

Jörg Heiser described Okwui Enwezor as 'perhaps the most important curator of his generation' (tribute in Frieze, 2019). Through engagement with Enwezor's exhibitions and writing examine the veracity of this claim.

Introduction

Jörg Heiser's valorization of Okwui Enwezor's curatorial regime is understandable; Prior to his death in 2019, Enwezor was undeniably a driving force in expanding the contemporary art canon to include non-Western artists. His legacy included curating the 1997 Johannesburg Biennale and South Korea's 2008 Gwangju Biennale, as well as the much-feted Documenta XI, which culminated in Kassel in 2002. In 1994 he established Nka, a pioneering magazine of contemporary African art, which he co-founded alongside scholars Chika Okeke-Agulu, Salah M. Hassan and Olu Oguibe. Its name derives from the Igbo word for creation, as well as the Basaa word for discourse. Indeed, Enwezor was acutely sensitive to "the very complex cultural ecology"¹ in which the contemporary art world operates and theorised a "postcolonial constellation," made up of a "matrix that shapes the ethics of subjectivity and creativity today."² This is to say that Enwezor, above all else, valued relational thinking in his curatorial practice. Referring to Bourdieu's field theory, he posits that art ought to be "understood and recognised as being produced and mobilised in a field of relations."³ For this reason, I believe Heiser does Enwezor a disservice; in positioning him as "the most important curator of his generation,"⁴ he reinscribes what Bourdieu calls the "charismatic ideology of creation,"⁵ which locates cultural and artistic production in the singular genius of the curator-cum-artist. This totalising view of his work does not reflect the "deeply entangled relations and forces...founded by discourses of power,"⁶ Enwezor spent his entire career meditating on. His work

¹ Michele MacCarone, "Aside from Being Wildly Intelligent: Michele MacCarone in Conversation with Okwui Enwezor," Bidoun, accessed January 20, 2023, <https://www.bidoun.org/articles/aside-from-being-wildly-intelligent>.

² Okwui Enwezor, "The Postcolonial Constellation: Contemporary Art in a State of Permanent Transition," *Research in African Literatures* 34, no. 4 (2003): 58, https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/4618328.pdf?refreqid=excelsior%3Ad798f8145ea8c97019cbd7a9c8551bbd&ab_sgments=&origin=&acceptTC=1.

³ Enwezor, *The Postcolonial Constellation*, 76.

⁴ Jörg Heiser, "How Curator Okwui Enwezor (1963-2019) Changed the Course of Art," *Frieze*, March 15, 2019, <https://www.frieze.com/article/how-curator-okwui-enwezor-1963-2019-changed-course-art>.

⁵ Pierre Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production: Essays on Art and Literature* (Cambridge: Columbia University Press, 1993), 316.

⁶ Enwezor, *The Postcolonial Constellation*, 58.

ought to be received within a relational paradigm, positioning him as but one cultural actor within a nexus of relations.

As Sylvester Okwunodu Ogbechie suggests in his trenchant critique:

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.⁷

This ‘star system’ can be read as a form of “symbolic capital,”⁸ in which Enwezor’s position within his field legitimates and produces economic capital through “selective curatorial dismissal.”⁹ While I think that Ogbechie’s framing of Enwezor as a ‘culture broker’ is overly cynical and dismissive of his curatorial achievements, he makes a salient argument that collaborative work ought to exist within a multiplicity of viewpoints, not “ascribed to a specific individual.”¹⁰ In this essay, through sustained consideration of the 1996 Johannesburg Biennale and Documenta 11, I will situate Enwezor’s curatorial practice within the “networks and cross-hatched systems of production, distribution, transmission, reception and institutionalization”¹¹ he recognised to be at play within the globalized contemporary art landscape.

Johannesburg Biennale, 1997

Describing his experience of seeing Cape Point for the first time Enwezor said, “I was astonished by the experience of standing there, where the two oceans met. I knew at that very moment this would be my concept: the meeting of worlds.”¹² The Cape is where the first European colony settled, and where a violent legacy of enslavement began in South Africa. For this reason, Enwezor argues that “globalisation actually

⁷ Sylvester Okwunodu Ogbechie, “The Curator as Culture Broker: A Critique of the Curatorial Regime of Okwui Enwezor in the Discourse of Contemporary African Art,” ASAI, June 23, 2010, <https://asai.co.za/the-curator-as-culture-broker-a-critique-of-the-curatorial-regime-of-okwui-enwezor-in-the-discourse-of-contemporary-african-art/#more-722>.

⁸ Bourdieu, *Cultural Production*, 334.

⁹ Ogbechie, *Culture Broker*, 3.

¹⁰ Ogbechie, *Culture Broker*, 7.

¹¹ Enwezor, *The Postcolonial Constellation*, 73.

¹² Okwui Enwezor, “Trade Routes Revisited: Okwui Enwezor’s Reflections,” *issuu.com* (Stevenson, October 28, 2013), https://issuu.com/stevensonctandjhb/docs/trade_routes_book_issuu.

started...in South Africa.”¹³ The Biennale’s theme of ‘Trade Routes: History and Geography’, thus reveals its simultaneous preoccupations with globalisation and postcolonialism. For Africa, the concept of trade routes simultaneously connects the opportunity of contemporary cultural exchange with the violence of slavery. This is to say that the enmeshed cultural and historical factors that culminated in the 1997 Johannesburg Biennale were just as important as Enwezor’s curatorial intervention.

In *Poetics of Relation*, Édouard Glissant argues “in Relation, the whole is not the finality of its parts: for multiplicity in totality is total diversity.”¹⁴ His argument essentially is that unity has become fragmented and that our contemporary reality is based on a multiplicity of ever-transforming Relation. Relation identity “is linked not to a creation of the world but to the conscious and contradictory experience of contacts among culture.”¹⁵ Instead of a world of nations, he imagines the image of the archipelago, in which we share interconnectivity while remaining distinct subjects. The archipelago is a fitting metaphor for the Johannesburg Biennale itself. Enwezor’s conception of nationality as “durational and contingent,”¹⁶ led him to eschew national pavilions in favour of building new “contact zones”¹⁷ for art, artists and their viewing public. Through a series of diverse exhibitions, with six international curators at the helm – Octavio Zaya, Hou Hanru, Colin Richards, Kellie Jones, Yu Yeon Kim and Gerardo Mosquera – an archipelagic formation of artworks took shape. The Biennale took a decentralised approach, peppering exhibitions across sites in Johannesburg and Cape Town.

The central show “Alternating Currents” was housed in a former power station, renamed the Electric Workshop. The entrance gallery featured a large-scale installation called *United Nations Project 1993-2000* (Fig. 1) by the Chinese artist Gu Wenda. As described by the artist, it was “a wall of pseudo-English, Chinese, Hindi, Arabic and world ethnical maps made of human hair with African shorn hair on the

¹³ Enwezor, *Trade Routes*, 11.

¹⁴ Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, trans. Betsy Wing (Ann Arbor: University Of Michigan Press, 1997), 192.

¹⁵ Glissant, *Poetics*, 144.

¹⁶ Okwui Enwezor, “Introduction – Travel Notes: Living, Working, and Travelling in a Restless World,” in *Trade Routes: History and Geography, the Catalogue of the 2nd Johannesburg Biennale*, ed. Matthew DeBord (Johannesburg and The Hague: Greater Johannesburg Metropolitan Council & Prince Claus Fund, 1997), 10.

¹⁷ Enwezor, *Travel Notes*, 12

ground.”¹⁸ Collected from over 300 barbershops worldwide, the artwork explored notions of transnationalism, imagining a world in which ethnical identities are retained while coexisting alongside hybrid cultures. Functioning as a thesis statement for the Biennale, *United Nations* constructed a “zone of encounters”¹⁹ in which the spectator could “explore how culture and space have been historically displaced through colonisation, migration, and technology.”²⁰ These composite factors negate an absolute imposition of curatorial authority.

The rejection of an ossified conception of nationhood would not have been possible without the “curatorial roundtable”²¹ Enwezor assembled. Each curator brought their own national sensibility to the theme, while exploring what it means to exist in a postcolonial, globalised world. Cuban curator Gerardo Mosquera’s show “Important and Exportant” drew on notions of diaspora, mobility and cultural exchange. Diaspora was an overarching theme of many of the Biennale’s artworks and over half of the artists displayed were settled in other countries than their origins. The title is a humorous play on the systems of exchange underpinning the art market: “the ‘importance’ of artists who are ‘imported’ for the event and the ‘export’ value of art and artists as assets in global culture.”²² This inextricable web of relations was central to the exhibition. Indeed, many works artists chose to express the idea of global connectivity through the ocean as a means of traversal, whether through diaspora, invasion or colonial exploration. Cildo Meireles, a Brazilian artist, made a site-specific installation for the Biennale called *Sounding Sea (Marulho)* (Fig. 2). A jetty led the spectator to the installation, which consisted of photocopies of water covering the floor. The word “water”, spoken in many different languages, could be heard playing over a speaker, speaking to a diasporic experience of culture and identity in flux. This had a lulling effect, like waves lapping against the shore, alluding to the repeated voyages to be found at the end of the pier. David Medalla’s *A Stitch in Time* (Fig. 3) similarly spoke to the “perpetual motifs... of movement and migration.”²³ The piece took the form of an old sail suspended from the ceiling in the shape of a hammock. Audience members were invited to participate in the production of the work by sewing small objects of personal significance into the tapestry, a testament to the collaborative process and fluctuating cultural exchanges engendered in the creation of art. Mosquera and Enwezor’s collaboration was only one part of a multifaceted Biennale but it effectively demonstrates that Enwezor was but one cultural actor, “aligning thought and vision through the separation and juxtaposition of a

¹⁸ Gu Wenda, “www.wendagu.com | United Nations,” wendagu.com, accessed January 20, 2023, http://wendagu.com/installation/united_nations/concept.html#intro.

¹⁹ Bisi Silva, “An ‘Other’ Stop on the Global Art Trail,” *NKA: Journal of Contemporary African Art* Spring / Summer, no. 8 (1998): 49.

²⁰ Enwezor, *Travel Notes*, 9.

²¹ Enwezor, *Trade Routes*, 17.

²² Shannen Hill and Elizabeth Rankin, “Important and Exportant,” *African Arts* 31, no. 3 (1998): 76, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3337581>.

²³ Okwui Enwezor, “Between Localism and Wordliness,” *Art Journal* 57, no. 4 (December 1998): 33, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00043249.1998.10791902>.

²⁴ Enwezor, *The Postcolonial Constellation*, 76.

The shadow of apartheid loomed large over the Biennale. From 1997-1998, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission held over two thousand hearings about the human rights abuses committed by the apartheid state between 1960 and 1994. Inequality was vast, only exacerbated by the 1997-1998 financial crisis. This seismic historical event conditioned the reception of the show and led to critiques of cultural imperialism. In the context of South Africa's emergent nationalism, Carol Becker asked how a nation "working through their own emotional and physical problems... attempting to create equality at all levels"²⁵ could possibly adopt a post-national outlook. In describing a world reconstructed by an "unprecedented flurry of activities and events called globalisation,"²⁶ Enwezor opened the Biennale up to the critique that it ignored the political urgencies of its locale. This simply demonstrates that the Biennale itself existed within a discursive field, structured by the afterlives of apartheid and colonialism. The Biennale was closed down a month before it was due to finish, an event entirely beyond the control of the curatorial team. Its reception became a structuring principle of the exhibition, simultaneously demonstrating the limits of curatorial intervention and the nexus of relations in operation.

While the Biennale was constructed under Enwezor's curatorial aegis, it is impossible to position him as 'the most important' figure in its production. Enwezor poses the question: "How does the curator of contemporary art express her agency within the state of "permanent transition" in which contemporary art exists today?"²⁷ The answer the 1997 Johannesburg Biennale provided is that the agency of the curator is inextricable from the "flood of convergences,"²⁸ historical, political, local and international, that gave it its distinct character.

Documenta 11

Documenta 11 was a mammoth curatorial undertaking. Enwezor's curatorial team, composed of Ute Meta Bauer, Susanne Ghez, Carlos Basualdo, Sarat Maharaj,

²⁵ Carol Becker, "The Second Johannesburg Biennale," *Art Journal* 57, no. 2 (June 1998): 89, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00043249.1998.10791881>.

²⁶ Enwezor, *Travel Notes*, 8.

²⁷ Enwezor, *The Postcolonial Constellation*, 74.

²⁸ Glissant, *Poetics*, 45.

Octavio Zaya and Mark Nash, constructed the exhibition across four continents, on five transdisciplinary platforms. The aim of the exhibition was to “enlarge the space of the critical debates of contemporary artistic discourse today.”²⁹ The enormous scale “required viewers to rethink the relationships of their minds and bodies to the spaces and time of the exhibition, and, by extension, to the global processes addressed in each component of the project.”³⁰ This engendered a discursive flexibility, confronting the limits of Western hegemony and its impact on discourses of globalisation in the contemporary art world. In an exhibition as sprawling and ambitious as Documenta 11, it is fruitful to position Enwezor as a cultural actor within a plurality of contexts.

Platform 5, co-curated by Enwezor and Zaya, was the final exhibition of Documenta 11, taking place in Kassel in 2002. In many ways it “embematized the mechanisms that make the space of contemporary art one of multiple ruptures,”³¹ in which globalisation, in the face of the European colonial world order, becomes a ruinous and inequitable force. Five years after Johannesburg, Enwezor had a more nuanced, less naïve outlook on the problematics of a global art world. The curators engendered an intertextual dialogue between works in the exhibition, commenting on the “devastating effects of an unequal distribution of resources.”³² Two works in particular emblemise this dialogue. Isa Genzken's *New Buildings for Berlin* series (Fig. 4) and the *Phantom City* series of Bodys Isek Kingelez (Fig. 5) construct alternate visions for different cities ruptured by the cold war. Kingelez imagines a utopic vision of what the Congolese city of Kinshasa could have been after the collapse of the state of Zaire. The Mobutu regime's ambitious building schemes never came to fruition and the city was left in a state of disrepair. Kingelez's work, with its glittering skyscrapers and profusion of colour, simultaneously offers a glimpse at what Kinshasa could have been, while mourning its loss of potential. Genzken's kaleidoscopic models of glass high-rises are at odds with Berlin's grey stone facades, articulating her vision for a colourful post-cold war urban environment. The

²⁹ Okwui Enwezor, “Preface,” in *Documenta 11_ Platform 5: Exhibition Catalogue*, ed. Heike Ander and Nadja Rottner Rottner (Ostfildern-Ruit: Hatje Cantz, 2002), 7.

³⁰ Reesa Greenberg, “Identity Exhibitions: From Magiciens de La Terre to Documenta II,” *Art Journal* 64, no. 1 (April 1, 2005): 91, <https://doi.org/10.2307/20068368>.

³¹ Enwezor, *Preface*, 6.

³² Sylvester Okwunodu Ogbechie, “Ordering the Universe: Documenta II and the Apotheosis of the Occidental Gaze,” *Art Journal* 64, no. 1 (April 1, 2005): 85, <https://doi.org/10.2307/20068367>.

difference in Kingelez's and Genzken's metropolises is that Genzken's was broadly realised. While her structures don't literally represent the buildings of Berlin, they speak to the potentiality of the city. Berlin survived the cold war and cemented its position as a centre of global power. The dialogue between the two suggests that the concentration of wealth in the occident has a direct negative impact on the development of cities outside of the West. While partially facilitated by Enwezor, the discourse engendered has implications beyond curatorial oversight. Here, the boundaries of art exist "in a dispersed, fragmentary, and asymmetrical state of economic capitalization endemic to all global systems...foreshortened by historical and institutional forces."³³ Enwezor is as beholden to these forces as any other actor within the nexus of the postcolonial constellation, thereby demonstrating the limits of curatorial power.

Many of the artworks at Documenta "criticized the Western world's ethnocentrism and opposed its expanding spheres of influence."³⁴ If Enwezor imagined Documenta to be "a constellation of discursive domains,"³⁵ it was to define the relationship of non-Western actors to the oppressive force of globalisation. Jeff Wall's *Invisible Man* (Fig. 6) succinctly embodies this relationship. Based off of Ralph Ellison's 1952 novel *Invisible Man*, Wall's meticulously staged installation recreates the underground conditions of the unnamed protagonist. In the novel, he illegally siphons electricity from the state utility company to power thousands of lightbulbs. He reflects on his own invisibility in Jim Crow America, living in fear of the state shutting the power off and leaving him in the dark. The lights remained burning in Wall's installation, reflecting the protagonist's desire for visibility and his self-determined drive for subjecthood. The metaphor for the condition of non-Western peoples living "after imperialism"³⁶ is apt; As Ogebechie suggests, "the control of technologies of discourse by the West strongly limits the ability of black and brown peoples everywhere to make their voices heard or to attain viable political, economic, or cultural power."³⁷ In the same way, the privileging of Enwezor as 'the most important curator of his generation,' renders invisible the "the dramatic multiplication of

³³ Enwezor, *The Postcolonial Constellation*, 75.

³⁴ Ogebechie, *Ordering the Universe*, 85.

³⁵ Okwui Enwezor, "The Black Box," in *Documenta 11 _ Platform 5: Exhibition Catalogue*, ed. Heike Ander and Nadja Rottner Rottner (Ostfildern-Ruit: Hatje Cantz, 2002), 42.

³⁶ Enwezor, *The Postcolonial Constellation*, 58.

³⁷ Ogebechie, *Ordering the Universe*, 85.

articulation,”³⁸ he recognised to be at play within artistic production. This is not to suggest that Enwezor wields the political power of the West, but rather situates his work within the ruptures facilitated by globalisation. The “entanglements of worldwide relation,”³⁹ were the impetus that facilitated and sustained Documenta, and his curatorial practice should be received in the same paradigm.

Conclusion

In this essay, I have refuted Heiser’s positioning of Enwezor as ‘the most important curator of his generation.’ Instead, I have situated his curatorial regime within a relational nexus, in which a multiplicity of forces conditions the production of exhibitions. In critiquing the sovereignty of the curator as star, I have demonstrated that the postcolonial constellation of Enwezor’s imagining is intimately bound up in “the global processes of movement, resettlement, recalibration, change, shifts and modalities of cultural transformation.”⁴⁰ To suggest otherwise mitigates his immense curatorial legacy and academic contributions.

³⁸ Enwezor, *The Postcolonial Constellation*, 69.

³⁹ Glissant, *Poetics*, 31.

⁴⁰ Enwezor, *The Postcolonial Constellation*, 58.

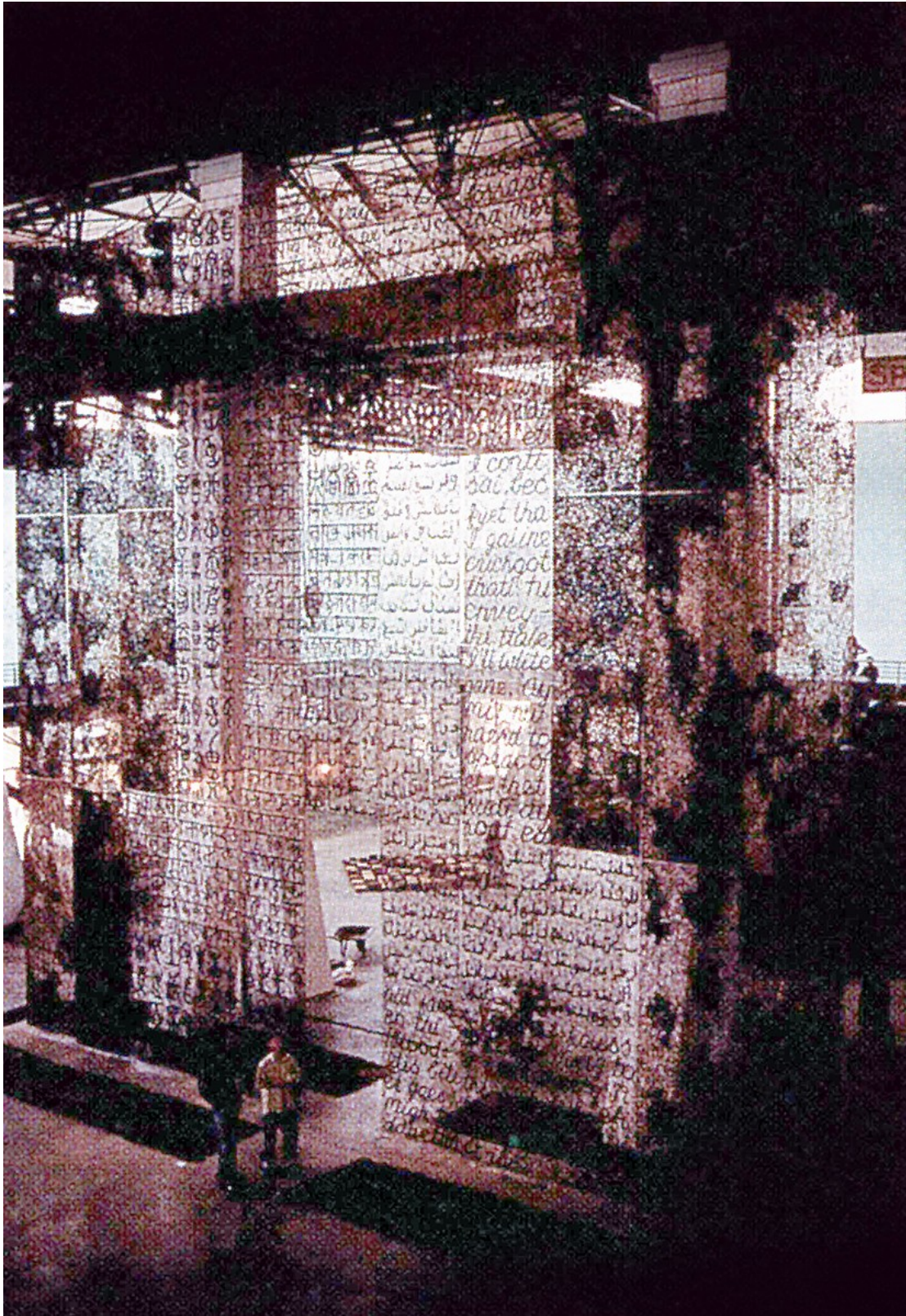


Figure I

Gu Wenda

United Nations Africa Monument: The World Praying Wall

1997

Hair and mixed media

1219.2 x 1219.2 cm

Johannesburg, South Africa

Photo: Rachel Weiss

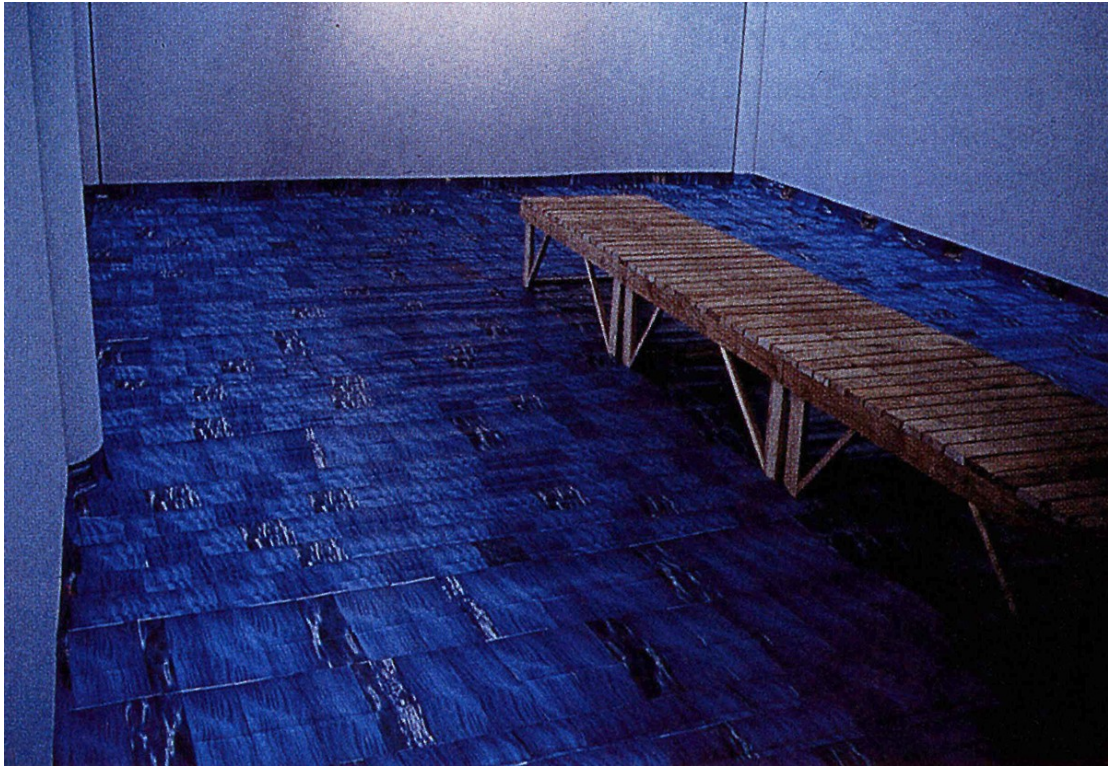


Figure II

Cildo Meireles
Sounding Sea (Marulho)
1997
Mixed media
Various dimensions
Johannesburg, South Africa
Photo: Rachel Weiss



Figure III

David Medalla

A Stitch In Time

1997

Mixed media

Dimensions unknown

Johannesburg, South Africa

Photo: Adam Nankervis



Figure IV

Iza Genzken

New Buildings for Berlin – Installation View at Documenta 11

2002

Glass, mirror, foil

Each appr. 80 x 17 x 23 cm

Kassel, Germany



Figure V

Bodys Isek Kingelez
Kimbembele Ihunga (Kimbeville)
1994
Mixed media
130 × 185 × 320 cm
Kassel, Germany
Photo: Haupt & Binder



Figure VI

Jeff Wall

After Ralph Ellison, Invisible Man, The Preface

1999-2001

Cibachrome transparency, aluminum light box

193.7 × 269.9 × 26 cm

Kassel, Germany

Photo: Jeff Wall

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