant of the reckoning to come with Westernism after colonialism?

Let's begin again. It may be said – in the sense of the insecurity, instability, and uncertainties it inspires – that the kind of political violence we are experiencing today may well come to define what we mean when we invoke the notion of Ground Zero. Beyond the symbolic dimension of its funerary representation, the notion of Ground Zero resembles most closely Fanon's powerful evocation of the ground-clearing gesture of *tabula rasa*, as a beginning in the ethics and politics of constituting a new order of global society moving beyond colonialism as a set of dichotomizing oppositions, and beyond Westernism as the force of modern integration. No contemporary thinker comes closer than Fanon to articulating with such radical accuracy and propinquity the chaos that now proliferates inside the former dead certainties of the imperial project of colonialism and Westernism. These dead certainties are still to be found in the discourses that have equally proliferated to describe the radical spatial and temporal violence of the actions of September 11. Some call it the clash of civilizations, others the axis of evil, or the battle between good and evil, between the civilized and uncivilized world; others call it jihad, intifada, liberation, etc. In all the jingoistic language that mediates this state of affairs, cultural and artistic responses could, however, posit a radical departure from the system of hegemony that fuels the present struggle. In fact, it was the Iranian president, Mohammed Khatami, who called for a dialogue between civilizations. Even if the void in downtown Manhattan constitutes a sort of apocalyptic vision of destruction, we must do well not to see its destruction as an apotheosis and the final chapter in the confrontation between the West and Islam; or in fact, the West and the rest of the world that is not doing its share in George Bush the Younger's war on terrorism. September 11, therefore, far from positing a logical end in the long series of oppositions to Westernism, should perhaps be framed as the instance of the full emergence of the margin to the center.

When Fanon was writing in the 1950s and early 1960s, the Islamic and Arab world in Algeria had risen up in bloody resistance against the brutal force and terror of French colonialism. The Algerian war of liberation, along with other decolonization processes across the southern hemisphere from the 1940s onwards, should have taught us a lesson on how to read the history of all future political struggles. Ground Zero as such is not the lacuna in downtown Manhattan out of which the symbolic pillar of blue light that illuminates its empty center is the suture that will restore it to its past. Ground Zero, as the *tabula rasa* defining global politics and cultural differentiation, points toward that space where the dead certainties of colonialism's dichotomizing oppositions, and Westernism's epistemological concepts for managing and maintaining modernity, have come to a crisis. The emptiness at the center is not a ground but a founding moment for articulating the demands of the multitude that have emerged in the wake of Empire¹². In the later stage of the Algerian liberation war, Fanon articulated this tension between the multitude and Empire so clearly, a view that completely prefigures fundamentalist Islam's radical transnational enterprise. In terms of strategy, program, and the direction of their assault on the West, the fundamentalist Islamic challenge to the global order is clearly Fanonian. Let us listen to Fanon, writing towards the end of the French/Algerian war:

"The naked truth of decolonization evokes for us the searing bullets and bloodstained knives which emanate from it. For if the last shall be first [my emphasis], this will only come to pass after a murderous and decisive struggle between two protagonists. That affirmed intention to place the last at the head of things, and to make them climb at a pace (too quickly, some say) the well-known steps which characterize an organized society, can only triumph if we use all means to turn the scale, including, of course, that of violence.

You do not turn any society, however primitive it may be, upside down with such a program if you have not decided from the very beginning, that is to say from the actual formulation of that program, to overcome all the obstacles that you will come across in so doing. The native who decides to put the program into practice, and to become its moving force, is ready for violence at all times. From birth it is clear to him that this narrow world, strewn with prohibitions, can only be called in question by absolute violence.”¹³

Absolute violence seen from Fanon’s perspective is not an end in itself but a means for the confrontation to come with the forces of Westernism, today defined by the hegemony of industrial capitalism. In the Islamic world, the Iranian revolution led by Imam Khomeini clearly marked the opening of this confrontation. The defeat of the occupying Soviet forces by a broad coalition of Islamic mujahideen in Afghanistan in 1989 marks another point in the continuous Islamic battle with Westernism. Similarly the sanction placed on Salman Rushdie’s novel *The Satanic Verses* was clearly a contestation of the Western epistemological avant-gardism out of which the novel emerged. From the foregoing, it seems quite clear that the West had completely underestimated the ferocity of fundamentalist Islam’s hostility toward Western hegemony. On the other hand, there is also a clear recognition by forces within Islam (enlightened and fundamentalist alike) that the only force capable of challenging the global political and cultural power of the West is that of Islam as a viable world culture.¹⁴ As such, radical Islam must therefore be properly understood as a serious counter-hegemonic opposition, at least on the global political stage. Because radical Islam has often drawn from theories of jihad – which it narrowly interprets from a binary oppositional standpoint of believers and non-believers, infidels and good Muslims – it underwrites, through the deployment of excessive violence, a view of Islam as belligerent, warmongering, and violent. By objectifying violence as a means through which to bring about social and cultural transformation in regions where it is a majority culture, and by proposing very little innovative political model for its interaction with the rest of global society, radical Islam risks alienating other blocks of the disaffected global polity if it does not confront a longstanding perception of it as intolerant of difference and coercive and unjust in its juridical procedures. The place of women and religious minorities, the lack of transparency and corruption in its elite, and the lack of political rights and participation of a large segment of its societies further undermine Islam’s claim to universalism.

As the battle with the forces of “terrorist” elements continues apace in Afghanistan and elsewhere – as Palestinians fight Israeli hegemony in the Occupied Territories; as antiglobalization groups battle the police in Genoa, Seattle, Montreal, and other cities in Europe and North America; as protesters in Argentina, Turkey, Nigeria, and all across the developing world engage the pernicious policies of the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund – there is a view today that Ground Zero represents the clear ground from which the margin has moved to the center in order to reconceptualize the key ideological differences of the present global transition.

Platform – an open encyclopedia for the analysis of late modernity; a network of relationships; an open form for organizing knowledge; a non-hierarchical model of representation; a compendium of voices, cultural, artistic, and knowledge circuits –

I have briefly sketched the socio-cultural-political-historical dimension within which Documenta11 was constituted. “Democracy Unrealized”, the first Platform in the five-platform project of Documenta11 opened on March 15, 2001, in Vienna, Austria, exactly six months before the events of September 11th. Two months later on May 5, the second Platform: “Experiments with Truth: Transitional Justice and the Processes of Truth and Reconciliation” opened in New Delhi. The second part and conclusion

of "Democracy Unrealized" began on October 7, 2001, in Berlin. Both Platforms, in the serious discursive direction of their respective themes, presaged the discussions that would come to dominate global debate in the wake of the destruction of the World Trade Center. The third Platform, "Créolité and Creolization", was organized on the Caribbean island of St. Lucia in January, 2002; and the fourth, "Under Siege: Four African Cities, Freetown, Johannesburg, Kinshasa, Lagos" was held in Lagos, Nigeria, in March, 2002. The fifth Platform, the exhibition, brings the historical space of Documenta in Kassel into the orbit of other domains. The five Platforms define a constellation of disciplinary models that seek to explain and interrogate ongoing historical processes and radical change, spatial and temporal dynamics, as well as fields of actions and ideas, and systems of interpretation and production; all of which significantly enlarge the exhibition format of Documenta11.

Platform1 Democracy Unrealized

The tradition of the oppressed teaches us that "the state of emergency" in which we live is not the exception but the rule. We must attain to a conception of history that is in keeping with this insight. Then we shall clearly realize that it is our task to bring about a real state of emergency, and this will improve our position in the struggle against Fascism. Walter Benjamin¹⁵

There is an illuminating paradox in the political field today, whereby the end of communist universalism has not proven to be democracy's greater profit. Several factors have contributed to the current wave of reassessments of the hegemony of liberal democracy. As Francis Fukuyama pronounced in *The End of History and the Last Man*¹⁶ firstly, the end of communism and the triumph of the liberal form of democracy represents a logical conclusion in the distinct political form of the constitutional state whose perfection no longer requires any innovation or change; and secondly, liberal democracy is logically tied to capitalism, which is best expressed in the scale and penetration by which global capitalism determines every facet of cultural and political life around the world. This in a sense makes democracy exportable and adaptable to any given context that wants to participate in the global "New World Order". Despite these pronouncements and formulations of democracy from a number of academics and Western politicians, the rise of nationalisms and fundamentalisms of every imaginable kind as responses to the neo-liberal globalist onslaught, the widened horizon of notions of citizenship produced by the large-scale displacements and immigration that today are reshaping the face of once stable societies, and, finally, the emergence of the postcolonial state as it grapples with the imperfect legacy of imperialism and colonialism – have brought about a structural and epistemological re-evaluation of liberal democracy as the best of all possible forms of popular political representation and participation.

The project "Democracy Unrealized" represents a questioning inversion of the theories and institutional policies that have defined the field of democracy as essentially realized. In the series of debates, presentations, and workshops organized within the purview of the project, philosophers, political theorists, historians, activists, and students present imaginative and wide-ranging interpretations and arguments that assert that even if democracy has been the watchword for different kinds of participatory governance and political systems of the last half century, to a large degree it remains a project under constant reinvention. The notion "unrealized" alluded to in the title of the project is a way to interpret the varied modifications that the ethic of democracy and its institutional forms have undergone and continue to undergo today, making democracy a fundamentally unrealizable project, or put another way, a work in progress.

Platform2 Experiments with the Truth: Transitional Justice and the Processes of Truth and Reconciliation

The last two decades have witnessed a series of juridical inquiries and conflicts – as well as political and social assessments all over the world that have considered the nature of state impunity – from which have arisen overwhelming cases of genocide and gross human rights violations. While the expressibility of the law is mostly concerned with the legality of the state, its actions, and the individuals acting within it (a central thesis of the Nuremberg trials and Adolf Eichmann's trial in Jerusalem), the "truth commissions" that have recently emerged in the lexicon of the search for answers to genocide and state repression seek to engage the dimension of the cultural, the social, and the political as spaces of collective bargaining within civil society.

What comes after violence and after the collapse of the state? Where does the horizon of culture and civility lie after state impunity and the termination of authoritarian rule and fascism? How are human rights to be fashioned in the wake of the unaccountable power of a radical force that displaces, decapitates, dehumanizes, and destroys? What guarantees these rights? These questions, amongst many others, converge in ordering the central problematic that structures "Experiments with Truth: Transitional Justice and the Processes of Truth and Reconciliation". The project looks at two normative interpretations of justice and their political, cultural, and social corollary attending the mechanisms of prosecution, testimony, witnessing, political liberalization, and social transformation in the last half century. The second part of the project considers the historical work that has emerged from the study of these commissions and the philosophical and political theories, as well as the artistic and cultural responses that have accompanied their formation.

Across the divide of regions, continents, and national or quasi-national denominations, the sheer proliferation of "truth commissions" has made them one of the prime manifestations of our time. On the one hand the concept of "universal jurisdiction" which indicts perpetrators of violence and war crimes has led to the establishment of an international juridical process of borderless justice, making it possible for the prosecution of offenders regardless of their status and citizenship, as has been made clear in the cases of Augusto Pinochet (Chile) and Slobodan Milosevic (Yugoslavia/Serbia). But the kind of justice that has emerged could hardly be said to be perfect. Oftentimes, its application is quite arbitrary, with political convenience and expediency dictating indictments and prosecutions. According to Ruti Teitel, "The paradigm of a provisional, hyperpoliticized transitional jurisprudence is linked to a conception of nonideal justice that is imperfect and partial. What is fair and just in extraordinary political circumstances is determined not from an idealized archimedean point but from the transitional position itself"¹⁷. It is this development which has followed the political deliberations of justice, and which has determined the cases that have spelled out the conceptual and juridical modalities of transitional justice.

On the other hand, the trauma of survivors and victims militates against silence, while the potential destabilizing effects on societies undergoing transition, with minimal state security, have led to the consideration of "truth commissions" as alternative spaces in which to mediate the debilitating structure of trauma and loss. Today, each of these two forms – "truth commissions" and transitional justice – has acquired a level of juridical legitimacy that has become part of our contemporary understanding of a human rights-based law. They have further animated the distinction we make between those seen to be perpetrators and those who are victims. Where law and scholarship convene around the aporias of trauma and testimony, works of art and literature have emerged that give form to the remnants of these histories. Whereas each of these cultural fields offers a singular perspective on the

limits of witnessing and the limits of representation, the space of memorials and public commemorations continues to haunt the imagination where the work of artists, architects, writers, filmmakers, museums, and archives has been called to intervene in spaces of representation.

Platform3 Créolité and Creolization

Two points define the theme of this platform. First, in terms of its poetics, créolité is to be understood as a critical theory of creole language, literary form, and mode of producing locality. The locality that envelops this language is, of course, the Caribbean. However, this does not capture the entire complexity around which creole is situated, that is, if we extend its geographical character beyond the borders of the Caribbean. But for the moment let us just imagine the Caribbean as the locus of its international projection to other branches of creole linguistics – in Africa, the Indian Ocean Islands, South America, and even the United States. The founding text of this critical theory as a literary form is expressed in a manifesto, *Éloge de la créolité* in Praise of Creoleness, published in 1989 by three Martinican intellectuals, Jean Bernabé, Patrick Chamoiseau, and Raphaël Confiant. In their controversial text, the three writers underline their intervention: firstly, by furnishing it with a name; and secondly, by designating its intertextual dimension as “a sort of mental envelope in the middle of which our world will be built in full consciousness of the outer world”¹⁸. In this “mental envelope”, the writers conceive of their cultural world as emerging out of the world of colonial domination into one of “*nontotalitarian consciousness of a preserved diversity* [italics in original]”¹⁹. The critical gesture and expression of this diversity is at the heart of the radical discourse of *créolité*, especially as it concerns the question of what it means to live and work from the polycentrism of the Caribbean. In this context Creoleness emerges in the scissions and agglutinations forged in the contact zone of its historical transmission, i.e., “Creoleness [as] *the interactional or transactional aggregate* of Caribbean, European, African, Asian, and Levantine cultural elements, united on the same soil by the yoke of history”²⁰.

The second part of the thematic is concerned with defining creolization as a process of emergence of a world culture conceived from the perspective of radical cultural and situational flux. More than five hundred years separates us from the first arrival of slaves in the New World. Slavery and colonialism as the Janus-faced projects of European imperialism and the global institutionalization of capitalism today define an array of configurations through which to understand the paradigms of mixing and hybridization that underpin such concepts as modern culture, identity formation, language, ethnicity, and race. Creole societies have their roots in the institutions of slavery and colonialism and mark the intersections where modern subjectivity and historical processes meet. In recent years, through waves of migration and displacements, creolization has emerged as a dominant modality of contemporary living practices, shaping patterns of dwelling that are crossed and differentiated by massive flows of images and cultural symbols expressed through material culture and language.

Equally, the intersections of modern subjectivity and the historical consciousness that it circumscribes are never smooth. They come out of uneven, and often violent, encounters, and in patterns of articulating and signifying norms of cultural heritage, exchange, difference, and resistance strategies seeking to maintain the integrity of non-dominant cultures. If globalization has defined and reworked old circuits of capital, creolization represents its strongest cultural counterpoint. While globalization tends toward consolidation and homogenization, creolization moves towards differentiation and dispersal. Creolization’s mode is a “signifying system through which ... a social order is communicated, reproduced, experienced, and explored”²¹. In elaborating its discourse, creolization as a process

of transformation of cultural givens subtends its critical fashioning in the Caribbean to involve other areas of its historical manifestation in the Indian Ocean islands of Africa, in South America, the United States, Asia, and Europe, and to the global world at large.

Platform4 Under Siege: Four African Cities Freetown, Johannesburg, Kinshasa, Lagos

This platform represents an attempt to foreground the dimension of global formations that animate the study of urban systems as a category of spatial relations and ecologies of sustainability from which are derived a set of imperatives toward development and modernization. The loci of this study are the urban systems of four African cities which over the last two decades have witnessed increased population growth, migration, and the pressures of fragile urban governance, and state and economic collapse. That African cities are fragile urban systems is without a doubt; however, the conventional wisdom that describes them as unsustainable, chaotic, and unmanageable fails to understand the inventive dynamism out of which their urban residents have written new texts of resilience, survival, and growth. In the study of these four cities, a number of issues have emerged. The first is the degree to which informality – sometimes constituting as much as 70% of all functioning institutions – has shaped the nature of activities governing many sectors, and also mediates all relations (economic, cultural, social, political, and civic) where the State no longer plays a dominant role. The second issue is premised on a contradiction: one that simultaneously underwrites these urban systems as conurbations of multiple crises and obsolescence, but also as inventive systems of creativity, vitality, and dynamism. The third aspect of the survival strategy of city inhabitants – understood here as co-extensive with rural, traditional, indigenous, and familial practices – is the expanded role of women in the production of new types of subjective practices that have consolidated their role as important players in the shaping of urban imaginaries. A fourth point relates to the catastrophic effects of the International Monetary Fund and World Bank Structural Adjustment Program policies of the 1980s across Africa. SAP (as it is popularly known and explicitly translated by Africans in terms of its effects on their lives) overnight destroyed the middle class and dramatically increased poverty, destroyed value, and limited productivity. The fifth conclusion relates to the effects of State collapse (Johannesburg linked to the demise of apartheid, Freetown and Kinshasa with civil conflict, and Lagos with a pernicious dictatorship) on the stability of the cities' urban economies.

Writ large, these four African cities express paradigmatic contexts of intense production of locality (neighborhoods, associations, imaginaries of religion, and circuits of mediatic representations).²² As any other urban space around the world, African cities are centers for the migration and refuge of increasing numbers of people. As such they are also the meeting place and battleground for two conflicting worlds of power and impotence, wealth and poverty, corruption and hope, center and periphery. But the issue we want to emphasize is that African cities are not only outlined by these troubling bifurcations. Nor do we wish to reproduce only the images of cities riddled with crime and ethnic violence, the grinding poverty, the overcrowded suburbs and shanty towns, the congested living spaces that are usually lacking essential services and are breeding grounds of disease, the high mortality rate, or the persistent degradation of their environments. These are certainly important issues that need addressing. Yet our attention is also persistently called to focus on the ethical accounting of the dynamics of these cities as hosts of great potentials that challenge the often gloomy, doomsday pictures painted by the popular media. As part of the complexity of the issues at play within these urban conditions, there may be a need to highlight the reality of these cities as vibrant spaces that foster and recapture the possibility for self-constitution.

The foregoing define a field of praxis and intention. They are constitutive of the critical envelope in which we wanted to place the entire paradigmatic operation of Documenta11. It is above all an attempt to shape and assess the common points of fruitful exchanges and the questioning necessary to craft an exhibition project that would project a more complicated picture of contemporary life and thought. Traversing continents and cities, locations and disciplines, practices and institutions, formats and publics, Documenta11's proposition to open up new spaces for critical reflection on contemporary artistic and cultural situations, creates for us – in dialectical interaction with heterogeneous, transnational audiences – a public sphere through which to think and analyze seriously the complex network of global knowledge circuits on which interpretations of all cultural processes and research today depend. The shaping of Documenta11's public sphere of multiple relations and intersections was, in part, a recognition of the limits of all models of large-scale international exhibitions that aspire to be global and inclusive, but which wittingly maintain the separation between disciplinary models and publics. Equally, it was to deterritorialize and exacerbate modernism's strategy of differentiation and homogenization, its reification of pure objects of art in relation to value and hierarchy within the artistic canons. But in a larger sense, it expresses the limits of Documenta itself as an institution of important global stature.

It goes without saying that, given the unruly nature of late modernity, and the inadequacy of spaces of agency to interrogate the uneven conditions of global development and governance today, the scope of Documenta11's intellectual and exhibition project needed redefinition and enlargement – that is if we are to understand the contribution contemporary art and artists can make in shaping the future. Some would argue that art must stay above politics. Such a call is not only perversely conservative but, more importantly, misunderstands the nature of the critical energy that drives the conditions of artistic production, dissemination, and reception across a multiplicity of institutional and non-institutional frameworks today.

Platform5 Passages through the Construction of an Exhibition

ENCYCLOPEDIA I CONSTRUCTION – emergence of the social and political; the city as a modern manifestation of transnationality, sociality, and transindividuality; the city as an incarnation of a postnational, identitarian model of citizenship – MIRROR/REFLECTION – the domain of spectatorship and the carnivalesque; level of the individual and society; the constitution of the individual as subject, popular sovereignty, difference –

Nearly fifteen years of unrelenting neo-conservative attacks have weakened the political and cultural base within which artists have expressed – via modes of popular sovereignty and difference and through an engaged critique and self-reflexivity, especially in the strategies of many artistic positions – the multicultural and postcolonial nature of modern and contemporary culture. Here is not the space to debate the merits or failures of multiculturalism, feminism, or minority rights movements; or to answer back to the pernicious dismissal of postcoloniality that is so prevalent in academic forums, media, and politics. I only wish to remark that contemporary art institutions have often been defined as the most enlightened and liberal of all cultural institutions working on the global stage. In the 1980s, the movements of multiculturalism, feminism, and gay rights forced new debates that sought to decolonize longstanding resistance to reform by major institutions. In the context of the contemporary art sphere, expanded opportunities that came through the discourses of multiculturalism and difference brought about a new visibility in the participation of minorities and women, consequently redrawing the borders of institutional and gallery systems. However, in the 1990s there was a change of course, which slowly and systematically eroded what had been a healthy, vigorous environment of debate. According to Habermas:

"At first glance, however, claims to the recognition of collective identities and to equal rights for cultural forms of life are a different matter. Feminists, minorities in multicultural societies, peoples struggling for national independence, and formerly colonized regions suing for equality of their cultures on the international stage are all currently fighting for such claims. Does not the recognition of cultural forms of life and traditions that have been marginalized, whether in the context of a majority culture or in a Eurocentric global society, require guarantees of status and survival – in other words, some kind of collective rights that shatter the outmoded self-understanding of the democratic constitutional state, which is tailored to individual rights and in that sense is 'liberal?'"²³

But to make an exhibition of art, I would insist on the proposition that spectatorship is central and fundamental to all forms of valuation of the visual content of an exhibition. Spectatorship is that dimension of subjectivity and consciousness that defines the relation of power to acts of cognition and valuation. Spectatorship, which takes the carnivalesque as its mode of enunciation, can only function productively in a democratic, open system. Here, I am mostly interested in the kind of democratic spirit whose referent is constituted by the degree to which a plethora of institutions – formal and informal, public and private – rather than mediating all aspects of popular sovereignty, make room within their regimes for the experimental, the imperfect and unfinished. Such recognition connects artistic practice to notions such as community and citizenship. In the democratic system, which is to be distinguished from popular politics, but rather one that promotes agency over pure belief, the demands of citizenship place strong ethical constraints on the artist based on his or her commitment to all "forms-of-life". The practice of art presents the artist with the task of making such commitment.

Therefore, it does not matter whether the artist is an abstract painter, an avant-garde filmmaker, or a "political" provocateur, as the constraint is the same. Giorgio Agamben, from whom I have borrowed the notion "forms-of-life", describes it as:

"... that life which can never be separated from its form, a life in which it's never possible to isolate something such as naked life ... A life that cannot be separated from its form is a life for which what is at stake in its way of living is living itself. It defines life – human life – in which the single ways, acts, and processes of living are never simply facts but always and above all possibilities of life, always and above all power."²⁴

Taken at its most radical interpretation, Agamben's philosophical argument would seem to place the very act of artistic practice that seeks to designate itself as autonomous from all regulative political and social processes in a suture of constraint. The question confronting any artistic practice that designates itself as completely autonomous from political participation within which notions of community and citizenship are constituted – and which also refuses to recognize the conflicts that arise in the relations of power, grounding the subjective dimension of spectatorship – is: From what is art autonomous? This obviously cannot be taken to mean that art, through its unique institutions and procedures, cannot construct for itself a space from which to engage critically with all domains of socio-political life without being integrated within their mechanism.

Afterword

Despite their proliferation, institutions such as museums and large-scale international exhibitions cannot on their own define the legitimacy of contemporary art today; rather, they are caught up in reshaping their own legitimacy as a consequence of their delayed recognition of the complex topos of the new global community. Therefore, from the outset, the project of Documenta11 was conceived not as an exhibition but as a constellation of public spheres. The public sphere of the exhibition

gesture, implicit in the historical formation of Documenta, in which art comes to stand for models of representation and narratives of autonomous subjectivity, is rearticulated here as a new understanding in the domain of the discursive rather than the museological. Documenta11's paradigm is shaped by forces that seek to enact the multidisciplinary direction through which artistic practices and processes come most alive, in those circuits of knowledge produced outside the predetermined institutional domain of Westernism, or those situated solely in the sphere of artistic canons.

If the Platforms were a compendium, a constitutive map of contemporary knowledge circuits: art, theory, science, culture, ecology; spatiality and temporality: urban systems, locality, globality; institutional formations (informal and formal), meta-territory, experience – albeit always incomplete, discontinuous, forever requiring qualification, elaboration, and continuous enunciation – then each phase of staging the discursive potentialities of the engagement between artistic practice and social reality, theoretical reflection and political systems, forms-of-life and image economies, advanced technology and local industries, confronts us with a world of vast displacements and deterritorialized understanding of culture. In the process of its composition, the exhibition stands for the rigor, precision, courage, vision, power, freedom, agency, openness, and imagination of the individual statement as it opens to changes wrought by global transformations. These individual statements and sometimes individuated units connect to and overlap with each other. The demands placed on each component and composition require that they each complete, complicate, and reveal that which is deliberately masked, distanced, and effaced in others. The Platforms signify journeys of experience and methods for thinking the global at the height of its own reconstitution. Within their individual formats, there is no need to make a polemic of globalism, multiculturalism, and difference; the wider scope of the project assumes them as already part of the complex weave of tongues, the tide of voices that will activate the final meaning of its dramatization.

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 within the various projects of modernity. Their impact, as well as their material and symbolic ordering, is woven through procedures of translation, interpretation, subversion, hybridization, creolization, displacement, and reassemblage. What emerges in this transformation in different parts of the world produce 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 on 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.

Okwui Enwezor. The Black Box. In: documenta und Museum Fridericianum Veranstaltungs-GmbH (ed.): Documenta11_Platform5: Exhibition Catalogue. Hatje Cantz Verlag, Ostfildern-Ruit. 2002, pp. 42-55.

References

- 1 Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle* (New York: Zone Books, 1999), pp. 130–31.
- 2 Achille Mbembe, "At the Edge of the World: Boundaries, Territoriality, and Sovereignty in Africa", *Public Culture*, no. 30 (winter 2000), p. 259.
- 3 Fernand Braudel, *Civilization and Capitalism: The Fifteenth Century to the Eighteenth Century*, vol. 3, *The Perspective of the World*, trans. Siân Reynolds (New York: Harper and Row, 1984); quoted in Mbembe, "At the Edge of the World", p. 259.
- 4 Achille Mbembe and Janet Roitman, "Figures of the Subject in Times of Crisis", *Public Culture*, no. 16 (winter 1995), p. 324.
- 5 See Giorgio Agamben, *Means Without End: Notes on Politics*, trans. Vincenzo Binetti and Cesare Casarino (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000).
- 6 See Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2000), p. xv.
- 7 *Ibid.*
- 8 Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (New York: Grove Press, 1963), pp. 35–36.
- 9 Jürgen Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action*, vol. 2, *Lifeworld and System: A Critique of Functionalist Reason*, trans. Thomas McCarthy (Boston: Beacon Press, 1987), p. 151.
- 10 V. Y. Mudimbe, *The Invention of Africa: Gnosis, Philosophy, and the Order of Knowledge* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1988), p. 4.
- 11 See Gerardo Mosquera, "Some Problems in Transcultural Curating", in *Global Visions: Towards a New Internationalism in the Visual Arts*, ed. Jean Fisher (London: Kala Press), 1994, pp. 133–39.
- 12 See Hardt and Negri, *Empire*.
- 13 Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, p. 37.
- 14 See Akbar S. Ahmed, *Postmodernism and Islam: Predicament and Promise* (London and New York: Routledge), 1992. Ahmed has argued the point that within the "new world order" only two categories of societies exist, those that are imploding and those that are exploding. Imploding societies represent those caught up in underdevelopment, economic helotry, cultural insecurity, social malaise, political fragmentation and collapse of the state form, and are marked by crises; while exploding cultures are those segments of the industrialized world which he identifies as bubbling with optimism, and have the technological achievements which allow them to continuously expand economically, culturally, and politically. With such asymmetry in place, those societies seen to be imploding offer no alternatives to Western global hegemony, and are condemned to be ruled by the West. In the case of Islam, Ahmed makes the case that Islamic modernity is caught in the tension in which ideas of both implosion and explosion define the basis of what its societies

are undergoing, but also provides it with the tools to adequately respond to Western hegemony.

- 15 Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History", in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), p. 257.
- 16 Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: Free Press), 1992.
- 17 uti G. Teitel, *Transitional Justice* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 234.
- 18 Jean Bernabé, Patrick Chamoiseau, Raphaël Confiant, *Éloge de la créolité* | *In Praise of Creoleness*, bilingual edition, English trans. Mohamed B. Taleb-Khyar (Paris: Gallimard, 1993), p. 75.
- 19 *Ibid.* p.89
- 20 *Ibid.*, p. 87.
- 21 Raymond Williams, quoted in Terry Eagleton, *The Idea of Culture* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Ltd., 2000), p. 33.
- 22 For a nuanced discussion on the notion of how "locality" is produced both as an ethnos and as an imaginary encapsulation of delocalized formations, see Arjun Appadurai, particularly the chapter "The Production of Locality", in *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 1996).
- 23 Jürgen Habermas, *The Inclusion of the Other: Studies in Political Theory*, ed. Ciaran Cronin and Pablo De Greiff (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1998), pp. 204–5.
- 24 Agamben, *Means Without End*, pp. 3–4.