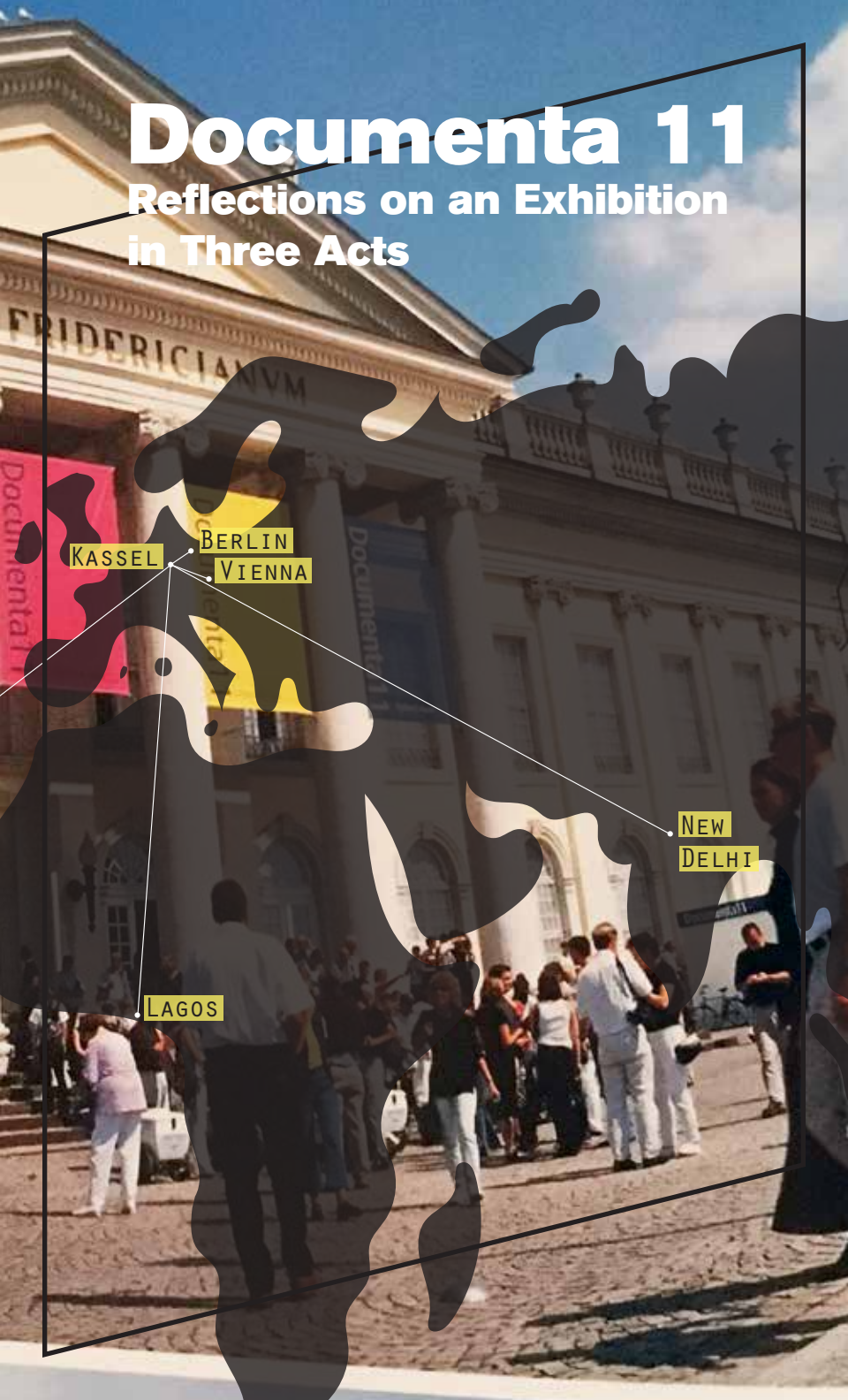


Documenta 11

Reflections on an Exhibition
in Three Acts



KASSEL

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PRESENTS

Documenta 11

Reflections on an Exhibition in Three Acts

Documenta 11: An Exhibition in Three Acts was collectively written by students enrolled in James Voorhies's spring 2018 graduate course *Binding Agents: Toward an Aesthetic of the Postcolonial in Contemporary Exhibition* at California College of the Arts. The script was written by culling parts of seminal texts on the discourse around Documenta 11, *Magiciens de la Terre*, postcolonial studies, and critical theory.

CAST (IN ORDER OF APPEARANCE)

JAMES VOORHIES.....THE HOST
YOMNA OSMAN.....OKWUI ENWEZOR
JUDIT NAVRATILUTE META BAUER
EFE OZMEN.....ELENA FILIPOVIC
PRESTON FOX.....IRIT ROGOFF
MADDIE KLETT...SYLVESTER OKWUNODU OGBECHIE
JILLIAN CROCHET.....JACQUES RANCIÈRE
PALIJA SHRESTHA.....GAYATRI SPIVAK
BIANCA MORAN.....RASHEED ARAEEN
YOKO TAHARA.....PABLO LAFUENTE

This script was performed on the final day of class, Thursday, May 3, 2018, to a group of willing attendants in San Francisco, California.

Documenta 11, the eleventh edition of Germany's esteemed perennial exhibition was the first edition of the new millennium curated by the first non-Western director, the Nigerian-born curator Okwui Enwezor, in 2002.

Founded in 1955, Documenta is organized every five years in Kassel, Germany. It was conceived after

World War II as part of postwar reconstruction efforts to update knowledge in Germany about recent and contemporary trends in art and to enhance Kassel's economy. The stimulation of the local economy and the elevation of Germany's international prestige were central to its mission. Documenta thus began with the intent to rehabilitate

**the image of
postwar Germany
by transforming
the ruined city of
Kassel into a cultural
destination and center
of the art world.**

**While today the city's
architectural makeup
remains spotted
with radical postwar
buildings, having
been 80 percent
destroyed during the
war, and therefore is
not as alluring to the
mainstream tourist
circuits as other**

**German cities
abundant in classical
architecture,
Documenta's
economic impact
on the city has been
extraordinary.**

**Documenta 11 posed
something completely
new in relation to
previous editions.
Billed by Enwezor,
as "the first truly
global, postcolonial
documenta exhibition,"
this edition marks a
pivotal moment in**

exhibition history when postcolonialism was addressed in art on a highly visible, international scale. In fact, Documenta 11 unleashed a discourse led by artists, curators and institutions in contemporary art to re-write and re-address colonial histories. The exhibition as a delineable thing, a form, with political potential to change perspectives and increase awareness about topics such as colonialism, immigration, and nation state became even more notably tangible around that time and with this exhibition. Enwezor disrupted the traditional form of Documenta with his 2002 edition. While the exhibition had been traditionally confined to 100 days with activity centered mostly in and around Kassel, Enwezor, instead, created five different exhibition sites, or, as he called them, “platforms.” He organized the platforms across the globe and launched the exhibition more than a year before the planned opening in June 2002 in Kassel. Today, artists and curators are heirs to this activity, operating within the legacy, or the aftermath—a post-Documenta 11 era.

THE SCENE

[Clärchens Ballhaus, in Mitte, Berlin’s posh district in the center of the city. In the outdoor courtyard of a war-torn nineteenth ballroom now the occasional scene of twenty-first century art world glitterati, a group of curators, artists, and writers convene at a large table over pizzas, schnitzel, and Käsespätzle, drinking white Silvaner from Germany’s Franconia region and classic Pilsner. The sun sets as a string of lights crisscrossing the courtyard provides a soft glow on an unusually warm, early May evening during Berlin’s famed Gallery Weekend.]

Act 1

What is Documenta 11?

HOST

Okwui, you curated the groundbreaking exhibition Documenta 11 in 2002, an exhibition that, as I just relayed, continues to resonate in artistic, intellectual, and institutional circles across the globe. What were the initial goals you had in mind when conceiving Documenta 11?

ENWEZOR

From the outset, the project of Documenta 11 was conceived not as an exhibition but as a constellation of public spheres. Documenta 11 began by displacing its historical context in Kassel, like you mentioned. Secondly, by moving outside the domain of the gallery space to that of the discursive by using seminars and conversations formats in the platforms we organized. And, thirdly, by expanding the locus of the disciplinary models that constitute and define the project’s intellectual and cultural interest.

BAUER

As one of the authors of the catalogue and curators of the exhibition, I can also attest to this. Documenta 11, spatially and conceptually, opened on March 15, 2001, with Platform I in Vienna, over a year in advance of the planned opening on June 8, 2002. This advanced opening extended accessibility to the exhibition’s “knowledge capital.” And, opening for audiences at different sites, helped break down the authority inherent in Documenta as an institution. In other words, by locating the platforms on four continents, through numerous partnerships, cooperative ventures, and co-productions,



and by deliberately extending the themes to the sociopolitical, Documenta not only expanded its territory, but also abandoned it. Selective de-territorialization into cities like Vienna and Berlin, New Delhi, St. Lucia, and Lagos, as well as into other thematic fields, should be understood not least as a reaction to the claim, which can no longer be asserted, that Documenta must take place at a particular time, in a predetermined format, for a fixed audience—namely, the Western art world—as it has for more than fifty years.

HOST

To be clear, the fifth and final platform returned the exhibition to Kassel. And rather than resembling the seminar, conversation-based formats of the previous four platforms, the fifth edition utilized the well-worn white cube of the gallery and museum as a primary site, but not exclusive as we shall see, for the presentation of works of art in and around locations in Kassel.

[A server walks up to the table and asks the group if they are ready to order. At the same time, Elena Filipovic rushes in and takes a seat with the other guests. Amidst the confusion, Enzewor asks the server to give them a moment.]

FILOPOVIC

Did I hear you talking about the platforms at Documenta 11. Indeed, the first four platforms were, by most accounts, thought provoking if academic affairs, at once dislocating the singular site of Documenta while situating critical research and theoretical reflection at its heart. Despite the fact that relatively few visitors and participants actually attended the conferences at the first four platforms, these proceedings were integral to the form of Documenta 11, which expanded the boundaries of this art event traditionally held in the provincial

European town. Okwui transformed the exhibition into a transnational, interdisciplinary, multilayered manifestation. While these events overturned the strictures of Documenta's hallmark one-hundred-day exhibition in Kassel, the fifth platform, as you say, appeared to be a decided return to order. Impeccable arrangements of white cubes and black boxes recurred throughout most all of the show's multiple sites in Kassel.

ENWEZOR

But I contend that Documenta 11's many spaces—including its geographical locations of Lagos and St. Lucia and New Delhi—were 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.

[Enzewor motions to the server.]

ROGOFF

Such major international exhibitions as Catherine David's Documenta 10 in 1997 and yours, Okwui, have heralded substantial paradigm shifts within our understanding of the parameters of the art world. As a result, we have come to inhabit a far more international, far more socially attenuated, more formally adventurous and more intellectually grounded art world than ever before.

[Server appears, asking the group if they are ready to order. Rogoff raises a finger, asking for a moment to finish.]

As I was saying, within this world the very concept of what is an art practice has been able to expand from making objects to experimenting with structures or enabling gatherings or doing substantial research. It is



one of the contentions of this research project that the pressures of globalization have resulted in a greatly expanded world of artistic practices that is consequently able to play a far more substantive role in furthering the general culture.

HOST

Are you talking about the way research materials and ideas are increasingly integrated, not only into the space of the gallery, but as ideas and knowledge through seminars, public conversations, and conferences comparable to what we saw at Documenta 11? Almost 20 years onward, these expanded, researched-based practices were quite visible in the recent trifecta of exhibitions—documenta 14, Skulptur Projekte Münster, and Venice Biennale in 2017.

FILOPOVIC

Yes, as was the case with Documenta 11, this striking expansion goes in tandem with curatorial discourses that increasingly distinguish the biennial or mega exhibition as larger than the mere presentation of artworks. They are understood as vehicles for the production of knowledge and intellectual debate.

HOST

Let's turn to postcolonialism as it was addressed by Documenta 11.

[Server interrupts and asks if they should come back later. The group asks to order in a few minutes, while requesting another round of drinks.]

Postcolonial theory, or postcolonial critique, is a study of the impact of colonialism and imperialism on the economic, social, cultural and political consequences it has on a people or a nation. The “post” in

postcolonialism, not unlike the “post” in postmodernism, refers to the lingering effects of this impact, the aftermath of colonialism or modernism, respectively. To that end, colonialism and modernism are deeply intertwined because of the extraordinary impress of the West's narrative of modernism.

FILOPOVIC

And, to your point, in the context of Documenta 11, reiterating the terms of the larger project's postcolonial critique, the stridently political artworks and accompanying curatorial statements rendered explicit the need to question Western imperialism, including its perpetuation through such notions as modernity, the avant-garde, universality, and democracy.

HOST

Did curators and artists address questions through these integrated conferences and seminars about postcolonialism and Western imperialism in each location of Documenta's five platforms?

[Music can be softly heard in the distance, inside the ballroom where a dance party begins.]

BAUER

Yes. The decision to address the questions raised in the five platforms at the relevant sites was a sign of genuine interest in dialogue, in exchange, and in discourse, and was thus much more than a symbolic act. It meant recognizing the specificity of each location and the conditions of each lived social space. It meant, above all, a respect for those who established these discourses. And these discourses were determined by personal perceptions, experiences, and living circumstances. It would be absurd to assume that Documenta 11 was simply being politically correct or operating as a charity

organization. Quite the contrary. The engagement and generosity of everyone who participated in the platforms, who tried to open up fields of discourse that had been generated over many years and to make them accessible to the Documenta audience, ultimately benefited everyone.

HOST

Documenta 11 then took a kind of two-fold removal from its founding origins. On one hand, as mentioned above, Okwui took the exhibition beyond Kassel to other parts of the world. And, in the fifth platform, although organized in Kassel, this platform, too, departed from the practice of only exhibiting in the primary domain of a gallery site. Works by artists Renée Green, Thomas Hirschhorn, and Andreas Siekmann, for example, were located well beyond the gallery. Even Juan Muñoz created a radio piece, available only on the airwaves of FM radio. This theme of displacement is both part of the concept and organizing structure of the exhibition, yes?

BAUER

Yes, even the exhibition in Kassel itself was subjected to a series of displacements, through the use of various sites such as the art college, the seminar room, the museum, the multipurpose arena, the train station, the industrial building, print media, radio, and the internet.

[Server returns with drinks and asks if the group is ready to order. Enwezor signals, “not yet.”]

In fact, further to your question, Documenta 11 is, above all, a space of dislocation, of displacement, and it is precisely this that makes it a kind of temporary “adopted country” for an intellectual diaspora from many disciplines and origins. In the space that Documenta 11 establishes, there is an encounter of varied postcolonial

topographies, heterogeneous political and religious roots, wide-ranging geographic circumstances, and diverse situations and juxtapositions. This, however, raises the question: How is it possible, in the European milieu of the exhibition in Kassel, to exhibit art from all over the world without smoothing away the details of their local identity and the specific geographic and political circumstances under which these statements were produced?

HOST

This sense of displacement threaded conceptually and geographically is—one might say—the performance of an exhibition. You mentioned identity. Identity is closely tied to the idea of displacement, identity, for example, as it is connected to nation state and immigration. One also thinks about identity within the context of globalization as it is overseen by the West...

ENWEZOR

...let’s not forget the exhibition was conceived and developed in a moment when 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.

[Sylvester Okwunodu Ogbechie arrives and joins the group.]



OGBECHIE

Are you still talking about Documenta 11, sixteen years after the fact? Server. A glass of wine, please. As we know, the exhibition argued that the neutral citizen of liberal theory was in fact the bearer of an identity coded white, male, bourgeois, able-bodied, and heterosexual. Critics of this exhibition who raised the charge of identity politics refused to acknowledge that the current American imperium, and the European colonial world order that preceded it, uses various strategies to maintain and sustain white privilege. It is telling that earlier Documenta exhibitions were not read as celebrations of white identity despite their total exclusion of African, Asian, and other non-Western artists.

[Dance music inside the ballroom increases in volume. Server brings wine to Ogbachie and asks if he'd like to order food. Ogbachie requests a minute to look at the menu.]

FILOPOVIC

To that end, the discussions in the platforms deliberated such issues as the recent impact of globalization on the world or the violent legacy of colonialism. Although far from a literal rehearsal of the exhibition, they also mapped out the concerns at the heart of the fifth exhibition platform that, as we've discussed, was realized in Kassel.

HOST

We are talking about a change in the appearance of the form of Documenta, thus the way Documenta looks—or I'd like to say—its aesthetics. With that in mind, the critique of colonialism and the political and cultural legacies that artists and curators are heir to are deeply integrated into the concept and form of the exhibition. The thing looked different. And therefore it needs a new

set of vocabulary to describe and analyze it, which is what you are rehearsing in this conversation. Since the exhibition intentionally looked different, it inherently had a political position because there was no longer a consensus on how to describe it. Let's talk about the politics of Documenta 11. Jacques, could you speak to the critical position that Documenta 11 offered?

RANCIÈRE

Yes, in fact, politics invents new forms of collective enunciation. Politics re-frames the given by inventing new ways of making sense of something. But, within the case of Documenta 11, art does not necessarily become critical or political by “moving beyond itself,” or “departing from itself,” and intervening in the “real world.”

HOST

But what about Thomas Hirschhorn's infamous *Bataille Monument*, sited in Nordstadt, a suburb with the highest immigrant density in Germany, located eight miles north of Documenta-Halle in Kassel. A Turkish cab company carried Documenta visitors in an old Mercedes to and from the *Monument*, where they could experience an exhibition site, public sculpture, library, TV studio, and *Imbiss*, the small food stands in Germany. Visitors to Documenta were not in the space of a gallery. They were in the real world.

RANCIÈRE

There is no real world that functions as the outside of art. Within any given framework, artists are those whose strategies aim to change the frames, speeds and scales according to which we perceive the visible, and combine it with a specific invisible element and a specific meaning. Such strategies are intended to make the invisible visible or to question the self-evidence of



George Bataille

BIBLIOTH

>> Georges Bataille

Man walking

the visible; to rupture given relations between things and meanings and, inversely, to invent novel relationships between things and meanings that were previously unrelated.

[The server appears once again, exasperated. They stand waiting as Rancière continues without interruption.]

RANCIÈRE

But, further to your earlier questions, the question that arises is “what happens to critical art in the context of consensus?” Art attempts to exceed consensus by supplementing it with presence and meaning. But it may well be that oversaturation is the very law of consensus itself. The more art fills rooms of exhibitions with monumentalized reproductions of the objects and icons of everyday life and commodity culture, the more it goes into the streets and professes to be engaging in a form of social intervention, and the more anticipates and mimics its own effect. Art thus risks becoming a parody of its alleged efficacy. It thus appears, as I said earlier, that art does not become critical by “moving beyond itself.”

[The group asks the server for another round of drinks and finally places their order for dinner.]

Act 2

An Historical Precedent in Paris

[The table is filled with empty plates and glassware, the aftermath of several courses. Music with a deep bass along with people shouting can be heard coming from the interior of the ballroom while voices and laughter of passersby on the Berlin sidewalk filter into the courtyard.]

HOST

I want to turn our discussion to look at the legacy of exhibition history within which Documenta 11 found itself. Documenta 11 was not the first exhibition to claim, as Enwezor said, a truly global position in contemporary art. As scholars have reminded us, in 1989 the landmark *Magiciens de la Terre* attempted to present art from the West and the non-West on an alleged equal footing. *Magiciens de la Terre*, which billed itself as the “first worldwide exhibition of contemporary art,” brought together more than one hundred artists, half from the West and half from the non-West, and juxtaposed their work in two exhibition venues in the City of Paris, the Centre Pompidou and the Grande Halle de La Villette. This exhibition, too, represented a pivotal moment in this discourse around global art and exhibition. The curatorial team led by Jean-Hubert Martin were invited to develop new work on site and in most cases were selected on the basis of a set of agreed criteria that included radicalism, a sense of adventure and excitement, their originality with respect to cultural tradition, or the relationship between the maker and his or her work. The exhibition became the embodiment of a neocolonialist attitude that allowed the contemporary art system to colonize, commercially



fig.77



fig.79

Returning from the mezzanine back to the ground level, visitors encountered the large ground painting *Yam Dreaming* (1989), made on clay by seven members from the Yuendumu community in Australia: Francis Jupurrurla Nelson, Frank Bronson Jakamarra Nelson, Paddy Jupurrurla Stewart, and Caddy Japaljarri Stewart.

and intellectually, new areas that were previously out of bounds.

Gayatri, you contributed to the conference organized in association with *Magiciens de la Terre*. Could you talk about the exhibition in relation to this controversy and its connection to globalism and the West?

SPIVAK

In our letter of invitation to the colloquium organized as part of the exhibition in Paris, we were asked to ponder a general topic from our own point of view. The title of the colloquium was *Alterity, Identity, Métissage: Center and Periphery*. The subtitle comes from the very tendency that the curators want not so much to annul as to reverse. I sympathize with the wish, such as it was reflected in the image of the world projected in the upper right-hand corner of each artist's page in the exhibition catalogue, where the center of the given map marks the artist's country of origin. Let us turn to the main title: *Alterity, Identity, Métissage*. Names like Asia or Africa or Moldova or Nago or Svavberg are not anchored in identities. The immediate need for collectivity based on identity should not take an absolute truth-value based on the monumental gravity of our exhibition, which, I believe, takes the identity of the colossal West for granted...

[The server arrives, begins clearing plates, and is distracted by requests for a dessert menu. Rasheed Araeen interjects, interrupting Spivak.]

ARAEEN

...*Magiciens de la Terre* was indeed a grand, monumental spectacle with a lot of fascination for the exotic. There is nothing wrong with a grand spectacle, but if it ignores or undermines issues of a historical and epistemological

nature then we must not be bogged down by the excitement and fascination it has produced. However, exoticism is not necessarily inherent in the works themselves. It is in their decontextualization, not only in the shift from one culture to another, which is inevitable, but more importantly, in the displacement from one paradigm to another. This has emptied them of their meanings, leaving only what Fredric Jameson calls a play of surfaces to dazzle and dominate the eye.

SPIVAK

Excuse me. As I was saying, perhaps it is true that the visual arts in the West have not been globalized in the same way as literature or music. Our exhibition, then, marked the desire for a rupture. This was reflected in the beautiful title *Magiciens de la Terre*. But every rupture is also a repetition. I think we must acknowledge this by focusing not only on the word "magiciens," but also on the word "terre." Our desire for a rupture with previous practice lives in the separation between two expressions "artists du monde" and "magiciens de la terre." The work of art, then, writes a world on uninscribed earth, or *terre*.

[Pablo Lafuente arrives and joins the group, seemingly disheveled by the crowds of people on the sidewalk and initially distracted by the loud music and laughter inside the ballroom. He hears the group discussing Magiciens de la Terre.]

LAFUENTE

What is often forgotten is a consideration of what arguably constitutes the essential aspect of the medium of exhibitions display. By considering display rather than identity and representation, and the way in which display enacts this movement of inclusion and exclusion, we can attempt to look at this "partial" history of identity struggle as more than that as a means to understand

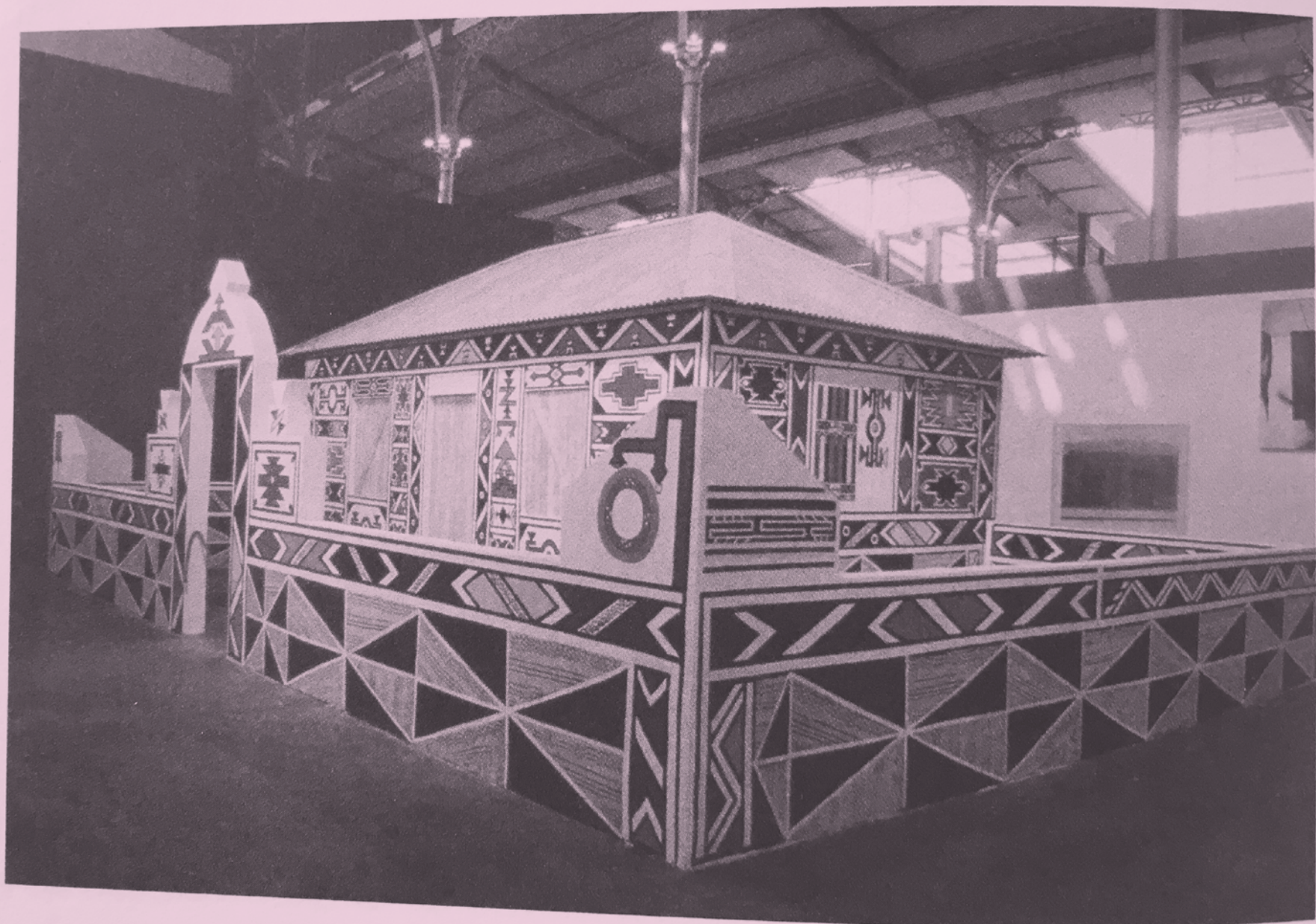


fig.71

something about the nature and the mechanisms of “art” and “exhibition.” That is, if considered in this way, this particular history becomes a lens through which to access a more general understanding of the processes by which the contemporary exhibition form works, along division lines that are no longer geopolitical or civilizational, but rather refer, for example, to the nature of knowledge and the effects of its presence or absence, the differing agencies of both artist/maker and object, and the way aesthetics might relate to the political—not only in terms of political representation and knowledge production but also of its specific effectiveness. The history of the inclusion in the Western contemporary art context of what comes from its outside offers a privileged window from which to understand, and therefore intervene, in the contemporary art system itself.

[Dessert menus arrive. The server stands, waiting for the guests to decide. Enwezor asks the server to return in a second.]

HOST

Let’s recall that Documenta—as an institution—is a stalwart emblem of the West’s industrial art complex. Comparable to *Magiciens de la Terre*, the eleventh edition organized by Okwui also reached into other parts of the globe. Okwui, could you talk about the influence of *Magiciens de la Terre* on curating Documenta 11?

ENWEZOR

Yes, but this reference to *Magiciens de la Terre* and identity is connected to a larger question related to postcoloniality and the exhibition, as we were discussing earlier. Postcoloniality, in its demand for full inclusion within the global system and by contesting existing knowledge-making 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. 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.

ARAEEN

The crisis of Western culture was caused, in our view, by the inability of the system to come to terms with its colonial past and recognize the reality of the postcolonial world and its aspiration and struggle for human equality, creating intellectual paralysis in its discourse. This paralysis was particularly evident in art history scholarship which is still riddled with eurocentric and racialist assumptions.

HOST

The crisis around human equality, identity, and the emergent questions related to globalization and postcolonialism that plagued the reception of *Magiciens de la Terre* in 1989 continued into the new millennium and became even further exasperated by the unexpected world rupture caused by the catastrophic events of September 11. All of this affected the making and reception of Documenta 11.

OGEBECHIE

Indeed, the memory of international terrorism loomed large at Documenta 11 as the Western world digested the implications of the September 11, 2001, attack on the United States and America’s reaction of open-ended war against “terror.” The West absorbed this return to violence in cultural terms by generalizing it, as encapsulated in the unfortunate designation of the devastated site of the World

Trade Center as Ground Zero. Enwezor viewed the attack itself and the occidental response to it as a space-clearing gesture from which contemporary society might map a new and inclusive discourse of global relationships. Thus, although Documenta 11 proclaimed the ultimate demise of the modernist avant-garde's vision of art, its search for meaning in the dystopian reality of contemporary existence after this demise is itself a thoroughly avant-garde project.

ENWEZOR

The events of September 11 in the United States, indeed, 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? These are all factors that affected our organization of Documenta 11.

[Desserts and more drinks are ordered as the ballroom evidently turns into a full-on dance party with music becoming louder and streams of party goers walk pass their table, through the courtyard, and into the ballroom.]

Act 3

Toward an Aesthetic of the Postcolonial in the White Cube

[The night sky becomes slightly brighter, a crespecular moment before the sun appears in this northern European city. The sounds of a crowded dance floor with a thumping base — out of sight — continue.]

OGBECHIE

In spite of its radical attempts to rethink the discourse of contemporary art, Documenta 11 did not succeed in disrupting the West's drive for global hegemony. Its interrogation of the possibility of avant-garde action was criticized as a very conservative and institutional interpretation of contemporary culture, one that emphasized precisely the occidental paradigms that Documenta 11 targeted in its counter narrative. Although the artworks represented a global perspective on contemporary art and visual culture, the overriding structural perspective was still that of the Western world. The scopic regime of the panopticon was fully at work in the meticulous ordering of chaotic events, which spoke to a peculiar occidental, or Western, tendency to objectify and fix reality. This clinical ordering of the material world is a very Western conceit that presages the revival of fascist aesthetics in this new century. The exhibition thus represented the latest attempt to order the universe in line.

HOST

Perhaps one of the reasons for its inability to, as you say, "order the universe," or, as I would add, counter the modernist narrative laid down by the West over centuries,



SALT e-yayınlar / e-publications

and especially the twentieth century, is due in part to the fact the exhibition ultimately manifested in Kassel as an exhibition in much the same manner as any other edition of Documenta. Installations of objects inside galleries reinforced the modernist doctrine and thus Western impress of the white cube. The white cube is the defining institutional element in what is understood and circulated as contemporary art and one of the defining emblems of modernism.

FILOPOVIC

Yes, if Documenta 11's notable breadth of representation, with significantly more visual artists from non-Western nations than any previous edition, and the displacement of the four platforms sought to challenge occidental paradigms and champion instead "those circuits of knowledge produced outside the predetermined institutional domain of Westernism." But corseting the exhibition portion in exactly the predetermined institutional paradigm intimately connected with the development and historicization of Western modernism effectively undermined the objectives of the project. Examining the fifth platform in this way, inevitably simplifies the breadth and theoretical complexity of a much larger project. But it also underlines the silence which allows the white cube to function, even in the projects most consciously and explicitly positioned against the hegemony of modern Western forms.

[The server begins to clear dessert plates and glasses. All the guests ask for a cup of coffee.]

HOST

Modernity is about narrative and the narrative has for the most part been constructed by the West. Gayatri, you've written about the writing and reading of historical narrative. Can you add to this point?

SPIVAK

You are asking: How are historical narratives put together? In order to get to something like an answer to that question, I will make use of the notions of writing and reading in the most general sense. We produce historical narratives and historical explanations by transforming the society, upon which our production is written into more or less continuous and controllable bits that are readable. How these readings emerge and which ones get sanctioned have political implications on every possible level.

Let me, then, speak to you as a citizen of independent India, and raise the necessary critical and cautionary voice about false claims to alternate histories. False claims and false promises are not euphoric topics. I am also a feminist who is an old-fashioned Marxist and some of that will enter into any discussion of the cultural politics of alternative historiographies.

HOST

These narratives within the realm of contemporary art were first written in the twentieth-century in the space of the modernist white cube. And, now, over the past three decades they have been written even further by the large-scale perennial exhibitions. As Elena Filipovic has observed in her essay "The Global White Cube," the Western construction of the white cube continues to influence contemporary art through the form of biennial culture. I want to turn and talk about the biennial as a thing and the influence it has on artistic and curatorial production.

[Coffee arrives. Party goes begin to stream out of the ballroom into the empty streets of a Berlin morning. A street cleaning machine can be heard outside the courtyard. The morning sun begins to rake across the table.]



FILOPOVIC

The proliferation of biennials in the 1990s rendered them new privileged sites for cultural tourism and introduced a category of art, the bombastic proportions and hollow premises of which earned it the name “biennial art,” a situation that knotted the increasingly spectacular events to market interests. That mega exhibitions can be compromised is a frequent lament, but in their best moments, they offer a counterproposal to the regular programming of the museum as well as occasions for artists to trespass institutional walls and defy the neat perimeter to which the traditional institution often strictly adheres when it organizes exhibitions, although museums, it must be said, are increasingly challenging their own once-staid protocols.

HOST

Documenta 11 is indeed part of this legacy and, in fact, initiated some of these challenges. But, in 2002, as we’ve been discussing and as Okwui has stated, his exhibition sought to address this history and its influence over what is written and read and thus understood as contemporary art. Isn’t this a mode of critique? Isn’t it part of the ethos originally embedded in postmodernism?

Rasheed, do you see postmodernism as a complete abandonment of modernity?

ARAEEN

The shift from modernism to postmodernism does not absolve us from our responsibility to look into the history of modernism and try and understand the implications of what it includes and excludes. What I am trying to say is that if we abandon the idea of modernity, because of its colonial connections, eurocentricity or all those things which postmodernism is critiquing, there is little left with which to challenge the disturbing aspects of

modernity. The world is still dominated and controlled by the eurocentric structures of modernity, despite all the rhetoric of postmodernism. The difference between earlier modernity and the present structures of modernity is that these new structures are camouflaged by the spectacles of postmodernism to which everyone is allowed enter and play their own game. These games are now being played on the assumption that this has given us the freedom to express ourselves. But what we in fact are doing is only targeting the camouflage, leaving behind the structures of domination almost totally intact.

BAUER

Yes, as I stated at the beginning of the evening or, at this point, last night, Documenta is one of those structures. Documenta has become a factor in the economic life of the city of Kassel and also a screen onto which a wide variety of expectations are projected. This weighs not only on the whole exhibition project but also on its curators. The latter are only too aware that the artistic positions selected will carry far more weight and have farther-reaching consequences than they would have if presented only at other exhibitions. The label “Documenta” constitutes an assessment and a decision in favor of certain artists whose names will then circulate in the art world under that label in years to come, and increasingly means that this exhibition, even more than others, specifies inclusions and exclusions.

ENWEZOR

I want to interject here with regard to the relationship between postmodernism and postcolonialism. 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.

ARAEEN

The concept of modernism in art, its language and history, represents a dominant structure of art institutional power in the West, a bastion of white intellectual supremacy, and this power has been maintained by the exclusion from it of non-whites.

RANCIÈRE

The postmodern carnival was basically only ever a smokescreen hiding the transformation of the second modernism into an “ethics” that is no longer a softened and socialized version of the aesthetic promise of emancipation, but its pure and simple inversion.

[The table is completely cleared. The check has been on the table for hours. The server stands trying to interrupt in order collect the tab. The restaurant transforms to the scene of breakfast as a Monday morning in Berlin begins. The music inside the ballroom has stopped while a few lingering partiers laugh quietly in the doorway.]

ROGOFF

Returning to the earlier discussion about biennials as the new global white cube, do you know there are now 146 biennial exhibitions around the world? These have become a circuit of investigation, exchange and conversation that bypass the traditional centers of art and culture such as New York, Paris, London, Moscow, Berlin, etcetera. Instead we have been witnessing an intriguing mode of exchange and investigation emerging from these combinations of detailed local specificity, site specific to the exhibition, like Documenta 11 in Kassel, and the desire to illuminate some similar set of

conditions elsewhere, like the four other platforms of Documenta 11, located on four continents in St. Lucia, Lagos, New Delhi, Vienna and Berlin.

FILOPOVIC

I would say that contemporary large-scale exhibitions no longer present finished masterpieces. Instead, they display the visible relationships between the curator-as-author, the exhibiting institution, and the artist-as-performer in the world of media and cultural traces. Specific kinds of productive relations within society, which have historically determined every paradigm of the large-scale exhibition as well as the art world in general, cause this to occur. A high modernist fetishization of the art object determined the white cube. From the beginning, the Venice Biennale was founded on models of identity endemic to a nationalistic bourgeois society as well as the synthesis of representative “national” arts. Conversely, a system of rapid changes in the artistic and cultural fashions of late capitalism shaped Documenta from its outset.

HOST

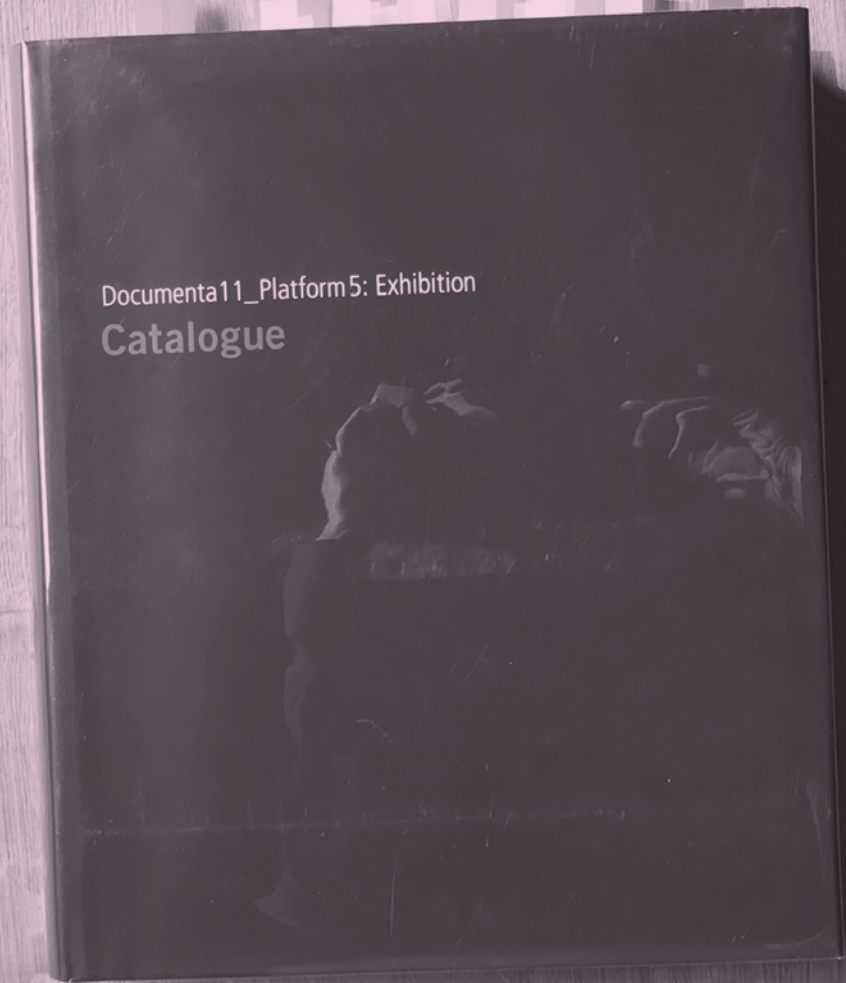
Let’s not forget, at the same time the large-scale biennials you discussed here, came to prominence, many new initiatives in art and institutions have emerged at non-Western institutions around the globe that examine colonial histories. Townhouse Gallery in Cairo, Spring Sessions in Amman, and SALT in Istanbul, to name only a few, employ long-term programmatic strategies to address questions around colonialism, the nation state, and immigration. Further to that argument, contrary to the highly-visible perennial exhibitions in Kassel, Gwangju, Istanbul, Venice, and Münster, many less-high-profile programs and activities in contemporary art in cities such as Algiers, Johannesburg, Mexico City, New York, Paris, São Paulo, and Shanghai have emerged,

even in the past ten years, that demonstrate a long-term commitment to critiquing issues around colonialism as an integral part of their ongoing institutional structures.

And so, as we begin to historicize the art of the 1990s and early 2000s and grapple with its genealogy, we realize the need to continually question the viability of these critical forms—like Documenta 11—and march toward new ones. As we finish here, I think we should not forget that art has the capacity to change the appearance of things and, in turn, the perspective of spectators, and that is what gives it political potential.

[The group pays the tab and exits slowly into an afternoon in Berlin.]

END



Citations

Quotations from the cited authors are respectfully included in this script in slightly altered form to dovetail with the conversational tone of the text. It should be noted that their texts have been changed to accommodate this format; citations of the original texts and page numbers are included below for reference.

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*Part of the Host’s introduction to *Magiciens de la Terre* sourced from Pablo Lafuente, “Introduction: From the Outside in *Magiciens de la Terre* and Two Histories of Exhibitions,” in *Making Art Global (Part 2): Magiciens de la Terre*, (London: Afterall, 2013): 11

Cast

in order of appearance

JAMES VOORHIES (BORN UNITED STATES, 1970),
CURATOR, ART HISTORIAN, AND PROFESSOR OF
CONTEMPORARY ART, AS HOST

YOMNA OSMAN (BORN EGYPT), MA VISUAL
CRITICAL STUDIES/MA CURATORIAL PRACTICE
2020, AS OKWUI ENWEZOR (BORN NIGERA,
1963), CURATOR, WRITER, AND EDUCATOR

JUDIT NAVRATIL (BORN HUNGARY), MFA 2019,
AS UTE META BAUER (BORN GERMANY, 1958),
CURATOR AND PROFESSOR OF CONTEMPORARY ART

EFE OZMEN (BORN TURKEY), MFA 2019, AS
ELENA FILIPOVIC (BORN UNITED STATES,
1972), CURATOR AND ART HISTORIAN

PRESTON FOX (BORN UNITED STATES), MFA
2019, AS IRIT ROGOFF (BORN ENGLAND, 1963),
WRITER, THEORIST AND CURATOR

MADDIE KLETT (BORN UNITED STATES), MA
CURATORIAL PRACTICE 2018, AS SYLVESTER
OKWUNODU OGBECHIE (BORN NIGERIA), ART
HISTORIAN AND CRITIC

JILLIAN CROCHET (BORN UNITED STATES), MFA
2019, AS JACQUES RANCIÈRE (BORN FRANCE,
1940), PHILOSOPHER

PALIJA SHRESTHA (BORN NEPAL), MFA 2019,
AS GAYATRI SPIVAK (BORN INDIA, 1948),

LITERARY THEORIST AND FEMINIST CRITIC

BIANCA MORAN (BORN UNITED STATES), MA
CURATORIAL PRACTICE 2019, AS RASHEED
ARAEEN (BORN PAKISTAN, 1935), ARTIST AND
WRITER

YOKO TAHARA (BORN JAPAN), MFA 2020, AS
PABLO LAFUENTE (BORN SPAIN, 1976), WRITER,
EDITOR, AND CURATOR

Images

Meschac Gaba, *Museum of Contemporary African Art:
The Library* (2001–2002), Documenta 11, Kassel

Andreja Kulunčič, *Distributive Justice* (2001),
Documenta 11, Kassel

Meschac Gaba, *Museum of Contemporary African Art:
Humanist Space* (2002), Documenta 11, Kassel

Thomas Hirschhorn, *Bataille Monument* (2002)
Documenta 11, Kassel

Yam Dreaming (1989) by the Yuendumu community in
Australia (foreground) and *Red Earth Circle* (1989) by
Richard Long (background), Magiciens de la Terre, Paris

House (1989) by Esther Mahlangu, Magiciens de la
Terre, Paris

SALT Research (2017), Istanbul

Townhouse Gallery (2008), Cairo



FOUNDED BY JAMES VOORHIES IN 2007, BUREAU FOR OPEN CULTURE IS A COMBINED CURATORIAL PRACTICE, PHILOSOPHY AND STRATEGY THAT INHABITS AND CONNECTS WITH INSTITUTIONS AND PUBLISHERS TO REALIZE PROJECTS WITH ARTISTS AND WRITERS. THE PROJECTS FORGE INTERSECTIONS AMONG ART, DESIGN, EDUCATION, AND CONSUMER CULTURE WHILE RETHINKING AND PUSHING AGAINST THE WAY ART INSTITUTIONS ADDRESS AND ENGAGE THEIR AUDIENCES. BUREAU FOR OPEN CULTURE IS A COLLABORATION WITH DESIGNER NATE PADAVICK.

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Binding Agents

Toward an Aesthetic of the Postcolonial in Contemporary Exhibition

COURSE DESCRIPTION

Bracketed mostly between the first documenta of the new millennium curated by the first non-Western director, Okwui Enwezor, in 2002, and the trifecta of documenta 14, Skulptur Projekte Münster, and the Venice Biennale in 2017, *Binding Agents: Toward an Aesthetic of the Postcolonial in Contemporary Exhibition* parses activity in exhibitions, institutions, and publications around the globe in order to define and analyze situations wherein the contemporary art world of the West has influenced an aesthetic of the postcolonial. Students are introduced and become familiar with a discourse surrounding a selection of international exhibitions, institutions, and publications that articulates and traces situations in art over the past two or more decades where postcolonialism is increasingly aestheticized, from the art presented at major international exhibitions to the work seen at smaller institutions and informal arts initiatives. The course collects this nuanced and complicated material into a synthesized whole within the context of the discourse studied in this course in order to critically assess it, ultimately seeking to generate better clarity about the impact of globalization on contemporary art and exhibition.

ST. LUCIA