

## **Okwui Enwezor – Topographies of Critical Practice: Exhibition as Place and Site**

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**Caribbean Curatorship & National Identity Symposium Keynote Lecture**

**Generational Shifts within the Caribbean Diaspora: Black Diaspora Visual Arts Panel**

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**David Bailey** [Introduction]

I just want to say a few words to introduce our next guest, who I'm very pleased to say is a very old friend and a colleague. Okwui Enwezor is Dean of Academic Affairs and Senior Vice President at San Francisco Art Institute. He has held positions as visiting professor in Art History at the University of Pittsburgh, Columbia University - New York, University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign. (Is that where Oprah's from? Well, you're in good company.) And the University of Lima in Sweden. If people are not aware of Okwui's work, the markers of what Okwui has done – is documenta 11 in Kassel 1998-2002, and of course, the second Johannesburg Biennale, 1996-1997. I'm very pleased that Tumelo [Mosaka] is actually here, who also took part in that.

He has curated numerous exhibitions in some of the most distinguished museums around the world, including *The Short Century: Independence and Liberation Movements in Africa 1945-1994* at the Museum Villa Stuck in Munich, which toured to Century City, Tate Modern, Mirror's Edge, Insight, which is one of my favourites, and also *Global Conceptualism, David Goldblatt* and *Stan Douglas*. I can wax lyrical about Okwui's achievements. What you have to understand [is] that towards the latter half of the 20th century, and also, at the beginning of the 21st century, there has been shifts and changes - quite dramatic and globally - in relation to... how the the notion of the white cube [is] shifting towards the white cube in the kind of urban public arena, in terms of the question of biennales. That shift and change has also represented what Okwui has called societies and transition. Those societies in transition have somehow embarked on new ways of reflecting and deflecting questions on what it is to, in some ways, represent ideas around the contemporary in that kind of curatorial practice.

And for me, what's quite important in that field is that the place of the notion of the question of the diaspora, where one thinks about Africa, the Caribbean, or the kind of the triangle, or whatever, has been, for me, very very paramount in that strategy and in that thinking. And for me, people such as Okwui, has been very, very clear and very focused [on] a trajectory in relation to thinking about those areas and those sites.

When one thinks about, when one talks about - and I'm very pleased that Florence [Alexis] is here - is that, the notion of the question of weapons or the weapons of resistance in relation to the Haitian Revolution, and in relation to the question of struggle, and it's quite clear that the weapons of resistance in the late 20th century and the weapons of resistance in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century has been for the curator, has been the struggle with the notion of the object as that weapon, in terms of that site of struggle. And I'm very pleased today that Okwui is here to kind of talk and reflect and deflect around some of those key questions. My friend Okwui, welcome to Barbados.

### **Okwui Enwezor [03:45]**

Good morning. Thank you so much, David, that was very generous of you, to introduce me with such passionate, and also in many ways, sort of over describing what I believe is my very minute contribution to a field, if you will, that people like David really helped put together. And it's my distinct pleasure and indeed an honour to be here to speak to all of you this morning. Not least because we could all still be at the beach swimming, it's such beautiful water. But anyway, this is a very, very important occasion and an opportunity to continue to sort of to expand on many of the questions that David put on the table. And I would like to use the opportunity to thank our hosts for this event, especially Alissandra Cummins again for her incredible warmth, generosity and, and being able to bring us to make a conference here. John Franklin said that all conferences must have warm waters attached to it. So, this is really what a great site to make this conference. And also, to thank the members of [BNAG], MAC and ICOM. Great colleagues, for making this possible. I know what it is to put together a conference or an event of this complexity bringing people from different parts of the world.

I'm going to shift this morning, as yesterday was mostly concerned with heritage. My talk this morning will be concerned with the contemporary, but not only with contemporary art, but also the question of contemporaneity. And that is to say, the time in which our discourses and practices, so to speak, make the most sense. But without forgetting, obviously, that to think about contemporaneity is also to think historically in the present. So, my talk 'Topographies of Critical Practice: Exhibition as Place and Site' is a way to sort of get into the theme of this conference, which offers an opportunity to engage a range of diverse issues that constitute the vital stakes, and the practice theory and production of contemporary African art. And I want to emphasise this, because yesterday, there was a lot of discussion about slavery, the networks and the roots and routes, if you will. I use routes in the

American sense, just to make the distinction between roots as heritage and routes as networks of dispersion, if you will, networks of the travel out to beyond the space where one is rooted. But what for me was very interesting was the very notion of Africa was very much skimmed or mostly unremarked on. Yes, George [Abungu] did make his presentation, of course, reminding us again, about the importance of the locality called Africa, the place that Africa occupies, in terms of the general trajectory of historical determination.

So, I want us to focus a little bit on Africa, in terms of my own practice, but not out of the notion of identity. I would like to serve again to specify that I've never made an exhibition about identity. That is not to say that identity is not interesting. But I want to state this fact because the field of contemporary African art, as I understand it, is not a field about identity, but rather a disciplinary question, and this is the trajectory that I'm going to take.

So, it's an important reminder that every field or discipline requires a frame, or perhaps, a concatenation of frames within which theoretical reflections and historical analysis could be made. So, my frame of analysis today concerns such a field for to designate the practice of any artist's work in the context of the international and global arena, as being part of contemporary African art, is to raise a series of serious queries. These queries may not necessarily begin with issues of disciplinary identification but may instead point to what at first may be understood as limiting forms of identification that concern race, ethnicity, nationality, citizenship, and ultimately, locality.

Contemporary African art is not only a fraught disciplinary concept. More importantly, it is a fraught geopolitical concept. It is a common fact of African critical practice that disciplinary identification occurs at a much later stage of its development. That is to say, before anybody thinks that contemporary African art or modern African art is a discipline of art history, it's first seen from a much more culturalist perspective. So, this culturalist perspective sort of puts Africa in an anthropological box and an ethnographic box, before it makes its way as a discipline into the general frame of art history. So, the looming dichotomy then, in the culturalist idea of African critical practice, can be succinctly delineated in the jagged cut that separates our notions of the authentic from the inauthentic. In the spirit of this conference, and also because the business at hand is far more limited than the generally complex parsing of your authentic and inauthentic debate can permit, I will not take us down that dividing line of the authentic and inauthentic. Rather I will use this occasion as an opportunity to reflect on the sub-discipline of exhibition and curatorial practice as frames through which to inhabit new geographies of contemporary African art.

As a curator whose practice over the last 20 years has been resolutely concerned with contemporary art in general, and more specifically contemporary African art, I think it is essential to understand the remarkable role the exhibitions of contemporary African art have played in the last two decades in

helping shape a better knowledge, a more complex understanding of the work of African artists. In this context, exhibitions represent both frames of analysis and topographies of critical practice. Here I am offering exhibitions of contemporary African art as places of encounter and sites of production. And to riff on David's notion of collegiality, as spaces of hospitality, if you will, as localities where distinct grammars of artistic practice can be found. My intention is to offer only a limited survey one of the exhibitions that there have been engaged with over the last 10 years as one approach for understanding not only the role of an exhibition as place of hospitality for contemporary African artists, but also as a site of critical production, historical analysis and theoretical reflection.

I will begin first with the idea that the field of contemporary African art exhibition is a complicated one. To my mind, to understand this field, to theorise or analyse it productively requires specific attention to five typologies of African exhibition practice. These include: the ethnographic and anthropological model, the genre model, the hybrid model, the post-colonial model, then there is the postmodern model that combines genres, methodologies, practices, localities. This model shakes things up, leaves the details or the specificities in the air, pushing audiences to speculate on the meanings and the status of objects and images and ideas, the yet to emerge. Susan Vogel, the former director of the Museum of African Art in New York, was a provocative expert at this type of exhibition practice. When done well, the post-modern model offers new possibilities for reading the schemas of African artistic thought, providing insight that helps expand the purview of the field. Vogel's work was always boldly theoretical, always taking historical and epistemological liberties with exhibition models, how we state and understand the function of objects, how the settings or localities of exhibitions are not neutral friends, but sides of contending and clashing intellectual positions, as such her exhibition *Art/artifact* proved ground-breaking for a put forth the notion that African art can be understood not simply from a culturalist contextualist perspective (Is it authentic or inauthentic? Real or fake? Functional or non-functional?) but can be explored through theoretical and conceptual frames.

But of course, Vogel learned from the distinct failures of the Museum of Modern Art's "*Primitivism*" in *20<sup>th</sup> Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern* exhibition, which struggled with its own dichotomy between the tribal and the modern, and thereby, the primitive and the civilised. Vogel's exhibition was not merely about the state and status of African art objects, about whether they can be considered art or not. On that note, her turn was surprisingly cautious and equivocal, most certainly because of her own anthropological background. Rather, it was equally about... the exhibition frame, and the place, the museum within which these determinations and judgments were being made. In this sense, the exhibition becomes the grand theatre in which to see whose sits in the judgment seat of historical designations and with what aesthetic and epistemological lens. In fact, Vogel poses succinctly that the exhibition was motivated by unresolved philosophical, but ultimately, curatorial problems dealing with, and I quote, "the way perception of a work of art is conditioned by its presentation".

And I think this already explodes the notion that when we talk about heritage, we have to talk about heritage absent of the frame. I think that George was, again, speaking about the importance of the frame yesterday. So, this statement by Vogel is useful for our purposes because... I'm sorry, she continues by saying that "if the public knows one thing about African art, it knows that the original African setting was nothing like a Western Museum". This statement is useful for our purposes because it points to the larger framework of my idea of the exhibition as place and site. So, the exhibition frame as representing something there, a discursive part of curatorial practice, and the museum as the institutional site on which that discursive practice is put... before the public. So, this tension between the contextualist and culturalist point of view is an interesting one. And I think that for any curator, [unclear audio] making an exhibition, in my view, is not about organising objects and placing them in proximity to a number of discursive framings and so on. But we must also contend with the kind of theoretical and historical, as well as the epistemological issues that are deeply embedded in the kind of decisions that we make, the kinds of choices that we make, the kind of interpretive optics that we deploy when an exhibition is put forward.

So, here, this work can be isolated, then, in Vogel's statement is the idea of the African setting, which designates a spatial context, while the Western Museum designates a temporal context. So, what we see is a separation of two things, that the spatial context represents the over there, the temporal context is over here, the present. So, this issue for me is an interesting one that if you think about Johannes Fabian's book 'Time and the Other', where you Johannes Fabian talks about the notion of coevalness - that Western anthropology had always constructed the other as not sharing... either the other may share the same space with the authority, but they do not share the same time. The other is always somehow out of time, out of joint, always belated in order to be recuperated in the present. And that is really the tension between the frame of the African context, the African object and the Western Museum. So, this spatial / temporal distinction is for me an important one and I will come to my main point, as I go forward.

So, Vogel uses this temporal context to address the larger issue of her exhibition, which in its progressive shift away from the anthropological model to the postmodern model was moving inexorably towards a more suspended, or as they used to say, in between the [audio unclear] rarefied state of illumination of the art object. This shift can be better understood as a soft war on the atemporal, ahistorical device of the anthropological cage, in which African art objects tended to be crowded, pell-mell Natural History Museum style in museums all over the world. Using the device of the ready-made Vogel transformed her exhibition, if not necessarily into a neutral site, she at least attempted to neutralise the way that ethnography and anthropology of everyday objects and everyday practices, they historicize African art. Her model was the exhibition site as a new typography of critical curatorial methodologies as a resonant site of discursive re-contextualisations. Of course, I cannot do justice to the complexity of issues Vogel undertook in her exhibition, and advanced later on in another

exhibition called *Africa Explores: 20th Century African Art* in the limited amount of time I have, but I believe her curatorial projects were directed at enabling us to develop an awareness of an exhibition's critical context, as part of a broader discursive system that is not static, but rather, is continually evolving and theoretically unfixed.

Vogel's work to a large extent owes great debt to the type of discursive practices that emerge with post-colonial theory. Post-colonial theory made us aware of the extent to which historical entanglements challenge anthropological and ethnographic discourses, thus revealing fissures that surround the exchange between post-colonial cultures and Western museum publics. Both of these constituencies converged to compete in a historical environment that remained disproportionately in favour of the advanced institutions and cultural markers of empire, namely, previous imperial powers.

The new museum in Paris, Musée du Quai Branly in Paris (did I say it right Florence?) represents a prime example of the current impasse between radical forms of curatorial practice and institutional practices designed around political rather than disciplinary interests. Quai Branly inhabits a totally different frame of reference; its exhibition methodology is equally at variance with the issues taken up in Vogel's projects. This mammoth, theatrical museum - that is as much a showpiece as a Disney-esque version of the crumbling Roman villa that looks as if it could have been lifted out of Gabriel Garcia Márquez's *Macondo* - was designed by the French architect Jean Nouvel.

I just want to show you this quickly. What is very interesting is the way that Jean Nouvel framed this museum. So, when you enter the facade, it's as if you're entering the jungle, it's taken over by trees. The rhetoric of the architecture is, in itself, really very interesting. And the goal is that as time goes by, the foliage will take over the museum, it will swallow it up, it will disappear in a jungle in the middle of civilised Paris. But the interesting thing is the designation of this museum, as a museum of *arte premier*, a museum of the early art, which will mean early people, and so on. So, this is very, very interesting. And so, I just want to take us through very quickly, and I think this will be of interest, I'm very sure you guys visited Quai Branly while planning the museum at the Smithsonian, John Franklin. And oftentimes, when we think about museum architecture, we tend to forget that the museum is an ideological machine. It is not a temporal space, it's not a neutral space, it's an ideological machine. And the extent to which these ideologies are put in force can be seen in how the Quai Branly was framed, so I'm going to stop here, in any case.

So, just to show you a little bit of the façade, that's what I'm most interested in - this entrance when you go down [Quai Branly] in Paris before you get to the museum, there's a glass panel that sort of shields the museum from the rest of the street, and then you enter through this kind of subterranean garden. And, of course, enter into this place of wonder as it were. But just the way that objects from

other parts of the world still treated in this fashion, you would think that in the 21<sup>st</sup> century this would be different, but it's not. The discourse is not different at all.

So, beyond the academic debates, though, of their appropriateness of the museological language of the displays, which have a new science fiction field at the Quai Branly, or the exaggerated jungle facade of the architecture, covered with a dense climbing field of plants that may evoke a French fantasy of the jungle. And on to the leather clad walls, the cave-like knaves, where the terrors of [audio unclear] are staged in the flickering light of an outdated television monitor. We must also respond to certain demands of post-coloniality. These include, but are not limited to, questions of cultural patrimony and heritage, that have been sort of talked about, but which be-deviled the history of the objects and the museum. Because to release the objects from the museum, as no longer instruments of patrimony and heritage, is really to confront their powers in the present, to stage or to restate their presence within the context of contemporaneity.

So, as with all tussles, where post-colonial resentment and colonial fantasy meets, Quai Branly will continue to raise fresh questions about the exhibition as a typography of critical practice. As James Clifford, in a reflection on the museum, wrote in the journal *October*, and I quote: "In the museum Quai Branly, illusion and the work of art co-exist uneasily with the realism of ethnography and history. Indeed, since the project's inception under the sign of 'artes premiers', the proper balance between aesthetics and anthropology has been hotly debated. A decade of polemics and committees has produced an unstable truce with the aesthetic agenda in overall control. Nouvel's ecstatic primitivism of spiritual communions in a high-tech, sacred forest is an embarrassment for some on the museum staff who are working to counteract it. Jacques Chirac, the project's founder, now translates neo-primitivism into the language of universal human rights. The museum - and I quote from Jacques Chirac: 'where culture's converse' - is the new institution's motto. Exactly how 'cultures' will be able to converse. Speaking what languages? supposing what epistemologies? What political agendas? With what degrees of authority representing whom? All of this remains to be seen."

Again, I've offered this example as a way to prompt us towards reflecting on more rigorous ways to think about exhibitions of contemporary art, as not just spaces to apprehend the latest preoccupations of artists, most specifically, African or diasporic African artists, but as real theoretical spaces, to reflect the changing strategies of artists and the institutions in which they become embedded.

If I have advanced the view of the exhibition as a typography of critical practices, it is only in the interest of what I do curatorially, but simply to reflect the necessity of the curatorial work as an important theoretical model. A disciplinary field in which you elaborate the schemes of new artistic models perhaps out of this a more sophisticated intellectual infrastructure could be developed to analyse, historicise critique and exhibit contemporary African art. To insist on exhibitions as

typographies of a critical practice is to insist on developing a place or constructing sites for the advancement of the singular ideas of both individual artists and groups of artists who share common critical ground.

So, the first exhibition I want to show very quickly, is an exhibition that David mentioned, called *The Short Century: Independence and Liberation Movements in Africa*. And I began by saying that the demand of contemporaneity is not only about placing ideas in the present, but also about forcing us to think historically in the present. *The Short Century* was an attempt to do such a work curatorially, but mind you this was not an art exhibition, it was an exhibition of cultural history in which art plays a very important part in developing. This exhibition, just to give you a very, basic trajectory of this project, it took about seven years to plan. Initially, the first idea was to show a prologue of this exhibition as part of the second Johannesburg Biennale in 1997, in Johannesburg. Obviously, time constraints and limited resources would not make it possible. But in any case, the exhibition was developed to be a discussion between practices by writers, filmmakers, artists, activists, politicians, the entire range of what I consider the short African 20<sup>th</sup> century.

And why did I use the notion of the short century to describe this period? Of course, historians of the present tend to see the 20<sup>th</sup> century as a short 20<sup>th</sup> century. That the 20<sup>th</sup> century began after the end of the First World War and ended with the dismantling of the Berlin Wall. Of course, we can see already the Western historical narcissism there, it's all bracketed by the Western historical experience. Whatever that may be. So, if [it was this] short 20<sup>th</sup> century, then for Africa, this century was even shorter, because we are really talking about post-1945, unmaking of colonisation. This was the topic of this exhibition from 1945 to 1994... We began with the fifth Pan African Congress in Manchester and ended with the first elections in South Africa in 1994. So, in a way, to sort of change the kind of historical and temporal trajectory that allowed us to organise this exhibition.

So, I'm going to run through images of the exhibition... we worked with an architect to design the framework. Tom Finkelpearl is here because he was a partner of the project when he was the chief curator and the deputy director of the PS1 Museum, in New York. And of course, this exhibition was really the first time that many of the objects of this nature - posters, architecture, readings, commemorative cloth, magazine covers, spanning the period from '45 to '94 were all put together. The city making, urban planning, urbanism of different kinds, from Le Corbusier... So, it was not really only restricted to African practitioners. It had Architects like Yona Friedman, whose utopian designs for architecture in Africa has been very influential for many young architects, people like David Adjaye, and so on. And of course, Le Corbusier's plans in Algiers during the 1930s, the master plan that was ultimately of course rejected.

So, the frame of the exhibition involves many different types of practices, because it's not possible to tell the story of a continent. And of course, this was the kind of challenge that this exhibition took up, that for us it was not the story of the country, it was just a special biography of the continent. And in that sense, the work of artists like Tshibumba Kanda Matulu here, an artist that would normally be called a genre painter or airport art or any kind of notion you might use, but really quite sophisticated. This body of work 'The History of Zaire' series comprised of 101 panels of his attempt to historicise, as it were, the history of this country through pictures and contend in discourses and so on. So, it was really the first opportunity to be able to present this work. We presented this work before the museum that owns it in Amsterdam finally was able to show it.

So, the exhibition here, the rooms you're looking at is at the Gropius Bau in Berlin, where it was shown. People like William Kentridge's agitprop posters from the early 80s. And in here you have many different films, Isaac Julian and all the rest of them, his film on Fanon. So just very quickly, the work of artists in Yinka Shonibare, Ouattara Watts. What's his name from Algeria? Just forgot his name now.

(From the audience): Koraichi.

Koraichi, Rachid Koraichi. Thank you, Florence. Yinka Shonibare, a work we commissioned for the for the project called '100 Years'. So, there were several commissions in the project, the work of Gavin Jantjes. Music, films about Fela, and Abdullah Ibrahim, whom you see on the cover of Drum there from 1959. And here... do I have a pointer? Left hand corner, Fela and one of his 27 wives, Debbie Copeland. So, in any case, *The Short Century* addresses substantively the intellectual, artistic, social, political and cultural typography of modern and contemporary African art and culture, as they were shaped by events of decolonisation. I think I wanted to present this here because of the topic of the conference, and also Kevin Farmer's presentation yesterday is for me very much in concert with what I'm trying to talk about.

So, the exhibition focused on the significant intellectual and cultural practices of African thinkers and artists. It gathers a constellation of artistic objects, painting, sculpture, photography, film, drawing and graphic media and documentary material, such as posters, commemorative cloth, publicity bills, newsreel footage, music, books, and other material, in an attempt to bring to light the interplay of culture, politics, and art, in the construction of a new social space by Africans for Africans, and the world at large.

So here, the frame is not about identity... that this is really, that the project of decolonisation was first an attempt to create a space, a new social space for Africans. And this has nothing to do with identity. And identity is what of course, comes afterwards. In so doing then, the exhibition explores an elaborate on the critical products and ideas related to concepts of identity, subjectivity, political and

cultural independence, which served to vest in the African consciousness, a new sense of an emergent selfhood out of the ruins of colonialism.

Though the exhibition is not centred only on artistic production, the work of three generations of modern and contemporary African artists represents its core bringing together these three generations, whose disparate experiences and conditions of production differ greatly from place to place, [and] required a proper historical overview of the artistic intentions and formal problems that have played a central role in the definition of the work of African artists in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The demand of any historiography of non-European modernism is not simply to resist the overwhelming influence of a generalised notion of the modern as a formal category within 20<sup>th</sup> century art, but to work against the grain of the vast disciplinary and conceptual perspectives unique, especially to the European experience.

To discuss African modernism... to discuss modernism in Africa one begins from an analysis of what the African experience of modern forms are, and what uses artists and intellectuals made of those forms. This was a concern of *The Short Century*. So, one way of positing such an experience is to acknowledge that the colonial experience was not purely a traumatic one, but also represented a fundamental sin of exchange of values, concepts and forms in service of elaborating a super language of modernism that extends beyond the European example. One can even say that the receptions of European modernism quite often were wilfully mis-translated, the more to vest in the new forms a different meaning of either the image or the object. In this sense, modernism represented for African artists and intellectuals, a dialectical frame of sutures and illusions.

The meaning of African European modern art was a two-way traffic. This attraction, though, was mediated both by historical, conceptual and methodological problems, which required modern African artists to negotiate and address simultaneously, the question of tradition and modernity. Because when you talk about modern African art, there was always in the middle this notion of tradition, which yesterday was... we heard of as heritage. And this was that the struggle for modern African artists should not be understood only as a struggle with European modernism or with modernity as such, it was also a struggle with heritage, with tradition. But it is not to displace tradition, but it is to reinvent tradition, because African tradition is always understood as fixed, immobile, unchanging and un-reflexive. And this was the task that modern African artists wanted to undertake, to contest tradition, but not to displace tradition, per se.

So, the response to this question of tradition and modernity, till today remains a central principle of the critical expression of both modern and contemporary artists of Africa, be it in the work of people like Iba Ndiaye, Ernest Mancoba, Twin Seven-Seven, to younger artists like Ouattara, Yinka Shonibare, Rachid Koraichi, and even William Kentridge. While the place of contemporary African artists today is

decidedly within the larger international and global context. For early modern African artists working during the immediate post war period, the central preoccupation was formal, especially with regard to abstraction and figuration, two modes of expression within modernism. These two former areas of representation exerted a singularly dominant influence around which the artists position their work. In each instance, there was always a double move, a strategy of critical enunciation, which articulated itself around the formal means for merging the powerful iconography of classical African art. So, when you look at African paintings, the ways in which the iconography revisits - but not like Cubism, not through the distortions of Cubism - but through, a kind of what I will call, new authenticity.

So, and you will see this also that, figuration on the other hand can be seen from the point of view of modern African artists as a political form. Because to paint the black image, to paint a portrait of a black person is a political act, because it means that you want to put this image in the public record. And even till today in western museums, to encounter the portrait of a black person in a museum is still both an aesthetic issue, aesthetic problem, and a political problem. It sits uneasily within the museum. I don't know if any of you remembered when Jacob Lawrence's 'The Migration Series' was shown at MoMA in the basement galleries. No, it was a nice gallery, [laughter] but it's still basement, but it was a nice gallery. And why was this historical, seminal body of work not installed in the temporary galleries where they... why was it not framed there? So, this is a very interesting issue. And this is for me some of the issues that *The Short Century* as an exhibition took up. So, *The Short Century* then became more than an exhibition about art as a form of cultural practice, but art as a framework through which a range of discursive activities could be articulated.

My goal for the exhibition was to create not merely an event space for the reception of the radical proposals and procedures of decolonisation, I wanted it to function as a concatenation of places signalling the complexity of the contemporary grammar of what has become the post-colonial multitude. This is an important point, not least because we are now witnessing the degree to which what I call forms of placemaking have entered the logic of the artist's production, as the case of Chris Ofili's brilliant exhibition at the British Pavilion at the 2003 Venice Biennale really proves. So, this is not my exhibition. But I want to show more concretely how an artist takes up this notion, this tension between the exhibition as frame and the museum as site, in order to create a place that displaces both the frame and the site.

A proper study of Ofili's paintings within the pavilion, and I'll come to that just simply to explain, because again, this is also part of the transnational transaction of Ofili's pavilion, which is a kind of Black Atlantic model. If you notice, the pavilion in the Giardini in Venice is framed by the Union Jack, which has now been recoloured in the Marcus Garvey colours of red, black and green. Marcus Garvey's 'return to Africa' colours. So, in a sense, Ofili was sort of signalling his partial affiliation to this ideological framework, if you will. Of course, Ofili borrowed this iconography from the great African

American artist David Hammons (who Tom [Finkelpearl] also worked with on *Rousing the Rubble*) who remade the American flag and called it the African American flag with these colours. And so, Ofili of course, is really sort of signalling his response to some of these issues.

So, as you come towards this [audio unclear] neoclassical Palazzo, what you see is not the Britain that we already think that we know, but the Britain that is now being sort of submitted to a post-colonial critique of the notion that Britishness is something that is specifically European, that Britishness is a process of constant assimilation of others, and not the ways in which this problematic entanglement of empire and colony really produce new orientations of critical thinking. And Ofili boldly takes up this question by his attempt to displace the British Union Jack. But the interesting thing is that Ofili then moves the subject of the exhibition, [it] was staged not within this kind of diasporic frame, but within a kind of fantasy of an African Eden. It is a love story between an African Adam and Eve.

And I'll show... this was a collaboration between Chris and David Adjaye. So, David Adjaye designed the spaces and if you notice in the galleries of the pavilion were divided into the three colours - the green colour, which you see, and the red and the black. But in each case, what you see is that you are really entering an optically saturated space in which the architectural is literally disarticulated, completely displaced, the more to focus on the kind of tropical energy if you will, inside the galleries.

(If you can turn off the light, I think it will be much better to really see, we can turn off the lights are over here so you can see the work.)

So, you move from the green then into the red gallery, and this interplay of forms vegetation, and so on. Then there's a long corridor in the back of the pavilion, which kind of links this suite of small galleries, and this corridor is divided between red, green and black and so on. So, it's really that on the one hand the works are optically very, very, very intense, but at the same time somatically the exhibition is meant to be experienced through the body because of the way the exhibition integrates. So, this is the central gallery, and you see, the dome has been displaced with this amazing stained-glass dome that David Adjaye designed.

So, this the crescendo of the of the exhibition and of course, Ofili kind of takes on the classical church architecture that is scattered all over Venice, in order to make this statement. And the primacy of this red, green and black is not just simply to be subtle or illusionistic, but in many ways, also substantially physical and as an emblem of what the discursive and the aesthetic parameters that Ofili was a proposing in the exhibition. So, this is kind of the summation of this amazing experience.

So, a proper study of Ofili's painting within the pavilion, which I will not have.... [jump in the recording]

...of earlier post-modernist practices rather, it sought a complete annihilation of the paradigmatic purity of the claim to citizenship under the banner of the imperial flag. The key for Ofili was not merely in replacing the Union Jack, as a symbol of Empire, which he did with a Garveyite black, red and green tricolour of the Black 'Back to Africa' movement of the 1920s. But to inhabit this space, in the name of another historical model of subjectivity, thus calling into question the very identity of the Black African allegiance to the flag and the Union. This change of iconic contents of the nation corresponds to the change in cultural contents as well made most obvious by Ofili's grounding of the paintings in the installation as an allegorical courtship between an African Adam and Eve in this luxuriant tropical Garden of Eden. This biblical spoof has less to do with the theological issues of religious identity and more with a cultural appropriation of the politics of origin.

The situations that I have mentioned emerge from within a shift in paradigm, a move in which diasporic cultural formations take up references of post-colonial struggle as reflexive opportunities for cultural and artistic engagement. In the work of Ofili, contemporary African diasporic art aims to destructure the a priori differencing of place in contemporary art. Ofili's critical project demonstrates that encounters with formally different artistic models are no more the norm than the mainstream models, [such as] Black British artists [when] it's never like white British artists and so on. So that begins from this position of difference, and I mark you, I'm not arguing for there not to be Black British anything, but I think it's important to understand that once you say Black British artist, that's the differenced model. When you say British artists, that is the mainstream model, and this tension has to be engaged productively by curators. We can't just simply pretend that these models of differencing and mainstreaming are not part of our language, particularly as organised by the exclusivist institutional rhetorics constantly organised by so called mainstream forms of contemporary art. Such fora have become not only deeply entangled with the modalities of post-colonial theory but are also shot through with ambivalence and contradiction. As Ofili's British Pavilion at the Venice Biennale proves, while the ideological remnants of differencing remain, by taking his instrumental properties as his installation's point of departure, he showed that they are no longer to be perceived as out of place and out of time, and therefore, in the wrong place.

So, Ofili being in the British Pavilion, he's not in the wrong place, rather difference art had become intrinsic to the establishment of some of globalisation's most resilient theories of the relation of place to artistic subjectivity. Some of the other possible narratives to unfold here involve artistic procedures, that at one point or the other, were part of the itinerary of exhibition and museum practices of the last few decades, from post-apartheid to cultural criticism to feminism, and so on. So, all of these have come up in the past. But the broader context of contemporary art today, is situated in the domains overseen by the objectives of those artists, whose practices began first as responses to modernism, through what I will call versions of anti-modernism. I've mentioned this in relation to African artists. But I liken this anti modernism to acts of engaged criticality and reflexivity. The anti-modernism of the

artists is clearly linked to historical models of early exhibition models, and interrogation of certain anthropological matters of institutions.

What emerged from this anti-modernism is not a product of negation of modernism as such, but a broadening of its roots, an attempt to foreground aspects of its recalcitrant practices - sort of what Kobena Mercer will call discrepant abstraction - the joining of the high and low, the novel and the outmoded, vernacular and the Cosmopolitan, politics and aesthetics. All these, among many other disciplinary ruptures, build the constitutive heterogeneity of the language of contemporary art today. By the same token, through the historical issues raised by this anti-modernism, we witness the dispersal of certain modernist styles and with them institutional logics. Thank you

**David Bailey** [Closing]

Thank you, Okwui. Thank you, Okwui, for that really, really kind of illuminating keynote.

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Please note: There may be slight discrepancies between the video recording of this lecture and this transcript.