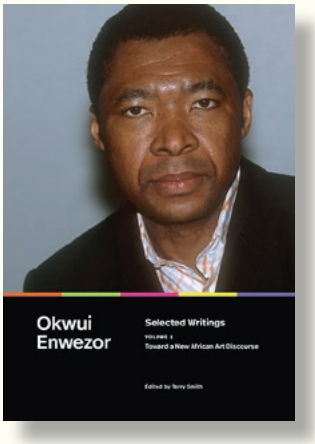

Okwui Enwezor
***Selected Writings: Volume 1, Toward a New African Art Discourse*, ed. Terry Smith**

Duke University Press, 2025
472 pp., 72 colour illus.
$145.00 USD (hardcover)
ISBN 9781478028314
$45.00 USD (paper)
ISBN 9781478031529

Okwui Enwezor
***Selected Writings: Volume 2, Curating the Postcolonial Condition*, ed. Terry Smith**

Duke University Press, 2025
542 pp., 82 colour illus.
$145.00 USD (hardcover)
ISBN 9781478028345
$45.00 USD (paper)
ISBN 99781478031567

Trevor Stark

In the months after the attacks of September 11th, 2001, as the forces of American imperialism swiftly sought to claim the imperative to mourn as an affective ground for their boundless War on Terror, Okwui Enwezor sat down to write his catalogue essay for Documenta 11, for which he was artistic director. He meditated on "Ground Zero" as a polyvalent "metaphor for articulating what is at stake in the radical politics and experimental cultures of today" (1:214). Where, he asked, should we locate this metaphorical site? "Is it to be found in the terrible pile of molten steel, soot, broken lives, and scarred, ashen ground of the former World Trade Center in downtown Manhattan? In Gaza, Ramallah, or Jerusalem? In the ruins of Afghan cities?" (1:214). In American state propaganda, the metaphor of "Ground Zero" served to dehistoricize the wreckage in Manhattan as a founding moment of spectacular and irrational violence against Americans, Enwezor argued, one that would justify the "annihilation" of an "undifferentiated" "enemy" (1:214). But, Enwezor countered, what of the retaliatory devastation of Afghanistan? What of the everyday violence of Israeli apartheid in Palestine? Are these razed sites to remain unthinkable, unmournable, and unavenged?

Perhaps most provocatively, Enwezor asked whether the metaphor of "Ground Zero" might end up standing for "the founding instant of the reckoning to come with Westernism after colonialism" (1:214). If so, it was crucially important, for Enwezor, to wrest the metaphor of Ground Zero from the hands of those who would use it to serve the deathly ends of fundamentalist politics, whether those of Bush or Bin Laden. Toward this end, evoking the promise of the "tabula rasa" of decolonization described by Frantz Fanon in *Les damnés de la terre* (1961), Enwezor refused to consecrate the "emptiness at the center" left by colonialism's crises and hoped against hope that it might instead be seized upon as "a founding moment for articulating the demands of the multitude" (1:215, 216). In this sense, Ground Zero was both the scar left on the world by the violence of the colonial order and the necessary point of departure for any "nonintegrative," decolonial politics—and an art proper to it (1:214).

Twenty-four years later, in our current moment of political revanchism, as Western art institutions have almost universally engaged in pre-emptive censorship to suppress critique of Israel's American-backed genocide in Gaza, it is difficult to imagine a curator of Enwezor's stature expropriating the jargon of American exceptionalism in the same

breath as they affirm the legitimacy of the Palestinian "fight [against] Israeli hegemony in the Occupied Territories" (1:217). Indeed, since 2023, no major global museum has seen fit organize an exhibition of artistic reflections on the Israeli-
American genocide in Palestine, nor even to devote significant attention to Palestinian artists. Instead, global art world institutions, from *Artforum* to the Whitney Independent Study Program, from the Art Gallery of Ontario to the Venice Biennale, have followed the institutions of the international "rule-based order" in voluntarily incinerating their vestiges of credibility to prevent solidarity with Palestinians.[1]

Enwezor would not be shocked by this state of affairs. Reading the two volumes of his *Selected Writings*, edited by Terry Smith, every page burns with his awareness of the mechanisms of symbolic reification and political neutralization structuring the always-revocable acceptance of the colonial "Other" within the institutions of the liberal Western art world. The earliest text included, his editorial for the first issue of *Nka: A Journal of Contemporary African Art* in 1996*,* recognized forthrightly that, "Despite their power, pull, and influence, mainstream Western institutions are no less cultural ghettos than any other institutions that operate outside their inscribed boundaries of relevance precisely because their politics of selection are exclusionary, restrictive, parochial, discriminatory, narrow and flagrantly marked by hard-core ethnocentrism" (1:22). And writing in the midst of Trump's first term about *Grief and Grievance: Art and Mourning in America* (2021) at the New Museum, his final exhibition, which he did not live to see, Enwezor expressed the urgent need for art to confront "the crystallization of black grief in the face of a politically orchestrated white grievance" (2:476).

It is difficult to summarize the impact of Enwezor's twenty-five-year career—as a writer, editor, curator, academic, and museum director—and doubly so to exhaustively catalogue the vast scope of his intellectual efforts. The challenge facing Smith, who Enwezor requested as editor along with advisory editors Salah M. Hassan and Chika Okeke-Agulu, was to select from a voluminous corpus of art-historical, theoretical, and critical writing in order to reveal throughlines and shifts in Enwezor's thought. Though organized chronologically, Smith writes in his insightful and personal introductions that the division into two volumes indicated a "shift in perspective": while the first volume focuses on Enwezor's goal of founding a "new African art discourse" from 1994 to 2006, the second volume is oriented toward his critical analysis of the role of art within the "dominant world picture" of "neoliberal globalization" from 2006 to 2020 (1:11). Taken together, they reveal a dialectic that sustained Enwezor's career: contemporary African art, he believed, should not merely find a place within the networks of newly globalized art institutions, but shatter and remake them into "multilayered platforms… for the many worlds to come, all of them postcolonial," as Smith puts it (2:14).

Born in Calabar, Nigeria, and moving to New York City in 1982 at the age of eighteen, Enwezor conceived of himself primarily as a poet throughout the 1980s. But, by the time of the founding of *Nka* in 1996, he established his life's mission, which was to "de-exoticize contemporary African art products" and set them "as part of the contiguous critical nexus of revolutionary practices" in global contemporary art (1:17–18). This dialectic was already in place in his earliest critical writing: negatively, he fiercely opposed the enclosure of diasporic African art within the paradigms of "racial essentialism" (1:24), in particular those of the liberal Western art world which all too readily "objectifies, fetishizes and marginalizes [the Black] body as the locus of spectacle" (1:38); and, positively, he advanced an internationalist conception of African art as a nexus for grasping the world condition of post- and decoloniality. Toward this end, Enwezor became one of the most significant curators of what he would call, gimlet-eyed, the "mega-exhibitions" produced during the "Biennial fever" of the 1990s and 2000s. For all his skepticism, Enwezor advanced the biennial as a key node in "multilateral networks of knowledge production" (1:257) in important exhibitions such as the 2nd Johannesburg Biennial of 1997, which emphasized a post-national model of African identity—and, as Smith notes in his preface, attracted much criticism for doing so in the immediate post-Apartheid years (1:6–7)—and Documenta 11 of 2002, which involved five curatorial "platforms" in New Delhi, Berlin, St. Lucia, Lagos, and Kassel (1:257).

Enwezor's predicament was to navigate the field of contradictions and compromises, of financial entanglements and political negotiations, inherent in taking the helm of such global institutions, without losing hope

that they might contribute to the generation of knowledge about the "postcolonial constellation" (1:236). One senses that Enwezor's tough diplomacy—and tireless energy—as a globally sought-after curator was forged in his theoretical battles. Reaching maturity as a thinker in New York in the mid-1990s, Enwezor confronted the diverse strains of postwar French thought that were entering American humanities departments, then grouped incoherently under the period term "postmodernism." However engaged he was with the writing of Jacques Lacan, Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, or Jean-François Lyotard, he critically resisted the notion that the discursive field that was defining itself in relation to these thinkers could adequately grapple with the real geographical and colonial ground of the modern condition, let alone the "postmodern condition." Indeed, writing with his acid pen in 1995, Enwezor argued:

> Recognition of difference, cultural hybridity, and the apparent instability of identities within postcontemporary (to borrow an absurdity from Fredric Jameson) spheres of production and representation will indeed become semiological emblems of a postindustrial twenty-first-century culture. If this sounds like a kind of postpsychedelic love-in, the truth is that it is, albeit with a few caveats: the Swamis of this commune are academic all-stars from various French, American, and German academies. (1:153)

He raised a "word of caution," that "the disinterment and recuperation of the so-called margin must also call for the delocalization and decentering of the center" (1:153). Otherwise, those who are included into the colonial center as exceptional avatars of diversity "must remain thankful until his/her usefulness expires like a transit visa. But as we travellers who wear our badges of difference with unremitting pride on the postmodern bandwagon have repeatedly learned, the expiration of one's visa means the termination of tolerance" (1:154).

What Enwezor called for ceaselessly was not the incorporation of the postcolonized "margins" into a putatively tolerant postmodern West committed to "multiplicity," but the development of a decolonial "conjunctive force that impels fresh relationships" (1:153). Enwezor describes Jankara Market in Lagos as the materialization of precisely this sort of "conjunctive force," a "sprawling, cacophonous theatre of colorful apparels and languages... [that] defies the laws of order" (1:160). Likewise, contemporary African art, he wrote, was not a response to the theoretical trends then grouped under the aegis of the postmodern but was "the offspring of chaos born out of the desire to reconstruct a different idea of the world" (1:161). Rather than emblematizing a politics of the "contingent, provisional, variable, tentative, shifting and changing" (1:157), the arts of the African diaspora respond to the real historical multiplicity of cultural "contact zones" in the wake of transatlantic slavery and the catastrophe of colonialism.

Enwezor's attention to these dynamics in contemporary African art animated his work as a historian. As he recounted the struggle of contemporary African artists to forge a "grounded" African identity while fighting the "kitsch of Blackness"—a term borrowed from Manthia Diawara to critique the selling of Blackness as an image-commodity on the white supremacist art market—he was also describing a tension that played out across the long history of colonization and decolonization (1:157). In his major early text "Colonial Imaginary, Tropes of Disruption," co-written with Octavio Zaya for his exhibition *In/Sight: African Photographers, 1940 to the Present* (1996), Enwezor developed a truly panoramic history of the colonization of Africa, the transposition of "Africa" as a figure within colonial thought, and the resistant image practices developed by African photographers. In this history, he emphasized the contradictions of negritude as a "fundamentally modernist vision intermixed with the ideal of an originary essence of African identity" (1:63). In his essay for his exhibition "The Short Century: Independence and Liberation Movements in Africa, 1945–1994," Enwezor continued his probing of the tensions inherent in negritude, torn between the erection of "*Africanité* as essentialist particularism" by Leopold Senghor and the more "ambivalent" vision of Aimé Césaire (1:64). If Enwezor rejects "Senghorian negritude's salvage paradigms" outright (1: 68), he holds to Césaire as a model for thinking a form of Black "regeneration" that would resist the reimposition of identitarian universalisms: a case for "black heterogeneity" (1:8).

This dialectic was put to the work of unsettling ossified art-historical categories

in "Postwar: Art between the Pacific and the Atlantic, 1945–1965," co-curated in 2016–17 with Katy Siegel and Ulrich Wilmes. In his essay for that exhibition's mammoth catalogue, Enwezor irrevocably challenged the "postwar art history industry" in its use of "postwar" as shorthand to refer to European art grappling with the aftermath of World War II and the rise of New York City as the global modern art capital (2:336). Enwezor's "postwar" is anchored not only by the devastation of Hiroshima and the Nazi Holocaust but by the Bandung conference of 1955, in which twenty-nine independent African and Asian countries gathered in Sukarno's Indonesia to plan for a world after Western colonial hegemony. With Césaire's rebuke to existentialism as its theoretical lodestar, Enwezor described how European humanism "was met with radical postcolonial doubt" in the works of artists such as Ben Enwonwu and Uche Okeke, Ibrahim El-Salahi and F.N. Souza (2:330). Against "ethnocentric corrals," Enwezor sought to write a history of the period as "a multivalent network of relationships and differences, affiliations and cultural solidarities, singularities and multiplicities" (2:336).

Over the course of his career, Enwezor defended the capacity of art to articulate the complex processes of racialization without succumbing to essentialism. Of Chris Ofili's British Pavillion at the 2003 Venice Biennale, which featured the Union Jack remade in the colours of Marcus Garvey's Pan-African flag, Enwezor wrote, "His gesture was never meant to reify identity.... Rather, it was to show how the stubborn myths of identity are relational to the dominant categories to which they oftentimes respond, and as such have real cultural uses, particularly in the practice of oppositional artistic initiatives" (2:42). This is the dialectic that art at its best could sustain, in Enwezor's view: race becomes visible as a *social fact*, rather than a biological essence, one that is not only oppressive but that generates a field of cultural forms. Thus, in Ofili's hands, the conjunction of red, black, and green does not stake out the ground of Blackness as a circumscribed *terra firma*, but is a political tool drawn from the archive of Black forms.

These "structures of archivization" that operate on and through race were the fulcrum of Enwezor's decades-long engagement with Lorna Simpson's work (2:85). In his early critique of Thelma Golden's Whitney Museum exhibition *Black Male: Representations of Masculinity in American Art* (1995), Enwezor singled out Simpson's work as an exception to what he saw as the exhibition's "indiscriminate ethnographic zeal" for the way in which she undermined the fetishization of Black identity (1:44). Later, in his long and important essay "Archive Fever: Photography between History and the Monument" (2007), Enwezor argued that Simpson's work constituted a "counter-ethnographic" (2:86) critique of the dialectics of Black racialization: on the one hand, there is what Fanon famously called "epidermalization," which is to say the manner in which the Black subject's body is coded or "inscribed" by the cultural category of race (2:85). Thus, the epidermis paradoxically comes to signify race's putative *preexistence* to signification, culture, and history. Yet, on the other hand, despite the racist naturalization of race, the "Fact of Blackness" enters into the bloodstream of culture in all its manifestations. In this unruly cultural field, Blackness is always in excess of the reifications of "identity," constituting a vast archive of images, practices, and forms that can be put to subversive uses. Thus, Enwezor perceived in Simpson's work an "archaeology of knowledge as a means through which the archival relationship between the black subject and American culture is shorn of sentimentality and instead revealed as a source for understanding the codes of the racialized image..." (2:85–86). In his authoritative essay on Simpson, "Repetition and Differentiation," (2006) Enwezor showed how works such as *Twenty Questions (A Sampler)* of 1986 conjoined photography and language to draw from this "vast Africanist visual archive," while insisting as an ethical principle on the "sheer obduracy of the subject's refusal to declare an identity" (1:314, 323).

By 2002, Enwezor was already looking back at the international spread of biennials, in which he himself was a major mover, asking whether it was "premature to write the obituary of the global ideal" (1:271). Enwezor was better attuned than anyone to the risk of biennials operating as "agoras of spectacle" (1:283), yet he also held out hope that they might function as fragile "diasporic public spheres" (1:289). Making a curious reference to Mikhael Bakhtin's concept of the carnivalesque, Enwezor noted that "the gap between the spectacle and the carnivalesque is the space, I believe, where certain exhibition practices, as resistance models against the deep depersonalization and acculturation of

global capitalism, recapture a new logic for the dissemination and reception of contemporary visual culture today" (1:296). Though he did not explain his reference to Bakhtin further, this phrase describes the strategy of his curatorial practice: he held to the carnivalesque promise of inverting the hierarchy of geopolitical center and periphery, while knowingly operating on a terrain structured by spectacle's omnivorous appetite for commodified novelty.

In an interview with *Democracy Now!* on the site of his Venice Biennale in 2015, Enwezor described himself as "deeply anti-utopia, simply because I believe that utopia is the end of politics. And I'm very much invested in the politics of the possible."[2] Enwezor's 56th Venice Biennale stood for his materialist conviction that one should always begin with the "state of things" rather than a position of abstract idealism. So it was no contradiction, he believed, to take the helm of that most venerable and prestigious exhibition in order, first, to stake out a critique of "the current art system's casual and unquestioning relationship to power, its love of its trappings and privileges," and, second, to develop "language and concepts that would...operate beyond the gilded cage of institutions, markets, and mechanisms of exchange and surplus value" (2:279).

While in 1996, he dismissed the African Marxism of Senghor and Nkrumah as the importation of a "Eurocentric" ideology that "subordinates African existence to the terrain of a homogenized history" (1:71), in 2015 Enwezor put Marx at the centre of his Biennale. With Isaac Julien, Enwezor organized a live reading of all three volumes of *Capital* in a space designed by David Adjaye: the *Das Kapital Oratorio*, inspired by the Sikh Akhand Path. And in the catalogue that he edited, Enwezor devoted almost eighty pages to Marx: to Marx's notes on Rousseau, to the foreword of the first German edition with handwritten corrections by the author, to the covers of *Capital* translated into fourteen languages, and to Etienne Balibar's notes from Louis Althusser's 1964–65 seminar "Reading Capital." If, as Enwezor put it, "Nothing looms larger in every sphere of experience [than capital], from the predations of the political economy to the rapacity of the financial industry," it was time, he felt, echoing Althusser, to "read *Capital* to the letter."[3] Indeed, nowhere more powerfully than in the live performances held in the Adjaye-designed space, Enwezor placed the Marxist text into vital new conjunctions: with "work songs" from the archives of Black American music under conditions of unfree labour (Jason and Alicia Hall Moran) and from nineteenth-century English factories (Jeremy Deller and Jennifer Reid), with performances of Charles Gaines' compositions that set words by Fredric Douglass and Ida B. Wells to eighteenth- and nineteenth-century political songs, and with sessions organized by the Gulf Labor Coalition on the complicity of art institutions with labour exploitation in the Gulf region. The international art press' almost universal complaints about the exhibition—one memorably asserted that "Marx's text has limited relevance to art or life in 2015 or an elitist art world event like the Venice Biennale"—were the result of Enwezor's sense that any artistic "politics of the possible" would have to begin with its entanglement in the capitalist empire of value.[4]

"Here we are: standing, puzzled, looking with scrutiny at the inscrutable: a plateau of debris stretching out across the horizon" (2:272). This is how Enwezor described the view from his vantage point at the heights of art world power in Venice: an expanse of wreckage left in the wake of the ongoing devastations of colonialism, fascism, and the never-ending search for new frontiers of surplus value extraction. His career was driven by a strategic conviction that the global contemporary art biennial could operate as a critical space for the articulation of counter-discourses against Euro-American cultural hegemony, for what he called the "diasporic features of black thought" against the homogenizing force of "*mondialisation*" (2:472), and for the power of art against the power of money. Enwezor was aware of the "extreme contingency" of the fragile conjunction of globalized capitalism and *soi-disant* liberal democracy that sustained the space for his most ambitious exhibitions, and which may now be collapsing for good under the weight of its own contradictions (2:297).

But, as we recall, Enwezor considered "Ground Zero" as a space of potential within devastation. In an interview with Smith from 2013, six years before his death, he expressed enthusiasm for the "quasi-institutional structures that enable civic exploration," which he witnessed in "Lebanon, Jordan, Nigeria, or Palestine" (2:298). Building "civic imagination" through art from the wreckage of ongoing imperial destruction, these artworlds nurtured Enwezor's counter-utopian principle of hope.

His work offers the lesson that, whatever disasters may come, “An exhibition is something that happens in the world, and carries with it the noise, pollution, dust, and decay. Like the growing mass of debris, it is part of the messy world it inhabits” (2:272).

Trevor Stark is Associate Professor of Art History in the Department of Art and Art History at the University of Calgary.
—trevor.stark@ucalgary.ca

1 I discussed several such cases in 2023; see Trevor Stark, “Artforum and the Art World’s ‘Palestine Exception,’” *Jadaliyya*, November 22, 2023, https://www.jadaliyya.com/Details/45543. Unfortunately, many further examples have proliferated in the years since, as Israel’s genocide in Gaza has continued unabated and now expanded to assaults on Lebanon and Iran. For instance, after artists in the Whitney Independent Study Program expressed political support for Palestinian liberation, the museum cancelled their exhibition and Whitney director Scott Rothkopf suspended the fifty-six-year old program and fired ISP associate director Sara Nadal-Melsío, https://news.artnet.com/art-world/whitney-museum-paused-independent-study-program-censorship-2651955. Recently in Canada, the Art Gallery of Ontario declined to acquire a work by Nan Goldin after a campaign led by AGO donor and trustee Judy Schulich to label Goldin “antisemitic” for her opposition to Israel’s genocide. This led to the resignation of curator John Zeppetelli only a few years after the institution pushed out curator Wanda Nanibush for her advocacy for Palestinian self-determination. Josh O’Kane, “AGO Trustee, Major Donor Judy Schulich Led Internal Push to Prevent Nan Goldin Acquisition,” *The Globe and Mail*, January 26, 2026, https://www.theglobeandmail.com/culture/art-and-architecture/article-ago-art-gallery-ontario-judy-schulich-nan-goldin-israel-antisemitic/. On the Nanibush case, see Jason McBride, “Why Did Canada’s Top Art Gallery Push Out a Visionary Curator?,” *The Walrus*, August 28, 2024, https://thewalrus.ca/why-did-canadas-top-art-gallery-push-out-a-visionary-curator/.

2 “Art, Politics, and ‘All the World’s Futures’: Okwui Enwezor, First African Curator of Venice Biennale,” *Democracy Now!*, August 11, 2015, https://www.democracynow.org/2015/8/11/political_art_and_all_the_world.

3 Okwui Enwezor, “Exploding Gardens,” in *All the World’s Futures,* ed. Okwui Enwezor (Marsilio Editions, 2015), 94–95.

4 Benjamin Genocchio, “Okwui Enwezor’s 56th Venice Biennale Is Morose, Joyless, and Ugly,” *Artnews*, May 8, 2015, https://news.artnet.com/art-world/okwui-enwezor-56th-venice-biennale-by-benjamin-genocchio-295434.