

Documenta 11 Takes On Masters of the Universe

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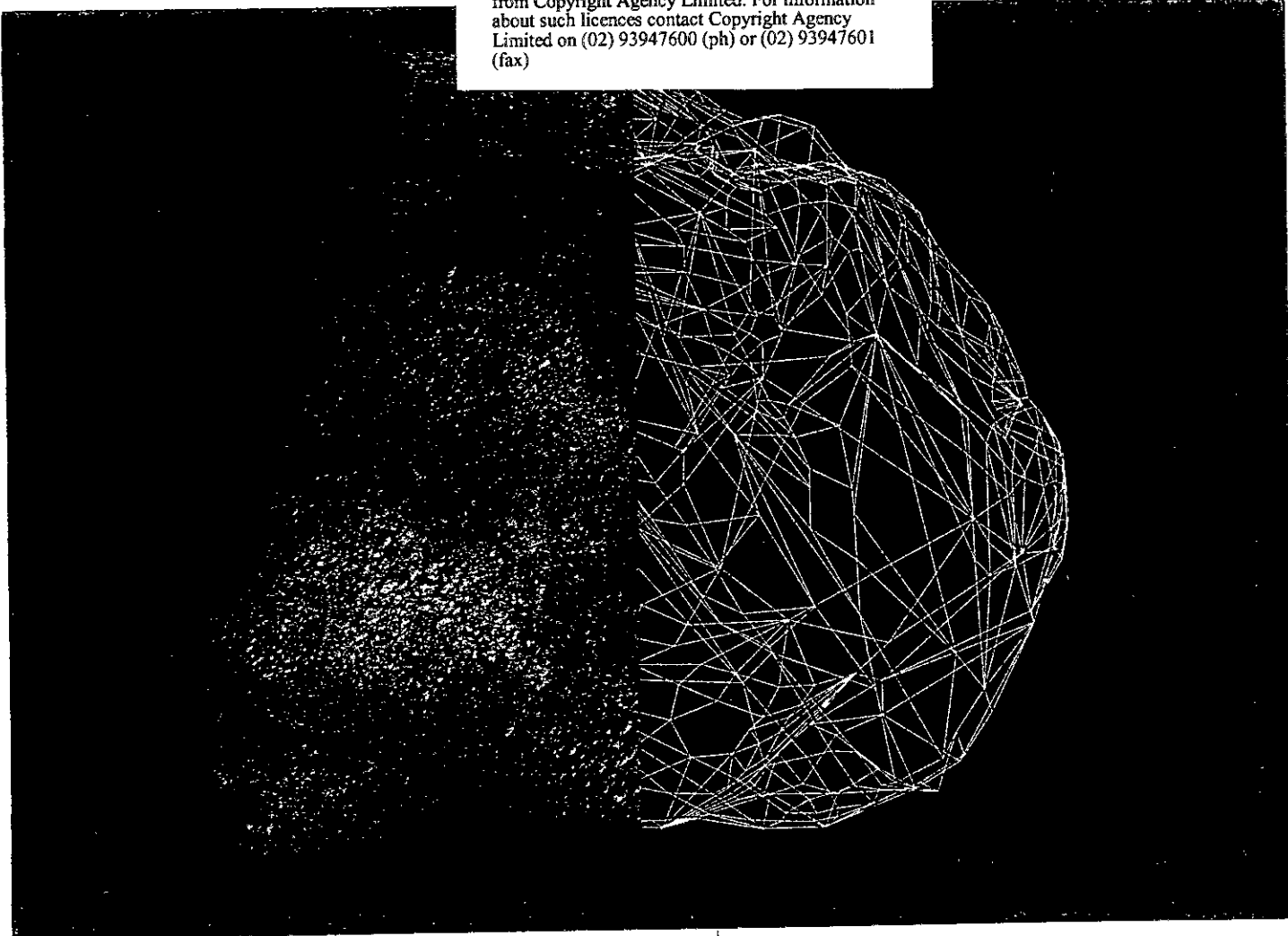
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David McNeill

Documenta 11 takes on masters of the universe

Every five years the sleepy little German town of Kassel is invaded by the international art world. As a venue for the presentation of current art trends, the *Documenta* exhibitions that are staged here have traditionally played second fiddle only to the *Venice Biennale*, which has tenaciously hung on to its reputation as the oldest and most prestigious of all the large artfests. However, *Documenta 11* has generated more interest, and staked a more rigorous claim for serious attention, than the last *Venice Biennale*, which was, by comparison, somewhat sprawling and directionless.

This year's event was eagerly anticipated as the first genuinely postcolonial *Documenta*, due in large part to the appointment of the expatriate Nigerian curator Okwui Enwezor as Artistic Director. As if this was not enough, it was also the first large-scale survey exhibition to deal comprehensively with artistic responses to '9/11'.

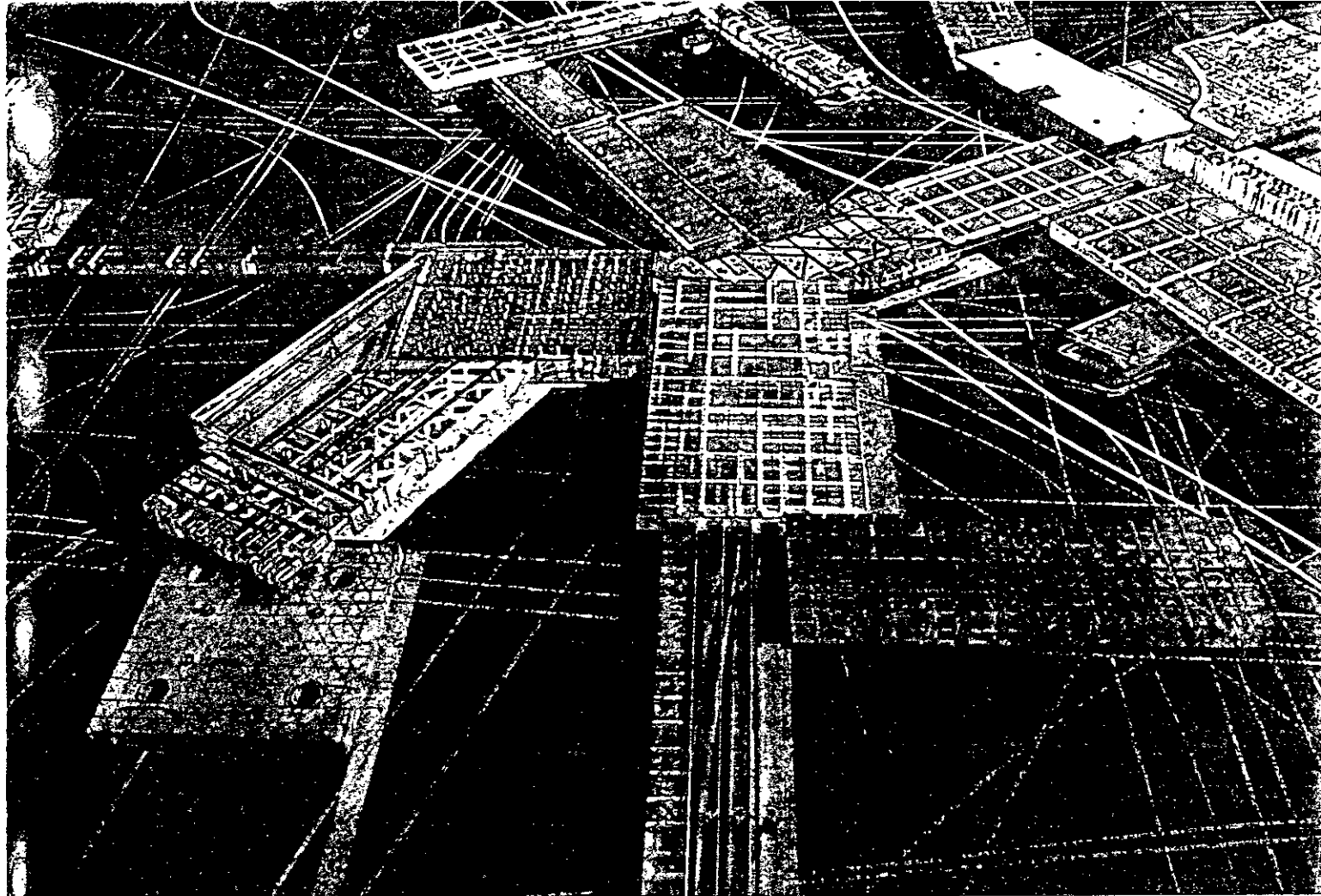
Not surprisingly, Enwezor (and his co-workers Sarat Maharaj, Mark Nash, Susanne Ghez, Octavia Zaya, Uta Meta Bauer and Carlos Basualdo) selected a considerable number of African artists for the show. He quite deliberately and provocatively mobilises the metaphor of the 'migrant worker' in Europe to underline his critique of an artworld still largely controlled along a Euro-American axis. The exhibition is offered as a kind of 'invasion' mirroring the increasing

cultural proximity frequently cited as a symptom of 'globalisation'. Indeed 'globalisation' serves as the organising theme of the exhibition which was itself only the culminating event of a year-long program of conferences, or 'platforms', which took place in Vienna (*Democracy Unrealised*), New Delhi (*Truth and Reconciliation*), St Lucia (*Creolisation*) and Lagos (*African Cities and Urbanisation*).

To describe this constellation of events as ambitious is something of an understatement and it is fair to assume that the exhibition itself, and the collateral publications from the conferences, will produce significant reverberations in the international artworld for some time to come.

In fact, this process has started already. A number of reviewers from the United States have expressed reservations about *Documenta 11*. These range from the charges that it is dour and humourless and overly 'documentary' to reservations about a perceived prejudice in favour of the Palestinian cause.

Such charges may be baseless but it is not difficult to see why they have been levelled. The exhibition comprehensively and relentlessly challenges North American (and European) hegemony over artistic taste and commerce, and, beyond that, it offers a timely reflection of international concerns over an increasingly belligerent U.S. foreign policy.



Thus, to a rare extent, this *Documenta* will be judged along lines that are predominantly political. If you detest the aggressive fundamentalism of George W. Bush you will love it; if you support the 'New Crusades' the show will be anathema.

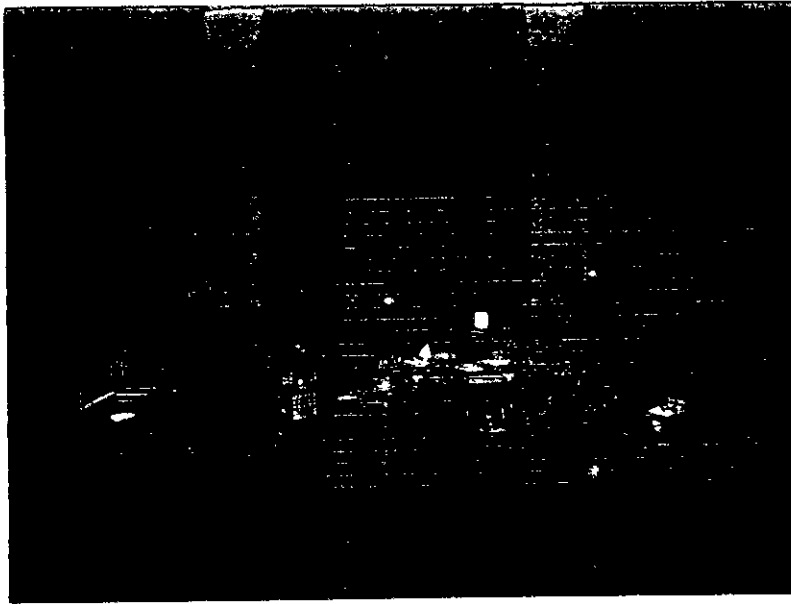
Through his choice of works and the ways in which they are hung, Enwezor appears to be presenting the following argument. With U.S. dominance of the post-war art scene, a fragile but established nexus between the avant-garde and progressive politics was effectively severed, and this separation then folds back into European art practice. *Documenta* offers a clarion call for some kind of reunification of art and politics, led by artists without strong allegiances to the Euro-American mainstream. If one approaches the exhibition without this premise in mind, a number of the European inclusions make little sense. For example, works such as Hanne Darboven's interminable mathematical sequences, and the Bechers' rather dull photographic archives are presented as exemplars of instrumental rationalism.

They serve as a control against which the different intensities of the postcolonial contributions can be measured and contrasted.

As a case in point, Isa Genzken's neo-modernist 'skyscraper' maquettes are presented in proximity to the effusive urban models of the Congolese artist Bodys Isek Kingelez. Two rival utopian visions are juxtaposed, one that recalls the social engineering impetus of international modernism, and the other founded in a carnivalesque profusion of form and colour. Here, as elsewhere, however, Enwezor's presentation complicates any simple 'us versus them' binary. The exhibition also includes many architectural models from the 'New Babylon' project conceived in the sixties by the Dutch COBRA artist Constant. This huge labour of love is his attempt to model entire cities designed to facilitate the *dérive*, or purposeless and leisurely stroll, advocated by his colleagues in the 'Situationist' group.

Enwezor's exhibition is characterised by such evocative hanging and in the majority of cases it works well. If I may be allowed one minor cavil, the association of Colombian artist Doris Salcedo's uncanny installation of stainless steel and lead chairs (*Tenebrae*, *Noviembre 7* and *Noviembre 6*) with Leon Golub's large canvases of brutal police thugs does no service to either artist. Despite the common theme (they both deal with the 'disappeared' and other casualties of political violence in Latin America) the subtle 'affective' resonances of Salcedo's work are largely lost in competition with Golub's 'in your face' social realism. The Brazilian Cildo Meireles addresses the same theme in a work that many may have missed. Outside the principal venue, the neo-classical

FACING PAGE: Fareed Armaly with Rashid Masharawi *From/To* (detail) 2002, digitised stone, model for installation at Documenta Halle, Kassel, Courtesy Fareed Armaly and Documenta11. ABOVE: Constant *Group of Sectors*, 1959, iron, copper, ink on plexiglass, oil on wood, 4.5 x 100 x 100 cm, collection Gemeentemuseum, The Hague. Photo Bram Wisman.



Fridericianum, there were a number of vendors selling iced lollies from small commercial carts. However, the lollies were simply frozen fresh or salt water, and as they melted they revealed the inscription of the work's title – *Disappeared Element* – on the sticks.

If a single work could be chosen as emblematic of the show as a whole, it would probably be the Palestinian artist Fareed Armaly's *From/To* – an elaborate multi-media installation that filled several rooms at one of the four main sites, the *Documenta-Halle*. *From/To* employs videos, slide projections, static displays, computers and film to document the occupation of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip back to 1972. The work is unsettling, and one wishes everyone who has ever passed judgement on the Palestinian cause could view it. It is configured on a ground-plan derived from a digital scan of a single stone which represents both the basic 'unit' of the contested land, and the traditional weapon with which the Palestinians defend themselves against Israeli

assault rifles. In a similar vein, the 'prickly pear' cactus is used as a recurring visual trope since it is claimed, for its metaphorical value, by both sides. For the Israelis the cactus is 'hard on the outside but soft inside', apparently like themselves, and for the Palestinians, the stubbornly resilient plant serves as a reminder of their prior occupation. This installation is moving because of its almost seamless integration of both aesthetic and didactic ambitions and it therefore gives substance to Enwezor's desire for a new political agenda.

Walid Ra'ad's *Atlas Group* deals with Middle Eastern politics in a more parodic manner, displaying documents from a fictional archive, purportedly chronicling the history of the Lebanese civil wars but revealing only the local historians' penchant for horse-racing and placing wagers on photo-finishes. A succession of images of the race finish-line attest to the impossibility of capturing 'the moment' – either of the horse's win or, more ominously, of the historical event. Another work, comprising collaged pictures and scrawled annotations, documents the types of automobiles and explosives used in Lebanese car bombings. And in a riotously funny video, a local kidnapping survivor describes his ordeal with particular emphasis on the strange behaviour of the American hostages held with him in captivity.

Works dealing with refugees and diasporic communities feature prominently. Chantel Akerman documents the policing of the US/Mexican border and Isaac Julien's film, *Paradise Omeros*, continues his ongoing desire to pay homage to significant anti-colonial theorists and writers, in this instance Derek Walcott who makes a cameo appearance. The film uses triple split-screen projection to evoke the experience of Caribbean communities in the UK. The Italian collective, *Multiplicity*, presents a multi-screen video installation that describes the tragic drowning of a boatload of illegal immigrants in the Mediterranean. The work features interviews and shots of the wreck, filmed by a robot camera. Australian viewers would have been moved by resonances with the *Tampa* incident.

Yinka Shonibare continues his work with colourful European trade cloth. His family of astronauts shown at the last *Venice Biennale* is a hard act to top but he manages to do it with a large installation, parodying the eighteenth century grand tour with the travellers having sex in most of the better known positions. Here, as always, his point is that the industrial revolution was built on the profits made from the slave trade.

TOP: Mona Hatoum *Homebound* 2000, installation, mixed media, dimensions variable, courtesy Jay Jopling/White Cube, London / Alexander and Bonin, New York. **LEFT:** Steve McQueen *Western Deep* 2002, film still 8mm/DVD, colour, sound, 25 min, courtesy Marian Goodman Gallery, New York/Paris commissioned by Artangel and Documenta11. **FACING PAGE TOP:** Bodys Isek Kingelez *Kimbebele Ihunga - Kimbeville* 1994, balsa, cardboard, paper, plastic, inks, C.A.A.C.-The Pigozzi Collection, Geneva. **BOTTOM:** Yinka Shonibare *Gallantry and Criminal Conversation* 2002, detail/partial view of installation, horse carriage, suitcase, 11 life-size mannequins, costumes, courtesy Stephen Friedman Gallery, London, photo Richard Kasiewicz.

Homebound, an installation by Mona Hatoum, turns an innocent domestic interior into a menacing prison cell surrounded by an electrified fence, and the South Africans Kendell Geers and David Goldblatt both document the barriers protecting white privilege in the fortress suburbs of Johannesburg.

The availability of relatively inexpensive video projection has impacted on international art remarkably over the past decade and *Documenta 11* is not immune to the ongoing ascendancy of the format. Indeed, the exhibition suggests that video is becoming even more cinematic with many of the contributions lasting as long as some of the feature movies which were also included. Three days at Kassel was still not long enough to sit through all of the works by Trinh T. Minh-Ha, Amar Kanwar, Stan Douglas, Eyal Sivan and The Black Audio Film Collective. It is perhaps not surprising that a number of visitors and reviewers have complained rather petulantly about a failure to respect the distinction between an art exhibition and a film festival, but this disrespect is entirely consistent in a show which sets out to blur borders of all kinds.

Steve McQueen's *Western Deep* which documents the working conditions in a South African gold mine has attracted considerable critical attention. Its stylised 'claustrophobic' editing and soundtrack effectively captured a descent into hell. *The Four Seasons of Veronica Reed* by the Turkish artist Kutlug Ataman was also a standout. It recorded the musings of an English plant breeder whose obsessive quest for perfection was expressed in a language redolent of racism and eugenics. Each 'season' unfolded on a separate screen and, against the odds, it was extremely entertaining and amusing.

Documenta 11, then, continued and expanded on the political emphasis of its predecessor (curated by Catherine David), but its historical moment is marked by a different constellation of issues. The intense North-South debates surrounding globalisation, racism, the environment, the rise of 'post-fascism', the increasingly brutal treatment of refugee groups, and the Western anti-Islamic hysteria generated by '9/11', have all conspired to make David's homage to the politics of 1968 look, in retrospect, quaint and provincial. Enwezor attempts to make some sense of this new world by showcasing art that deals with real inequalities of wealth, justice, and opportunity. Further, his insistence on presenting this art under conditions that proclaim the fluid and porous nature of established categories and boundaries and the necessary interconnectedness of all cultural practice, diasporic or otherwise, is entirely appropriate to these volatile and uncertain times. ☞

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