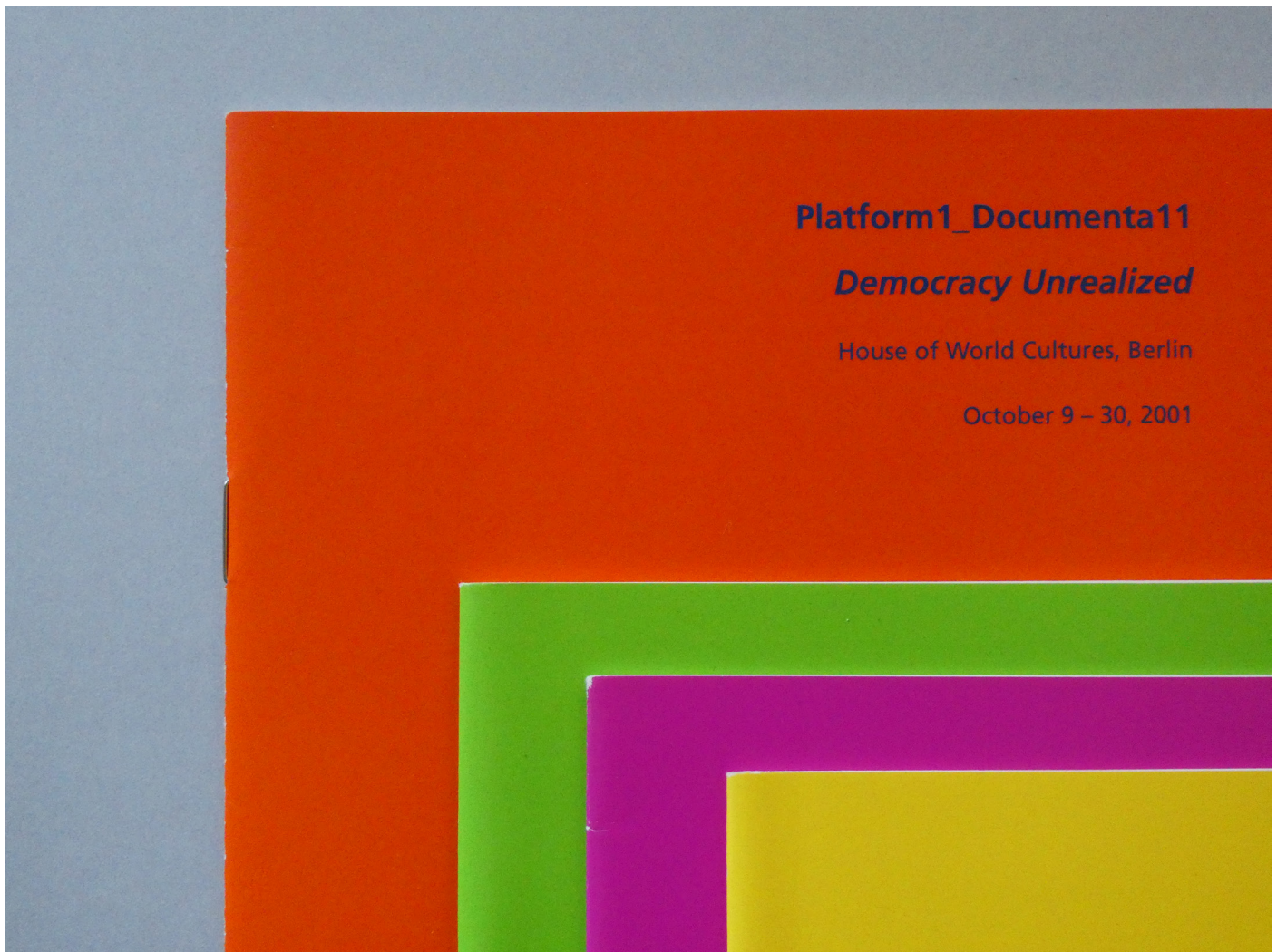


# Platform1 Democracy Unrealized

Okwui Enwezor



Platform1 Brochure Documenta11, Signature: docA, AA, d11, Mappe 101, fol. 1  
©documenta archiv

Between October 9 — 30, Documenta11 and the House of World Cultures, Berlin in association with the DAAD, the German Academic Exchange Service, will inaugurate an international symposium: *Democracy Unrealized* in Berlin that will bring to conclusion the series which opened in Vienna March 15. *Democracy Unrealized* is the first in a five-part series of public debates, symposia, film presentations, lectures, and art exhibition organized within the framework of Documenta11 in Kassel, Germany.

## About the Platforms

The present symposium continues Documenta11's yearlong series of public debates and informal presentations in six key cities around the world. The intention of these platforms is to bring the important artistic field to which Documenta11 belongs in dialogue with other fields and cities. The 1st part of *Democracy Unrealized* in Vienna (March 15 — April 23, 2001) presented lectures of about 20 international speakers. The second platform *Experiments with Truth: Transitional Justice and the Processes of Truth and Reconciliation* (New Delhi, May 7 — 20) was twofold: for the conference about 30 participants: historians, legal scholars, film makers, visual artists, psychoanalysts,

curators, anthropologists, art historians and theater makers presented papers. The conference was accompanied by a video and film program of 35 films by 26 directors. All the proceedings of the two platforms are fully documented and are available as videos on our website: [www.documenta.de](http://www.documenta.de).

The locus of Documenta11 is one of debate and contestation in which a constellation of theoretical ideas cross with praxis. Planned as intellectually rigorous and methodologically adventurous, the culmination of the platforms as an exhibition unfolds the complex vicissitudes that shape the Documenta11 when it opens on June 8, 2002.

The platforms can be understood then as constellations that open up a critical review of processes of a range of knowledge production. Equally, these platforms perform a second operation in that they allow Documenta11 the opportunity to render transparent the dimension of its intellectual interest and curatorial research. Hence the entire conceptual orientation of the exhibition is decidedly interdisciplinary, connecting a wide range of scholars, philosophers, artists, and filmmakers, institutions, cities, and audiences.

## ***Democracy Unrealized***

### **Background**

As the ideological forces of the "New World Order" recede and those of institutions of global economics and politics become entrenched values, there have emerged a number of powerful questions about the fate of democracy at the beginning of the new millennium. Though these questions have preoccupied intellectuals, institutions, and thinkers of all stripes for more than half a century, it was only in the waning moments of the 20th century that the full meaning of the political fragmentation that attended the dissolution of the Soviet empire made issues of democracy more pronounced. Several factors have contributed to the current wave of reassessments of the ideological hegemony of democracy, namely: the scale and penetration of global capitalism in determining every facet of cultural and political life around the world; the rise of nationalism and fundamentalism of every imaginable kind as responses to the neo-liberal globalist onslaught; the widened horizon of notions of citizenship produced by 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.

Within all these transformations, crucial to the narration of modernity in our time and the formation of subjectivity (ethnic or national, individual or collective), an important qualification needs to be made, which is the extent to which current tendencies of democratic governance are inherited from, and connected to the traditions of Western conception of democracy. But because it can not be denied that the state of democracy around the world today has become more varied and flexible, we are moved to question whether the notion of democracy can still be sustained only within the philosophical grounds of Western conception of democracy around the world today has become more varied and flexible, we are moved to question whether the notion of democracy can still be sustained only within the philosophical grounds of Western epistemology. What are the possible ways to imagine democracy today as method and praxis available to both governors and the governed, the nation and subjects alike?

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 modification that the ethic of the democracy and its institutional forms have undergone and continue to undergo today, making democracy a fundamentally unrealizable project or, put another way, as a work in progress.

As an example we may recall the subversion of the democratic logic by far right extremists, nationalist parties, and xenophobes sweeping through Europe today, or the conditions of democracy within the totalitarian governments in the former communist countries, dictatorships in Africa, Asia, and Latin America. On the opposite side of the spectrum, the appropriation of the democratic ethic recently enacted by the reformist movement in Iran calls for a fresh examination of the fundamental concept of democracy as essentially a secular endeavor. Equally, the history of the independence movements and de-colonization in Africa, Asian and the Middle East testifies to the extreme topicality attained by the idea of democratic politics. This has led not only to structural changes in those societies in which democracy and its institutions form part of the heritage of the former colonial state, but also in the political culture itself. These associations have been reinforced after the collapse of the USSR at the end of the eighties and the ensuing, apparently natural co-dependence between liberal democracy and global capitalism.

In the last twenty years, the very structure of the powerful ideological discourse has crystallized in the West that emphasizes the mutual belonging of these two components. This is a model of democracy that emphasizes individual rights above any form of collective action, while in the developing world a search for an alternative paradigm to this system are producing sober reassessments. Activists, thinkers, artists, and cultural producers both from Western and non-Western contexts have sought to resist and contest these assumptions. Entirely new uses and possible forms of democratic contestation have also been articulated, at the core of which lies an interpolation of the traditional, Western European conception of democracy and the appropriation of its rhetorical methods in service of other agendas. Notions such as “representation”, “hegemony” and “popular participation” have been refined by different groups in an attempt to elaborate new forms of resistance to the pervasive neo-liberal ideology and ascendant righthwing extremism that characterizes late capitalism in the West.

To grapples with many of the issues around the debates of democracy within this project a few issues require consideration:

## **1. Exploring the Term Unrealized**

The central impetus of this project is to discuss how liberal democracy has been presented in the post-cold war setting – not only as the best of all systems but as a totally realized, essentially completed project. From this rather triumphal, post-cold war viewpoint, if democracy is in any way to be described as an *unfinished* project it means that no structural changes are conceivable or necessary, that it is complete in all its foundational features — only small technical adjustments and minor tinkering is what it may need in future. The logic of this argument can be seen as the technocratic interpretation of the term *unrealized*, which is seen as fine tuning of democratic procedural methods and due processes that had already been largely settled. This has been the way in which the main Western democracies see themselves — at best as “incomplete implementations” of equality and justice on which modern democracy is based, rather than limits, flaws, dead-ends, and problematics inscribed in the principles themselves. In reaction to this presumption, we start from the idea that *Democracy Unrealized* is a matter of bringing to light what liberal democracy promises but fails to deliver. The emphasis, then, is on potential for revision, reevaluation of values,

extension and creative transformation to keep in step with 21st century globalizing processes — the idea of an ever-open, essentially unfinishable project that in principle has fallen short of its ideals.

## 2. The End of History, Emergent Democracies, Unstable Democracies

Against the backdrop of the Soviet Union's meltdown in the early 1990s, Francis Fukuyama in *The End of History and the Last Man* (1989/92) came to spell out what would become almost a post-cold war doctrine — that liberal democracy is tied to the marketplace. According to him, the end of communism proved that no other system could match, supersede or improve upon liberal democracy. Hence his claim that liberal democracy marks the "end of history" — not in the sense that everyday events and developments have come to a halt — but in that no further structural development beyond the framework of contemporary liberal democracy was possible. No viable alternatives appear on the contemporary horizon. Liberal democracy, tied up with global market economics represents a limit case of the development of political life, "the end point of mankind's ideological evolution", as he calls it. A part of Fukuyama's thesis uses not an analysis of rational factors or economics, but a master/slave metaphor. In this analysis, liberal democracy emerges and evolves from the idea of the recognition of the master (aristocracy, bourgeoisie) into a form of universal recognition. But is the recognition available to citizens of contemporary liberal democracies completely satisfying? The longterm future of liberal democracy, and the alternatives to it that may one day arise, depend above all on the answers to this question.

We may have already arrived at the point when such alternatives need careful examination. The various forms of democratic processes that have engulfed the emergent countries of Eastern Europe, the struggle to align democracy to the theocratic, authoritarian political institutions of present day Iran, or in the case of Africa the sheer futility of asking postcolonial African regimes to reform the former colonial state's institutions mark the ontology of forms of democratic governmentality that are irreconcilable with the principles propagated in the West. Equally pressing in this evaluation are the dynamics of what emerges as the dialectics of fundamentalism and liberalism as played out in Algeria, Turkey, and ex-Soviet Union, the violence enacted in former Yugoslavia, or China's "One Country, Two Systems" policy. Whatever one may make of these democracies, their very contradiction calls for an analysis of democracy both from the inside and without in order to form a coherent picture of the present system of global transition.

## 3. Tolerance

With issues of tolerance, we see most strikingly the construction and exclusion of difference and otherness, the demand for assimilation put on immigrants and outsiders, and the de-legitimation of other ways of living and knowing. All of these mark the limits of tolerance in liberal democracies. Tolerance itself implies looking outwards from a ready-made body of values to which others are expected to conform, as opposed to perhaps ethical encounters and engagements with difference, mutual exchange or transformation. What are the implications of the construct of tolerance in our present global society?

In this forum on democracy's ethical and epistemological blind-spots we are confronted with forms of living experience and knowledge it is unable to acknowledge or provide for; its limits as Western liberal democracies encounter new categories of citizens: economic immigrants, political refugees, asylum seekers, "sans papiers", and other excluded groups, whose pressing demands for recognition, presence and participation have increasingly shown up the limits of tolerance, limits of notions of civil rights against the universality of human rights. From the foregoing, it seems necessary to re-engage and examine how narratives and testimonies of marginalized groups, especially how their

struggle to overcome their sense of exclusion presses on democracies to examine their ethical and epistemological limits, sometimes forcing them to extend and forge new spaces and provisions for difference.

#### **4. Work Ethic**

The claim that democracy can only be realized and operate when its prerequisite — the work ethic — is strongly established is the argument put forward for the basis of liberal democracies in the West and Japan. In the United States, it is attributed to Protestant culture; this argument is similarly wielded against places that through colonialism are struggling to develop alternative forms of governance. Is the work ethic then the instrument of conversion? What are the counter-narratives that question whether democracy can only truly secure itself when a work ethic is inculcated and institutionalized?

#### **5. Development Ethics, Globalization and Democracy**

Since the end of Second World War, "development" has been a catchword of modernization, the great leap forward toward sustainability and self-sufficiency. It has equally been the directive from a range of global institutions of creating democratic societies within the confines and fringes of the Western capitalistic model. By grafting an economic structure onto the rhetoric of democracy, rigid practices of such developmental institutions as the World Bank and the IMF have in fact disrupted societies in the process of transition. The ethics of such globalization has been bitterly debated from inside the countries which are "to be developed", offering alternatives to the polarization of tradition and modernity and a simultaneous conflation of development with progress.