

and power. They both serve not only to erase the African American woman and justify her continued abuse but to serve up a disturbing narrative of national identity.

The extent to which Williams has hit upon a basic nerve of the American character and its history can best be illustrated here for an Italian audience by the 1997 curtain call of *The Birth of a Nation* at Le Giornate del Cinema Muto in Pordenone. When the conductor turned to an onscreen picture of director D.W. Griffith, the mostly Italian audience rose as one and gave a thundering ovation of applause and cheers. The Americans scattered throughout the audience sat dumbfounded, unable to applaud or react. The difference in cultural understanding was telling: in Italy, the film is a stunning achievement of film art; for Americans, as Williams so effectively shows, the film represents a landmark in a complicated racial history of shame and denial that is reenacted regularly in today's racial politics and injustices.

- 1 P. Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination* (New Haven: Yale University Press, reprint 1976); Ch. Gledhill, "The Melodramatic Field: An Investigation," in Ch. Gledhill (ed.), *Home Is Where the Heart Is: Studies in Melodrama and the Woman's Film* (London: BFI, 1987).

SELECTED BY: COSETTA SABA

Documenta 11 Platform 5: Exhibition. Catalogue, Kassel, June 8 – September 15, 2002 (Ostfildern-Ruit: Hatje Cantz Publishers, 2002, English edition)

The catalogue of *Documenta 11 Platform 5: Exhibition* outlines a circuit of attention on the otherness of art, producing at the same time a short circuit of our attention on the same subject: a "behind the times" operation, which muddles modern Western societies,

where the critical activity is deliberately atheoretical or programmatically post-theoretical. This volume deals with the otherness, expressed and documented not only by the works exhibited in the *Platform 5* – works which are oriented towards the crossing of thresholds and of frontiers between territories, bodies, minds, texts, societies, signs, etc. – but also by the expositive context itself.

Documenta 11, as maintained by its curator, Okwui Enwezor,

was conceived not as an exhibition but as a constellation of public spheres. The public sphere of the exhibition gesture, implicit in the historical formation of Documenta, in which art comes to stand for models of representation and narratives of autonomous subjectivity, is rearticulated here as a new understanding in the domain of the discursive rather than the museological.¹

Enwezor presents a new curatorial model, consisting of an experimentation of the "platform" concept as referring to world cultures and to their geography – traced out by historical and contemporary conflicts –, according to the following thematic paths: *Democracy Unrealized* (Platform 1, Vienna); *Experiments with Truth: Transitional Justice and the Processes of Truth and Reconciliation* (Platform 2, New Delhi); *Créolité and Creolization* (Platform 3, St. Lucia, West Indies); *Under Siege: Four African Cities Freetown, Johannesburg, Kinshasa, Lagos* (Platform 4, Lagos).

The discourse of *Documenta 11*, planned by Enwezor together with his co-curators, highlights through works of art, the theme of the difference between Postmodernism and Postcoloniality, in a context of modernity. Enwezor asserts that

postcoloniality must at all times be distinguished from postmodernism. While postmodernism was preoccupied with relativiz-

*ing historical transformations and contesting the lapses and prejudices of epistemological grand narratives, postcoloniality does the obverse, seeking instead to sublimate and replace all grand narratives through new ethical demands on modes of historical interpretation.*²

Documenta 11 is the point of synthesis of a multidisciplinary research into artistic practices and processes, inquiring about “circuits of knowledge produced outside the predetermined institutional domain of Westernism, or those situated solely in the sphere of artistic canons.”³ This is inferred from works like, for instance, *Future Amnesia* (2002) by Pierre Huyghe, *The House* (2002) by Eija-Liisa Ahtila, *Suspiria* (2002) by Stan Douglas, *From the Other Side* (2002) by Chantal Akerman, *Shoes for Europe* by Pavel Brâila, etc. Such a research reveals some precise forms of interconnection between artistic practices and different social realities, in various parts of the world: this constitutes “a rethinking of modernity, based on ideas of transculturality and extraterritoriality.”⁴ Let us think, for example, of *As I Was Moving Ahead Occasionally I Saw Brief Glimpses of Beauty* (2000, 16mm, 288’), by Jonas Mekas, an artist who knows well the condition of displacement; or else, of Shirin Neshat (present in Kassel with *Untitled*, 2002, 35mm), with her special way of overcoming the binary opposition between the East (Islam) and the West, outlining some identities of transition, some migrant figures crossing frontiers and continually shifting the limits between “local” and “global,” and sometimes investigating into this mutual overturn (the local into the global and *vice versa*).

The introductory essays – let us remember among others, “The Encyclopedia of Babel” by Carlos Basualdo, “Xeno-epistemics: Makeshift Kit for Sounding Visual Art as Knowledge Production and Retinal Regimes” by Sarat Maharaj, “Can Places Travel?” by Sverker Sörlin, etc. – modulate the same con-

ceptual isotopy in different ways: this can be schematically outlined as “the postcolonial aftermath of globalization and the terrible nearness of distant places.”⁵ The works, or better said, the texts of Platform 5 elaborate programmatically their own visibility in the double acceptance of *testis* and of *textum*, in relation to a research path on discourses, on silences, on signs of the world realities. Their geography is continually re-shaped by mobile frontiers, by trespassing and by crossing, produced by the reversibility between the local and the global dimension. *Documenta 11*, at least in the intention of its curator Enwezor, transfers in social life itself – and most of all in the discourse that art brings to contemporary world realities – an analytic look through which it is possible to see procedures of creolization, hybridization, displacement, subversion, translation, interpretation and reassemblage taking place.

Constitutively seeking its own definition, art is a “reserve of sense;” it connects in an indissoluble way *text* and *out-of-text*, text and context (certainly not the merely expositive one, which marks the artistic function). *Documenta 11 Platform 5* reveals vehemently how aesthetical intervention does not just dwell in the work, but also in the cultural and social intertext which receives it. Apart from the “museal” expositive space, let me recommend *Bataille Monument* (2002), by Thomas Hirschhorn: he creates a “text” from an intervention on the receptive context (a suburban area in Kassel, where a Turkish community lives) and from the utilization of the same work in the aforesaid context (an installation articulated into a social center, a library, a TV set and a bar). *Bataille Monument* is indeed a confusing text: the spectator, compelled to put into effect a condition of “other,” of stranger, must renegotiate it in the context of art, of daily life and of the artist’s expressive intention. Art is the place where countless relations between texts and contexts materialize; a reserve of expressive forms, originating from an aesthetical intention (prefiguring the

interpretative action to which it is dedicated), producing and awaiting their sense at the same time.

As far as the visual content of an exhibition is concerned, spectatorship is central; as pointed out by Jean Fischer, “this means that the affectivity of any aesthetic strategy depends on the way it understands and structures its relation to the viewer.”⁶ If, as Mark Nash emphasizes, “artist’s film and video has emerged as a major if not dominant image discourse in the museum and gallery circuit,”⁷ what is changing the gallery or museum-going experience actually regards the spectatorial activity, and concerns the presence of the work and the time of vision. The artistic utilization of audiovisual languages does not place the viewer in an “aphysical and intellectual dimension,” but rather in a different physical one, determining a near-corporeal implication of the spectator, whose aspects still have to be investigated. Let us think of the film and video by Shirin Neshat: not only does she make a complex image out of the body, but also aims at the spectatorial body, since she foresees it, she “incorporates” it, by outlining the look trajectory and concentration between the screens and the motion-picture camera, between light and sound.

As Fischer points out, “art itself is a form of excess expenditure:” when it is not organic to power elites, that is, where it escapes the aesthetic procedures of the globalized art market, it emphasizes the discourses on legitimation of what is “acceptable” and “unacceptable” in the artistic languages, and not only in those. In relation to such legitimating discourses, the otherness of art is what “enables a coherent discursive position to take place.”⁸ This is the “behind the times” challenge of *Documenta 11*, finding its own expositive actualization in *Platform 5*. It is the challenge of a rigorous curatorial program, that of Mister Enwezor: thematizing and making visible theory’s aspirations of critical resistance, plus underlining the paradoxes and the displacements of artistic languages, as well as of

reality. All this makes us even more aware of the “built-up” character of culture and invention, or better said, of social negotiation processes, of what we define “tradition,” of what shows how culture is a “transnational survival strategy, in continuous traductive movement.” These are therefore the themes of the unceasing translations among different cultural systems and of the interferences between different modalities of sense production. It all regards the West and its colonial history, but also the existence, in it, of cultural differences: let us think of the knowledge belonging to the minority, that is, knowledge which is not shared or which is unsuitable for the contingencies of cultural industry. This knowledge requires our utmost attention, especially because it reveals the discursive processes which just made it become “minority knowledge.”

Documenta 11 presents some conceptual passages which are incredibly “behind the times” and can only be read by inducing an assumption of responsibility, a crisis, a change.

- 1 O. Enwezor, “The Black Box,” in *Documenta 11 Platform 5: Exhibition. Catalogue* (Ostfildern-Ruit: Hatje Cantz Publishers, 2002), p. 54.
- 2 *Ibid.*, p. 45.
- 3 *Ibid.*, p. 54.
- 4 *Ibid.*, p. 55.
- 5 *Ibid.*, p. 44.
- 6 J. Fischer, “Toward a Metaphysics of Shit,” in *Documenta 11 Platform 5: Exhibition. Catalogue* (Ostfildern-Ruit: Hatje Cantz Publishers, 2002), p. 66.
- 7 M. Nash, “Art and cinema: some critical reflection,” in *Documenta 11 Platform 5: Exhibition. Catalogue* (Ostfildern-Ruit: Hatje Cantz Publishers, 2002), p. 129.
- 8 Fischer, *op. cit.*, p. 67.