

# The Curator as Culture Broker: A Critique of the Curatorial Regime of Okwui Enwezor in the Discourse of Contemporary African Art

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## Prologue

I presented this essay recently at the University of California Santa Cruz, at a conference titled The Task of the Curator. The general audience reception to my presentation showed me that the issue discussed here is being very much debated in the field of African art history. However, few people have written about it. I think formal critical analysis of our work and positions are very important for a field to grow. I am posting it here in the hope that it allows us to start discussing the important issues it touches on.

What is the meaning of Enwezor's curatorial work and how does it affect the kind of knowledge emerging in the discourse of contemporary African art? Enwezor's curatorial practice of the past decade is one of the most significant developments in the discourse of contemporary African art. It has succeeded in validating this context of practice in contemporary art while ironically negating a critical engagement with the history and development of modern and contemporary art in Africa itself, or with indigenous forms of African art whose contemporaneity remains untheorized. Enwezor's curatorial focus is devoted to radical notions of contemporaneity built mainly on the practice of African artists who live and work in the West, and an unflinching interest in defining contemporary African art as a context that emerges with the postcolonial African subject. His curatorial work thus produces ahistorical interpretations of contemporary African art in general and echoes Marianne Eigenheer's criticism (in *Curating Critique*, 2007) of curators as "perpetuating the automation of self-reflexive autonomous systems within closed 'contextualizations'", or in other words, of advancing a very self-referential narrative of contemporary practice using limited number of artists recycled in closed-loop exhibitions. Enwezor's curatorial intervention is also built on a notion of globalization that assumes the free flow of cultural producers: however, this notion is patently false since the global context enforces the locality of contemporary Africans with increasingly authoritarian protocols by preventing their movement across international borders. Also, there are an estimated 2500 contemporary African artists who live and work in the West. This estimate is extremely generous: it is possible there is quite less. How valid is a discourse that uses that limited number of artists to stand in for "contemporary African art" in general? In this regard, I propose that the curatorial regime of Enwezor can be faulted for legitimizing a notion of Africa that dispenses with the continent itself as a historical theater of contemporary art and

visual culture engagements. It thus seems to me a formal analysis of Enwezor's curatorial regime is due, which is attempted below.

### **The Curator as Culture Broker**

This essay grew out of my recent focus on the economics of cultural production as it impacts the value of African arts and culture in the context of globalization. Specifically, it evaluates how value is created for cultural commodities and the role of cultural brokerage in determining which objects gain value and which do not. All forms of African art are historically less valued than art from the West and the discourse of art history did not until recently recognize contemporary African art as a valid context of practice. Okwui Enwezor's emergence as a notable global curator of note was therefore most opportune because it provided a singular opportunity for a curator to direct attention to this marginalized context. In the past decade, he has produced important exhibitions that brought to global attention a category of artists who are now very well represented in the discourse. It seems now is a good time to review the impact of Enwezor's work as a curator in order to figure out the exact nature of his interventions and what view of Africa's contemporary art they promote. Consider in this regard the role of the contemporary curator who in recent times has displaced artists and art historians from "participation in the process of constituting meaning" (Beatrice von Bismarck, 2007: 62). Much has been written on the expanding role of the curator in contemporary art and we need not focus on that here. Suffice to say that whereas artists in the era of modernism claimed an avant-garde status and the authority to define the horizon of meanings of their work, contemporary curators have by and large usurped this role and curatorial practice is increasingly seen as a form of installation art in which curators aggregate artworks and objects to construct a structure of interpretation for contemporary practice. If we agree with von Bismarck's definition of curatorial practice as the process of establishing connections for objects from a wide variety of sources, we will agree that it gives the ensuing installations created by contemporary curators a new position of authority that lays claim to "special powers to interpret the processes of connection" (von Bismarck, 2007: 63). This means that the curator's work as a creator of connections and narratives between various forms of art and cultural objects is rapidly taking the place of the work of the artist. In the information age where content aggregation is the primary mode of data management, curatorial practice reconfigures artworks as data and constitutes the curator as a supremely powerful search engine that ranks artists and artworks according to rather opaque algorithms, in the process rendering specific forms of cultural practice visible or invisible according to its self-referential autonomous logic. Much as contemporary knowledge systems value content aggregators and search engines above their constituent data, the contemporary artworld increasingly values the curator above the artist. In fact, the curator is displacing the artist to become the one who most directly benefits from the work of artistic production.

The second impetus for this essay came out of the global economic crisis and the role of financial brokers (bankers, hedge-fund managers, etc.) in creating the crisis by reconfiguring the meaning of fungible commodities. In the run up of the economic bubble, hedge fund managers in particular became star figures of pop culture by leveraging financial brokerage to stratospheric levels and manipulating financial information to create newer and more esoteric financial instruments that yielded

greater levels of profit. The move away from the “basic labor” of banking and money management into this rarefied field of financial information brokerage provides a parallel to the rise and role of the curator in contemporary practice. According to Paul Kaiser, “the success of curators as social figures in recent years derives from the old dilemma of art in the (post-)modern age, i.e. the need for art to assert its supposed autonomy in a market heavily regulated by economic forces.”<sup>1</sup> The hype and star cult quality of most contemporary curators factor into a reorganization of cultural production as a process of brokerage and management. Curators fit into the new economy as culture brokers who mediate the value of artworks in economic and critical discourse.<sup>2</sup> Again, in an information age where content aggregation is the primary mode of data management, curatorial practice as brokerage redefines a process where known objects accumulate greater value merely by being known, while other objects of equal value, rendered unknown by selective curatorial dismissal, find it difficult to gain traction. In this regard, questions about the economic value of art and cultural production are even more relevant in the contemporary era since cultural objects have to be mediated for them to become artworks, just like money has to be made fungible in order to create wealth. “The cult of originality, the determination of value, the economics of scarcity, of supply and demand, apply themselves with particular poignancy to the visual arts” (O’Doherty 1976:110) and there is a direct correlation between the discursive visibility of an artwork and its financial/cultural value. This direct correlation sustains the business of auction houses such as Sotheby’s and also sustains the cultural value of artworks in museums and related institutions. The contemporary curator emerges as a central figure in this production of value. In fact, the validation of cultural objects and their conversion into artworks is part of a debate over “power and status” (von Bismarck 2007: 64) that pits various validating institutions (artists, art historians, critics and now curators) against each other for control of the discourse and economics of the field of cultural production.

Let us suggest then that the contemporary curator is a culture broker in pretty much the same way a hedge-fund manager brokers financial instruments. Beatrice von Bismarck points out that recent similarities that have evolved between artistic and communicative practices in the field of art and mostly deriving from “practices adopted outside the art field in the economic world [and referring to] the forms of “immaterial work...which is not directed at material production but the creation, administration and distribution of meaning should be understood as a direct analogy to the curatorial practice of assembling, arranging and communicating” (von Bismarck; 67). The post-Fordist ramifications of this notion of “work” is evident in disparity between the remuneration that accrues to actual labor (of the artist in this case, or the teller in a bank) and the broker (e.g. the hedge-fund manager) or in this case, the curator who mediates the horizon of meanings available to the artist through his curatorial practice. It suggests that curators benefit from their work in a manner completely out of proportion to the value of their input into artistic and cultural production much as hedge-fund managers do in relation to financial brokerage. Their lopsided remuneration fits well within an economic environment in which managers reap all the benefits of labor relative to workers.

## **Africa as Place, Space and Time**

The location of contemporary African art within a global discourse of art confronts a central problem of cultural practice in the era of globalization: what is the value of Africa as a site of globalization, as a place with its own history of development of specific visual languages and strategies of visual representation? Enwezor's emergence as a global curator of note directed attention to Africa through exhibitions in which he argued for the relevance of contemporary African art in general. However, his curatorial practice is devoted to radical notions of contemporaneity built mainly on the idea that Diaspora Africans best represent the continent and that the postcolonial African exists as an autonomous subject whose cultural history is not relevant to our understanding of his or her own contemporaneity. These two impulses correctly identify transnationalism as a primary framework for global culture but incorrectly assume that globalization is a neutral context of transnational movements. While it may appear as if globalization invalidates erstwhile modernist notions of center and periphery, it is possible to argue that it actually reinforces these binaries since it essentially incorporates the periphery (Africa in this instance) within the hegemonic narratives of the center (the West) only insofar as African art conforms to Western prescriptions. This explains the monotony of much contemporary art in terms of its hegemony of styles (conceptual art/installations) curatorial and critical practices, and even spheres of exhibition and display. The ability of African artists to participate in this global context is dependent on political forces largely outside their control, and they remain peripheral to its unfolding ethos. Besides, no one lives in global space: we live in Cotonou, Katmandu and Copenhagen. The ideal of a transnational global culture assumes a free flow of people across borders in a context where Western countries (who control an outsized portion of global wealth) work furiously to limit the international mobility of Africans. Globalization has become a one-way flow that enforces locality on African artists by narrating their contemporary practice as a moribund context of cultural engagements while validating Western contemporary art as a universal rather than local context of production. It also participates in a relocation of African cultural patrimony to Western ownership by enhancing Western authority in defining the value of African cultural production.

In my review of Enwezor's directorship of Documenta XI (see "Ordering the Universe", 2004), I suggested that future evaluation of his role as a global curator of African ancestry might commend him for centering contemporary African art within the global discourse of art, or condemn him for delivering contemporary African art to capitalism's voracious appetite for new commodities. Nearly a decade later, it is obvious that Enwezor's valorization of a contemporary African art largely defined through the work of artists of African Diaspora artists has had the paradoxical result of validating a form of contemporary African art that negates critical engagement with the history and development of modern and contemporary art in Africa itself, or with indigenous forms of African art whose contemporaneity remains to be theorized. His curatorial work thus produces ahistorical interpretations of contemporary African art in general and advances a self-referential narrative of contemporary practice using limited number of artists recycled in closed-loop exhibitions. Douglas Hofstadter suggests that the recursiveness inherent in this activity produces "strange loops" which feels like "an upwards movement in a hierarchy, and yet somehow the successive "upward" shifts turn out to give rise to a closed cycle. That is, despite one's sense of departing ever further from one's origin, one winds up, to one's shock, exactly where one had started out."<sup>4</sup> Given that Enwezor's emergence was

due in main part to efforts to open the closed-loop of art history's focus on the West as center, his own regression into a closed-loop protocol of curatorial practice highlights the irony of a global art world situation in which things "change" while essentially remaining the same.

The criticism of Enwezor's framing of contemporary African art as a context of essentially Western replications emerged early in his career. For example, his interrogation of the possibility of avant-garde action in Documenta XI was criticized as a very conservative and institutional interpretation of contemporary culture, one that emphasizes precisely the occidental paradigms that Documenta XI supposedly targeted in its counter-narrative. Massimiliano Gioni identified this as the essential quality of Western hegemony while noting that "the industry of art has reached such a level of complexity and sophistication that it can easily transform itself, only to confirm its own status and integrity: everything must change, in order to leave everything as it was." But given the obvious fact that Enwezor's interventions have increased the visibility of his particular interpretation of contemporary African art, surely he deserves credit for the pioneering nature of his work. One does not argue otherwise. The issue is that Enwezor's interpretation of contemporary African art renders Africa redundant as a location for the unfolding of a global ethos. You can see the limits of this protocol in Enwezor's recent publication "Contemporary African Art since 1980" (produced in collaboration with Chika Okeke-Agulu). The publisher's blurb states that "[t]o address contemporary African art is necessarily to address the African Diaspora and its attendant thorny issues of postcolonial and identity politics: what is contemporary African art, and who qualifies for its rubric?" (italics mine)

5 That questions of definition should be important to this book after decades of significant work directed at defining African contemporary art shows how a cavalier ideal of perpetual rediscovery of Africa contributes to its marginalization. I am however more interested in the book's analysis of contemporary African art that centers the African Diaspora as the prime subject of Africanness. While it may allow the curator to engage the disparate locations of African contemporary art, the assumption that the African Diaspora is pivotal renders the subject problematic. This attempt to shift the study of Africa away from the continent can be traced back to Paul Gilroy's seminal but flawed publication, "The Black Atlantic" and it is now reaching a critical phase. When Enwezor, the most important curator of contemporary African art, consistently locates Africa in the Diaspora, he encourages a focus on this Diaspora context as the primary location of African visual culture. The effect of such dislocation ripples across a wide range of discursive practices with devastating impact. Africa is everywhere but nowhere, essentially described in the discourse as a non-location. (Put aside for now the obvious fact that redefining the African Diaspora as Africa removes it from political and cultural consideration of its own location in global discourse).

I should point out that I am not demeaning the importance of studying the African Diaspora context of contemporary African art but only stating that such a focus should not take place at the expense of studying art in Africa itself. Consider in this regard the ongoing transformation of African studies in the American academy: almost all academic positions focused on African art history are now being offered to scholars of the African Diaspora, and the field faces an increasing reluctance by researchers to conduct "Africa-focused" research in Africa. Consider also that museum collections devoted to contemporary African art are primarily filled with

artworks from African artists based in the West with the exception of a very small number of Africa-based artists like El Anatsui who resolutely refuses to relocate to the West but has nevertheless engaged globalization from a very specific location as an artist who lives and works in Africa. Anatsui has produced some of the most distinctive contemporary African art of this era, firmly located in his indigenous origins and his international engagements while attuned to the most sophisticated protocols of contemporary global art practice. Anatsui's success positions Africa as a significant locale in the global discourse of contemporary art. It provides a basis for reinterpreting contemporary African art in a manner that recognizes the invention of new visual languages within Africa that engages indigenous aesthetics as a framework for contemporary practice while rising above crass mannerism of moribund nativism. Above all, it reaffirms the importance of Africa as a vibrant engine of globalization instead of seeing the African continent as a marginal context to this discourse.

### **Coda: The Visual Field of Western Reception**

Foucault described Jeremy Bentham's panopticon as a curious instrument that enables total control: the subject of the panopticon's focus is at once totally visible from the vantage point of the omnipotent observer yet remains invisible within the confined space he is relegated to (the panopticon arose as a concept for an ideal prison). This puts the subject in "a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power".<sup>6</sup> It also appropriates the power of the subjugated individual for the State. The visual field of Western reception demands that contemporary African art conforms to established Western paradigms of art making. (NOTE: There is also the larger problem of the emasculation of politics from the works of these "in-artists" and, along with and as a result of Enwezor's curatorial brokerage, their total co-optation by the engine of post-industrial Western capitalism. Works like Julie Mehretu's mural for Goldman Sachs brings to a reality Frederik Jameson's interpretation of postmodernism/contemporary art as the "logic of late capitalism". The work itself is a bloated agglomeration of marks completely dependent on the authority of the artist for its constituent meaning, which ironically makes it a classical modernist painting). For the few "contemporary African artists" that are recognized within this field, the closer their practice is to the norm of New York art, the higher rated they are. The plethora of work done by modern and contemporary African artists directed to legitimizing Africa as a viable location within the global art world is mostly dismissed as irrelevant to Enwezor's discourse, which suggests all are welcome as long as they come naked and ready to be clothed in Western styles and prescriptions. I had written elsewhere that perhaps the recent focus on non-western art merely answers to global capitalism's persistent need for new commodities in which case, Enwezor's curatorial focus served to bring some African artists and marginal centers of art to the purview of the West, thereby making them available for consumption. Rather than reflecting an identity politics that empowers marginalized societies and structures their demand for recognition, his curatorial practice to date constructed the conditions for a new appropriation of the "Other" by the West, in a manner similar to modernism's appropriation of African and other "non-Western" arts at the beginning of the 20th century.

Ironically, the arc of Enwezor's ascent to a position of global power replicates the trajectory defined above: his impact as a curator is undeniable but his emergence

remains a classic example of how the West dismisses African expertise in most areas of discourse. Enwezor came to curating from a rather undefined background with negligible training in African art history but with an active engagement with New York art of the 1990s. His rise to the top of the artworld through the vehicle of African art curating is inspiring but also reflects the willingness of Western discourse to bypass formally trained Africans in consideration of issues related to their field of work. In the 20th century, academically trained African artists were marginalized while informally trained, workshop-produced artists were valorized under a false assumption that the ethos of modern African art is best perceived in the works of self-trained artists (see the entire corpus of Ulli Beier's work on Oshogbo for example). In art history, the opinion of the most minor Western scholar is given greater weight than that of the most advanced African scholar, which shows a similar bias in the valuing of knowledge work. The reception of contemporary African art in the West also followed this trajectory by its installation of Enwezor as its premier interlocutor despite the fact that his initial qualifications lay mainly in his founding of the NKA journal (with Olu Oguibe and Salah Hassan who are given short shrift—especially Oguibe—in the formal analysis of Enwezor's ascent). The concentration of curatorial power to define contemporary African art in this singular individual has essentially created a star system in which the hard work of art historical analysis is disregarded in the discourse in favor of a purely interpretative and problematic form of critical analysis. To return to my earlier analogy, the "curator as culture broker" is not devoted to the orderly unfolding of a discourse: like a hedge fund manager, he thrives on short-term focus and self-referential exegesis. We may also question the depth of work produced in such a context: close reading of Enwezor's various publications show large gaps in his understanding of art history and African art history in particular. Furthermore, Enwezor's elevation (and in fact, the elevation of African curators in general within the American discourse of contemporary art) served to displace African American artists and art activists who were, at the beginning of the 1990s, starting to demand greater representation at the table. Shifting attention to African curators allowed the mainstream art establishment to completely cut out these bothersome African Americans. The fact that Enwezor has largely not collaborated with these African American curators and critics speaks volumes about his own complicity in this process of marginalization.

Finally, in this regard, we should give serious consideration to the fact that much contemporary curatorial practice involves assembling artwork as data and is thus a supremely collaborative process. The idea that a curator owns or exemplifies the knowledge work that emerges from such a process builds on outmoded modernist notions of the supreme authority of "the author". I am often amazed that despite the intensive critiques of such ideas and the obvious general acceptance of the curator's role as a manager of art as data, no one raises the issue of the ownership of knowledge produced through such processes. When collaborative work is routinely ascribed to a specific individual, it creates the kind of concentration of power that now ironically limits the horizons of meaning of contemporary African art, by adopting the viewpoint of an individual as proxy for the multiple viewpoints available. Although new curators have emerged in contemporary African art, most are still beholden to the paradigm set up by Enwezor. (Rejection of this paradigm means most curators don't get the funding to do their work from funding institutions, practically all of which are based in Europe and the USA). In this process, these new curators extend the West's control over African art discourse and the dominance of Enwezor's curatorial

regime. And this is where Enwezor's work has the most negative impact: his valorization of Africa as Diaspora supports a transfer of cultural equity from African producers to Western collectors, in which the curator operates mainly as an information broker who makes African cultural resources available for appropriation. While the value of Diaspora-based "contemporary African art" is moving ever upward (think of Julie Mehretu's \$5m mural commission for the Goldman Sach's headquarters in New York), Africa-based contemporary African art remains virtually valueless. (There is a similar dynamic in South Africa where the works of white artists gain value while those of "township" black artists are devalued). Part of the problem in the Western devaluation of African art is the refusal to understand that Africans live in a co-equal contemporaneity with Euro-America. Young African artists live in global culture and we should be interested in figuring out how their art reflect this expanded awareness of their location in Africa (if they live and work there) or in the Euro-American contexts that they often relocate to in an effort to gain greater visibility for their work in global discourses of contemporary art. Africa is also being renewed in response to the challenges of modernization and globalization. We must try to understand its unique responses to these processes rather than try to impose the aesthetic preferences of contemporary Western art on it. Enwezor has clearly failed on this front and his curatorial practice should now be subject to a formal criticism that is so far lacking.

## Notes

- 1) Paul Kaiser, "Is the Curator a Product of the Cultural Crisis?" in Christoph Tanner and Ute Tischler, *Men in Black: Handbook of Curatorial Practice*. Frankfurt am Main: Revolver, 2004: 198-199.
- 2) In this regard, recall Fredric Jameson's definition of postmodernism as the cultural logic of late capitalism.
- 3) Beatrice von Bismarck 2007, *Curating Critique*: 67.
- 4) David Hofstadter, *I Am a Strange Loop*. Pp. 101-102
- 5) <http://www.photoeye.com/bookstore/citation.cfm?catalog=DQ299>. I merely mention this new publication and do not carry out a review of its contents as part of my analysis whose focus is on Enwezor's work before this new publication.
- 6) See the section on "Panopticism" in Michel Foucault, *Discipline & Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. NY: Vintage Books 1995: 195-228

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