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The Spectacular Difference of Documenta XI

Anthony Downey

Since its inception in 1955, Documenta has established itself as an institution that not only presents a survey of contemporary art historical issues but, more recently, the social and political milieu in which we live. Add to this the considerable amount of critical attention focused on who is chosen to curate Documenta, and the entire project would appear to be becoming more of a multidisciplinary inquiry into the ethics of curation and the institutionalising effect of exhibitions per se. In opting to not only investigate the structures and conditions of present-day artistic production but also interrogate its institutional status, Documenta XI appeared to be indicative of this trend. As the first major exhibition of the twenty-first century, moreover, this interrogative stance is hardly surprising – indeed, given the wider developments in museological, curatorial and institutional conventions, it would seem to be obligatory.

The shift towards utilising the occasion of Documenta as an opportunity to critique its function, moreover, has a long and venerable history. Amongst other things, Harald Szeemann used his appointment to oversee Documenta V in 1972 as an occasion to fundamentally restructure the organisational framework that had developed over the years into an unwieldy form of curation-by-committee. More recently, Catherine David premised the mandate for Documenta X upon what was perceived to be an immediate ethical demand to confront the historical, political and cultural foundations of the present confrontation, moreover, that unequivocally placed the very institution she was overseeing in the evaluative firing line:

The last documenta of this century can hardly evade the task of elaborating a historical and critical gaze on its own history, on the recent past of the post-war period, and on everything from this now-vanished age that remains in ferment within contemporary art and culture: memory, historical reflection, decolonization and what Wolfgang Iser calls the 'de-Europeanization' of the world.¹

1. Catherine David, 'Introduction', *Documenta X: Short Guide*, Cantz Verlag, Germany, 1997, p 9.

Taking place over eighteen months, between March 2001 and September 2002, and organised through the framework of five separate Platforms located across four continents, it was obvious that Documenta XI was not going to follow the format of preceding projects. Conceived as an opportunity to provide both a public and private intercession into the topics of art, history, politics and economics, the first platform, 'Democracy Unrealized', took place in Vienna as early as March 2001 and continued in Berlin. Platform 2, 'Experiments with Truth: Transitional Justice and the Processes of Truth and Reconciliation', took place in New Delhi and consisted of five days of public panel discussions, lectures and debates. The third Platform, 'Creolit and Creolization', was held on the West Indian island of St Lucia in the Caribbean, whilst Platform 4 took place in Lagos and examined the current state of affairs of African urban centres. Under the artistic direction of Okwui Enwezor and five co-curators – Carlos Basualdo, Ute Meta Bauer, Susanne Ghez, Sarat Maharaj and Octavio Zaya – the final Platform of Documenta XI, the exhibition proper, concentrated on the critical demand to investigate, and simultaneously produce, a forum within which the relationship of art to politics, postcoloniality and the process of globalisation could be problematised and further explored.

Suffice to say of a project the size of Documenta XI, and despite the incessant gripe that there was too much emphasis on time-based art practices such as video installation (and not enough time to see it), there were many memorable and significant works to be seen. However, rather than focus on the merits or otherwise of the work displayed here, I will highlight the institutional context and critical tropes that underwrote the exhibition – a focus that amplifies two distinct but nonetheless related issues. First, there is a need to examine the critical and curatorial precepts that underpinned the formal organisation of the exhibition. To pursue such an enquiry invokes Okwui Enwezor's fundamental ambition and the presiding issues that Documenta XI set out to explore, namely: 'What could be Documenta XI's "spectacular difference" if viewed from the refractory shards thrown up the multiple artistic spaces and knowledge circuits that are the critical hallmarks of today's artistic subjectivity and cultural climate?'²

Second, there is a need to examine how the various art practices brought together in Documenta XI functioned in respect of both the critical framework that accompanied the exhibition and the wider debates regarding art's autonomy, or otherwise, from the domain of the sociopolitical. The way in which the overall project was promoted in terms of its 'spectacular difference' from previous Documentas, moreover, encourages the question as to whether such a proposition had any significant critical purchase when applied specifically to the exhibition Platform. This is not to propose an examination of the personal achievements or failures of the curators as such, rather it is to outline an examination of the institutional constraints and formal conventions that support and prescribe the structure that Documenta can take. Needless to say, none of these questions is without critical precedent in the context of Documenta; nevertheless, I will suggest a number of issues that are in need of further discussion, not least the one we were confronted with at the outset of this discussion: what is the function of Documenta in the twenty-first century, and to what extent did Documenta XI undertake to

2. Okwui Enwezor, 'The Black Box', *Documenta XI, Platform 5: Exhibition*, Hatje Cantz, Germany, 2002, p 43.

not only problematise this function but coextensively articulate a differential critical locus for examining contemporary art practice?

The critical vocabulary that informed Documenta XI was, unsurprisingly, suffused with the rhetoric of postcoloniality and globalisation. The debates surrounding the two latter terms are, of course, not just diagnostic; they also contain an ethical injunction to highlight representations of social and political injustice and, in doing so, open up a space for the articulation of counter-hegemonic voices. The postcolonial space, Okwui Enwezor suggested in the exhibition catalogue, 'is the site where experimental cultures emerge to articulate modalities that define new meaning-and memory-making systems of late modernity'.³ The articulation of modality here not only operates on the level of an epistemological aporia but also precipitates the production of agonistic narratives that generate new ethical requirements on the conditions of historical interpretation. Where the curator of Documenta X, Catherine David, generally saw the postwar period in terms of developments within Western capitalism and globalism, not least the relatively localised events surrounding Paris in 1968, the organisers of Documenta XI refocused this historical perspective through the prism of postcoloniality and globalisation. The formal displacing of Documenta XI, alongside the privileged notion of 'extraterritoriality', was central to this objective. In Enwezor's words:

Documenta 11 begins from the sheer side of extraterritoriality: firstly, by displacing its historical context in Kassel; secondly, by moving outside the domain of the gallery space to that of the discursive; and, thirdly, by expanding the locus of the disciplinary models that constitute and define the project's intellectual and cultural interest.⁴

Whilst the approach outlined above is in keeping with the previous curatorial and critical stress placed upon Documenta's institutional context, this time around the overall project was relatively unique in its comparative repositioning of the actual exhibition itself. The inter-continental infrastructure was presented here not only in terms of geographic displacement but as a paradigmatic corollary to the project's intellectual and critical conceptualisation – a proposition that effectively relativised the exhibition's overall function: as Enwezor suggested, 'the exhibition is not to be understood as a terminus for understanding the wide-ranging disciplinary models spelled out in the first four Platforms of the conferences, debates, and workshops that preceded it'.⁵ Instead, the exhibition was foregrounded as an aspect of Documenta XI's 'spectacular difference': 'one claim that can be made for Documenta's spectacular difference is that its critical spaces are not places for the normalization or uniformization of all artistic visions on their way to institutional beatification'.⁶

The re-contextualisation of Documenta XI, advocated in terms of its 'spectacular difference', effectively prefaced an extensive enquiry into the degree to which institutions have historically usurped art's sociopolitical agency in favour of its autonomous status. As an alternative to such practices, the organisers and curators sought to position contemporary art practice in terms of its ability to produce knowledge systems beyond already existing structures: 'Documenta 11's paradigm is shaped by forces that seek to enact the multidisciplinary direction through which

3. Enwezor, *ibid*, p 44.

4. Enwezor, *ibid*, p 42.

5. Enwezor, *ibid*, p 42.

6. Enwezor, *ibid*, p 43.

artistic practices and processes comes most alive, in those circuits of knowledge produced outside the predetermined institutional domain of Westernism, or those situated solely in the sphere of artistic canons'.⁷ In this respect, the exhibition Platform of Documenta XI was endorsed in terms of being an alternative to that which preceded it – specifically, the teleological inclination involved in producing an institutional space for the progressive establishment and canonical legitimisation of the art object. We are, nevertheless, confronted with a conceptual, if not altogether methodological, problematic here: what curatorial/organisational methodology can Documenta exercise that avoids providing the spectacle that is traditionally expected of the exhibition – a spectacle that Documenta XI was at pains to renounce.

Despite establishing itself as an occasion for a self-reflexive critique not only of its own spectacularity but its function as an institution, Documenta XI was still contextualised as a 'spectacle' of sorts, not least in the reviews that appeared in art magazines and journals. Given the institutional context, generous funding and coextensive need to attract hundreds of thousands of visitors in order to be seen as even halfway successful, the production of a spectacle is perhaps unavoidable. There is, nevertheless, a further debate that needs to be referenced here, namely, the degree to which we can reinvent a political and representational space that avoids the flawed, but nonetheless inviting, logic of multicultural spectacle. This is to invoke what Slavoj Žižek proposes to be the problematic that usurps multiculturalist claims to inclusivity and the manner in which such a problematic is present in the apparent universalism that lurks beneath its premise:

The 'real' universality of today's globalization through the global market involves its own hegemonic fiction (or even ideal) of multiculturalist tolerance, respect and protection of human rights, democracy, and so forth; it involves its own pseudo-Hegelian 'concrete universality' of a world order whose universal features of the world market, human rights and democracy, allow each specific 'life-style' to flourish in its particularity.⁸

Multicultural inclusiveness does not, Žižek argues, and counter to popular belief, challenge the cultural logic of global capitalism; on the contrary, multiculturalism, and its implied corollary liberal tolerance, strategically produces the 'Other' as a marketable form of identity-formation. Žižek suggests that: 'Liberal "tolerance" condones the folklorist Other deprived of its substance like the multitude of "ethnic cuisines" in a contemporary megalopolis; however, any "real Other" is by definition "patriarchal", "violent", never the Other of ethereal wisdom and charming customs.'⁹ In other words, the pronouncement of multicultural inclusiveness – its claim to realise a more progressive representational space that is legitimised by a non-totalising form of politics – is the disavowed, inverted and self-referential assertion of superiority and should be seen as such.

In censuring the tendency in exhibitions to perpetuate the ontological distinctiveness of art, Documenta XI sought to develop a non-totalising topos of representation that allowed for a form of mediation between the formal context of art as a politically engaged practice and, conversely, the institutional tendency to propose it as a separate, privileged, and therefore autonomous, apolitical discipline. Notwithstanding such an

7. Enwezor, *ibid*, p 54.

8. Slavoj Žižek, 'Multiculturalism, or, the Cultural Logic of Multinational Capitalism', *New Left Review*, no 225, September/October 1997, p 41.

9. Slavoj Žižek, *ibid*, p 37.

intention, it is critical in light of Documenta XI that we enquire into the extent to which the exhibition presented us with a multicultural spectacle or a radical re-visioning of a non-totalisable representational space that made a point about art's formal relationship to politics and coextensively provided a space beyond 'the predetermined institutional domain of "Westernism"' – a phrase, it should be noted, that is far too broad to have much by way of critical purchase. And herein lies the corrosive rub: how do you set out a radical agenda within an art network that, in conjunction with the re-territorialising imperatives of globalisation, is always already being repackaged within the neo-liberal, and invariably empty, wrapping of multicultural inclusiveness? This further raises the concern about Documenta's particular place within a global art network and the extent to which it normalises that which is intended to offer a counter-voice to the canonising and institutionalising museological impulse inherent in contemporary art practice. The curators of Documenta XI were of course acutely aware of this and exactly what was, and continues to be, at stake in the somewhat double-edged remit that attends the entire project: how do you cultivate, that is to say, a radical Documenta that acts as a critique of its own institutionalising agenda and tendency towards spectacle without eviscerating its very function as an institution? In part, this problematic was addressed by suggesting that art as a practice should be contextualised within the terms of its potential to produce knowledge systems that further articulate interdisciplinary models for the discussion of the effect of globalisation, its relationship to postcoloniality, and the production of new modes of subjectivity within these axes. However, if the works represented in Documenta XI were brought together to make a discursive political point, what, if any, was that point – and, crucially, how did the enunciation of such issues constitute a differential relationship to that which went before. How did Documenta XI open up a radically new knowledge system or paradigm within which to discuss contemporary art practice? This returns us to the question of how the art presented here functions in the wake of postcoloniality and the sociopolitical realignments established by globalisation.¹⁰

Documenta XI resonated with the ongoing pressure for theory to proclaim a politics and reformulate the connection between the political agency of art as a practice and the world itself. Furthermore, if the relationship between artistic practices and the sociopolitical sphere becomes problematised, then the connection can be reintroduced by the introduction of political criteria into both cultural criticism and curatorial rationale. For Enwezor, art 'exceeds the borders of the former colonized world to lay claim to the modernized, metropolitan world of empire by making empire's former "other" visible and present at all times, either through the media or through mediatory, spectatorial, and carnivalesque relations of language, communication, images, contact, and resistance within the everyday'.¹¹ The politics that informs post-colonial criticism and theory is advanced here as a predicative model for the content and form of the art chosen to be included in the exhibition. To the extent that such a demand anticipated the motives and motifs of the exhibition, it was in terms of a critical disposition that not only enlarges the world-view aperture of modernity but rearticulates art in terms of sociopolitical praxis.

10. Thomas McEvilley noted that many of the issues that Documenta XI explored had a sense of having already been rehearsed (for better or worse) elsewhere, and for anyone with an interest in the politics of representation in a global, postcolonial context there would have been few surprises in the rhetoric of otherness, difference, globalisation and hybridity employed in Documenta XI. McEvilley wrote: 'In a sense the agenda proclaimed by these curators gave one a sense of *déjà vu*; or rather, it seemed not exactly to usher in a new era but to set a seal on an era first announced long ago'. Thomas McEvilley, 'Documenta XI', *Frieze*, Issue 69, September 2002, p 81.

11. Enwezor, *op cit*, p 45.

This raises the perennial debate concerning art, autonomy and politics. The autonomous artwork is associated in Enwezor's essay in terms of lack: existing in an idealised, absolute state, the autonomous (avant garde) art object is deficient when it comes to exploring social interaction and generating commitment in the form of ethical and political responsibility. This needs to be further considered in respect of Enwezor's emphasis upon what he reads to be the innate 'Westernism' that bolsters not only international museum networks and canons but the entire practice of the avant-garde per se: 'Today's avant-garde is so thoroughly disciplined and domesticated within the scheme of Empire that a whole different set of regulatory and resistance models has to be found to counterbalance Empire's attempt at totalization'.¹² Whilst this point is not without validity, it begs further questions, not least how the 'model' offered by Documenta XI specifies, or at least alludes to, such a counterbalance. This has further ramifications when we consider that the formal properties of much of the work included in Documenta XI – formal properties that in a somewhat time-honoured fashion mediate the content (political or otherwise) of the work – draw their inspiration from the very techniques employed by the so-called modernist avant-garde. To dismiss, in sum, the entire tradition of Modernism and the avant garde as irremediably in collusion with 'Westernism', and therefore implicated in a neo-imperial form of Empire, is to strategically pass over the formal vernacular of much of the work on display in Documenta XI.¹³

In sidestepping the more traditional teleological task of the exhibition, Documenta XI sought to radically reinterpret its function in the context of a socially, ethically and politically committed art practice. This was not without its problems, however, not least the issue of how exactly Documenta as an institution is to effect a radical agenda from the diverse and varied working practices, institutional settings, discursive paradigms and epistemologies that inform art today without coextensively homogenising such practices. It was perhaps with such a debate in mind that seventy per cent of Documenta XI was specifically commissioned. The commissioning of such a high percentage of work is no doubt laudable in itself, in so far as seeing the up-to-the-minute work of an artist is, more often than not, preferable to seeing a modified version of a previous work. It would also suggest a heterogeneous approach to the entire project that was in keeping with its formal organisation; nonetheless, this high percentage of commissioned work also, and no doubt paradoxically, disclosed a certain evenness of output – specifically in the content of the art represented: injustice, interstitial states, hybridity, the aftermath of (post)colonialism, the plight of migrant workers, international trade, globalisation, and the effects of tyranny, were all explored time and time again. This is not, of course, to suggest that such issues do not have a place in contemporary art practice, nor is it a comment on the quality or otherwise of the work displayed here; on the contrary, it is to note the effect of having such a high percentage of commissioned work overall and the manner in which it elicited a certain response to what was a very clear, and perhaps over-prescriptive, curatorial mandate.

The above discussion references a further problematic, not least the one that concerns the politics and aspirations of so-called politically engaged art: what, in sum, is its function in an age of global capitalism and the latter's tendency to reterritorialise counter-hegemonic voices and

12. Enwezor, *ibid.*, p 45.

13. The discussion of 'Empire' is drawn from Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri's *Empire*, published in 2000. In invoking the latter, Enwezor outlined the way in which the effects of globalisation coalesce around the increasingly homogenised sphere of social, cultural and political life regulating, in turn, all forms of social interaction and cultural transactions.

cultural practices at the very moment of their inception? Much of this discussion, it should be noted, was predicated in an essay Slavoj Žižek put forward within the framework of Documenta XI's earlier Platform 'Democracy Unrealized'.¹⁴ More than ever, Žižek writes, one should bear in mind Walter Benjamin's reminder that it is not enough to ask how a certain theory (or art) declares itself with regard to social struggles – one should also ask how it effectively functions in these struggles. If the intention of Documenta XI was to highlight injustice, oppression, historical and representational elision, and tyranny then we need to probe into how this intent is, if at all, any different from the way in which such issues are examined in the media. How, moreover, is this work situated in relation to a wider political, cultural and discursive realm and, crucially, how does it function in relation to the very struggles and inequities that it registers?

That art has always made political points, and that aesthetics is imbued with a politics in and of itself, was not so much neglected in Documenta XI as refocused into a rallying point for much of the art on show. Whilst, for Walter Benjamin, politics turned to the potential to be had in the aesthetic, the aesthetics of art practice here would appear to turn to the potential to be had in politics. However, if this process of accommodating a more politicised art form is to be more fully accomplished then there is also a demand to explore the extent to which art is indeed different from politics or other forms of documentary. It is possible in this respect to ask whether it is actually more radical to take the apparently 'conservative' position and contend that there is such a distinct practice as 'art' that is, if not independent from a politics then at least an alternative to it – or, perhaps more crucially, enquire into how art as a practice reinterprets and condemns both the inclination towards spectacle and the largely vacuous rhetoric of multiculturalism employed in the political realm. We are left with a further question here: is it adequate, or critically efficacious, to present an overview of contemporary art practices, if not in terms of spectacle, then in terms of the extent to which they reflect issues readily accessible in the media and newspaper images we are confronted with every day? To paraphrase that most politicised of artists, Felix Gonzalez-Torres, do we really need a gallery space to find out something we can read in a newspaper or watch on CNN?

Again, this raises the difficulty of isolating what exactly constituted the 'spectacular difference' of the exhibition Platform that accompanied Documenta XI. On a formal level, as already noted, the organisation of the project across four continents and five separate Platforms, and the subsequent relativisation of the exhibition, was certainly radical; nevertheless, this radicality was less in evidence in respect of the exhibition. Without resorting to a litany of artists included, there were few surprises here, on the level of both content and form. However, if Documenta XI did fall short in providing such a space, and only further discussion of the cultural repercussions of the project will be able to answer this, then it was not any fault to be found in the work on display per se; on the contrary, the issue is whether we can develop a non-totalising politics of representation and the degree to which Documenta per se, not only Documenta XI, finds itself in a 'double bind' of sorts that revolves, but is not totally resolved, around the attempt to negotiate both its radical intent and institutional normativity.

14. Slavoj Žižek, 'The Prospects of a Radical Politics Today', in *Democracy Unrealized: Documenta XI, Platform I*, Hatje Cantz, Ostfildern-Ruit, 2002, p. 68.

It should be noted here in conclusion that the scope and briefing for Documenta XI outlined an impressively ambitious number of political, ethical and cultural goals and this should be recognised, if not commended, as such. However, to accept the exhibition of Documenta XI as an unmitigated success in presenting a form of 'spectacular difference' would serve merely to expedite further representational elision in so far as it could be held up as the de facto amelioration of past exclusions and the reconciliation of the problematics surrounding the representation of sociocultural and political difference in an era of postcolonial, global politics – surely the very opposite of the project's intention. Moreover, if, in this instance, Documenta XI is to be held aloft as a 'way forward' – if it is to constitute a space within which to more fully consider the ethics of difference, otherness and art as sociopolitical praxis – then we must evaluate its shortcomings alongside its productive worth; anything less would be to go against the interrogative spirit that the curators of Documenta XI no doubt actively encouraged.