

Reflections on Okwui Enwezor, Platform VI Regarding Critical Globalism for the 21st Century

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Like many others touched by his great spirit and intellect, I feel the untimely passing of Okwui Enwezor as a great loss. It is hard to imagine the world without him; I am grateful for the occasion to share some reflection on how, through documenta, his ideas and provocations interesting with and influenced my own path as a scholar and thinker focused on transitional justice and the human sides of globalization.

My meeting Okwui came on the occasion of participation in Documenta11 where I was invited to engage in one of the “platforms” meeting preceding the well known art show in Kassel, Germany every five years. These are what Okwui would call the discursive openings; where Okwui’s vision was to host the platforms in diverse venues which connected in some way to the particular conversations. While now, decades later, we regularly use the word “platform” in the context of the Internet, back then it was novel. Okwui took it to be where the ideas that would be represented in Kassel show would first be engaged – i.e., a jumping off point for engagement. I remember asking if there was an agenda or script for how the conversation was supposed to go but that was not Okwui’s vision: his practice was to bring people together to get them in conversation – onsite-meaning neither NY nor Washington. The rest would follow. Here is how he conceived of the documenta Platforms: In his Introduction to *Documenta11*’s catalogue:

“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.”¹

Documenta11 Platform2 entitled “Experiments with Truth” convened in New Delhi was where the journey would start: – a first for me in India, as well as a remarkable interdisciplinary engagement with some of the themes I had just written about in my book, *Transitional Justice*² which was legal and political in its approach, comparative and historical. Okwui reached out to me through Charity Scribner an accomplished comparativist in her own right.³ I accepted right away to speak at Platform2. Okwui had just read my book *Transitional Justice*⁴ and this struggle over justice and truth in political transitions would be the topic of the platform in New Delhi. In some way it sought to deal with issues of transition especially the question of what line should be drawn between regimes?

How to reckon with the past? *Transitional Justice* was an interdisciplinary effort, connecting law, philosophy and politics in order to grapple with the dilemmas of post-communist and post-authoritarian transition. The Documenta11 Platforms were a welcome change for me and involved engagement with the discursive and a turn to the visual.

Recalling the Summer of 2001

Reflecting back to Documenta11 and to the New Delhi Platform in May 2001 necessitates a moment of memory as the Platform was convened the summer just prior to September 11: A transformative world event which certainly had an impact on documenta. While documenta’s start many years before there might have been the sense of a triumphant post Cold War optimism, yet even at the time,

Okwui and the curatorial team were already engaged in critical reflection. Yet, September 11 could not help but change things: At a logistical level, when the attacks occurred it impacted all travel which seemed the lifeblood of Okwui and his team. But that was simply the tail wagging the dog. As Okwui put it in his preface to the Platform2 volume, while the event had “launched debates” “whatever the outcomes of these debates, the commonplaces we all share are to be found in the features of global instability and insecurity that explode the triumphalist concept of a new world order.”⁵

One would soon grasp the proximity between New York and Kabul: this understanding of globalism put in question the triumphalist narrative being promoted by various policy analysts and human rights theorists like Michael Ignatieff, etc.. By the time the group of scholars, artists gathered in New Delhi our eyes were already open to the precarities and inequalities of globalization that Okwui well understood. His work on Africa had long addressed the tensions between the decisionmaking of Washington elite versus the issues surrounding structural adjustments and economic and political prospects in the region.

So it would be that in the new century, the extremities of globalism were laid bare and veered on the collapse of the sense of the center and the peripheries; we saw the sacrifices being made to sustain the post Cold War markets whether in Eastern Europe, or Latin America as well as the response of terror often by those most excluded and by groups threatened by the advent of globalization – tensions which for many were seen as incoherent when considered in light of the hitherto prevailing neoliberal narrative.

In the Delhi Platform2 we saw in the audience an interest in these but clearly also much emotion, a visceral harshness to the West, associated with neoliberal Empire in all its manifestations. There was a palpable hostility to globalization, to America – even to New Yorkers. Another source of historical conflict was an artifact of the British Empire. Indo-Pakistan tensions, which remained unworked out politically, received expression through art and film. Interest in the discussion was such that at the end of the official platform panel, there was a demand to continue the exchange that an improvisation discussion with audience questions was led by myself and Professor and author Mahmood Mamdani. That summer, Mamdani had published a penetrating study on transitional justice, which interrogated the prevailing understanding of victims and perpetrators in the Rwandan genocide. Mamdani challenged typical understandings in the human rights movement, and sought to bring to light the central conflicts and fault lines in the region.⁶

Experiments with Truth.

In Okwui’s own words, the Platforms (the one in New Delhi was called “Reckoning with Truth”) were “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.”⁷

One can easily see the ambition and valence of the project: the Platforms conceptualized themes in globalism that were salient at that time of millennial transition Platform1 – democracy (in relation to history), reconciliation in connection with justice; cultural hybridity (exemplified by creolization), and urbanization (the millennial stresses that might undo or reshape civic culture).⁸ “From the outset, the project of Documenta11 was conceived not as an exhibition but as a constellation of public spheres.”⁹

The New Delhi Platform2 aimed specifically to interrogate issues of Truth, Reconciliation and Justice – from what Okwui characterized a “deterritorialized perspective” – not Europe not Global North

but also not in a static way within a discipline – ergo the idea was grappling with and trying to make sense of the problem as it arises in those de-territorialized sites. This Platform’s success derived from the pursuit of truth in transition being interrogated in this way. The participants in these platforms/practices were drawn from a mix of curators, academics, artists, writers; suffice it to say that, while in some legal communities, the problem of justice might be seen as uniform over time and place, here it was thoroughly interrogated.

At the heart of Okwui’s project ie., the exhibition preceded by the Platforms; we saw that the ideas of transitional justice would importantly be raised in a part of the world -post colonial India where these issues had distinctive salience. The Platform’s intention was “to examine not only the central arguments that form the core of the juridical and social methods of Truth Commissions as they pertain to state crime and violence; it also argued for a sober reflection on other complex conflicts (ethnic, racial, religious, and sectarian) that are seen as extra-territorial and marginal to the discourse of the search for truth and reconciliation.” The scope of the Platform in Delhi was expansive as it was informed by Mahatma Ghandi’s writing as well as that of neighboring regions which were part of some of the same movements, thus for example engaging with the work of William Kentridge who drew upon the Indian movement of nonviolence in his art reckoning with South Africa’s apartheid legacy. This would be my introduction to Kentridge’s extraordinary mixed media projects which was hugely impactful. Kentridge’s imagining of transition and related themes would deeply inform my work going forward. Further, I spent a lot of time in this Platform viewing films, where it was interesting to see how much the Documenta11 films shared affinities to human rights films; many were documentaries – but also stylish and bit blurry or indirect representations in their way. Often their subject tended to reflect pursuit of representation of that which had been hitherto unseen. Later on, Kentridge’s video art piece “Refusal of Time” would speak to me; as it offered sustained meditation on how we understand time and its direction(s) – important to transitional justice.¹⁰ Hence a still from the piece became the cover of my next book, *Globalizing Transitional Justice*: whose themes were very much affected by the exchanges with Okwui and his direction/documenta.¹¹ In *Globalizing Transitional Justice* I address head – on the challenges of globalization for international justice, exploring the uses of an increasingly transnational and bureaucratized approach to transitional justice often disconnected from local politics.

Reckoning with Truth (and Justice)

My contribution to Documenta11 Platform2 and its accompanying publication sought to explore the notion of what did it mean for a society to seek a truth about a contested event- common to certain cultures including legal culture. In fact, I used this as an opportunity to review conclusions from my earlier book on the significance of phenomena I identified as “Transitional Justice.” This essay would subsequently be republished within a broader compendium, *Globalizing Transitional Justice: Contemporary Essays*¹².

My sense then and now is that such truths necessary to create transition pointed to not grand truths but rather “micro truths” emerging from a number of diverse processes, such as historical commissions of inquiry, criminal processes, constitutional and other approaches.¹³ In the essay I argued that these were micro truths, as opposed to grand monumental truths, because in some regard one might say that the truth commission reports sufficed to counter the narratives of the repressive regime.¹⁴

Yet upon further reflection, this notion of a micro truth is just the beginning. The real question is what truths or political knowledge are needed to build a more liberalizing regime? These transitional processes aim to shed light on closed repressive systems, and in so doing inform and educate towards the future.

If one analyzes affinities across processes and practices the story that emerges out of these truth seeking informs, one has glimpses of a shared narrative of transition. This does not mean consensus on one narrative necessarily but the pursuit of an apertura or opening. The philosopher Carlos Santiago Nino wrote about the way that trials of the military in Argentina for grave human rights abuses shed light on the epistemic decision making of a closed elite, united in oppression.¹⁵

Beyond prizing the value of truth itself, we hear often about truth in relation to “reconciliation.” This was prominent in the South African transition, and also in Chile’s before that.¹⁶ We see the telling of a story that starts out in bitter conflict and then ends up in a position of reconciliation. We can see the aim to engage on the construction of the narrative across diverse processes.

I explored these accounts in my contribution to the Documenta11 Platform catalogue; that is, the idea of the role of micro truths in relation to the possibility of imagining a different future. In my book, I argued how the notion of a “truth” worth knowing ought not be essentialized but was affected by its political and other contexts, depending on the nature of the repression and country’s democratic legacy. Thus, coming out of disappearances in Latin America – the first “truth” commission of the modern moment – factual documentation was seen as the answer to disappearance. Not surprisingly this was not an answer in post totalitarian societies. One can see that it is the biggest contrast between repression in Latin America and that in Eastern Europe. Following the post Communist transitions there was no big demand for truth commissions, indeed, one might surmise that such references back to totalitarian control could hardly afford a sense of new legitimacy.

We see many films from the East, struggling to tell the story of that period of collaboration, of complete control. In raising the question of where to go for accountability, so by contrast, we see the demand for control over one’s information and against government surveillance. At present, this topic has lost none of its topicality; indeed in contemporary debates the relevance of anxieties about surveillance, technology and post truth or false news one might conclude that it is even more salient. Here again, one recalls Okwui’s call for a critical assessment of the pursuit of knowledge: One of his favorite terms was “precise”; he was always asking people around him to speak with precision. Indeed, the speakers like the pieces he chose for the exhibit were in one way or the other all grappling with this question of the meaning of truth in transition.

Ultimately, Okwui would find useful and invoke the discourse of transitional justice characterized as it was by imperfection and irregularities informed by its political context.¹⁷

The Global Turn

Going forward, after Documenta11, several themes would have an ongoing impact on how I conceptualized ‘transitional justice’. Globalism was the main theme and a related one had to do with time. Both of which were critical to Okwui’s interests in art and politics.

My next book *Globalizing Transitional Justice*¹⁸ followed some years afterwards and one can see some themes which were very much impacted by Okwui’s method. While my first book theorized the topic through a comparativist analysis of diverse state projects/phenomena in transitional justice practices, my second book on the matter studied the phenomena in transitional justice hitherto and reflected the ways these had changed and become global practices and arguably informed a new field. It has journals, depts conferences etc.¹⁹ I was also seeing more and more the relationship of transitional justice to art – whether in dialogues – or books.²⁰

The central theme in this second book is the “*beyond the state*” aspect of the project. Both supranational and transnational as well as sub national and local. One had to concede that by that point transitional justice was no longer a particular comparativist exercise but one distinguished by its globality, hence an interest tracing global actors and practices, both subnational and transnational.

Seeing beyond the transition also had an impact on our understanding of history with impacts on politics and culture etc. This destabilizing of what one might regard as *the times* of transitional justice had already in a sense been flagged in Documenta11. This was particularly salient in the work of artist William Kentridge as previously mentioned.

The confluence of these two developments, the sense in which we are both *beyond the transition* and *beyond the state* in terms of relevant actors goes to the ongoing meaning of transitional justice at present: chaotic, decentered, destabilized; a changed enterprise from what it had been at the start in 2000. This awareness also has an impact on the variable nature of the understanding of “transition” in transitional justice. What we see relates to the opening up of the phenomenon to a *field*, starts to encapsulate post conflict justice and even pre transition – ie *ex ante* to shape political expectations of a well – organized society.

Postscript: Of Grief and Grievance

The evolving expectations generated by globalized transitional justice were finally brought home to the USA. I am writing these reflections about Okwui during the trial of Derek Chauvin, after the last year of Trump administration culminating in Jan 6 – the supremacist riots and breach of the Capitol. Shocking round the world, this political crisis had started long before and was the culmination of months of police violence and related marches for justice. The Black Lives Matter movement and other civil society initiatives in universities and in the media reflect the contemporary momentum for the long postponed racial reckoning in America.²¹ For some time, at least since the election of President Barack Obama, Okwui had sensed the struggle over race was at a pivotal moment in the country. His preoccupations would be prophetic, as his final show (postponed due to the pandemic) would open March 2021 at the New Museum, New York City²². Together with his curatorial team, some of which were the organizers at Documenta11, in this exhibition, Okwui reflects on the centrality of the ongoing legacies of injustice to the black experience in America. Okwui’s vision begins with the pivotal moments associated with the end of the Civil War and the past that is not yet past.²³ Every room in the exhibit integrates President Lincoln’s language at his historic speech at Gettysburg – the Civil War battleground and cemetery where the President invoked the extreme sacrifice of the country as the basis for the war, and elevated the *new birth of freedom* as its purpose.²⁴

While this critical speech was aimed at unifying the country, its conciliatory tone and nuance in the context in which it was delivered more than 150 years later would continue to frame the ongoing battlelines in the country. This extraordinary exhibition offers the representation of everyday grief which to be sure is informed by historical legacy but also shows us just how the mourning work never ceases and in so doing informs and illuminates contemporary American culture.

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References

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