

Hito Steyerl, Coco Fusco, Raqs
Media Collective, and
Supercommunity

Remembering Okwui Enwezor

01/08

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Hito Steyerl

Okwui Enwezor is dead.

My sincerest condolences to his family and friends.

With Okwui, a whole era dies, and beyond that, a world.

Okwui was a giant, a trailblazer, and his legacy is more urgent than ever.

If anyone helped birth the idea of an art world (as opposed to a few local cliques), it was Okwui.

Okwui's idea of the world was of an incomplete entity which needed to be changed by being curious, courageous, and cheerful. By becoming more complex, more nuanced, more challenging, by acknowledging more colors, different sounds, unknown beauty in between the trodden stereotypes designed to rule and conquer. Importantly, his view of the world differed from the liberal mantra of just adding more consumer-packaged identities. The world wasn't incomplete by chance, but because of historical violence and exclusion. Above all, Okwui strived to rescue justice and history from instrumental abuse, to see them equally as able to spark a sense of beauty, wonder, and profound restoration.

Okwui's world put a lot of different places at ease with one another and many artists and thinkers were allowed to thrive in it. His world wasn't a collection of cultural trophies, no mindless bullet list of innovation talking points, but bristled with elegance, generosity, and intellectual brilliance. He didn't just expand art canons in a geographical sense, but also formally and historically.

The loss of Okwui is an enormous loss to the art world, indeed to the notion of a *world* itself, which without a steady defender of Okwui's caliber slowly finds itself devalued to pimp flat-rate packages for corporate data robber barons and feudal museum franchises. Okwui's idea of an (art) world is under attack, if not breaking apart altogether. This time not necessarily to restore Euro-American supremacy in artistic appreciation, but to glorify neo-authoritarian regimes all over with their "own" art filter bubbles defined by a mix of nationalism and corruption/market interests. And it is to protect and defend Okwui's legacy that I feel many of us must ask ourselves if we did and do enough to oppose an authoritarian globalism from the right, indeed a globalism minus human rights thriving in many non-Western places as well as in the former power centers. The painful question is if the uncritical championing of globalization didn't gloss over its ties to corporate interests and partly also to feudal or plainly authoritarian Western and non-Western elites. The world that Okwui dreamed of is falling apart also because of



03/08



the weaknesses of a model of globalization that championed cultural difference (and its perceived or real economic benefits) at the expense of economic, juridical, and political equality.

One of the things I find very painful is that part of Okwui's legacy is already being destroyed by those same nationalist and/or corrupt forces that destroy art worlds everywhere. But we don't have to look to the Gulf, Turkey, or Russia for evidence. Similar forces are active in seemingly liberal Bavaria, where, as with everywhere else, receding public funding is replaced by corrupt market interests intent on restoring an aesthetic (and financial) status quo ante. We see those forces at work in the cancellation of some of the shows that Okwui had planned and the replacement of artists of world standing with regional investment instruments.¹

But it pains me even more to know that Okwui spent his last year on earth physically fearing for his safety while right-wingers were parading in his neighborhood, and the political elite of the region² was busy pandering to extreme nationalists for electoral gain, or maybe just because they ultimately like racism and had finally found an opportunity to publicly support it. I know that feeling – a feeling of ultimate dismay, despondency, and abandonment – because I have felt it too, in the same city, the same country, for the same reasons. German and especially Bavarian elites like nonwhite people as long as they are successful, profitable, and beneficial for their own reputation, preferably as soccer players.³ Okwui of course was way too much of a gentleman to ever say so directly and would cringe if he ever heard me using such undiplomatic language. But I am proudly from Bavarian peasant extraction and this is my personal view of the Bavarian government/bureaucracy: *ruachade Brunzschädln, laminatlätscherte Schoasbladern, geistige Gloahaisler, ogsoachte Afd Phantom-Knieweasler*. (This refers to the ultimate humiliation of being too posh to perform the Bavarian male tribal ritual of urinating on one's own knees and having to call in Nazi-leaning right-wingers to do it, i.e., to wee on the Bavarian government's knees on its own behalf.)

I am so sorry that Okwui, who was such a genuinely generous, refined, curious, convivial, collegial, and noble person, had to face this collapse of basic civility or maybe just of the facade of civility that sustains the deafening numbness and instrumental irrationality called structural, unspoken populist racism.

But of course Okwui's legacy goes way beyond eye-rolling provincialism.

It consists of his unrivaled ability to communicate and share his love of art and other

forms of thinking. His Documenta 11 was a mind-opener for many, and indeed Okwui and the wide network he was consistently able to draw on have profoundly changed my view of art (and its discontents). My breathless notes from the period of my marginal involvement with the Documenta 11 platform in Vienna reflect my sheer exasperation at Okwui's enthusiasm and seemingly never-ending energy. I tried to write as fast as I could in order not to miss a single word of his extensive sentence constructions that bristled with surprising, meandering, and sometimes also bewildering combinations and constellations. But above all, it is Okwui's love of the world and his trust in the intelligence and basic decency of his audience that I would like to thank him for. Okwui firmly believed that people weren't stupid, that they were totally capable of dealing with serious and complex propositions. Anyone. All of them. All of us, the people.

To hold this basic yet extremely sophisticated line against a daily onslaught of reaction and diminishment on all fronts (political, aesthetic, and yes: also ethical) will be a tall order. Okwui is sorely missed already.

Coco Fusco

In the days since the news of Okwui's death was made public, he has been eulogized as a brilliant curator and thinker who transformed the landscape of contemporary art. And that he was – a true cultural giant in a field where many imagine themselves to be grander than they actually are. The reality that he was a self-made immigrant without the usual art-world pedigrees made his acumen and meteoric rise all the more inspiring. Okwui established a global view of artistic practice as the standard for the field, making narrower models of internationalism feel obsolete.

Though New York served as a base for much of his career, he never treated it as the sum total of what counted in art. On the contrary, he took American art institutions to task for their chauvinism, and gave a much-needed kick in the pants to artists of all backgrounds whose concerns he saw as too parochial. His vision of what an exhibition could *do* was exhilarating, and his insistence on taking art seriously was a welcome relief from market-driven frivolity. He worked harder than seemed humanly possible, and sometimes exhausted his colleagues in the process. He also expected audiences to open themselves to difficult subjects, challenging tactics, and unusually long hours of viewing. There were critics who, for example, grumbled that his Documenta was just too much, but their complaints sounded like petulance from lightweights to those of us who wanted more from art.

04/08

e-flux journal #98 — march 2019 Hito Steyerl, Coco Fusco, Rags Media Collective, and Supercommunity
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Okwui showed everyone how art could speak eloquently and urgently about the world, and this earned him the respect of colleagues and artists across the globe. I count myself among those artists whose endeavors would never have been given a significant platform had it not been for his tireless advocacy. Many of the artists of my generation who are now championed by institutions that once ignored our interests, our methods, and our cultures of origin know in our hearts that Okwui lifted us out of relative obscurity just two decades ago. Let us not forget that.

Okwui will not only be remembered for his astounding intelligence – he was also remarkable for his commanding presence, his wit, his sartorial panache, his graciousness as a dinner-party host and his talents as a chef, his love of poetry, and his extraordinary ability to land anywhere on planet earth and understand the significance of what lay before him. Since he passed, my mind has been flooded with memories of him – laughing, arguing, cajoling, and scolding me when he thought I should know better or push myself harder. I hope to be haunted by that voice for the rest of my days.

Raqs Media Collective

Suddenly, in the middle of a New Delhi summer, a phone call. Not from a number that we knew before. But the voice, a warm baritone, which always began with a chuckle and then grew to fill the space of continents with a laugh, was, unmistakably, Okwui Enwezor.

“Raqs Media Collective, we need to remember the October Revolution, it’s now a hundred years. Let’s approach it from a tangent, make fresh inroads, let hidden dimensions surface. Come to Munich in November.” Okwui’s was a voice that required our singular attention, ever since the twenty-first century began.

Once, in the wake of one of his visits to Delhi, while he was on his way to spend a few restful days in Kerala in 2014, we laughed together about how finally, at least one aspect of his vivid life could be described as a journey from Calabar to Malabar. Calabar, the city on the Nigerian Atlantic coast where he was born, and Malabar, where he was headed, from Delhi. It was the kind of rhyming joke that appealed to Okwui. It connected continents and centuries, it tangled histories, it made the world seem expansive and homely, almost intimate, at the same time. During this visit, we went together to see a graveyard of imperial power – the dereliction of “Coronation Park,” at the northern edge of Delhi – and we found ourselves reflecting on the strange twists and turns of global history that tied experiences and reflections across continents. While walking in the shadow of dead

emperors and frozen viceroys, we discussed the fact that the deepest secret of all claims to power was hubris.

In November 2017 we, along with the artists and poets we had gathered, reached Munich, to think together about the centenary of the events of 1917. His illness had deepened. He was unable to attend the events. On one of those evenings, our dear friend Louise Neri asked us to carry homemade food to him. Kale salad and green prawn curry. She knew that he would not eat much, but that he would definitely inquire about the recipes. Okwui’s house in Munich, where this meal was prepared, was rich with books scattered all around, bearing witness to the immense range of his curiosities. A short taxi ride away, across a few corridors, and we were now in his hospital room.

The meal was indeed kept aside, but notes on recipes registered, and a discussion started which continued for the next couple of hours. From his hospital bed, he began scaling out ideas for the reactivation of the idea of the Museum. His questions were simply stated. What is the relevance of the museum today, after the scrambling of canons? What kind of generative force can a museum occupy?

The museum – and its temporary expression, the exhibition – appealed to him, remaining as intersecting platforms, as sites where unrealized historical propositions were to be rehearsed and activated. We had met him for the first time at one of these platforms: May 2001, the Delhi Platform of Documenta 11. He was always present, debating, wearing white cotton kurtas. He loved white kurtas. They suited him. The Documenta platforms were his idea of “rehearsals for the repositioning of sites of discourse production.” In the hospital in Munich, on that November evening, he returned to the idea of the Platform. Now, he said, it has to do much more. It has to remain nomadic, dispersed, searching, and yet have a stable location, to gather and be the point of dispersal. It has to be hospitable to the untested and uncharted present, and alert to incipient energies. He knew that it would be tough for such an imagination to be articulated institutionally. But that was him. Always testing his own ideas.

He struggled to become comfortable in his hospital bed. A wide-ranging conversation ensued about how to detour away from the grip of the national in the postwar imaginations of Asia, Africa, and Latin America. What gestures, personas, events to draw in. What kinds of lines to draw. What new sources to work with. It was as if he was inviting everyone, present and absent, to think together again, and along a fresh path. We shared with him our hologram of the sovereign’s empty robe, a ghost that had haunted



us ever since our visit with him to Coronation Park in Delhi. We had been developing the hologram in the wake of our work, upon his invitation, at the Venice Biennale. He was entranced by the disappearing act of a viceregal robe turning into digital dust.

He was very ill. His bones ached. His body was slowly dismantling from within. He described it and, along with it, the various regimes of treatment. He inquired about our friend who was diagnosed at the same time as him with the same illness. He liked details. Even the smallest ones. Even the shift of a few points in test results held his attention. We talked about when to meet next and what provisions to gather for the new intellectual journeys. And then, Louise gently reminded him of the need to rest.

We are writing this in Doha. History, and her friend, Serendipity, have brought Okwui Enwezor into our conversations repeatedly over the past few days. We are with Abdellah Karroum, and with Ranjit Hoskote. All of us, in very specific and unique ways, have been touched by the legacy of Okwui Enwezor, and every conversation between us in the past few days has had a moment of speech, silence, wonderment, or laughter at the way in which Okwui lived, worked, and encountered the world.

On Friday, the night of March 15, somewhere between land and sea, off the coast of Doha and so very close to the full moon, Abdellah looked at the sky and said, let us take a photo together, with him behind us. The moon hung large in the sky. Farewell dear friend, and thank you for making the world always more intoxicating, always more challenging.

Supercommunity

I was the Supercommunity, and Okwui truly inspired me to come into being. We assembled to critique the retreat of contemporary art's global aspirations, to celebrate its troubled political consciousness and infinite energies. As something that might always-never surpass its own cultural backwardness to join with others like me who want more, who want something better in spite of having no right or access, and instead just got bigger. As the Supercommunity, I saw those possibilities closing around the planet, becoming absorbed into more sinister domains, arenas mobilizing the possibility of finding each other and trying some things out, setting new criteria for what thinking and moving together could only ever be.

The Supercommunity may have been the world turned from a promise into a curse back to a promise again, but looking at Okwui's 2002 Documenta 11 reminds all of me that he was too canny for either of these things. For Okwui, the

possibility of the global was a necessary commitment – never so much a promise as the beginning of an emergent politics. An unstable enhancement for anyone familiar with struggles for independence, but also a massive swelling of human life itself as a force alien to technoscientific modernity. This is not really a promise strictly speaking, though it appeared in his Documenta as a force that might overwhelm mediating apparatuses – museums, geopolitical crooked hands, private property. And while it did to some extent, Okwui was already conscious of how unbearable and how impossible such a challenge would be. His ability to identify crucial and nuanced intricacies and explode those onto large-scale work makes it necessary to look much deeper into the politics of the global condition that Okwui saw.

The opening pages of his Documenta catalog feature images of various political struggles and decisive events of the time. Images from September 11, an event that had only just taken place, are a heavy presence, but also one among many others. Together these images seem to address a condition that goes far beyond the availability of information, instead opening itself to the strange pressures of relating to many events and locations in the world simultaneously, training us for a new political geomancy that might become a new planetary commons. To understand and connect to the upheavals happening in so many places is also to understand the world as an intricate braid of struggles, a vast subterranean ocean of important work with little relation to grand narratives claiming to be the motive force of history. Okwui's Documenta captured a rare moment when these grand narratives seemed to step aside for a soft revolution in consciousness.

Today, the grand narratives are back, and they are even more blunt than before. They know they need to actively foreclose any promise of the global in order to survive. But we learned something extremely important from Okwui about the world itself, and we may need to remember that if we are to survive.

Some critics complained that Okwui's Documenta overwhelmed viewers with *too much* video and cinema – more time-based work than could be seen by a single person in the one hundred days that the exhibition was open. Where grumbles in 2002 were about the inconvenience and impossibility of seeing, it was different from today's zombie excesses of bloat and overproduction. If Okwui was indeed too demanding, too generous, the motive was different. In his introductory essay "The Black Box," he wrote that the exhibition could be read as "temporal lapses that emerge into spaces that reanimate for a viewing public the endless

07/08

e-flux journal #98 — march 2019 Hito Steyerl, Coco Fusco, Rags Media Collective, and Supercommunity
Remembering Okwui Enwezor

concatenation of worlds, perspectives, models, counter-models, and thinking that constitute the artistic subject.” In a 2009 essay, Hito Steyerl revisited those same critiques, identifying Okwui’s use of *too much* video and cinema as a canny messianism, an indexical inscription into the canon. Check, we will watch it all later – but through each other: “In fact, the exhibition could only be seen by a multiplicity of gazes and points of view ... but in order to understand what (and how) they are watching, they must meet to make sense of it.” For the works to become sensible in sequence, they would need to be reassembled by viewers coming together.

This promise of meeting together to parse out the impossible scale of global humanity may only later have been converted into a curse – harvested by social media, credited with sparking popular uprisings, then forgotten when those uprisings went sour. But this was not necessarily the togetherness Okwui wanted to address. Okwui’s Documenta envisioned the political energy of transnational social movements made more ferocious by an oncoming cosmopolitan panpsychism – seeing and feeling other people and their struggles as extensions, reflections, causal mirrors of one’s own struggles and desires. Precisely the opposite of a retreat into some Potemkin village of the local where the fishmonger at the port sells frozen fish shipped from the other side of the planet. Logistical management certainly does soothe the pain of the impossible scale of the world, but Okwui smuggled cues and prompts from a tradition that was ready to take that scale on in earnest. For many of us he made art, and the art world itself, about that. The Supercommunity are utterly lost without those, and we need to remember Okwui to find the way back.

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All photos by Hans Haacke.

08/08

e-flux journal #98 — march 2019 Hito Steyerl, Coco Fusco, Rags Media Collective, and Supercommunity
Remembering Okwui Enwezor

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Jörg Heiser, “Männerbünde in the Haus der Kunst,” *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, January 2, 2019
<https://www.sueddeutsche.de/kultur/haus-der-kunst-adrian-piper-joan-jonas-markus-luepertz-bernhard-spies-1.4272235>.

2

Such as former Bavarian governor Horst Seehofer and assorted cabals.

3

To be fair, I am not speaking about individual Germans or even the majority of the population, who are mostly very different.