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*Tombeau pour Okwui Enwezor*

**Okwui Enwezor, et al.** *Trade Routes: History and Geography*. Johannesburg: Greater Johannesburg Metropolitan Council, 1997. 412 pp.

**Okwui Enwezor, et al.** *Grief and Grievance: Art and Mourning in America*. New York: Phaidon and New Museum, 2020. 264 pp.

I would run into Okwui Enwezor (1963 – 2019) in New York. On one such occasion he walked me around his exhibition *The Short Century: Independence and Liberation Movements in Africa 1945-1994* (2001, Munich, Museum Villa Stuck). I had missed its Chicago installation and felt that I had lucked out to be walking through the New York iteration of the show with him at MoMA PS1 (2002). He was already a rising star in the curatorial firmament, but after this show, *The Short Century*, his reputation was firmly and irreversibly established. The catalogue of his which meant most to me was his first great show, *Trade Routes*, the Johannesburg Biennial, for this exhibition showed the scope and depth of his ambitions, which was never simply to put on Big Shows – the command of resources cannot be ignored; it has in its own right a certain impressiveness – but to take the emerging genre of the project show to a new level where it would explore new epistemological and curatorial models of research and knowledge. It is with the emergence of the ambitious project show that the idea of the star curator is born and with it all the by now well-known clichés about the curator lacking humility, getting in the way of the works, wanting to be considered on a creative par with the artist, etc., etc. Enwezor’s ambition, however, wanted to re-write the DNA of Western ideas of

*contemporaneity* through Art – the capital A is required – in part by refusing to the West the privilege of measure or standard, by compelling a cultural confrontation – hence the prevalence of conflict as *substance and framework* so frequent in his shows - and not merely some anemic idea of contextualization, and to do so required, necessitated the command of considerable resources, could not, indeed, be an incremental thing. And what luck, the project mode of curating, the exhibition as epistemological model, coincided, post-Warsaw Pact collapse, with the expansion of Western ideas and wealth through globalization, and so both the resources and the infrastructure were available to take on the Western Idea of the order of things, even as new centers – Indonesia, China, Johannesburg, South Korea, Brazil, for example – were entering the fray whether to decenter or to polyphonize the strands of late modernization. This irony cannot be understated. The proliferation of biennials and large project shows was testimony to the wealth of globalization even as the issues of justice both within and beyond the West remained muted by this very wealth - until it didn’t, of course. It needs also to be emphasized, that the wealth of globalization led not only to a proliferation of biennials but a transmutation of art which the academic discipline of art

history as traditionally conceived could no longer manage nor conceptualize, and so curatorial practice (research) – and not even museum studies – has become one of the principle means of organizing the contemporaneity of art and its symbolic dissemination. *Trade Routes* is a materialist articulation of this development. Think Allan Sekula – the analytic capacity of Sekula’s practice - on the ocean as hidden space and the (mostly) hidden role (but hidden from whom?) of the container ship in the development of globalization, the spreading of the modern conditions of production through sea lanes. Trade Routes – Commodification – Spectacular Time. Think John Akomfrah’s *Nine Muses* (2010) - the poetic capacity of Akomfrah’s practice - also an essay film on the ocean as a language of the human account, whence the ocean / okeanus, as the means by which commodified human bodies are transported to their laboring fate, which,

in making Homer’s *Odyssey* the medium of reflection, confronts the nature of hospitality – this is the main reason why *Nine Muses* deploys Homer’s *Odyssey* – or rather the *inhospitality* confronted by labor built into the foundation of the modern world. We, les nègres, are “Bordeaux and Nantes and Liverpool and New York and San Francisco,” that is, the port cities of modernity, as Césaire’s great poem, *Cahier d’un retour au pays natal*, says, but each of these cities is also, as part of a poetics and spatial practice, an instance of where arrival is a graveyard as persisting topos for the colonial subjects whose labor, as with all oppressed groups, is the foundation of modernity. So powerful is this hold of the conditions of arrival that in many of the thinkers of Black modernity it has all but achieved the status of phylogenetic inheritance or condition whose *urform* is the slave ship of the Middle Passage

where the inheritors of the middle passage stewed,  
five to a room, still clamped below their hatch,  
breeding like felonies,

whose lives revolve round prison, graveyard, church.

The social articulation as architecture of a historical condition is further stated as

Below bent breadfruit trees  
in the flat, coloured city, *class*<sup>18</sup>

escalated into structures still,  
merchant, middleman, magistrate, knight. *To go downhill  
from here was to ascend.*<sup>19</sup>

The middle passage never guessed its end.  
This is the height of poverty  
for the desperate and black.<sup>20</sup>

The phylogenetic register is made even clearer and more emphatic when Walcott's poem speaks of "lives fixed in the *unalterable groove* / of grinding poverty."<sup>21</sup> One might now understand an Edward (Kamau) Braithwaite whose poem "Postlude / Home" asks: "Will exile never / end?" or a St-John Perse in whose *Anabase* (1924) one finds the refrain "L'exil n'est point d'hier! L'exil n'est point d'hier!" (Exile is not of yesterday) for exile, the logic of separation that links departure and arrival, is never definitively overcome, and so the originary moment of in-hospitality upon arrival - a "degraded arrival [...] as the beginning [...] of our history"<sup>22</sup> - is always present trans-generationally because embodied since and in the foundation of the City, that is, the modern world. There is plenty here over which to grieve, and for which one may indeed pronounce many grievances.

*Grief and Grievance: Art and Mourning in America.* The title is twice doubling - as if grievance is what comes of (unending or unacknowledged) *grief* (something built into the etymology of Old French *greivance*), that is, pain or torment, that grievance is a condition of continuance, "a history of repeated injuries"; as if grief is linked to grievance (as in, file a grievance) and to complaint - *plaint*: also art song of sadness - of the kind made by working people through their unions against management, but also of the kind made *foundationally* by elites of self-election in the founding act of separation and birth of this country (the USA) against its monarchical power (see the section of grievances in the Declaration of Independence of which, for example, the grievance against King George "For cutting off our Trade with all parts of the world"). The title doubles, also, in grief and mourning. - No matter how often I self-correct, I always need to be reminded that *grief*, which

sounds so physical, so concrete, weighty monosyllable, i.e., Anglo-Saxon as I have learned this, is in fact Latinate, and that to mourn / mourning, which sounds so Latinate to me, is the term etymologically rooted in the Old English, and so also to be reminded that to grieve and to mourn are not simple synonyms - they are synonyms in usage, to be sure - as grief is to be in pain and to mourn is already the ritualized act, the social practice,<sup>23</sup> of commemorating the pain, of learning to separate oneself from the danger of unending, ceaseless grief. Here we might return - as I returned in my reading and thinking in the temporality of COVID - to the insights of Elizabeth Hardwick shared with Guy Debord, where Debord tellingly observes that that "it is no longer the crisis of the status of Blacks in America; it is the crisis of the status of America, posed at first through Black people," putting us, says Hardwick, in a condition where one population has had enforced on it the *social* status of, or come to "*represent all the imponderables of life* itself." It is, says, Hardwick, the *unknown imponderables* (in my diction, the unconscious psychotic kernel) which *distract* attention thereby necessitating the heroic, the *severest concentration*. The temporality of Care (Heidegger), the disavowal of what is yet plainly in sight (what I learned from the function of camouflage in Diaz' *The Confederate Monument in the American South* at the same time that I was reading Solange Faladé with Stanley Cavell) necessitate violence, but George Floyd's murder ripped off the illusion in which our sociality is anchored and thereby laid bare the *graphic* nature of the violence and the role of the victim. Grief / Mourning is thus a calling to make public - to bring to attention is also a mode of caring - what is otherwise privatized pain, since such pain is foundational, not unlike the pain hidden in plain sight in "The Ones Who walk away from Omelas."

Still, *in America*... What is the difference between the intense preoccupation with mourning in the 1980's/1990's reception of Blanchot, Derrida, and deconstruction and the current preoccupation with Black grief? Is it conceivable that the social and linguistic articulation of Black grief was made possible by the deconstructive discourse of mourning? Still, my question – to myself, obviously – is, What is the difference between the intense preoccupation with mourning in the 1980's reception of Blanchot, Derrida, and deconstruction and the current preoccupation with Black grief?<sup>24</sup> There is indeed a difference, and here we may have to await another exhibition, another archeology of curating as we begin to grasp more clearly what was Enwezor and what was - legitimate, let it be said - rather his early heirs, for I comprehend Enwezor, for whom the German language landscape was so very important - see Chris Dercon speaking of “Okwui’s relation to Germany”<sup>25</sup> - as seeking to grasp and to articulate both the distinctiveness of Blackness in modernity and the challenges of universality, for in mourning no group is unique. The danger constantly skirted in this extraordinary exhibition is that Black grief is Black American grief, that Black grief is in some way unique amongst communal mourning, as if its phenomenology of grief cannot be shareable mourning – to *participate* is etymologically to *share*. In the conceptuality of Blanchot, mourning is the condition of being alive in modernity during the afterlife of the holocaust (for which Robert Antelme’s *L’Espèce humaine* was definitive in Blanchot’s thinking),

the dropping of the bomb on Hiroshima and Nagasaki (see here Marguerite Duras’ contribution to the film with Resnais, *Hiroshima, mon amour*, and her notebooks on *La Douleur* bearing on the return of her husband Robert Antelme from Buchenwald<sup>26</sup>), and the technological expansion of power into all aspects of interiority, indeed, destroying even the usefulness of a fiction of interiority, expanding into the feats of post-colonialization. None and nothing can escape this *après-coup*: “Le désastre prend soin de tout” (the disaster takes care of all) we find in *L’Écriture du désastre*, hence that limpid statement, also from *L’Écriture du désastre* [the writing of the disaster]: “Le désastre ruine tout en laissant tout en l’état. (The disaster ruins all leaving all in place [but also: intact].)” And the strangeness of which statement is that we for whom this is become a natal condition may not even recognize it, or *feel* it as our condition, not unlike the prisoners in Socrates’ allegory of the Cave - which Blanchot would not have used - who have been chained in a cave since childhood and can only see shadows which they take for reality, to which Socrates’ interlocutor, Glaucon, responds, *This is a strange image you have shown me and these are strange prisoners*, meaning that these are strange prisoners who do not know or are not aware that they are indeed prisoners! The “Allegory of the Cave” is not a Blanchotian image, for sure, but its strangeness, the recognition of which, like a second sailing, comes from the interlocutor, Glaucon, is Blanchotian: something has taken place, something has occurred, which nevertheless



would seem – that is, perceptually, phenomenologically, socially – not to have left in its wake any difference: The disaster ruins all *leaving all in place, intact*. This is something that recent Black American intellectual culture perfectly understands as *the non-event of emancipation*: the Emancipation Proclamation was enunciated, but it was performatively a non-event. (A statement, *Let there be light*, is paradigmatically performative, not by virtue of truth or falsity – it can be neither – but by virtue of its utterance leaving a difference in the world.) Saidiya Hartman: “Ultimately, I am trying to grapple with the changes wrought in the social fabric after the abolition of slavery and with the nonevent of emancipation insinuated by the perpetuation of the plantation system and the refiguration of subjection.”<sup>27</sup> Blanchot’s text further limns this strangeness of the disaster by limning a spectral sociality or infrastructure, for “[the disaster] does not reach such or such, ‘I’ am not under its menace. It is in proportion to the extent that, spared, left aside, the disaster menaces me that it menaces in me that which is outside of me, an other than me which is passively becoming other. There is no reaching the disaster.”<sup>28</sup> Whence, too, this sentence: “Danger que le désastre prenne sens au lieu de prendre corps,” which we might quickly – and hence, provisionally – translate as: “Beware that the disaster should begin to make sense [*produce sense?*] in place of becoming embodied.” Black grief is nothing if not embodied, but with this show is it in danger of becoming a machine for producing sense? A missing meta-curatorial dimension

would have been to include *ample* materials, doubling the size of the present catalogue as a fitting tribute to Enwezor – letters, emails, *provisional* lists of artists, drafts, and an accounting of the development of Enwezor’s curatorial practice – to allow a viewer of the exhibition or a reader of the catalogue to construe Enwezor’s *part* – his fate? – to feel that we have, are confronted with, a *tombeau* for a compelling and definitive figure of his time, and thus a moment in the transmission of what matters, namely, affect as transmission (*de prendre corps*: becoming body). It is striking how there is no statement in the accompanying catalogue that is not definitive. Enwezor died just as it became no longer avoidable that the current phase and model of globalization is collapsing like a pyramid scheme. What might an exhibition on *mourning in America* be that took cognizance of this moment of collapse, retreat, and separation, both analytically and narratively, that is, as a possible opening to an alternative future not predicated on any form of commodification or idolatry of ownership? Or that recognized rage as sorrow (*douleur*) seeking its practice of mourning (*deuil*) to eschew reduction to (mere) animality? The model for such questioning, the questioning that puts one’s own being and preconceptions into the experience of doubt, is available in what is likely Enwezor’s most compelling and significant achievement, namely, the plural practice and plural histories of *Documenta 11* (2002), and the *Documenta Platforms* (1-5), but especially *Platform 2: Experiments with Truth: Transitional Justice and the Process of Truth and Reconciliation*.