

**ANTHONY GARDNER & CHARLES GREEN**

# Okwui Enwezor's Johannesburg Biennale: Curating in Times of Crisis

**Editorial by Nanne Buurman**

In *Trade Routes: History and Geography: 2nd Johannesburg Biennale* (1997), the first large biennial that he would direct in the course of an extraordinary career of curatorial experimentation, curator Okwui Enwezor presciently selected art that explored themes of migration, cultural traffic, and sites of crisis. This essay by Anthony Gardner and Charles Green explains that his biennial occurred at precisely such a moment of crisis in postapartheid South Africa, when attention from the restlessly moving international art world biennial circuit meant little to local audiences, who were struggling with ongoing inequalities, economic hardships, financial uncertainties and constant change in their municipal power structures. This eventually led to a shut-down of the Biennale before its scheduled end.

Enwezor's biennial was, the authors of *Biennials, Triennials and documenta. The Exhibitions that Created Contemporary Art* (2016) argue, the site of an intense and telling disagreement about the role of a biennial of contemporary art in a time of crisis. It was caught in the frictions between Enwezor's internationalist ambition to scrutinize globalization from a postnational perspective, hailed by international reviewers, and South African demands for identity politics and nation building at a time of enforced financial austerity, all resulting in a sometimes hostile local reception and its marginal importance to civic leaders.

Although located in a radically different time and space, the critical reception of the second Johannesburg Biennale seems to foreshadow the response that *documenta 14* (2017) received twenty years later in Athens, where curator Adam Szymczyk was blamed for crisis tourism, for turning Athens into an exemplary showcase of the destructiveness of neoliberal austerity measures while allegedly not taking into account the needs of the local scene enough. And it is perhaps no coincidence that the authors draw attention to the necessity to understand the power and nuances of such patterns of critique in the wake of Brexit, in an era when nationalist policies have gained new momentum across the globe and the dream of a postnational world seems to move out of reach. In times like these, we should turn to Okwui Enwezor's legacy, reminding ourselves one year after the curator's tragically early death, that his exhibitions were always generous interventions within specific and charged histories, opening up new realities yet to come.

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### Okwui Enwezor's Johannesburg Biennale: Curating in Times of Crisis

On Tuesday, May 10, 1994, President Nelson Mandela addressed South Africans on the occasion of his inauguration after the end of the disastrous decades of apartheid and its many associated crimes. "That spiritual and physical oneness we all share with this common homeland", he declared, "explains the depth of the pain we all carried in our hearts as we saw our country tear itself apart in a terrible conflict."<sup>1</sup> His powerful speech encapsulated previous decades of injustice, oppression and trauma under apartheid, and the isolation of South Africa as a result. But it also bore a desire for transformation and civic renewal across the nation, for as he went on to say, "We pledge ourselves to liberate all our people from the continuing bondage of poverty, deprivation, suffering, gender and other discrimination."<sup>2</sup> This was not an easy task awaiting the country, of course, as he was all too well aware. Contemporary art was to play a significant, at times fraught, role in that process of postapartheid liberation, and it is this investment in art and especially the infrastructure of exhibition making that we analyse in this article. Our core focus is the renowned – although notorious is probably the better word – Johannesburg Biennale, the first of which was launched a mere nine months after Mandela's own inauguration.

Titled *Africus*, the first Johannesburg Biennale in 1995 marked the end of more than thirty years of cultural quarantine. Yet just two years later saw the ignominious early closure of the second Johannesburg Biennale, called *Trade Routes: History and Geography* (1997). *Trade Routes* was a remarkably ambitious enterprise, spanning multiple venues across two cities (Johannesburg and Cape Town), encompassing artists from across the world

<sup>1</sup> Nelson Mandela: "Statement of the President of the African National Congress, Nelson R. Mandela, at His Inauguration as President of the Democratic Republic of South Africa", inauguration speech, Union Buildings, Pretoria (May 10, 1994). Online at: [http://db.nelsonmandela.org/speeches/pub\\_view.asp?pg=item&ItemID=NMS176&txtstr=inauguration](http://db.nelsonmandela.org/speeches/pub_view.asp?pg=item&ItemID=NMS176&txtstr=inauguration) [September 14, 2015].

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

rather than just a local coterie (or indeed just of global superstars). Directed by the young, New York-based, Nigerian expatriate curator Okwui Enwezor (1963-2019), it ballooned the curatorial direction from a single impresario to a collective of eight (a strategy that would quickly become one of the hallmarks of Enwezor's collaborative ethos). As such, it sought a major transformation of the biennial format – already, by 1997, an exhibition genre that had become one of the defining characteristics of contemporary art globally – as much of South Africa's art worlds. So, why was the second Johannesburg Biennale prematurely shut down and why, to date, does it remain the last of the city's own biennials?<sup>3</sup>

### **Africus - The First Johannesburg Biennale (1995)**

Such hostility was not specific to *Trade Routes*; it significantly afflicted its predecessor too. *Africus* was directed by two white South African curators: activist and labor lawyer Lorna Ferguson and mercurial Johannesburg arts bureaucrat Christopher Till, a key but controversial figure in Johannesburg cultural politics. During the 1980s, Till had been director of the Johannesburg Art Gallery, presenting a series of ground-breaking exhibitions of South African art, including *The Neglected Tradition* (1988), which reassessed black South African artists and their huge contribution to the history of South African art. A few years after *Africus*, he would become the inaugural director of South Africa's Museum of Apartheid. *Africus* had been conceived during the transition to African National Congress majority government, led by Mandela, but the Biennale met immediate, and vociferous, local criticism. Till and Ferguson were accused of an obsession with international cultural recognition, a detachment from local communities, and a disinterest in local artists in favor of sophisticated image-building and an overwhelming emphasis on international artists.<sup>4</sup> They were, it appeared, *too* cosmopolitan, *too* focused on the flows of individual movement and cultural traffic that would soon become the mainstay of art's globalization, for a full and proper engagement with local art scenes. These claims would, as we will see, equally afflict Enwezor's directorship of the Biennale following his appointment in 1996 in a selection process that included Christopher Till. [Fig. 1] And yet such claims seemed to ignore Johannesburg's long history of hosting serious dealer galleries that showed cutting-edge contemporary art that was far from detached from the art worlds of Europe and the United States. Our task in this article is thus to explore some of the reasons, and problems, buttressing the trenchant criticisms of Johannesburg's large-scale international biennial, at a time of rapid change but also rapid uncertainty about nation-building and a city's and its art scenes' global positioning.

Part of our answer springs from a well-known essay by Marilyn Martin, "The Rainbow Nation: Identity and Transformation," which was published

<sup>3</sup> For a contemporary description of the South African art scene see Julia Landau: "New International Artistic Directions Cause Stir", in: *Cape Times*, January 17, 1997. See also Barbara Pollack: "When South Africa Joined the World, and the Art World", in: *New York Times*, March 9, 2003, p. 19. Online at: <http://www.nytimes.com/2003/03/09/arts/art-architecture-when-south-africa-joined-the-world-and-the-art-world.html> [September 14, 2015].

<sup>4</sup> For a later account of *Africus* in the context of South African politics, cultural policy, and the ongoing economic and social crisis into which the first Johannesburg Biennale inserted itself, see Natasha Becker: "Africus Johannesburg 1995: Butisi Tari", in: *Globalization and Contemporary Art*, ed. by Jonathan Harris, Boston: Blackwell, 2011, pp. 86–97. For a profile of co-director Christopher Till written just after *Africus*, see Mark Gevisser: "Christopher Till, Johannesburg Director of Culture, Homeless 'King of Culture'", in: *Mail & Guardian*, September 30, 1996. Online at: <http://mg.co.za/article/1996-09-20-christopher-till-johannesburg-director-of-culture.html> [September 14, 2015].

shortly after *Africus* closed.<sup>5</sup> Martin was director of the South African National Gallery in Cape Town. She argued that a strong definition of a nation would be integral to the new South Africa, adopting Desmond Tutu's famous metaphor of the "rainbow nation" as her illustration of diversity within unity, reminding the reader that no hard edges separate a rainbow's colours.<sup>6</sup> However, she noted, the sudden political transformation had not necessarily resulted in immediate social and economic empowerment: South African women remained disadvantaged after apartheid as well as before. As in postcolonial countries generally, neocolonial power structures were sustained by the new, international, economic order. Martin was suspicious of pluralism, preferring the term "intracultural," a word she had borrowed from Indian cultural activist Rustom Barucha to describe South Africa's internal diversity: "intracultural, transgressive and unpredictable ... it has always been open to currents and winds of change."<sup>7</sup> Martin also drew from the work of South African academics John Sharp and Ampie Coetzee. Sharp was Professor of Social Anthropology at the University of Pretoria, and had written about cultural diversity and multiculturalism in South Africa, making his name with a controversial article about the co-option of anthropologists by apartheid authorities.<sup>8</sup> Interestingly, in the article Martin quoted in support of her argument, Sharp's position was quite different from her own: Martin stressed the particularity of South Africa's cultural diversity and the need to redefine common terminology to reflect this particularity, Sharp saw North American multiculturalism as a productive model for South Africa. He argued in favour of a multiculturalism that allowed for "relativity" and fluidity, acknowledging in turn Ampie Coetzee, a professor of literature at the University of Western Cape, in her notes. Coetzee was a specialist in Afrikaans literature and a strong advocate for linguistic diversity in South Africa. Martin's debt to his writing was evident in her comments on the transgressive power of language.<sup>9</sup>

Where this got sticky, and where the tenor of her essay suggested the storm that would shortly await Enwezor, about to be announced the director of the next Johannesburg Biennale, was the nature of the links that she wondered could really be drawn between "contemporary mainstream international art" and South African artists, who, she warned the reader, remained separated from that "mainstream" by their economic and cultural experiences.<sup>10</sup> She noted, "The organizers of the Johannesburg Biennial [sic] chose the inappropriate title, *Africus*, for the first event. This reflects a continued genuflecting to Europe, as if the name of our continent needs to be Latinized (incorrectly in this case) in order to be acceptable to the world."<sup>11</sup> Some South African artists had altogether bypassed the international, through networks much along the lines of another major biennial staged in the so-called Global South, the *Bienal de La Habana*: Martin referred to a short list of Ndebele artists, including Esther Mahlangu and Isa Kabini, and to artists Jackson Hlungwani, Andries Botha and Willie Bester, describing the rich

<sup>5</sup> Marilyn Martin: "The Rainbow Nation: Identity and Transformation", in: *Oxford Art Journal*, vol. 19, no. 1 (1996), pp. 3–15.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 3.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 6.

<sup>8</sup> See John Sharp: "Two Separate Developments: Anthropology in South Africa", in: *RAIN* [Royal Anthropological Institute Newsletter], no. 36 (February 1980), pp. 4–6.

<sup>9</sup> See Martin, "Rainbow Nation", p. 5. On Rustom Barucha's notion of the "intracultural", see Rustom Barucha: "Under the Sign of the Onion: Intracultural Negotiations in Theatre", *New Theatre Quarterly*, vol. 12, no. 46 (1996), pp. 116–129.

<sup>10</sup> Martin: "Rainbow Nation", p. 7 and p. 15, note 7.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 7; p. 15, note 7.

tradition of political art that already existed in South Africa. She claimed that despite their current difficulties adapting to the new political landscape, “there is a place for artists who choose to be activists and to engage with the demands of a new society.”<sup>12</sup> She somberly argued that the role of art in postapartheid South Africa should remain essentially political, made by South Africans resisting external influences.<sup>13</sup> She concluded,

Neo-colonialism applies equally to culture. While the “center” is looking towards the “periphery” as a possible source for its own revitalization, its curators and cultural mongers have specific ideas of what the “periphery” should deliver and what it should have for its own good. South Africans need to be vigilant and firm in our resistance of such ambitions.<sup>14</sup>

Martin had been an influential figure in the South African art scene from the late 1980s on. Most importantly, from 1990 to 2001, during which the two Johannesburg Biennales came and went, she was director of the South African National Gallery in Cape Town. Further, the intellectual allegiances that she flagged were quite unusual for an art museum director: her essay quoted Homi Bhabha, Rustom Barucha and Rasheed Araeen, artist and founder of *Third Text*, and her comments about ongoing neo-colonialisms echoed Araeen's own essay in the 1995 Johannesburg Biennale catalogue, “What is postapartheid South Africa and its place in the world?”<sup>15</sup> And, finally, her perspective was that of the head of the South African National Gallery, which was “not only fully in line” with the new ANC government's Reconstruction and Development Program, but had, she claimed, actually “anticipated” it.<sup>16</sup> In short, the national reality of rainbow diversity was not the same, nor would it look the same as the cosmopolitan reality of *Trade Routes*.

### **Trade Routes - The Second Johannesburg Biennale (1997)**

That tension between the aftermath of a national liberation struggle and the demands of a global conversation about cosmopolitanism was to mark Enwezor's directorship of *Trade Routes: History and Geography: 2nd Johannesburg Biennale*. Born in 1963 in Nigeria and resident in New York from late 1982 on, Enwezor had an undergraduate degree in political science but no academic training in art history nor background in museum work. In the mid-1990s Enwezor co-founded *Nka: Journal of Contemporary African Art* with Chika Okeke-Agulu and Salah Hassan, and co-presented his first exhibition that would attract wide notice in the international art press, *In/sight: African Photographers, 1940 to the Present*, at the Guggenheim Museum in New York (1996). *In/sight* announced Enwezor's methodologies for the second Johannesburg Biennale. First, *In/sight* argued that powerful parallel modernities, in this case those of African art, needed to be taken into account in any global art history. Second, Enwezor was already choosing to work in collaboration, in this exhibition with co-curators Clare Bell

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 12.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 3.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 4.

<sup>15</sup> Rasheed Araeen: “What is postapartheid South Africa and its place in the world?” in: *Africus: 1st Johannesburg Biennale, 20 February-30 April 1995*, ed. by curators Lorna Ferguson and Christopher Till, Johannesburg: Greater Johannesburg Metropolitan Council and Thorold's Africana Books, 1995, pp. 16-19.

<sup>16</sup> Martin: “Rainbow Nation”, p. 4.

(assistant curator at the Guggenheim Museum), Danielle Tilkin (project director for *Africa Hoy/Africa Now*), and Octavio Zaya, who had been a co-curator of the first Johannesburg Biennale in 1995 and was to be a co-curator with Enwezor of the second Johannesburg Biennale and then of *Documenta11* (2002).

<sup>17</sup> Okwui Enwezor: "Introduction: Travel Notes: Living, Working, and Travelling in a Restless World", in: *Trade Routes: History and Geography: 2nd Johannesburg Biennale 1997*, ed. by idem., Johannesburg: Greater Johannesburg Metropolitan Council and Thorold's Africana Books, 1997, pp. 7–12, esp. 7.

Abandoning the national pavilion arrangement of his predecessor and most biennials till then, Enwezor divided the 1997 edition into six separate sections held across two cities separated by a two-hour flight time – Johannesburg and Cape Town – in a pattern of multiple curators and separate portions spread across different sites that was to characterize his later biennials as well. In Johannesburg, Enwezor and Zaya presented the largest exhibition, *Alternating Currents*, comprising about eighty artists in an old power station. Gerardo Mosquera (a central figure in the development of the Bienal de La Habana during the 1980s) presented *Important and Exportant* in the Johannesburg Art Gallery. Enwezor's emphasis on a South–South artistic dialogue and his preference for working in collaboration with a familiar team of other curators reflected the older curator's (Mosquera's) impact, drawing on Havana's celebrated (if somewhat latently) collective methods. Well-known Korean curator Yu Yeon Kim presented *Transversions* in the Museum Africa. The ubiquitous, then-Paris-based curator Hou Hanru presented *Hong Kong, etc.* in the Rembrandt van Rijn Gallery. In Cape Town, meanwhile, South African curator Colin Richards presented *Graft* at the National Gallery of South Africa, and Kellie Jones presented *Life's Little Necessities*. They all placed considerable significance on the existence of a globalized biennial in South Africa and, in return, unprecedented numbers of American and European curators, art dealers, and collectors flew into South Africa for the opening.

The 1997 Biennale emphasized dialogue, trade, migration, and power asymmetries between the global South and the North. Enwezor selected international artists whose work reflected on these themes, and he arranged for Nigerian academic-artist then resident in the UK, Olu Oguibe, to present a large conference on the issue, attended by international art-world luminaries and chaired by the renowned scholar of African art histories, Salah Hassan. The multiple exhibitions arranged by a group of curators, the film program, and the symposium were, according to Enwezor, an "open network of exchange," capable of productively exploring the sociopolitical processes of globalization.<sup>17</sup> This was an immense claim for an exhibition and rested on the curator importing conceptual territory far beyond the aesthetic. Enwezor emphasized the importance of openness in a world characterized by migration and displacement. Despite the economic focus of its title, *Trade Routes: History and Geography* presented physical displacement as the overarching unifying core of globalization, more than what he

described as “economic consolidation and efficient distribution of labour and capital.”<sup>18</sup> For the main thrust of Enwezor's argument at Johannesburg was that contemporary globalization politically and conceptually relates to historical colonialism, and that an examination of the enduring cultural *mélange* formed by colonialism “breathes new life” into thinking about globalization.<sup>19</sup> While he emphasized the colonial origin of current developments in global history, Enwezor also claimed that contemporary globalization is an unprecedented phenomenon, a period “like no other in human history.”<sup>20</sup>

### The Postapartheid Moment - Economic Crisis as a Blind Spot

However, Enwezor also attracted considerable suspicion and hostility, precisely because his worthy aims had a blind spot. For if *Trade Routes* sought to connect local social realities to the dominant trajectories of intellectual and artistic influence in contemporary art then, in the context of newly liberated South Africa's economic crisis and persisting, vast inequality, his Biennale (much like *Africus* before it) grasped at civic prestige and elitist incorporation into the international art world at the expense of more humble local projects and the improvement of even basic infrastructure. Johannesburg's metropolitan government was engulfed in a severe financial crisis all through the lead-up to the Biennale and during its opening. Just before the Biennale opened, the Development Bank of South Africa bailed out the Greater Johannesburg Metropolitan Council with a huge, 1 billion Rand loan. This was the unfolding financial context in which Nicky Padayachee, CEO of the Greater Johannesburg Metropolitan Council, the Biennale's principal funder, wrote the Preface in *Trade Routes's* exhibition catalogue, explaining that the Biennale had been founded to push Johannesburg into a leadership role in contemporary art, to create an international recognition of South African art, to encourage international investment and to bring cultural tourism into Johannesburg.<sup>21</sup>

Similar unexceptional and worthy civic aspirations were behind many of the globe's emerging, tiger economy biennials during the 1990s, but they meshed less well with the realities of Johannesburg's economic and social crisis at that new, postapartheid moment. *Mail & Guardian* arts journalist Mark Gevisser had commented a year before *Trade Routes* opened that Johannesburg was unable to successfully combine “biennales and township cultural centres ... we pay our rates for the one to ride on hubris and the other to wear blinkers”.<sup>22</sup> In a parallel critique (albeit one that ultimately championed Enwezor), made in *The Star* newspaper in 1997, artist Kendell Geers argued vociferously that too many local battles were being played out in foreign contexts – in part because of South Africa's postapartheid topicality on the world stage, and in part because local cultural scenes were

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 12.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 9.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 12.

<sup>21</sup> See Nicky Padayachee: “Preface”, in: *Trade Routes: History and Geography: 2nd Johannesburg Biennale 1997*, ed. by Okwui Enwezor, Johannesburg: Greater Johannesburg Metropolitan Council and Thorold's Africana Books, 1997, p. 4. See Susan Parnell: “Politics of Transformation: Defining the City Strategy in Johannesburg”, in: *The Making of Global City Regions: Johannesburg, Mumbai/Bombay, Sao Paulo, and Shanghai*, ed. by Klaus Segbers, Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2007, pp. 139–167.

<sup>22</sup> See Gevisser: “Christopher Till, Johannesburg Director of Culture, Homeless ‘King of Culture’”, in: *Mail & Guardian*, September 20, 1996. Online at: <http://mg.co.za/article/1996-09-20-christopher-till-johannesburg-director-of-culture> [October 10, 2015]. See also Jillian Carman: “Johannesburg Art Gallery and the Urban Future”, in: *Emerging Johannesburg: Perspectives on the Postapartheid City*, ed by Richard Tomlinson, Robert A. Beaugard, Lindsay Bremner and Xolela Mangcu, New York, London: Routledge, 2003, pp. 231–256.

not sufficiently supported by South Africa's state and other resources to confront those battles.<sup>23</sup>

For all the hope associated with postapartheid rhetoric, South Africa was plagued by financial crisis. It was the Biennale's bad luck to be founded in a period of financial difficulty, but even more so that it was caught up in, and eventually sunk as the result of, rapid cycles of decentralization and recentralization of power. Johannesburg's metropolitan governments - the Greater Johannesburg Metropolitan Council (GJMC) and the Metropolitan Local Councils (MLCs) - and their priorities, were changing fast. As apartheid ended, temporary councils had been established to administer Johannesburg until municipal elections could be held. In the years leading up to 1997, an authoritative Princeton University study explained, "The pressure to rectify urban inequalities was enormous. The new local government that came to power in 1995 was eager to transform the lives of its poorer black constituents."<sup>24</sup> But by October 1997, massive financial uncertainty had developed. An informant from the opposition party, the Democratic Alliance, told the researchers that: "The city's finances were so bad that they [the city government] couldn't pay the bulk electricity supply ... and they were three months away from not being able to pay salaries."<sup>25</sup>

Large corporations and high-income residents in wealthier areas like Sandton were boycotting their rates payments. The national government's finance minister, Trevor Manuel, pushed the Gauteng provincial government (the province that includes Johannesburg) hard to resolve the crisis and then, according to Tomlinson, "In October 1997 the Gauteng Provincial Government intervened in the financial affairs of the GJMC and the MLCs because the councils were experiencing a negative cash flow of R130 million per month."<sup>26</sup> The committee that was appointed to deal with the situation recommended administrative centralization and the abandonment of non-profitable, so-called non-core activities. This was the now-too-familiar, neoliberal prescription to cure financial crisis (at least, before the fetish for austerity measures after 2008). Tomlinson quotes their report: "Service delivery can and often should be outsourced. The consortium urges that the lack of financial resources makes it imperative that the Councils dispose of non-core activities as soon as possible. Examples provided are the Zoo, Rand Airport, the produce market and the Civic Theatre. If the non-core activities do not generate a surplus then they should be discontinued."<sup>27</sup> The *Mail & Guardian's* reporter Mark Swilling compared this to "a contract management model copied directly from Thatcherite Britain."<sup>28</sup>

<sup>23</sup> Kendell Geers: "Dangers Inherent in Foreign Curating", in: *The Star*, Tonight Supplement, March 19, 1997. Geers and Enwezor were both condemning the representation of black bodies by white artists on the international stage, such that South African debates were being recounted more overseas than locally. That condemnation was met by an equally vociferous critique, especially from white artists, in an anthology the launch of which was planned to coincide with the launch of *Trade Routes* in October 1997. See Brenda Atkinson and Candice Breitz (eds.): *Grey Areas: Representation, Identity and Politics in Contemporary South African Art*, Johannesburg: Chalkham Hill Press, 1999.

<sup>24</sup> Michael Woldemariam, Jennifer Widner and Laura Bacon: *Restructuring Service Delivery: Johannesburg, South Africa, 1996–2001*, Princeton, NJ: Innovations for Successful Societies, Princeton University, 2012, p. 2. Online at: [http://successfultsocieties.princeton.edu/sites/successfultsocieties/files/Policy\\_Note\\_ID207.pdf](http://successfultsocieties.princeton.edu/sites/successfultsocieties/files/Policy_Note_ID207.pdf) [September 14, 2015].

<sup>25</sup> Mike Moriarty, quoted in Woldemariam et al.: *Restructuring Service Delivery*, p. 1.

<sup>26</sup> Richard Tomlinson: "Ten Years in the Making: A History of the Evolution of Metropolitan Government in Johannesburg", in: *Urban Forum*, vol. 10, no. 1 (1999), pp. 1–40, esp. p. 18.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 27.

<sup>28</sup> Mark Swilling: "Mismanaging Jo'burg", *Mail & Guardian*, December 4–10, 1998, p. 41.



## Collateral Damage in the Tempest of Local Politics

*Trade Routes* was collateral damage in this tempest of local South African politics, political transition, the race to reduce poverty through huge government spending, and then in its wake the harsh constriction of fiscal restraints.<sup>29</sup> The 1997–1998 financial crisis had a massive impact on the Johannesburg Art Gallery, where Gerardo Mosquera's *Important and Exportant* was presented, and on all Johannesburg cultural institutions. Jillian Carman recounts that all capital projects were cut, the roof of the temporary exhibition area, which had leaked since 1986, could not be repaired, climate control systems could not be upgraded, no purchase budget was allocated, key jobs could not be filled and, at the Art Gallery, the security staff was cut in half.<sup>30</sup>

In October 1997, the central government in Pretoria imposed a system of externally regulated financial administration on the interim city government. These austere policy prescriptions were driven both by external agencies and by indigenous government. Susan Parnell explains that a powerful Lekgotla (the committee in charge of the city's City Development Strategy [CDS]) was appointed following the 1997 fiscal crisis; it included city officials and politicians, but was dominated by external, World Bank advisers such as Junaid Ahmed (the Bank's Deputy Resident Representative and Principal Economist in South Africa) and central government appointments, including Ketso Gordhan (the former Johannesburg City Manager who in 1995 had become Director General of Transport).<sup>31</sup> Gordhan was to trim it to one-third of its original size and later, as Johannesburg City Manager, he was responsible for the iGoli [Johannesburg] 2002 plan aimed at running the city as a business. He and Ahmed, according to Parnell, were friends: "the Joburg leadership was strong-armed into accepting the salvage package offered by the National Treasury [...] the Joburg council, having articulated an extensive spending plan favoring the poor after 1994, was, by 1999, cutting spending and endorsing the neoliberal national economic policy of GEAR (Growth, Employment and Redistribution)".<sup>32</sup>

We can therefore see why the exhibition was forced to close a month before its scheduled end, a clear symbol of a society still blighted by poverty and riven by inequity. (The Biennale was reopened soon after, following an injection of private philanthropic support – albeit support that was often missing from the broader social crises surrounding the exhibition.) The directive to cut the Johannesburg Biennale's funding was issued during the first round of unilateral cuts, which probably explained the confusion about the fate of the Biennale at the lower levels of government and cultural administration, which were then reflected in the Johannesburg media. The cuts had been implemented by a committee that had been appointed rather

<sup>29</sup> For the outlines of the battles over cultural policy and leadership following *Africus* see Hazel Friedman: "Battle of the Chiefs", in: *Mail & Guardian*, September 6, 1996. Online at: <http://mg.co.za/article/1996-09-06-battle-of-the-chiefs> [September 14, 2015]. Also see Friedman: "Furore over Top Arts Appointment", in: *Mail & Guardian*, September 6, 1996 <http://mg.co.za/article/1996-09-06-furore-over-top-arts-appointment> [September 14, 2015].

<sup>30</sup> See Jillian Carman: "Johannesburg Art Gallery and the Urban Future", p. 231.

<sup>31</sup> See Parnell: "Politics of Transformation", p. 147.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*

than elected, even in the context of a postapartheid South African that was ostensibly concerned with ethical procedures and equitable representation. The Committee's aggressive, neoliberal initiatives were enacted by unelected officials, aided by international agencies and advised by international management consultants. They did eventually bring the city's finances under control but completely changed the shape of Johannesburg's institutions.

<sup>33</sup> Enwezor: "Introduction. Travel Notes", p. 7.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 7–12.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 8.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, p.10.

## Postnational Ambitions and their Discontents

There was a further problem – conceptual more than financial – affecting the Biennale, and it lay at the heart of Enwezor's weighty curatorial thesis, which was that of an ambitious intellectual rather than a traditional art curator. Downplaying aesthetic priorities in his catalogue essay, he asserted that the artists in the Johannesburg Biennale "do not subordinate themselves to investigations of formal problems."<sup>33</sup> He made powerful references in his essay to apartheid and the slavery-based trade of the colonial past, asserting their parallels to contemporary trade routes and the traffic of people.<sup>34</sup> But local critics and activists did not see the after-effects of forced diaspora as identical with their own, contemporary, postapartheid predicament, especially in the face of the urgent fiscal crisis in late 1997 that tamped down the radical redistributions of wealth that would have housed and educated poor, young South Africans and built basic services for the majority black population in townships.

Enwezor located the exhibition beyond those urgent South African problems, out into emergent discourses around economic globalization, describing a world reconfigured by an "unprecedented flurry of activities and events called globalization" and the splitting of nation and home into diaspora and displacement.<sup>35</sup> Enwezor described South Africa as a microcosm of complex postnational hybridity, infused with historical trauma, identifying all this as characteristic of globalization. Observing that the Cape of Good Hope had been charted in the fifteenth century in order to open a sea route for trade between Europe and India, he noted that such international commerce would test more fixed ideas of origin, ethnicity, and home, for from its earliest manifestations, colonial displacement had formed new, complex (and enduring) cultural mixes.<sup>36</sup> His hope that waves of globalization might provide moments within which to challenge Eurocentric perspectives on culture and history was to appear highly esoteric and slightly out of place to his Johannesburg audience.

Reporting on her interview with Enwezor just before *Trade Routes* opened, local arts writer Hazel Friedman described him as a "consummate strategist", outlining his plan to set up "new contact zones" for "dialogue, disagreement and exchange", whilst noting that such zones were the exclusive province

of invited participants. Her obvious irritation at Enwezor's obduracy – during what she acknowledged was a “rushed” telephone interview just before the exhibition was opened – led her to the same conclusion that many other South African writers later reached: that *Trade Routes* had “separated itself from the imbalances that continue to afflict a country that has not yet located its own centre of gravity”.<sup>37</sup> The seeds of the controversy that Enwezor was to meet lay in the mismatch between his thesis and the local cultural politics that he encountered, within which resided an understandable belief in the exceptionalism of South Africa and of its recent history.<sup>38</sup>

By contrast, the Robben Island Museum opened at the same time, on the harsh island prison where Nelson Mandela and other activists had been imprisoned. It featured local artists who interpreted Robben Island's history, highlighting the ultimately successful struggle for freedom in South Africa. The three exhibitions at the museum's opening included installations and prints. Concerts, performances and artist residencies were planned, emphasizing the imperative “to develop local artists and indigenous art forms”.<sup>39</sup> The Robben Island exhibition presented images that interpreted the injustice of apartheid but which were ultimately celebratory in tone. The Biennale's critics would seem to have wished for something like this, imagining that exhibitions could function as a collective, highly social, art therapy. The Robben Island Museum also attracted national government support that was lacking for the Biennale: neither Mandela nor key political figures attended *Trade Routes*' opening.

It was clear that local audiences (which included popular reporters for daily newspapers and aggrieved activists) would not necessarily fall into line with the civic backers of international biennials unless there was a consensus that a biennial was important to the local community. This was not the case at Johannesburg, no matter what the quality of the exhibition. While Enwezor acknowledged the geographic spread and diverse history of struggles against domination and colonialism, he seemed to many observers to reject such immediate struggles. Implicitly, it looked as if the exceptional experience of the struggle for freedom that black South Africans were just emerging from, with all the shocking after-effects of white oppression that were still blighting their lives, was sidelined or a framing device for colonial history. Enwezor proffered instead a focus on “the cross-layering of discourses that describe issues of globalization.”<sup>40</sup> His disinterest in the overriding priority of this national struggle was never going to endear him to large sections of Johannesburg opinion.<sup>41</sup>

<sup>37</sup> See Hazel Friedman: “The Curator as God”, in: *Mail & Guardian*, October 10, 1997. Online at: <http://mg.co.za/article/1997-10-10-the-curator-as-god> [September 14, 2015].

<sup>38</sup> Friedman described confusion over the Biennale's leadership, the conflicts between key players and the concerns about funding in the build-up to the 1997 Biennale; see Hazel Friedman: “Biennale's Rocky Road”, in: *Mail & Guardian*, July 11, 1997. Online at: <http://mg.co.za/article/1997-07-11-biennales-rocky-road> [September 14, 2015].

<sup>39</sup> See Karen Rutter: “Unique Setting from which to tell our Story”, in: *Cape Times*, 15 October 1997. See also Karen Rutter: “From Prison to Museum – The Art of Freedom”.

<sup>40</sup> Enwezor: “Introduction. Travel Notes”, p. 8.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 11.

Enwezor wrote,

What kind of imperatives bring the nation into being [...] what manner of representation (cultural or otherwise) propels the nation's persistent hunger for incarnation? If a consensus could be reached, beyond the divisiveness, in which people lay claim to the values of their collective past, which images of the national culture survive, and which ones are cast overboard? It is within these tight confines, as well as in that which lies beyond the certain boundaries of the nation's stalwart image and incarnation, that many today inhabit the contradictions of being both citizen and immigrant.<sup>42</sup>

In deliberate and suggestive terms that were to shape the next generation of biennial curators more than perhaps any other single cluster of ideas, he described his Biennale as “a kind of open network of exchange” and artistic practice as a means for exploring contemporary political and social processes, with the ability to produce innovative new mappings of such processes.<sup>43</sup> Thus, in 1995 – seven years away from his enormously influential *Documenta11* – Enwezor was already ranging far outside art's conservatively conceived aesthetic capability into activism and politics. Enwezor instead asserted that artists and thinkers could together ponder the most important questions of our contemporary period. How can globalization and its effects on individual, collective and national identity be best described? And finally, what would the examination of what Enwezor described as “contingent” histories, and the cultural mixes resulting from colonialism, contribute to the understanding of a different globality, and what would it look like?<sup>44</sup> The answer was a list of major works by artists from William Kentridge to Hans Haacke, Vivan Sundaram to Carrie Mae Weems, Gu Wenda to Lucy Orta.

The genealogy of all this was a raft of postcolonial writers such as Edward Said and Homi Bhabha. Enwezor's description, for example, of the “contrary truth” of the European Age of Enlightenment as “a negative Age of Decline and Defensiveness” for Africa, Asia and the Americas, was indebted to these writers' descriptions of a colonial history that divided itself into a psychologically charged binary of self versus other, and original versus mimicry.<sup>45</sup> Similarly, Enwezor's strident refusal of nationalism (not least, abandoning the national pavilion arrangements that prevailed in most other biennials, including *Africus* in 1995 and the renowned and contemporaneous 24th Bienal de São Paulo in 1998) clearly drew from the long-emergent projects of postcolonial scholarship and recent anthropology.<sup>46</sup> In particular, he quoted directly from anthropologist James Clifford, and especially the book that Clifford had just published a month or two earlier that same year, *Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century*.<sup>47</sup> Enwezor described his curatorial research as akin to anthropological fieldwork in its reliance on physical travel chose the label of the observing anthropologist-outsider, reflecting on his own experiences as a traveler moving amongst foreign peoples and ideas.<sup>48</sup>

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., p. 11; On p. 12 Enwezor continued, “Ours should not be a world in which discussions of art merely rest on outmoded debates over formal and aesthetic methodologies, or on soft-fisted gestures towards so-called Third World societies. The demand of the late twentieth century is about expanding the forums within which serious critical debates about culture could be convened, and with meaningful contributions from areas traditionally, but unnecessarily excluded, from participation”.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., p. 7.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., p. 7.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., pp. 8 and 9.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., p. 7.

<sup>47</sup> James Clifford: *Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997.

<sup>48</sup> Enwezor: “Introduction. Travel Notes”, p. 9. This is particularly evident in his long section describing “ethnographic surrealism” (p. 11).

## Misalignment between Local and International Priorities

At least one observer noted that his focus was almost exclusively on physical displacement or travel, with its associated fieldwork, and on that of his selected artists.<sup>49</sup> In *Third Text*, reviewer Jen Budney described the discrepancy between local and international responses to the Biennale, contrasting the hostile local reception that criticized the Biennale's inaccessibility and lack of community engagement, with international responses that celebrated the achievement of presenting such a geographically diverse group of artists as equals.<sup>50</sup> In the Biennale's press releases, this discrepancy had already been foreclosed as "bourgeois philistinism versus the progressive cultural politics of the [international] art establishment."<sup>51</sup> South African newspaper reviewers were intensely aware of the gap between local and international audiences, and the lack of local attendance was glaringly obvious to them. In the *Cape Times*, art critic Benita Munitz focused squarely on the gaps between the Biennale's locations and audiences, noting that,

At this biennale two distinct constituencies are represented. There's the "in crowd"—everyone involved in some way with this art event which Christopher Till describes as "the most significant art event on the African continent". At the other end of the spectrum are visitors encouraged, perhaps, by director Okwui Enwezor's comment that contemporary art is a part of South Africans' political debate. Notably absent during these early days are Johannesburg's art lovers who habitually attend openings and visit galleries.<sup>52</sup>

This was perhaps no surprise given the Biennale was an inherently riven event: there was, after all, a two-hour flight required to travel between the two cities in which it was based, Johannesburg and Cape Town. Yet Enwezor seemed remarkably unperturbed by that distance, even though it meant that the two Biennale exhibitions staged in Cape Town – indeed, the two exhibitions curated by South Africans, one dedicated to South African art (*Graffiti*), the other to art made by women (*Life's Little Necessities*) – risked being entirely ignored by the international audiences and their focus on Johannesburg. The potential exclusion of both local artists and female artists from international attention, and the politics it suggested, only reinforced perceptions that Enwezor held little interest in or awareness about the practical realities of living in South Africa.<sup>53</sup> Many international visitors also found their Johannesburg experience dislocating and discomforting: the city's extraordinarily high violent crime rate meant that visitors effectively confined themselves to the Biennale exhibitions or shuttled from location to location and to the conference, and from there back to their hotels. This version of Johannesburg seemed "for all purposes still segregated and white," according to reviewer Jen Budney, yet South Africans themselves noted the tough security, rough neighborhoods and poor signage.<sup>54</sup>

<sup>49</sup> Jen Budney: "Who's It For? The 2nd Johannesburg Biennale", in: *Third Text*, vol. 12, no. 42 (1998), pp. 88–94.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 88-94.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 89.

<sup>52</sup> Benita Munitz: "Medley of works drawn from global art pool", in: *Cape Times*, 24 October 1997, p. 9 & p. 16, p. 16.

<sup>53</sup> Such criticisms would also emerge in an important set of reflections about *Trade Routes*, held in 2019 at University College, London, by Tamar Garb, Penny Siopis and Osei Bonsu: "Revisiting the Johannesburg Biennale", Institute of Advanced Studies, University College, London, 25 September 2019.

<sup>54</sup> Budney: "Who's It For?", p. 90.

One of the few works in which the issues of class and race meshed with the Johannesburg setting was Lucy Orta's "Nexus Architecture" (1997). [Fig. 2] Orta had worked with migrant laborers from the Usindiso women's shelter at the humble but historic Worker's Library, next to *Trade Routes'* main venue, the Electric Workshop and a block away from Museum Africa. They made patterned jumpsuits from printed cotton and kanga, eventually displaying them in a line of umbilically joined clothes at a spectacular, ephemeral conga-line parade outside the Electric Workshop. By contrast, Coco Fusco's "Rights of Passage" (1997) forced itself on every visitor entering the Biennale during the periods in which Fusco, wearing the uniform of a security guard and a determinedly stern expression, issued five thousand replica South African passbooks, the identity documents that regulated the movements of black and coloured people during apartheid. For Budney, the negative responses to Fusco's work were themselves symptoms that such art could trigger discussions of race and class.<sup>55</sup>

This was clearly disingenuous. Though the results of Enwezor's fieldwork (and the experiences of unsettled international visitors) were disconcerting in their likeness to disaster tourism, where the real trauma of others is transformed into a compelling backdrop for a cultural experience, this criticism itself was too easy as well. In fact, Enwezor's job had never included responsibility for representing South Africa and its current experiences, and he had explicitly said many times that he wanted to create an anti-national Biennale in Johannesburg, arguing,

I wanted to look at this biennale as being antinational, to bring about a conversation in which we can ask if it is possible to make a transnational biennale that is not naively boundary-less but that places the privileges that the nation unquestionably enjoys under a more critical gaze.<sup>56</sup>

In other words, he was very critical of the association of cultural authority, site and automatic authenticity that had become common in global contemporary art under the rubric of identity politics and auto-ethnography, and which may have been more acceptable in Johannesburg during its own promotion of self-identity and identity politics.<sup>57</sup> His was a complicated, self-interested but important argument. Enwezor was to come back to it some years later, in a 2001 lecture originally presented in Berlin titled "Mega-Exhibitions and the Antinomies of a Transcultural Global Form" (which then met with an equally intricate and furious rejoinder from George Baker, "The Globalization of the False: A Response to Okwui Enwezor").<sup>58</sup> But Enwezor had responded to his commission and had produced a long list of very important artists from around the world. He had been able to garner their best works, and works that represented these topics would always, inevitably, be tinged with the taint of tourism. Johannesburg was, in effect, the site of intense disagreements about the role of a biennial of

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 94.

<sup>56</sup> Carol Becker and Okwui Enwezor: "Interview with Okwui Enwezor", *Art Journal*, vol. 57, no. 2 (Summer 1998), pp. 101-107, p. 101.

<sup>57</sup> Hal Foster's critique of this tendency, written in the early 1990s, remains pertinent here. See Hal Foster: "The Artist as Ethnographer?", in: *Global Visions: Towards a New Internationalism in the Visual Arts*, ed. by Jean Fisher, London: Kala Press, 1994, pp. 12-19.

<sup>58</sup> Enwezor: "Mega-Exhibitions and the Antinomies of a Transcultural Global Form", in: *Documents*, no. 23 (Summer 2004), pp. 2-19; George Baker: "The Globalization of the False: A Response to Okwui Enwezor", in: *Documents*, no. 23 (Summer 2004), pp. 20-25.

contemporary art and the restlessly moving international art world circuit in a time of crisis, and South Africa did not host any international biennials for nearly twenty years after *Trade Routes* (when an international photography biennial called *GRID* transplanted itself from the Netherlands to Cape Town in 2015).<sup>59</sup> The rejection was obvious to visitors. Manthia Diawara, writing for *Artforum*, observed wistfully,

Clearly, those of us who attended must feel disappointed on some level: the show failed to engage South Africans in a dialogue with contemporary art and theoretical reflections. It is no small measure of nationalism in the new South Africa that what Okwui Enwezor has so elegantly and expertly proposed has been resisted so vehemently.<sup>60</sup>

## Conclusion

In hindsight, and in particular after the 2008 financial meltdown, during which floods of money washed into the top end of the international art world, Enwezor's enthusiasm for the anti-hegemonic possibilities of globalization (and art) would come to seem optimistic, as had his disinterest in the exceptional nature of the apartheid (and now postapartheid) struggle to many South Africans; his exhibition had been rejected both on the neoliberal right as a fiscal extravagance, and on the nationalist left as an internationalist extravagance. He was already quite aware, in 1997, of the latter criticism, pointing out that new systems contain traces of the old: "It would appear that one can't endorse globalization without borrowing from the antecedent rhetorics of colonialist exploitation."<sup>61</sup> His immediate method had been to make the fact of colonialism central to world history and art, allowing him to construct an artistic and intellectual framework focusing on former colonies, which remain places marginalized by Europe's and the United States' historical narratives. This was a genuine achievement.

But over the next fifteen years, and especially after his *Documenta 11* in 2002, a contradiction appeared. How could globalization both be unprecedented but also so thoroughly connected to colonial histories? For it seemed then, and in retrospect the same is true more than twenty years later, that Enwezor and the majority of other contemporary art curators had imagined that fluidity, trade and economics, despite being rooted in the violence and hatred of centuries before, might now soften the contours of conflict. Nationalisms and the fierce desire to demarcate borders would apparently fade, much as the borders between artists – whether based on nationality or medium – were erased in a dispersed, thematic group show (albeit with the notable exception of the many South African artists exhibited in Cape Town rather than Johannesburg). *Trade Routes* was thus, if sometimes implicitly, a celebration of the free movement of people, ideas and goods attendant upon the shifting winds of neoliberal globalization. This was a defiantly romantic view that would soon be challenged by the vengeful border policing,

<sup>59</sup> *Trade Routes* has since also been subject to a revisionist critique in an exhibition and book produced by the Stevenson Gallery (itself based in both Cape Town and Johannesburg). See Joost Bosland (coordinator): *Trade Routes Revisited: A Project Marking the 15th Anniversary of the Second Johannesburg Biennale*, Cape Town and Johannesburg: Stevenson Gallery, 2012.

<sup>60</sup> Manthia Diawara: "Moving Company: The Second Johannesburg Biennale", *Artforum* vol. 36, no. 7 (March 1998), pp. 86-89, p. 89.

<sup>61</sup> Enwezor: "Introduction. Travel Notes", p. 7.

especially after 2001, of North Atlantic nations, including increasingly trumped-up appeals to atavistic nationalisms that haunted much of the world from the late 1990s on. We say “implicitly” because, in an essay and an exhibition apparently so concerned with trade and globalization, Enwezor and his colleagues in Johannesburg discussed economics and money very little, positioning economic trade solely as an impetus for the social and cultural exchange that was his focus; this was not to be the case at Enwezor's great exhibition, *Documenta11*, five years later or his Venice Biennale of 2015, *All the World's Futures*. Both showed globalization and its impact on locality very differently and more darkly than *Trade Routes*, the first large biennial that Enwezor would direct in the course of an extraordinary career of curatorial experimentation. Nonetheless, in Johannesburg he had, it turned out, presciently selected art that explored themes of migration, cultural traffic, and sites of meltdown, themes that would only become more pressing in the war- and crisis-weary years following the Biennale and we would also argue that this 1990s disagreement about the role of a biennial of contemporary art in a time of crisis remains immensely relevant today.

<sup>62</sup> Enwezor, Katy Siegel and Ulrich Wilmes (eds.): *Postwar: Art between the Pacific and the Atlantic, 1945–1965*, exh. Catalogue, Munich: Haus der Kunst, 2016.

As a point of reflection, following Enwezor's sadly premature death on 15 March 2019, we can see that, for all its challenges and the critiques (sometimes rightly) that were made, *Trade Routes* offered a monumental reimagining of what the curating of contemporary art and thinking could do. When the North Atlantic image of itself as the radiating, luminous centre of art was corrected (though finishing that revision will be long, long underway), it was done largely through Okwui Enwezor's extraordinarily ambitious, postnational exhibition projects accompanied by vast, scholarly books and cycles of conferences, workshops and consultations. These would continue (perhaps culminate) twenty years after *Trade Routes*, in the epochal exhibition, *Postwar* (2016). That exhibition took up the ambition and revisionist challenge of *Trade Routes*. Intended as merely the first of a gargantuan trilogy, *Postwar* set out a wholesale revision of post-1945 art history, finally taking account of the global field of art-making and bookending French curator Jean-Hubert Martin's similarly epic, famous Paris exhibition of 1989, *Magiciens de la Terre*.<sup>62</sup> Each of Enwezor's exhibition projects attempted grand revisions. The ability to conceptualize different histories that did not relegate art as ‘untimely’ by freighted, fraught and often simply incorrect comparisons depended on the ability of inquiring curators like Enwezor to widen the field of artistic production to include other artists, other thinkers and other histories than just those anchored to the North Atlantic. It is an ethos of curating, grounded in collaboration and the marginalized (if not quite fully escaping its own potential for civic exclusion), that now stands as the yardstick for curating to come.





Fig. 1: Okwui Enwezor (left) and Christopher Till (right) give Prince Charles a tour of the electric workshop at the 2nd Johannesburg Biennale, 1997 (unknown photographer). Courtesy: South African History Online: <https://www.sahistory.org.za/article/2nd-johannesburg-biennale> [23 February 2020].



Fig. 2: Lucy and Jorge Orta: "Nexus Architecture", performed at the 2nd Johannesburg Biennale, 1997. Performers wear Dutch wax printed cotton and kanga Nexus suits created by Orta together with migrant workers from the Usindiso shelter. © Lucy Orta/ADAGP Licensed by Viscopy, 2016. Courtesy: Private Collection, UK and Motive Art Gallery: <http://www.studio-orta.com/en/artwork/16/Nexus-Architecture-Johannesburg-Biennale> [10 October 2016].

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Curating in Times of Crisis

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