

GLOBAL ENTRY

Okwui Enwezor talks with Michelle Kuo about the 56th Venice Biennale

THE WORLD IS NOT FLAT, and Okwui Enwezor, perhaps more than any other contemporary curator, has shown us just how mutable, turbulent, and multifarious it is. As he prepares to open the Fifty-Sixth Venice Biennale on May 9, Enwezor—who has said that this might be his last such undertaking—paused to speak with *Artforum* editor Michelle Kuo about his vision for the show and its relation to history, memory, capital, and the future of culture.

MICHELLE KUO: The title of your exhibition, "All the World's Futures," could easily seem utopian. But you've spoken about it as a nod to the unpredictability and volatility of our historical moment.

OKWUI ENWEZOR: I came to this title because I was imagining what role a Biennale could play in a moment of such uncertainty. I cannot remember a time more precarious, more foreboding, than the current moment. **MK:** Yes—we are living in what Ulrich Beck has called the risk society: when the unintended side effects of modernization—technological, ecological—seem to be trumping the systems devised to contain them, creating entirely new crises and instabilities.

OE: And art may enable us to think through that and to think beyond it. We have reached a point where we cannot have one homogenized narrative, one view of the future, a singular idea of what constitutes the good life, even though we have inherited certain monolithic cultural, social, and political ways of thinking about the world. This monolithic narrative has become increasingly untenable and can no longer hold. That's why George W. Bush and the neocons' version of enlightened despotism did not take hold in Afghanistan and Iraq. That's why there are multiple insurgencies occurring around us—political, intellectual, philosophical, economic. There is a search for alternatives.

One must rethink what the multiple frames of reference might be, what other paths might constitute new versions of the future, and the direction each might take. What if, say, in Nigeria we don't get it right? And we don't become like London, don't have the same luxury brands, along the same streets, owned by the same two companies? What if Beijing does not become like Washington? Is it possible to have multiple ways of

"One must rethink what other paths might constitute new versions of the future. What if Beijing does not become like Washington? Is it possible to have multiple ways of looking at social conditions that are not necessarily in alignment with the dominant Western ways of thinking?" —Okwui Enwezor



Lilian Novo Isioro for Invisible Borders' Trans-African Project, Yaounde, Camaroun, 2012, digital C-print, 23% x 31 1/2%.

looking at social conditions that are not necessarily in alignment with the dominant Western ways of thinking?

I think part of our sense of uncertainty has to do with this moment of post-Westernism, as I call it, that we're entering. Post-Westernism has to do with the skepticism in the non-Western world toward the essential wisdom that is the monopoly of the West. And so, in order to think about the future, to project forward, we need different lenses—it cannot be a singular lens. It would require a healthy dose of modesty to imagine all the world's futures in this way.

MK: Yet there is also a kind of master narrative that will run through the show, which is the narrative of *Das Kapital*. You are turning Marx's tract into a performance piece directed by Isaac Julien, with three volumes being read out loud by actors over nearly seven months,

in the Central Pavilion in the Giardini. How will that narrative help structure the exhibition?

OE: *Das Kapital* is not really a tract, but a work that preoccupied Marx for the rest of his life. He did not even finish it. The work on the theory of value, class relations, the universalization of money as a unit of value, the process of accumulation and circulation of capital, the exploitation of labor, the fall of wages as population increases—all these questions were essentially unfinished and ongoing when he died. The radical treatment of these ideas is why Marx arouses such passion on the left, and deep rancor and hatred on the right. I deliberately chose *Das Kapital* because it leads us to debate; there is no middle ground with Marx. The text remains a touchstone: It has enormous contemporary relevance; and its central thesis still illuminates the core of our social, economic, and political existence. In the past several years, multiple thinkers have returned to it: whether Thomas Piketty in terms of inequality, or Emmanuel Saez and other economists, or, of course, all the debates about the financial system, about the relationship between labor and capital.

If one is trying to think about the sense of precarity and instability now, in the wake of the financial crisis,

but without resorting to becoming an Occupy Wall Street curator, one has to ask, What are the instruments that one can deploy to begin to grasp this situation? Reading *Das Kapital*, articulating it, is one way.

The program surrounding the live reading of *Das Kapital*, which developed from discussions with Isaac, gives a sense of the scope of its impact—of how the book becomes an intervention into the exhibition—from Jason Moran’s work songs that derive from the field songs of slaves; to factory songs by Jeremy Deller; to Charles Gaines’s *Sound Texts* [2015], and so on. We’ll be showing Walker Evans’s *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* [1941]. So there are all these different trajectories.

Of course, many key elements of *Das Kapital* are questionable now. Is there such a thing as a proletariat anymore? Conditions have obviously changed quite radically. The very nature of labor has undergone a fundamental shift, as industrial and factory production moves to countries where workers have limited rights or none at all and advanced economies become mere producers of services. Might it be possible, for example, to look at the Gulf states, where imported labor outnumbers the indigenous population nearly two to one, as a massive archipelago of labor, a sort of gulag archipelago under the punishing sun?

MK: Some of these performances, like the Moran, actually reflect on the status of immaterial labor and cultural labor in relation to industrial labor itself.

OE: Yes, these artists are working with notions that Marx outlined—the structure of the working day, the unit of time as a category of the worker’s labor, etc., but they are also reflexive about artmaking itself. And the reading will be surrounded by annotations like the songs, films, lyrics. There is Olaf Nicolai’s new performance piece, based on Luigi Nono’s two-part composition *Un volto, e del mare/Non consumiamo Marx* [A Face, and of the Sea/Don’t Consume Marx, 1968], which sampled recordings of street protests aimed at the Venice Biennale in ’68. Born in Venice, Nono, a contemporary of Karlheinz Stockhausen’s, boycotted the Biennale himself; he was a staunch Marxist and wrote

Right: Saādane Afif, *The Speaker’s Corner of Hamra Street, Beirut, 2011*. Performance view. Nasri Sayegh. Photo: Houssam Mchaleimch.

Below: Glenn Ligon, *Come Out #4, 2014*, triptych, silk screen on canvas, overall 7’ 10” x 29’ 6”.



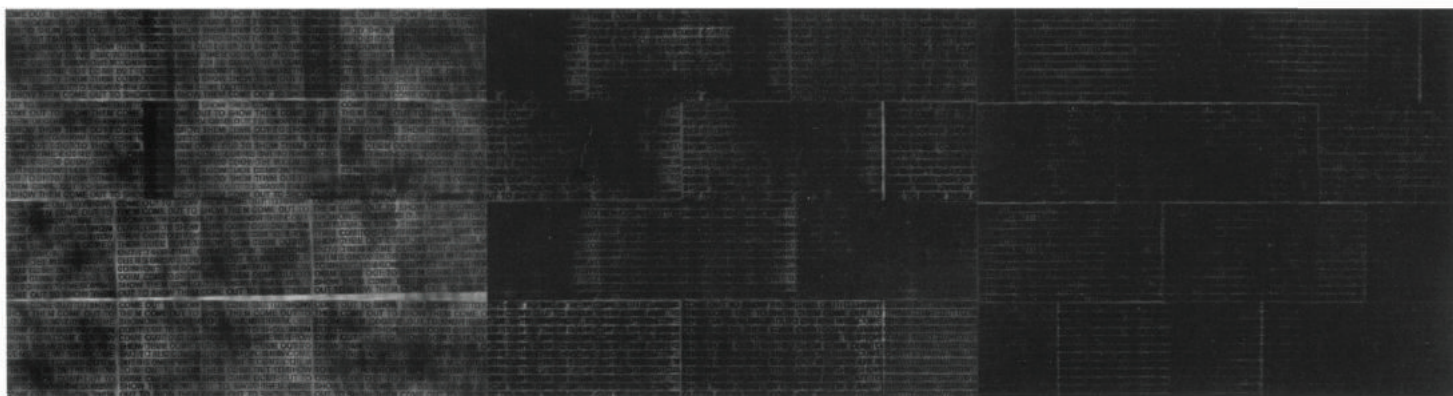
operas like *La fabbrica illuminata* [The Illuminated Factory, 1964]. His first opera, *Intolleranza*, looked at racism and discrimination in Italy—and this was in 1960!

And we’ll bring that together with Glenn Ligon’s *Come Out #12, Come Out #13, Come Out #14, Come Out #15*, and *A Small Band* [all 2015]—a group of silk-screen paintings and a neon sculpture featuring text from Steve Reich’s 1966 composition *Come Out*. Reich had contributed to a benefit concert to support the retrial of the Harlem Six, a group of men wrongfully accused of murdering a store owner in 1964; Reich sampled a part of the testimony of Daniel Hamm, one of the young defendants. Glenn’s piece obviously comes at a very difficult period for young black men in the US today, from Ferguson to Staten Island and just about every state. So you can see interconnections with Nono and others. These layers open up our historical understanding of capital but also of social relations, bringing in new instruments that are both poetic and aesthetic but also deeply political.

MK: The structure of your “Arena,” in which this will all take place, evokes an agora, a space for speech, a commons for political discourse. That is literally the case with Saādane Afif’s speaker’s corner piece [*The Speaker’s Corner of Hamra Street, Beirut, 2011*]; and with Allora & Calzadilla’s *In the Midst of Things* [2014], a staging of a choral group performing *The Creation* [1796–98], an oratorio by Haydn.

OE: Yes, I chose the term *arena* because I want this to be a site for the exploration of our common work together: Most of these pieces have been developed specifically for the Biennale. This is no critique of past Biennales, but I just didn’t want to reach deep into some past, even with the presence of Marx. To me, Marx is utterly contemporary. The conditions of the Biennale are not necessarily those of a museum. So I knew from the very beginning that I wanted to show a lot of new work and to engage with artists directly. The Arena will be the Biennale’s central nervous system.

MK: But this is quite different from your Gwangju





Left: Marco Fusinato, *From the Horde to the Bee* (detail), 2015, 10,000 496-page documents, tables, bank notes, time-lapse camera, dimensions variable.

Below: Raqs Media Collective, *Coronation Park* (work in progress), 2015, nine fiberglass sculptures, wooden pedestals, acrylic polymer plaques, dimensions variable.

Biennale [2008], for which you actually imported and reinstalled entire preexisting exhibitions from around the world. Now you seem to be going to the other extreme, focusing on different modes of duration and liveness, of performance, which are difficult to pull off in a Biennale.

OE: It's very exciting and at the same time quite terrifying. It may well prove to be a total cacophony. But in reality, I don't fear this. As Public Enemy said, "Bring the noise." I want an enlivening setting for this Biennale.

I am interested in not simply having dead time, where things are sitting there waiting for the public to come, but in presenting experiences that are current, with daily and different iterations, different textures. So you see these works happening before you—it's not postproduction. And I want to see if it's possible to inject some kind of previsual moment into the exhibition. That's why I wanted to bring in works that have to do with the voice, with orality, with speaking. And with words—words that are said, sung, recited, written, projected, sculpted, drawn, or painted.

MK: In a way, the previous Venice Biennale ["The Encyclopedic Palace," 2013] was very much about interiority, about a hermetic, visionary subject. And your Biennale seems to be unthinkable without the *exteriority* of the subject, the intersubjective, the relation of the subject to the world.

OE: That's a good way of putting it. I didn't set out to directly mark that kind of separation between the two, but I think they will feel very different in terms of their emotional, visual, and physical experience—which is not to say that this exhibition is all about exteriority. But, of course, if one wants to capture the mood of what I call the state of things, then one has to somehow delve a little bit more into the world.

MK: And you are obviously bringing in a critical mass of new subject positions. It seems extremely important

to you to inject cultural diversity into the Biennale, to make visible other types of subject positions that still do not really have a voice within the art world.

OE: I'm glad you pointed that out. I didn't deliberately set out to make a Biennale that is about cultural diversity, but I was nevertheless very interested in reviewing the history of the Biennale and wanted to think about some of these blind spots, which, of course, are not going to be corrected in one exhibition.

But I think that layering, putting different kinds of things into conversation with one another, creates a map of complexity. Raqs Media Collective's large-scale sculptural installation, which will be in the Giardini, deals with something that is very, very powerful and yet is known to very few people. They are trying to rethink a space on the outskirts of New Delhi called Coronation Park. The project consists of a work in two parts, based on a series of statues of members of the British Raj—including a monumental statue of George V—which were scattered all around New Delhi. After Indian independence in 1947, they were gathered by the new government of Nehru and brought to their current location, a park where King George had been proclaimed the emperor of India in 1911. The work incorporates excerpts from George Orwell's essay "Shooting an Elephant," a text about imperial hubris and absurdity. It manifests precisely the kind of historical layering so central to this exhibition, and I think it will look amazing in the Giardini.

Looking at our own field, I think it's striking how timid we are about speaking about cultural diversity. And when we do speak about it, we don't really engage it. That convinces me of the necessity for that kind of conversation and the transformation that position might bring. One can definitely take up American museums on this issue. The absence of significant numbers of artists of color in museum collections and in museum leadership and on boards remains troubling. I mean, it's

possible to make a mess of a show of a pop musician in one of our premier museums in New York, but it's not possible to be really courageous and do a major retrospective of a major artist of color. I think there is something wrong with that.

MK: Absolutely. And yet Venice is—despite in some ways representing the invention of the global exhibition—often strangely blinkered toward the transformation of global politics. It has, of course, a very different context from other biennials you have curated, and I'm thinking specifically of Johannesburg ["Trade Routes: History and Geography," 1997] and Gwangju.

OE: Well, Johannesburg and Gwangju self-consciously emerged out of the ruins of particular political contexts: apartheid in the case of South Africa, and dictatorship and the uprising in South Korea in the case of Gwangju. Those fraught contexts were one of the reasons many people responded to those biennials. They seemed to be speaking to something very historically urgent and palpable and contemporary at the same time.

MK: Venice, by contrast, is steeped in an older geopolitics: The Giardini seems to crystallize the tension between nation-states delineated by the world wars and the "periphery" of their former colonies; between the construction of Europe and the disintegration of other multistate alliances.

OE: The Venice Biennale is an institution that has gone through World War I, World War II, fascism in Italy, and the workerist and Autonomia movements of





From left: View of the 1974 Venice Biennale, "Libertà per il Cile" (Freedom for Chile). Students demonstrate against the 35th Venice Biennale, 1968. Photo: Archivio Cameraphoto Epoche/Getty Images.



the 1960s and '70s. (In fact, a new piece by Marco Fusinato, *From the Horde to the Bee* [2015], explores this legacy: It consists of a one-to-one reprinting of every copy of the literature of the Autonomist, labor, and anarchist movements in the library of the Milan-based Archivio Primo Moroni. That reprint will be available for visitors to the Biennale for ten euros, which will then be redistributed back to support the work of the *archivio*. Though the Biennale didn't seem to me to have really reflected on that history too much, it did do so in the '70s with a great deal of vigor. So for me, these had to be subjects of reflection now. Of self-critique.

That is why I am trying to align my thinking with a prototype I hope will feel relevant. I was very deeply moved by the 1974 Venice Biennale, which dedicated the entire exhibition to Chile, proclaiming solidarity with the Chilean people and against the brutal dictatorship of Augusto Pinochet. I mean, can you imagine doing that today? That's why we're trying to assemble all these fragments, all this residue. And the Biennale is such a space of residue, given its long history. One can reconstruct a kind of shadow history of the Giardini, for example, as a trajectory of empire: In 1907, the first national pavilion, Belgium, was built. At that time, the Belgian king Leopold II was still the ruler of the Congo, which was larger than Western Europe. During the Belgian reign, the country's population of twenty million was decimated, reduced by almost half. In 1909, the British pavilion was built, one more site where the sun never set. And in 1914, the Russian pavilion was built, a project of what was still czarist Russia. I see 1974 as an antidote to this negative residue: one of the only instances of

Venice confronting a contemporaneous catastrophe, and mounting a radical critique, at that moment.

MK: But is there a risk of simply flattening this material history, these traces or detritus, into a paradoxically ahistorical survey?

OE: To take on the question of residue, one obviously invites the risk of flattening out. But it is a risk worth taking. And the artists in the exhibition are so different and have such diverse destinies and narratives that I don't share your reservation at all. If you place the work of Glenn Ligon next to that of Fabio Mauri, as we will here, we start entering into complicated debates about issues of power and the social visibility of different constituencies that carry different historical import. From *Invisible Borders*, a group of African photographers, writers, and artists based in Lagos and their network of collaborators across Africa; to Olga Chernysheva from Moscow; to Nidhal Chamekh from Tunis, each artist engages a different premise of residue. It is up to the visitor to unravel it. I see no way of such flattening happening; this will not be like roaming the streets of Chelsea or the corridors of art fairs.

To my thinking, an exhibition of this kind should be about public debate, engagement with questions that visitors need to have access to. My motto for the moment is access and accessibility.

MK: And you will have highly specific concentrations on single artists, which, again, is an unusual counterpoint to the normal spread of a biennial. That's one way of negotiating local knowledge—dipping into local scenes—with a wider international scope, of countering the danger of dilettantish selection or arbitrariness.

OE: Indeed. I will give you one example: Mauri is an artist who was based in Rome. I had seen his work, but when I decided to include him in the Biennale, he became more and more of a discovery because of the power and the precision of his ethical, political, and philosophical position.

And so, for me, that was completely interesting and surprising. In one of the anthologies I'm doing in the exhibition, there will be a series of works by him. There will be three installations in two separate spaces in the Central Pavilion, and there will be another installation in the Arsenale. The important pieces *I numeri malefici* [Evil Numbers, 1978] and *Fabio Mauri e Pier Paolo Pasolini alle prove di "Che cosa è il fascismo,"* 1971 [Fabio Mauri and Pier Paolo Pasolini at the Rehearsals of "What Is Fascism," 1971, 2005], like the Fusinato project, deal with '70s Italian politics, but from a contemporaneous vantage.

MK: One important element in bringing together the live elements, the archival investigations, and the monographic subsections is the exhibition architecture and David Adjaye's structures.

OE: David's design for the Arena in the Central Pavilion—removing the wall that separates the mezzanine and the large central space, opening up two major spaces where artworks normally go—is brilliant. And then, in the Arsenale, he is helping me to reorganize the way that the public will experience the various spaces.

People are going to get lost sometimes. The point is that as people navigate through the spaces, they are going to make their own narratives, their own stories. □

The 56th Venice Biennale, "All the World's Futures," is on view May 9–Nov. 22.