

Okwui Enwezor

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- ¹ In the first issue of the magazine *Nka: Journal of Contemporary African Art*, which he founded in 1994, in New York, Okwui Enwezor opened his preface with these words: “One of the problematic aspects of visiting museums, art galleries, and other sites of cultural valuation, in Europe and in the United States, is the pervasive absence in these highly policed environments, of art by contemporary African artists. Not only are the works of these artists (many of whom have been working for the past half century) conspicuously absent of the museum and gallery environment, they’ve also been accorded little attention of significance in academic art historical practices, university curriculums, print media, or other organs of such reportage”.¹ Twenty-four years on, we can unhesitatingly say that the landscape described by Okwui Enwezor has been

deeply changed by a person who defines himself, first and foremost, as a poet. In publishing and in curatorial and museum posts (director of the Haus der Kunst between 2011 and 2018), as well as in academe (dean of academic affairs and vice-president of the San Francisco Art Institute between 2005 and 2009), Okwui Enwezor questions from the inside the effect that “alternating currents” (from the title given to one of the shows at the second Johannesburg Biennial which he jointly directed in 1997) have on a globalized art world.² In choosing to free up boundaries, he produces shifts between identities. Africa is plural, ancestral and rich. It is also exploited, looted and colonized. The African art being championed is that of a continent, a displacement, a diaspora. The place of migration, at the heart of his own history (Okwui Enwezor was born in Calabar, in Nigeria, in 1963, and arrived in New York aged 18), enables him to create links with the many different careers of the artists he works with. What he has established for African art has been established for all the world’s other cultures, because the barrages have finally given way; just as, little by little and probably forever, despite varying resistance, there has been an upheaval in all the predominant Euro-centric paradigms, thanks, in particular, to the assertion of an institutional platform being offered, as a priority, to artists.

- 2 At a sublime exhibition of Frank Bowling’s work which he organized in autumn 2017 at the Haus der Kunst, seeing an exquisitely elegant Okwui Enwezor walking through the corridors of the Munich museum created a strange feeling, where admiration mingled with the anxiety of imagining such responsibility. Was this not the same ground that was trodden on eighty years ago by an Adolf Hitler visiting *Entartete Kunst* in that colossal building erected for the needs of sordid Nazi megalomania? The emotion at what has been accomplished for contemporary art in just a few decades is abetted, counterpart-like, by stupor in front of a Europe linking back up with its racist past. The title given to the Venice Biennale which Okwui Enwezor directed in 2015 was *All the World’s Futures*. The plural of this future is significant.

NOTES

1. Enwezor, Okwui. “Redrawing the boundaries, toward a new African art discourse”, *Nka: Journal of Contemporary African Art*, n°1, Autumn-Winter 1994, p. 3

2. See in particular, for publications, *Reading the Contemporary: African Art from Theory to the Marketplace* (edited by Okwui Enwezor and Olu Oguibe), Cambridge, London : MIT Press ; the Institute for International Visual Arts : London, 1999; Enwezor, Okwui. Okeke-Agulu, Chika. *Contemporary African Art Since 1980*, Bologna : Damiani, 2009 ; and catalogues, *The Short Century: Independence and Liberation Movements in Africa 1945-1994*, Munich: Prestel, 2001, *Snap Judgments: New Positions in Contemporary African Photography*, New York, Göttingen: ICP/Steidl, 2006.

Among international events outside the United States, see the 2nd Johannesburg Biennial (1997), Documenta 11, Kassel (2002), the Biennial of Contemporary Art in Seville (2006), the Gwangju Biennial (2008), the Triennale d’art contemporain in Paris (2012), and the Venice Biennale (2015).