Who’s It For?
The 2nd Johannesburg Biennale

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Budget problems and an antagonistic local press plagued the 2nd Johannesburg Biennale, resulting in the event’s unplanned, temporary closure over the Christmas break and the bankrupt city council sending early dismissal notices to the Biennale’s staff (which they are now negotiating). During the opening, many South African artists and audience members complained of the exhibition’s inaccessibility and lack of engagement with the community; one local newspaper went so far as to post on telephone poles around the city advertisements for its evening edition, asking in

The Fifth Istanbul Biennial, ‘On Life, Beauty, Translations and Other Difficulties’, was held in Istanbul from 5 October to 5 November 1997.

Okwui Enwezor. Photo: Hans Haacke
bold type, clearly legible to motorists speeding by: "Is the Biennale a Fraud?" By most international accounts, however, the Biennale was a great achievement, the first major exhibition to present contemporary African, Caribbean, South American and Asian artists as equals and, in the current wave of post-colonial studies, often the betters of their European colleagues: some people have heralded this Biennale as the most important show since the Centre Georges Pompidou's 1989 'Magiciens de la terre', or as the most important exhibition of this decade.

This division of opinion over the exhibition's success has been presented by certain Biennale supporters as a matter of bourgeois philistinism versus the progressive cultural politics of the art establishment. Xenophobia is on the rise in South Africa; so many resented the presence of Okwui Enwezor, a Nigerian based in New York, as artistic director. Furthermore, as in most countries, blockbuster Matisse exhibitions go over better with the general public than multicultural, politicised art events. However, the Biennale's hypothesis for its miserable lack of public support, that "... stress, the high crime rate and numerous other factors of the South African lifestyle have driven the public into the comfort zone of suburbia, television and the occasional rave" implies that its target 'public' was precisely that minority, bourgeois class that has arguably least investment in the cultural ideals of the exhibition. President Mandela recently chastised this group — "white society in general, including white politicians, business, the judiciary, the media and the church" — as still undemocratic at heart, i.e., unwilling to explain "its involvement in the maintenance and perpetuation of the apartheid system and therefore its lack of readiness to make its own voluntary contribution to the creation of a truly non-racist and non-sexist democracy."

With this in mind, and considering South Africa's symbolic significance as site for the hope and inspiration of millions of people around the world for a non-racial society, could the Biennale have targeted its audience differently? Could it have brought its international visitors — artists, curators and critics — in closer contact with the wider South African cultural scene, not just the Linda Goodman gallery, (the city's best known commercial gallery in which most of South Africa's more successful artists have shown), without reverting to the tokenism that some felt underlay the 1st Biennale's presentations of 'community art' centres? The 1st Biennale was also criticised for pandering to an international
audience in that it was more aesthetically than politically focused, or not thematically based upon South African history. The 2nd Biennale, on the other hand, dealt explicitly with issues of colonisation, race relations and identity in South Africa and elsewhere, and yet was accused of privileging an international audience all the same.

Despite a director’s best intentions, it seems very difficult to make Johannesburg an actual location, rather than a setting, for an international event of this scale, precisely because it’s a problem of class as well as race (to which class is intimately tied, almost everywhere). Hosting an international biennial in a nation with such a tiny leisure class merely emphasises the problems of exhibition practices existing in all countries: questions about “whose story is being told, whose history, whose religion, whose meaning, whose future”, not to mention who gets to participate in the making of institutionalised culture and which audience benefits and how. In many ways, the Johannesburg Biennale underscored the hopelessly bourgeois nature of the art world in general.

Notwithstanding the celebrative atmosphere of the 2nd Johannesburg Biennale, with Hans Haacke’s flag installation The Vindication of Dulcie September flanking the entrance, indicating that South Africa’s turn had come, most visitors to Johannesburg were confined to the Biennale grounds in an atmosphere as tense as it was joyful. We were repeatedly told by our hosts that rather than ‘improving’, Johannesburg is more violent than ever, too dangerous to walk about even during the day. Just across the street from the Electric Workshop, the enormous ex-factory in which most of the Biennale took place, sits another derelict ex-factory which provides a roof for up to 3000 unemployed citizens and recent immigrants. All in all, little economic redistribution or reparation has taken place since the collapse of the apartheid system, leaving the social structure of apartheid basically intact. For example, many museum directors have kept their positions from apartheid’s bleakest years; apparently, some of them refused to visit the Biennale on the claim that it had nothing to do with their activities or ideas of culture. Other locals who wanted to participate in the Biennale’s festivities were frustrated by a lack of public information regarding the African film festival, artists’ bios, etc. — and these were informed, middle-class academics and professionals. As South Africans David Koloane and Pat Mautloa have pointed out, “most people in our country don’t even know what an art show or a Biennale might be”.

A number of visitors assuaged their feelings of isolation and claustrophobia by making day trips to Soweto or Alexandria, some with South African friends who are from these communities, others in hired cars or tour buses (others of us felt the tour buses were kind of weird). It required substantially greater effort or knowledge to avoid, in Johannesburg, being shuttled around from one suburban strip-mall restaurant or bar to another that were for all purposes still segregated and white. The South African art community itself is very small and rife with conflict, and a disproportionately large number of its more powerful members are white. With some of these people — the said museum directors, some critics, curators and artists — one gets the impression that South Africa is a setting, rather than a location, for them as well.

Obviously, these are not problems that the Biennale alone could tackle. Local advertising and the education programme were limited due to a lack of funds from the city council, whose bankruptcy occurred just weeks before the opening, and the immense economic disparity in South Africa is still the nation’s most urgent political dilemma. While many of us whose visits to Johannesburg were paid by the Biennale questioned the wisdom of this generosity when we discovered that a few artists in the exhibition
were not able to complete their projects for economic reasons (not to mention the fact that most South Africans can't even afford to buy art supplies, period), other South African artists stand to benefit from the international contact that the Biennale provided — hopefully, especially black South African artists who were not only isolated due to the cultural boycott during apartheid years, but also could not afford the expensive, investigative trips abroad that many white 'art people' were able to make, or even the few copies of international art magazines that trickled in to speciality bookshops at the time. The other side of this debate is that the Biennale's international effect might matter as much as its national impact.

When read in relation to the white suprematism that still exists but is under great discussion in South Africa, the excellent works at the Biennale dealing with the legacy of colonialism by Africans and members of the African diaspora from North America, Britain and the Caribbean, such as Pat Mautloa, Marc Latamie, Carrie Mae Weems, Pepón Osorio, Stan Douglas and Isaac Julien, resonate even more clearly than they do or would when presented in places that still haven't really been put to the test about their own colonialist foundations (like Canada and the USA). We've already seen how works such as these can be written off as celebrations of multiculturalism (anything goes, as long as we don't have to change) or purely academic inquiries (clever points for obscure essays). Many critics of colonialism have questioned the ideals and efficacy of officially-sanctioned multiculturalism as well as the recent surge in post-colonial studies in the West. Yet, just five years ago, the Whitney Biennial was sarcastically referred to as the 'multi-culti' biennial by members of the US press, proving that even art shows can threaten the status quo. In South Africa, it's somehow possible to read such a diverse and pluralistic exhibition as more than the tokenism of a well-funded institution. It might be the setting, whose all too apparent conflicts became a kind of micro-location; or, in another light, we might see the 2nd

Montien Boonma, Arokhayasai: In Between the Void, 1996, sculpture installation in Transversions, curated by Yu Yeon Kim. Photo: Werner Maschmann
Johannesburg Biennale as the beneficiary of earlier, sometimes didactic and discounted or revoked efforts by museums such as the Whitney to give voice to this new, more diverse generation of artists and curators (the contribution of all kinds of alternative spaces and artists' actions goes without saying; they're the only reason the museums have 'experimented' at all). Under Enwezor and his staff, the Jo'burg Biennale may have upped the ante from all previous 'post-colonial' exhibitions.

The curatorial structure of the Biennale seems to have been lifted straight from Gerardo Mosquera's guidelines for intercultural curating — emphasising south-to-south communication and using a multicultural 'team' of curators and local advisers, ideally leading to "a more pluralistic visual discourse according to the aesthetics, functions, values and meanings of the works in their original contexts". With cocurators hailing from Spain, China, Korea, South Africa, the USA and Cuba (Mosquera himself), Enwezor managed to gather more or less fair, if sometimes predictable, showings from most continents and regions, based around ideas of trade and cosmopolitanism, hallmarks of the supposedly post-colonial, advanced capitalist age. Mosquera's 'historical' show of mostly living artists like David Medalla, Sophie Calle, Frédéric Bruly Bouabré and Willem Boshoff, plus the late Ana Mendieta, among others (David Hammons was slated for the show but could not come due to a family emergency), suggested the possibility for a major art history textbook to counter Janson's, for example, to which most students in North America refer. Hou Hanru's show, Hong Kong Etc., presented an energetic discourse on 'density' and cities. However, like his recent all-Asian exhibition in Vienna's Secession building (curated with Hans Ulrich Obrist), it came just moments before the collapse of the 'Asian Tiger', whose previously imagined unlimited economic growth potential was one of the founding theses of both shows. This was an unforeseeable catastrophe by all accounts, but leading one to suspect that the West will not so easily make room for others in the great scramble for resources and power. At the same time, well-selected choices by Enwezor and Octavio Zaya of mainstream artists like Sam Taylor-Wood managed to distinguish some relevant art from the mostly facile art of phenomena such as the 'Young Brits'.

The most exciting aspect of the 2nd Johannesburg Biennale was its across-the-board selection of artists from places like Cuba, Japan, Mali and Slovakia not as 'other' artists — beneficiaries of a kind of charity or praiseworthy open-
mindedness, which is the norm in most curating — but as mere artists with something interesting to say. Tania Bruguera from Cuba, for instance, was able to discuss the Angolan-South African war in relation to its Cuban casualties (Cuban soldiers were sent as state-controlled mercenaries), a far cry from 'Cuba Lite' work such as Kcho's, which sells so well to monovisions of salsa music, Ché Guevera and boat people.

Still, it's interesting to look at the only two integrated performances of the exhibition: those of Lucy Orta and Coco Fusco. Orta was the only artist who actively brought current issues of class into the Biennale. She worked with women from a local shelter (migrant labourers who came from the countryside to Johannesburg seeking work, only to find none) to build a series Collective Wear, clothing to reinforce solidarity. Collective Wear is one of many of Orta's ongoing projects of a 'situational' nature — Paul Virilio has claimed in regard to her work that "art today is one of delocalisation" — that attempt to pique public issues through poetic acts. While Orta worked with and paid these women for ten days before their performance, most people noticed the project only when the group 'marched' on the last day through the Biennale grounds and nearby streets, singing Nkosi Sikelel'íAfrica (God Bless Africa — one of the new national anthems) and other inspirational hymns. Little attention was paid to the workshop because it was located in the Worker's Library, where few people visited, by the curator's decision. Some may have also felt that the 'therapeutic' nature of Orta's work was not quite up to art snuff (disregarding the recent celebration of Lygia Clark in documenta X). Orta is now working on establishing a permanent foundation through which these women will be able to manufacture and sell their own clothing designs, based upon the skills they learned with her.

Fusco, on the other hand, set up a mock control point at the Biennale's entrance, where visitors were forced to buy 'passbooks' for entry to the exhibition — passbooks which were almost exact replicas of the passbooks that black South Africans had to use during apartheid. A number of visitors, South Africans and foreigners, were put off or even enraged by this idea, seeing it as a trivialisation of suffering or else a condescending 'lesson' to white South Africans who did not experience the same humiliation but may have understood it all the same. Fusco insists that her black South African co-workers — mostly drama students — found acting the part of control guards a satisfying affair all round, and that other participants (visitors) were able to renegotiate
their own identities while answering questions of Race? Nationality? Name? a liberating exercise. Furthermore, she insisted that the performance brought to the fore the issue of waiting one's turn, something that white South Africans are still not accustomed to doing.

Whether one likes these performances or not, the fact that they were excessively ignored or reviled leads me to imagine that engaged (as opposed to theatrical) performance could still be a good trigger for discussion of immediate issues of race and class in a Biennale such as Johannesburg's — at least, as long as it's still difficult finding visitors to bring in to see the rest of the exhibition. Without a little creative bubble-bursting around the concept of a biennial in the South, we can't really continue justifying these catalogues full of essays about subjects like "place and production in the global economy", "violence, migration and basic health care in the inner-city", etc., topics found in abundance in the catalogue to this Biennale. And I'm also reminded of the Australian art magazine, Art Fan, which publishes at least three reviews of each show covered in every issue: one by a 'professional critic'; another by an artist or person involved in the arts, but not as a writer; and a third by a visitor who has no professional relationship to the arts at all. Johannesburg could benefit from a reviewing process similar to this as well.

6 From a telephone conversation with the artists, November 1997.

7 Denis Ekpo states that "... behind these little masks of goodness and post-imperial decency, lurks the same implacable will to power sublimated into the will to dominate through cunning and subterfuge, etc." in 'How Africa Misunderstood the West', Third Text, no 35, summer 1996, p 10. Howard Adams specifically warns that official sanctions or promotions of 'cultural nationalism' or displays of by now benign cultural 'pride' are meant merely to deflect energies away from political action. Referring specifically to Canadian Indians and Métis, Adams states that 'cultural nationalism' perpetuates the racist idea of 'Indians in their place', and does not allow them to develop a radical consciousness or a reorganised culture that would be in harmony with liberation. Prison of Grass: Canada from a Native Point of View, Fifth House Publishers, Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, 1975/1989, p 170. This would be, I imagine, the reason that Kendall Geers protested the display of 'traditional' South African beadwork in the South African National Gallery in Cape Town in 1994, a position that Jean-Hubert Martin claimed to find mystifying, in his catalogue essay to the 1st Johannesburg Biennale.

8 "Although there was much to criticise, [Whitney shows such as 'Black Male'] sounded the death-knell of a sort of multiculturist space for exhibition practices and art production that now can be seen as a hallmark of early 90s contemporary art. But what has been accomplished thanks to these shows is that boundaries have been pushed and the circle is little wider. The concept of such a show would now be dated, because there are several venues in which to see the work of these artists." Franklin Sirmans in the conference series 'L'arte e la cultura multietnica', curated by Roberto Pinto, Modena, October 1997.

9 Gerardo Mosquera, 'Power and Intercultural Curating' Trans>, vol 1, no 1, November 1995, p 14. However, while these guidelines sound good on paper, we might want to ask: What is south-to-south communication, anyway? If it means that the same individuals always 'represent' Latin America, Asia or Africa in these meetings, there's probably something wrong. Likewise, if these 'south-to-south' get-togethers unfold for and advertise themselves to an 'international' audience above all, i.e., an audience from the North, it's also kind of odd. In other words: Beware of the Usual Suspects.

10 US newspapers like the International Herald Tribune are so full of 'advice' to Asia, and refer so incessantly to the 'lessons that Asia must learn' that it appears nothing less than Uncle Sam, the zoo-keeper, admonishing a group of naughty monkeys.


The 2nd Johannesburg Biennale, 'Trade Routes: History + Geography', was held from 12 October 1997 to 18 January 1998.