

**Jean-Paul Martinon, “Capturing the Present?,” in *The Journal of Visual Cultures* 1, no. 3 (2002), 374-7, © The Journal of Visual Cultures, 2002.**

There is something fundamentally exhausting about Documenta XI, the transnational, interdisciplinary and transgenerational large-scale exhibition curated by Okwui Enwezor and his team of six international curators over eighteen months, across five platforms, four continents, involving more than eighty transmigrating multimedia artists and transdisciplinary scholars and part of which is displayed for 100 days in Kassel in five different buildings including a stylistically heterogeneous new Brewery.

The exhaustion does not come from the show itself. The exhibition is curatorially safe. Documenta XI does not in any way problematize traditional exhibition models for this kind of global middle-class tourist attraction: works are neatly displayed on museum plinths and in white cubes, everything is hung at eye level, wall labels give the name of the artist and the title of the work, everything is crowd and child friendly. Easy. Although it is a show with various platforms, it never allows for the unformed, for the curatorially unresolved. It might display in neat frames and printed panels social, and cultural processes and political agendas, but it never allows the presentation or the curatorial process itself to become a working process “without end”. It might be aware that we live in a moment of incredible instability, but it never allows for what is unsure to be exposed. One moves nicely from black to white cube and back again into a black cube only to reappear yet again into another unsurprisingly bright white cube with objects on plinths and 2d works on walls. Nothing is chaotic or perverse. It might pretend to present counter-models that allows us to see the sheer complexity of what we grapple with when we talk about globalisation, but it never actualises *on site* these counter-models: the show presents great art and great documents by singular artists, collectives and art networks in a curatorially dead safe museum realm. One of the curators, Carlos Basualdo writes in the catalogue that the show proposes a model of articulation that is architectonic and urban, situationist, even

psychogeographic, in which all the paths fork endlessly. The problem is that the show generates so many leaflets and maps that it is impossible to get truly lost in Kassel. One might move from Lapland to Benin by just taking a few steps, but one is still in a museum in the middle of Germany. Jan Hoet and Catherine David's previous Documentas were physically and curatorially more challenging in that they invited artists to take on various urban and non-urban spaces in the city centre. In a way, it was them who truly "urbanised" the museological space of Documenta, not this world map of art production. In this way, seeing the show might take some local globe-trotting time, but is not unfeasible or particularly tiresome. The exhaustion does not even set in after reading the two thousand four hundred and sixty two pages that have been published on the occasion (eight volumes). The costly 3.5 Kg catalogue for the show itself (Platform 5, the main volume) is a coffee table book with plenty of images and explanatory texts. Imagine flicking through a hard-back copy of a world-class six hundred page volume of Hello! with the added bonus of proper writing. Lovely, scholarly, entertaining, but essentially stately, decorous, and downright conventional in its layout and scope.

The exhaustion sets in because it tries to catch something really big, it tries to present something altogether unfathomable which I will characterise here as the immanent threshold of the present. This is not at first evident. Indeed, on the surface, the show tries to articulate the increasingly accelerated processes of cultural syncretism. The exhibition began with a series of literal deterritorializations (Platforms 1 to 4) which emblemize the mechanisms that make the space of contemporary art one of multiple ruptures: planes, buses, trams, trains, taxis, hotels, restaurants, cappuccinos in between Vienna, Berlin, New Delhi, St. Lucia, Lagos and Kassel. In between these ruptures, the team of Documenta XI tried to invent new models enabling trans-disciplinary actions within the contemporary global public sphere, they tried to mark the location of culture today and the spaces in which culture intersects with the domains of complex global knowledge circuits, they attempted to put forward a new reading

of creolization as a theory of creative disorder that analyses active urban and contact zones in flux, they endeavoured to map the geography of many cultural territories, they addressed hybridity, métissage, cosmopolitanism, the polycentric and polysemic aspects of a new political philosophy of the Other, the polymorphous, the chaotic logic of postcolonial cities, the signs and codes of expression of new urban identities, the emergence of “knowledge production” in lieu of the old notion of art and the spaces of the critical debates of contemporary artistic discourses today. As you can see, the scope is grandiose and imposing. In two word, it is overwhelmingly gargantuan. The team’s greatest achievement is that after this elaborate regalia of contemporary themes and issues, it managed to come up with one last show, one last platform. What Enwezor and his team have managed is to present the monumental disparity of The Multiple. I deliberately do not use here the dreaded word of globalisation for what Documenta XI truly presents is the multidimensional aspect of the world we live in, the endless shifts in geography where territorial borders, distances and places lose some of their previously overriding influence. The main achievement of the show is that it does not propose a new sovereignty or a new totalizing narrative. It does not revise or devise a canon. The show is clearly anti-utopian and desublimatory. It exposes a constellation of demands and discourses, from the Eskimos to the Lebanese, from the Congolese to the Croatian. In this way, this show is a rhizomatic network of communities and intellectual pursuits on a planetary scale and at the highest level and from which artists hail from the entire world.

Once all this has been properly understood and conceptualised, one suddenly becomes very, very tired indeed. Although Enwezor’s counter-hegemonic models keeps us all constantly and dictatorially on our toes, at one point one seriously cannot do anything else but flag. One becomes unsteady, feeble, our attention span withers. It is exhausting because the show ends up producing not so much a multifaceted interpretation of history and geography or a series of asynchronous temporalities and spatialities, but because it exposes the present

in its overwhelming manifestation. The Present as Multiple. As a poor singularity, as a wee person wondering the vast corridors of the Museum Fridericanum one cannot seriously attempt with this show to pin down our 21st century globalising artistic processes, let alone political or social ones. It is impossible. No one can make sense of the world's rapid changes and transformations. No one can articulate the unceasing cultural, social and political frictions, transitions, transformations, fissures and global institutional consolidations that take place while you see the show or while you read these lines. The viewer goes from a documentary on a war ravaged country to the Bataillean kitchness of Cerith Wyn Evans, from the Israelo-Palestinian conflict to the mystical poetry of Victor Grippo's school desks. To attempt to do so in a ground-breaking blockbuster show is to reveal the fundamental contradiction of Documenta XI: one the one hand to evade totalizing narratives and on the other to revert to the belief that time and space can be pinned down, that modes of knowledge can make sense five years after David's Documenta X. In this way, besides all their efforts, the show succumbs to one last utopia, that of capturing the presentness of presence, the immanent threshold of the infinitely complex passing of time on earth. This is evident when analysing the curators use of words. In this review I have grafted numerous words encountered in the catalogue and other various press documents. These words all start with the prefix trans-, which etymologically (in Latin) means "across, beyond, through, so as to change". The recurrent use of this prefix in words such as transitions, transformations, transnational, transgenerational, transmigrating, transdisciplinary, etc. highlights that what is addressed at Documenta is what exposes or moves from one state to another, permanently. An unfathomable fleetingness that ultimately one can only acquiesce as passing by. An impermanence that either in Benin or in Buthan one can only say "yes" to . A global transitoriness that ultimately will never *ever* make sense. The meaninglessness that comes when facing the absolute inarticulateness of the present is precisely what is missing from this show. A few pointless, aimless, foolish and insecure attitudes from both the curators and some of the artists would have revealed not only the horror of our helplessness in

front of some conflicts world wide, but also the essentially human aspect of such an ambitious exhibition.