

Transgressing Culture, November 29 – December 1

Before and after art

### **Radicality in a globalising art-polity**

Charlotte Bydler, PhD cand., Uppsala university, Dept of art history

Artist Jimmie Durham once titled an essay: “A friend of mine said that art is a European invention”.<sup>1</sup>

Of course, as Durham’s ironic title suggests, there was art before the invention of the institutional art concept, even before modernism swept through Europe. There is still art produced beyond the confines of the dominant capitalist world-economy and postmodern aesthetics. But how do we deal with the fact that its importance is contested by an art world; the same art world which professes to have relativised artistic value and turned global?

Common parlance in this art world is that the globalisation of art can be seen in the upsurge of new international biennials of contemporary art. Or for that matter, globalisation can be seen in the composition of prestigious mega-manifestations like this year’s Documenta in Kassel. The theme was an explicit interrogation of the globalisation of culture; creolization, global urbanism, deterritorialization. If this is the proof that debaters hold out, we had better stop and ask what substance is globalised if there was already art all over the world? And is it possible (or meaningful) to talk about a politically and aesthetically radical position in this process?

Let’s stick to this years Documenta as our globalisation example – because it was deemed a big success for the global art. One *Art Newspaper* headline (No 126, June 2002) shouted: “Global, with less than 5% of the 121 artists born in the US”. Of course this sounds like big news. New York is the uncontested centre of the international art world so this should signal a *very* radical shift: 95% of the Documenta-artists born elsewhere. And usually that is how the globalisation of contemporary art is weighed and measured: by body-count, by the number of “non-western artists” in major shows in Europe and the US. By non-western is meant persons who were born elsewhere, but who often live and work in countries that belong to the core of

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<sup>1</sup> Jimmie Durham in Jean Fisher (ed.), *Global visions: Towards a new internationalism in the visual arts*, London: Kala Press & INIVA, 1994.

the capitalist art world. Indeed, in the fine lines below the “Global, with less than 5% of the 121 artists born in the US”-headline it is admitted that even if one third of the artists come from Africa, Asia and Latin America, most of the Documenta-artists live in New York, London, Paris or Berlin. This is a disclaimer that frequently appears, in either accusing or apologetic words. It sounds like taking back the impact of globalisation that was held out. Well this is not the case.

A show like Documenta clearly demonstrates how the globalisation of art works, just like any other area of production: there are “hinterlands” (or peripheries) that provide raw material and labour, and the product is generally refined in core countries – like New York, Paris, London and Berlin. This also shows that the art world is more or less united in an art polity that has turned global. A periphery could of course only appear in relation to a core.

I call this an *art polity* because there is a sort of political *régime* here. The *régime* is constituted not by persons but by a law code that is laid out in practice rather than in writing. Adherence to this *régime* gives access to influence and money in art institutions, and this is what unites the international art polity. The product of this enterprise is of course contemporary global art. And what counts as art, or radical-political art, is defined by that *régime*.

So, the fact that “non-western” Documenta-artists *really* work in New York and Paris is definitely not a sign that other countries are left out of this globalisation. What we should ask is: who are in the globalisation of art, and just where, in this art polity? This globalisation is radical, it goes to the root in the international art business. But what about globalisation from below, with drives to greater inclusiveness, justice and democracy?

James Meyer, an American art historian, claimed in an *Artforum* review that “Documenta11 is global not only in theme but in location, exemplifying what I have elsewhere described as a mobile sense of place commensurate with the art world’s new internationalism”.<sup>2</sup> I take it that “global in location” and “mobile sense of place” means that the globalisation of art connects certain places and certain people, and that person and place are not particularly tightly knit together. Carlos Basualdo, who was part of the Documenta curatorial team, put it in another way: he saw himself and his colleagues as ambassadors for “ideas that travel. [...] Nowadays, cultural theories can be followed as they travel round Latin America, Africa, America, Europe and so on.”<sup>3</sup> Ideas do travel. But how, from where, to

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<sup>2</sup> James Meyer, “Tunnel visions”, *Artforum*, September, 2002, p. 168.

<sup>3</sup> Marina Sorbello, “Documenta, Kassel, Germany: Global, with less than 5% of the 121 artists born in the US. Europe’s huge, five-yearly contemporary art festival opens this month and it is trans-national, trans-generational and trans-cultural”, *The Art Newspaper*, No. 126, June 2002, p. 30.

where? For surely there are archivists/documentaries, senders and users in this communication. The artistic director, Okwui Enwezor, showed that he is not blind to concentration hot spots in this interconnected art world. He knew better than to say that the slight number of US-born artists meant that the US has become less powerful or that some other place more important.<sup>4</sup>

As he was tampering with global culture, I think the Documenta leader Enwezor faced a curator's most difficult dilemma. How to select art works from all over the world in an aesthetically and politically radical fashion, and still get an exhibition that was coherent enough to be able to get some sort of message through? The obvious danger was to look with a bias for that which is clearly covered by the "Western" art concept. To avoid such exclusions in the process, Enwezor is even said to have banished the word "art" from his vocabulary.<sup>5</sup> And in the end, the public recognised that he made a point out of destabilising the borders between art, sociology and journalism; fiction, fact and fraud.<sup>6</sup> In return, he was dubbed a politically correct curator with a taste for boring and didactic works.<sup>7</sup>

In fact, India had its very first showing at this year's Documenta. Virginia MacKenny of the South African art publication *Artthrob* lamented "that it wasn't the work of Indian artists that we saw but the work of a photojournalists and media collectives – Indian artists are still as marginalized as ever".<sup>8</sup> Surely, Documenta alone should not be the measure of the marginalization of Indian artists. However, the preference for journalistic rather than metaphoric expressions, meant that the Documenta-show was spared the friction that Indian self-defined artists might have contributed with. I am thinking of cases where art from countries like Iraq or Indonesia has been dismissed as of a "different aesthetic", sentimental and melodramatic. It is an absolute *must* to homogenise the exhibition in a "radical aesthetic" fashion, if it is to be taken seriously in the art polity.

Virginia MacKenny concluded that even if it is "Designed to give greater credence and a larger arena to the marginalized in this age of globalisation the show is still essentially created

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<sup>4</sup> Okwui Enwezor, "So that's clear then. Curator Okwui Enwezor explains why there are so few US artists in his Documenta", *The Art Journal*, 2002, p. 28.

<sup>5</sup> Silke Müller, "Mister Documenta", *Art Spezial*, 6, 2002, p. 4.

<sup>6</sup> David Galloway, Reviews: Documenta 11, *ARTnews*, summer 2002, p. 170. Eleanor Heartney, "A 600-Hour Documenta", *Art in America*, September 2002, p. 94-95. Linda Nochlin, "Documented success", *Artforum*, September, 2002, p. 161.

<sup>7</sup> David Galloway, Reviews: Documenta 11, *ARTnews*, summer 2002, p. 170. Eleanor Heartney, "A 600-Hour Documenta", *Art in America*, September 2002, p. 86.

for a western audience within a westernised context. Supporting texts (in a highly academic English) remain inaccessible to many in post-colonial and third world countries leaving the debate to the privileged elite and the paucity of visitors of colour that I observed whilst I was there might also attest to that.”

Concerning the “supporting texts”: As it was, Enwezor turned Documenta into a series of platforms of which the first four were symposia on economic, social and urban matters held by a number of culture professionals. Documenta was extended in time from the usual 100 days duration of the exhibition to 549 days. And it was also effectively extended to four continents, since the symposia took place in Vienna/Berlin, New Delhi, St. Lucia, and Lagos. The platforms were criticised by many more reviewers than MacKenny for being over-intellectual hermetic events ignoring the general public. As some art critics had it, the conference caravan went out in the world<sup>9</sup> and participants were “pitching their postmodern tents and philosophizing on such issues as creolization and globalization [...]”<sup>10</sup>

I think that choosing these particular locations for the Platforms gave a sort of authenticity: *Democracy Unrealized* in Vienna/Berlin, *Experiments with Truth: Transitional Justice and the Process of Truth and Reconciliation* in New Delhi, *Créolité and Creolization* in St. Lucia, *Under Siege: Four African Cities Freetown, Johannesburg, Kinshasa, Lagos* in Lagos, and finally the exhibition in Kassel. I mean this about authenticity in the sense of talking about a theme where it could be felt directly on the skin. This certainly calls for a measure of modesty. People in the audience could actually talk back, even if it was unlikely because there were so many international academic celebrities among the speakers on the Platforms. In fact, some are here at this conference. For all those who could not spend weeks in New Delhi or Lagos the video-documented talks were available on the Internet. The St. Lucia-platform was actually closed to the public, but it was netcast.<sup>11</sup> The Internet’s speed and multimedia nature were very useful here, not least because when the exhibition finally opened, only the first platform-collection was published and had reached the bookshops.

The four platforms should be compared with the 100 Days-100 Guests in the last Documenta’s program: one lecture each day of the exhibition. The platforms that were video-documented and netcast were of course a bit more accessible.

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<sup>8</sup> Virginia MacKenny, Reviews: Documenta11, *Artthrob*, No 60, August 2002, <http://www.artthrob.co.za/02aug/>, 2002.11.25.

<sup>9</sup> Silke Müller, “Mister Documenta”, *Art Spezial*, 6, 2002, p. 4.

<sup>10</sup> David Galloway, Reviews: Documenta 11, *ARTnews*, summer 2002, p. 169.

<sup>11</sup> Silke Müller, “Mister Documenta”, *Art Spezial*, 6, 2002, p. 4.

Bringing it all back home, all pieces of the puzzle (hopefully) joined together in Kassel, the location of culture (to speak with Homi Bhabha) seems to remain unaltered. The co-curator Octavio Zaya said that: “ I don’t think the four Platforms really worked as explanatory-academic encounters designed to prepare the public for the final statement, i.e. the exhibition itself. However, they certainly gave a supporting framework for the exhibition”.<sup>12</sup> But, we may ask, could the platforms function in any other way but to be interpreted in conjunction with the exhibition? According to Zaya’s colleague Ute Meta Bauer, the goal set for the curatorial team was no mean thing: “The question we were asked was: how can artistic practice play an active part in society today?”.

I figure that if the platforms and exhibition succeeded in answering this question could only be judged by its effects. One way of measuring this would be that money and know-how stayed in structures that were available to people in situations and places where the show was supposed to do a job.

The geographic and temporal spread-out of the five platforms seems both modest (if that word could be appropriate in this context) and realistic. This packages Documenta 11 as one contribution among others, albeit a mega-spectacular one, to discussions on contemporary culture that anyway have no centre and no end. This is in line with both political and aesthetic radicalism. But what is the relevance of a gargantuan show in a German small town to the cities where earlier platforms took place? And vice versa, what relevance did, in effect, preceding platforms have to the Documenta 11 exhibition? What but to show the art world establishment a colourful mix of participants, to cover some new ground, at least on the paper, to transgress avant-garde culture centred in European modernity?

Some 650 000 persons went to the fifth and last platform, the exhibition itself, in Kassel. It was estimated to contain 600 hours of film, but most people like myself were probably content with three days’ near-overload art stuffing in Kassel and some time back home struggling with the catalogues. If we ask about what impact the platforms had, besides prolonging Documenta’s duration with 500 percent we hear that there was great interest in the discussions – contrary to what people predicted. *The India Today* appreciated the effort to break Western hegemony. Nigerian media appreciated the promotion of African art. It is

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<sup>12</sup> Marina Sorbello, “Documenta, Kassel, Germany: Global, with less than 5% of the 121 artists born in the US. Europe’s huge, five-yearly contemporary art festival opens this month and it is trans-national, trans-generational and trans-cultural”, *The Art Newspaper*, No. 126, June 2002, p. 30.

impossible to say how many looked up the platforms on the Internet. Of course some critics didn't even comment on the platforms, whereas others claimed that Enwezor fought windmills with his attack on autonomous art, since the idea of art for art's sake is already dead or moribund in the art world.<sup>13</sup> But this great interest in the platforms made it strikingly clear that Documenta is important to the global art polity. Another sign is the highly international composition of Enwezor's curatorial team – with roots in Argentine, Britain, the US, South Africa, Spain- the Canaries and Germany.<sup>14</sup>

The Internet does not only function here to let people communicate over distance. It is in itself a very powerful metaphor of globalisation. As Eleanor Heartney wrote in her review for *Art in America*: “Documenta 11 includes the obligatory nod to new media and the idea of the Internet as a connective force”.<sup>15</sup> And indeed, the net that knows no borders has doubtless helped physical exhibition-making and international contacts. It also plays a role in radical art.

Documenta naturally featured a number of Internet-specific art works. These are not only aesthetically radical because they are unfit for the market but also – in line with the arguments here – politically radical since they extended the show geographically, demographically and economically beyond Kassel. The Internet promised to globalise the art world through abolishing distance and exclusivity. Since communication- and information technology companies crashed on the stock market 2000, expectations have been lowered to say the least. Basic infrastructure does not come near covering the world. Even if the market lowered costs for everyday users in richer countries, it has not done the same in poorer countries. Still, the self-image on the net remains: a free global public art space. But the Internet art discourse is as pinned down to European modernity as the physical art world is.

Prevailing avant-garde notions of artistic value in events like the international biennials were inherited from the modernisation of Europe. The avant-garde ideology privileges innovations and moves endlessly, creates and abandons icons along the way. This would seem to favour a radically inclusive art practice. On the contrary, avant-gardism is firmly tied to geographical and personal co-ordinates. These are necessary for transgressing the relevant values. The negation of art's utility or commercial value is one such fundamental transgression. (You may object here that it was long time since art was said to be autonomous and free of political implications or interests. My point is simply that the distinction between

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<sup>13</sup> Silke Müller & Dirk Reinartz, “Documenta 11: Der Bericht”, *Art*, 8/2002, p. 12-35. Eleanor Heartney, “A 600-Hour Documenta”, *Art in America*, September 2002, p. 95.

<sup>14</sup> Birgitta Rubin, “Tredje världen kommer till Kassel”, *Dagens Nyheter*, 2002.07.05.

<sup>15</sup> Eleanor Heartney, “A 600-Hour Documenta”, *Art in America*, September 2002, p. 94.

what is art and what is not art is usually easy to make. This line goes where the relevance of a practice to the art polity ceases – then whatever is at hand is not art.)

In this Europe-derived aesthetic, anti-commercialism is the *sine qua non* of political and cultural radicalism. The reviewer James Meyer asks “Is there not an asymmetry between the images of oppression and the impressive apparatus that supports their display?”. Meyer is thinking of sponsors like the German and Hessian governments, Deutsche Telekom and Volkswagen. But I think it is not a question about how to secure art’s independence (art’s autonomy?) as non-profit, it is not even important to question the political radicalism of Documenta11 because of its heavy dependence on multinational sponsors.

The first aesthetic criterion for influence in the sphere of avant-garde art is independence of the art market. So I see no alternative but to make artists dependent of sponsorship infrastructure in core capitalist countries, because that is where the money comes from. As elsewhere in critical practice, anti-commercialism is supposed to guarantee the artist’s freedom from economic loyalties. Now if state or philanthropic funding is lacking, artists must turn to the market with their work. To the extent that they cannot afford to be independent, extra-European elements go against the understood non-profit aesthetic régime. To this extent, poorer elements are also disqualified as aesthetically and politically radical art-making. What we have here is thus sort of a Catch 22: to be included in the leading aesthetic régime, you have to be non-commercial; but to be able to live from working as an artist you have to sell, and with that goes what would have been your possibility to do the poststructuralist destabilisation-definition work in the art polity.

Now the art polity pays for its privilege to speak freely, and the price is a lack of instrumental power. The most resourceful art institutions can’t afford to intervene politically if there is a risk that national law may be transgressed. They must do their political work obliquely, as “critical art” or “critical analysis”. Still, ambitious theoretical frameworks of shows like Documenta run an obvious danger. Instead of a discourse *of* subversion put to work in political practice, theory could work as a discourse *about* political-economic subversion, urbanism, deterritorialization etcetera, that is easily digested and consumed within the art world, which is only made to feel more self-content and important because raised to the relevance of politics. As Tom Holert, a Cologne-based art critic, the largely positive reception of Documenta11 in German mainstream media signals that this is indeed the case.<sup>16</sup> It is not easy to disturb with an art concept that is able to appropriate everything – even its own abolishment.

So can we not have a history of artistic practices where the European variety is one among many others, which sometimes cross, sometimes run independently of each other?

I think that a little poststructuralist theoretical politics could be useful. Reading Marx's account of the universal logic of capital, Dipesh Chakrabarty made a distinction between History 1 and History 2. In both cases, History only makes connections that prove this universal logic in retrospect. History 1 tells what we from this position perceive as historical events that actually produced the logic of capital. But it is also recognised that there are other relationships that do not necessarily contribute to the reproduction of the logic of capital.<sup>17</sup> This is what Chakrabarty called History 2. This includes pieces within the logic of capital that are "not yet" subsumed under the logic of capital, and which may not become so. As Chakrabarty notes, "not yet" is where the Third World is placed. And we know that also in general (or European) art history, the Third World is written in as the late-comer which has "not yet" taken to all the aesthetic practices of the globalising art polity.

Chakrabarty makes a point of the outside (History 2) that exists inside the History 1 of capitalism, always ready to reveal that it is not a coherent system. Likewise, things outside the European art paradigm exist inside its history, where they are made to appear as historic steps on the way to a globalised international art world that they have "not yet" reached. These "deviances" threaten to disclose the construction of European art history, and destroy its claim to universal legitimacy and truth. These irregularities within the hegemonic system may not subvert it. But at least they show that the art world is not seamless.

Chakrabarty's analysis is an example of a common poststructural politics. We may even see it in Documenta: Enwezor's choice of locations for the platforms provoked the European art world that could not even theoretically consume them all. The seminars in chosen diaspora did not enhance Documenta's global relevance but effectively demonstrated its extension in a certain art world polity.

To repeat, avant-garde art depends on non-profit, usually state-financed, organizations. The anti-commercialism and anti-capitalism of Internet and avant-garde art cultures depend on funding in the wealthier parts of the world. This means that those who can't keep up with Western standard budget for anti-commercial avant-gardism turn into exotic treats for cultural tourism.

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<sup>16</sup> Tom Holert, "Bataille that binds", *Artforum*, September, 2002, p. 165.

<sup>17</sup> Commodity and money, for example, existed before capital and must be subsumed under it – with violence (by the State) if it be necessary. Dipesh Chakrabarty, "Universalism and Belonging in the Logic of Capital", *Public Culture*, vol. 12 no. 3, 2000, pp. 653-78.

Since the international art world is premised on the reference works and values of European avant-gardism it is a local (History 2) affair. It is local, not necessarily in the sense of only including European artists, but it is localised by fiscal and private funding available on national basis. And as it is administered, globalisation of avant-garde art practices safeguards the influence of core countries' (a.k.a. Western) art institutions. Whatever this art practice can accommodate it swallows, and what it cannot digest is spat out as irrelevant.

So, the globalisation process generates a wider and more dispersed geography in exhibition practice. A rhizome of art activities that are or could be part of this particular art game. Art's globalisation could be aesthetically radical in the (poststructuralist) sense that it destabilises the current art polity art concept to a degree, so to speak rewriting its history from within. The Nigerian-American Okwui Enwezor can be a curator here, but it is perhaps not possible to include Indian self-defined artists. In fact, the documentary character in works related to Third World-designated countries hardly revolutionise their usual location in catastrophe news-scenes.