

# OPENING UP THE CENTRE, ARCHIVING THE OTHER

**Nancy Adajania** analyses Documenta 11, which brought together 415 works by 180 artists from five continents, many of them from cultures previously not represented in mainstream global art.



Eija Liisa Ahtila. *The House*. Three-screen DVD projection, colour, sound, 14 minutes. 2002.

Walking into the projection of the Atlas Group's *Hostage: The Bachar Tapes* at Documenta 11, I am enticed by the way this work debunks the flat, depthless language of the video as an instrument of archival record. The first-person account of the Arab hostage Souheil Bachar, who was detained with five other American hostages who were kidnapped in Beirut in the 1980s, is portrayed through a visual syntax of ruptures: image bleeds, ghost images, glitches and static. As a viewer from a postcolonial society, I sympathise with Bachar and feel mirrored in the process of othering that he endures at the hands of the Americans, the push and pull of racist attraction and repulsion, and the erotic perversions of conquests by stealth. What affects me most deeply is the deliberately distorted transmission of a classic video testimony, which immediately creates a schism between legitimised facts and the 'real'-ising of the fictional.

But I anticipate myself. Let me first set the context in which Documenta 11 operates. Okwui Enwezor, its artistic director, envisioned the fifth and culminating platform of Documenta 11 – the mammoth exhibition held this summer in Kassel – not as “a receptacle of commodity-objects”, but as “a container of a plurality of voices”<sup>1</sup>. His proposal to include and represent non-Western cultural production (especially from various African countries) in their complex

postcolonial contexts has helped sensitise Western viewers. It has made them acknowledge trajectories of the contemporary other than the established Western model. Enwezor employs Arjun Appadurai's evocative concept of the 'production of locality' to place before us the 'local', not as an ethnographic specimen, but as a dynamic site of political contestation and production of knowledge.

Despite Enwezor's best intentions to represent cultural production reflecting aspects of the contemporary global crisis – such as poverty, unequal labour flows, exported ecological disasters, conflicting territorial claims, urban dystopias, mass migrations, genocides and State surveillance – the viewer is more often overwhelmed by tedium or a touch-and-go First World guilt, depending on which part of the globe s/he represents. Unfortunately, the exhibition spaces seem, by and large, to affect the look of a global school playground. Didacticism in the making and curation of art can lead to blind spots of a dangerous nature.

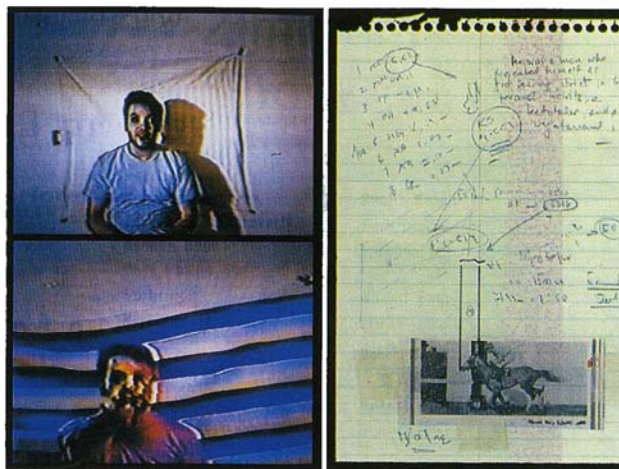
I would suggest that such a blind spot is produced, when the political processes of archiving and documentation are reified to the status of art. Although the Documenta 11 artists are presented as cultural interventionists, we see less of formal intervention in their works and more of the unmediated photographic archive, magazine illustration or television documentary, masquerading as the expression



of a concept. When art duplicates political rhetoric, it only becomes another propaganda device, and all the sophisticated word-peddling vis-a-vis the 'local' is visually reduced to good old ethnography.

Take the example of the Delhi-based photographer Ravi Agarwal, whose photographs on the Hindu procession, beggars and bandwallahs looked like a selection fit for a *Lonely Planet* guide. Even worse, I would add that this neo-Orientalist choice of images unplugged from their context resembles the *People of India* and *Occupation* series beloved of British colonial ethnography. In a double irony, Agarwal's context is activism, not the gallery circuit: he seems to have fallen between stools here, attempting an 'artistic' depiction while maintaining a connection with NGO-type imagery. It is unfortunate that many post-colonial artists, as well as some First-World artists included in Documenta 11 present the 'Third World' through the prism of an NGO aesthetic – an aesthetic funded for the purposes of demonstrating lack. At a different level of accomplishment, the US photographer Allan Sekula's *Fish Story* series (1990-1995) provided a more focused choice of images and textual context. He traces the global flow of people and goods, especially the occupational hazards faced by the maritime workers. The photographs work to the extent that they are dependent on the ironic textual narrative ("The Bosun's Story: Black and white photos tell the truth. That's why insurance companies use them"). On their own, they look like *National Geographic* pictures. Sociology is not a substitute for art.

On the other hand, works by artists like Joan Jonas, Eija-Liisa Ahtila, Steve McQueen and Eyal Sivan prove that the form of mediatic languages requires as much examination as does the reflection on the political as content. The New York-based Joan Jonas' installation/performance, *Lines in the Sand*, comprises a double video projection ('Helen in Egypt') and a video monitor ('Pillow Talk') installed at ground level, as also objects from the performance and computer-animated drawings of archaeological images and archetypes. To say that the narrative is multilayered is an understatement. 'Helen in Egypt' is based on a poem by the radical Bloomsbury poet H.D. (Hilda Doolittle), which uses an ancient variation on the epic *Iliad* to rework Helen's story from a feminist viewpoint. Here, only Helen's phantasm goes to Troy, while she remains in Egypt. Jonas implies that the Trojan War was not so much about Helen's infidelity, as about the battle for control, between Greece and Troy, over the Black Sea's rich resources. With America making preparations for war against Iraq, this sounds like a familiar story where blood will be spilt to keep the oil flowing. Jonas uses various visual clues, the most sensuous being the long moving shadows in a desert, lengthening time and history till they snap on an Egyptian icon transferred onto the roulette wheel at a Las Vegas casino in the desert or the artist's intimate studio space. In contrast with the scintillating light and mirage of the desert scenes, the video performance 'Pillow Talk' shows a couple in bed. This narrative functions like a shadow story of the main narrative; it is borrowed from an Irish epic, *The Tain*, in which a dialogue between a king and a queen, listing their various possessions, turns into a conflict – an echo of the Trojan



(Left) The Atlas Group. Stills from *Hostage: The Bachar Tapes*. Video: colour, 18mins. 28 sec. 2001. (Right) The Atlas Group. From *Notebook Volume 72. Missing Lebanese Wars*. 1999. Notebook, original pages 37, available pages 11. Each 5 1/2 x 8 in. (14 x 20.5 cm).

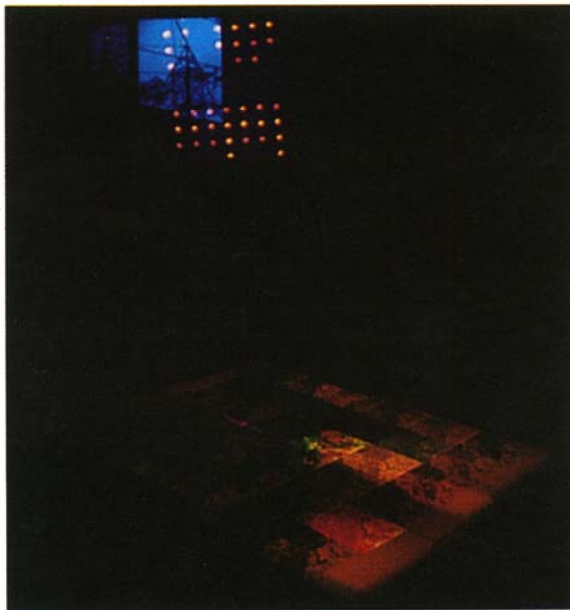
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Eyal Sivan and Alexis Cordese. Rwanda, One Genocide Later. Film: 35mm, sound, 13 min. 1996.

All images courtesy Documenta 11 Platform 5: Exhibition Short Guide and Catalogue. Publishers: Hatje Cantz.





Raqs Media Collective (Monica Narula, Jeebesh Bagchi and Shuddhabrata Sengupta) . 28°28' N / 77°15' E:: 2001-2002.  
(An Installation on the Coordinates of Everyday Life in Delhi).

War. This fragmented mock-biopic of Helen of Troy is a remix of the aesthetics of various media: TV, video, animation and performance.

Similarly, Finnish artist Eija-Liisa Ahtila's film, *The House* (2002) – which explores the story of a woman disoriented by the sounds she starts hearing – is influenced neither by a TV aesthetic nor by a factual data-gathering documentary mode. Ahtila creates her own private (though not hermetic) language, letting the projected narrative overlap across time- and space-frames on the three screens. We do not experience the predictable narrational disjuncture which would have been expected of a story revolving around aberrant behaviour. Rather, the deviant gestures – such as the woman flying in her garden or the cow represented on the TV screen who then ambles into the woman's living room – gently defamiliarise our own perceptions, which flow unchecked between image and reality, representation and recognition. This film, based on conversations the filmmaker had with psychotic patients, invites us into a world that is an enigmatic riddle posed by a brain on edge.

In Steve McQueen's *Western Deep* (2002), the images of gold miners in South Africa disintegrate in front of our eyes, break into an organic sweat, turn into teeming grains with light and sound flitting and grating through them. The language of commercial imaging turns all images into sleek, smart, larger-than-life machines, but McQueen's image-making is about allowing the slow death of the image, disembowelling its super-refined, substanceless qualities till it glows like freshly mined metal – rough, imperfect, more real than real. McQueen's formal inventiveness sensitises us to the plight of slave labour. These miners are not heroic figures: their bodies and faces, violently shredded by light and sound, say more to us than a thousand pamphlets.

Delhi-based filmmaker Amar Kanwar may not have stood image-making vocabulary on its head, but his film, *A Season Outside* (1997) – about territorial conflict between India and Pakistan – is impressive. The shots of soldiers performing the preposterous ceremonial of confrontation and separation on the India-Pakistan border, are beautifully filmed. However, *A Season Outside* suffers from a long didactic commentary on questions related to peace and violence.

While on the subject of commentary, in *Rwanda, One Genocide Later* (1996), the Israel-born, Paris-based documentary filmmaker Eyal Sivan and Alexis Cordesse juxtapose the 1994 radio broadcasts from RTLM (Radio Television Mille Collines), which were instrumental in inciting violence against the Tutsis, with photographs of the massacred Tutsis taken after the genocide. The images of the broken bodies and decaying skeletons are rescued from becoming mere artefacts of voyeurism because they are framed within an interpretative framework that shows the viewer the larger mediatic structures at play. This is an intelligent and humane employment of archival material that is usually forgotten in the titillation to which the present is reduced by the funerary industries – namely the newspapers, the radio and the TV – in our media-saturated world.

Like Sivan, the Chilean-born, New York-based Alfredo Jaar, who has also worked on the subject of Rwanda, is interested in laying bare the processes through which political and mediatic forces manipulate information. In *Lament of the Images* (2002), Jaar has installed three small light-texts in a dark room, and in another room an empty screen of blinding white light. The texts – dealing, variously, with the photographic record of Mandela's return to his





former place of captivity, Robben Island; the burial of one of the world's largest image archives in a limestone mine in Pennsylvania; and the US Defence Department's exclusive purchase of all satellite images of Afghanistan before launching airstrikes against Kabul in 2001 – meditate on the relationship between vision and blindness; on the withholding of freedom and the control over information by states and corporations. All sacred traditions speak of the text as illumination: Jaar renders this trope literally yet also with metaphorical power.

To return to the broad issues related to Documenta 11 – for all its rhetoric about including the 'Other', it is evident that the exhibition gives more space and emphasis to canonical works by First World artists. Perhaps ironically proving wrong those critics who feel that New York-based Enwezor's 'Third World' origins would automatically guarantee an unproblematic inclusion of the 'Other'; after all, Enwezor has a sophisticated understanding of the dominant history of Western modernism and postmodernism into and against which he has made his interventions. But a politically astute artwork can emerge victorious even from such complex curatorial negotiations. It is Congo-based artist Bodys Isek Kingelez's plywood and cardboard fantasies of urban utopias – projected from a sub-Saharan, postcolonial context – that work better than three floors of Hanne Darboven's tedious monument of iterative musical and mathematical notations or On Kawara's formulaic installation and performance piece. In one of his works, Kingelez uses humble materials to construct what clearly looks like an Oriental dome on the World Trade Center in New York! It is evident that Kingelez has successfully resisted the pressure of the NGO aesthetic.

Another disadvantage of being post-colonial is that the curatorial balance of power is not in our favour: yet again, our specific art histories tend to get bypassed in favour of art that approximates, in this case, to an archival resource whose parameters are drawn up by First-World curators. Fortunately, 'Third World' artists can resist and subvert this imperative too, as demonstrated by the Delhi-based Raqs Media Collective (Monica Narula, Jeebesh Bagchi and Shuddhabrata Sengupta) through their intermedia installation, *28°28' N / 77°15' E:: 2001-2002* which is an assemblage of video, text, sound, print and signage. The cartographic notation in the title represents the geographical position of Delhi. The work invites the viewer to interface with a wide range of narratives related to the ownership and use of urban spaces. The debate between legality and illegality, migrant and native, the out-

of-date juridical and the out-of-place real is first enacted through a deltoid narrative of stickers pasted on garbage bins, in underpasses and other spaces of public transit and consumption in Kassel.

Raqs has deliberately printed these stickers in German, Hindi, English and Turkish, to underline the fact that the condition of lack is not unique to the 'Third World' and that the 'Other' can be within. Thus the viewer would realise that the 'Third World' is not a geographical given, but a condition of marginality that can be found in any society, including seemingly advanced nations like Germany. We encounter these themes in the penumbral space in the Documentahalle, where Raqs has established its installation. And while the world's metropolitan centres are being divided into guarded, gated or cordoned enclaves, Raqs looks elsewhere in its search for an unbounded space for interaction, discussion and resolution: a digital commons, a multi-authorial online space, in the shape of the OPUS project <sup>2</sup>.

At this juncture, I return to the Atlas Group, which, some readers may be surprised to know, is an imaginary foundation that documents Lebanon's contemporary history – and is, in fact, an ongoing 'art-work' by the Lebanese-born, New York-resident Walid Ra'ad; its archive reaches for the truth through fictions that are, by turns, amusing, terrifying, tragic and ironic. The *Bachar Tapes* are a fiction of this kind, and tell the truth more sharply than any historically objective documentation could. In fact, in another work in the archive, Ra'ad makes a mockery of the historian's trade by documenting the bets placed by historians on racehorses; the wagers are thinly disguised semblances of Lebanon's historical crises: history as a gamble. And so, the Atlas Group satirises the notion of the archive itself, so sacred an element of the NGO aesthetic in Documenta 11. Many critics complained that Enwezor's Documenta was too solemn and without humour; it is possible that they missed the delicious curatorial (self-)ironies.

## Notes :

1. The fifth Platform was animated by the logic of the four preceding Platforms where transdisciplinary public discussions and conferences on cultural politics held in Vienna, New Delhi, Berlin, St Lucia and Lagos were meant to 'deteritorialise' the established Documenta structure of viewing and discoursing on art.
2. For an account of the Raqs Media Collective, see Nancy Adajania, 'Net Culture', in *Art India*, Vol. 7, No. 1 (Bombay: January-March 2002). It is interesting to note that while Agarwal's work falls between stools, Enwezor's decision to include the Raqs Media Collective – although it also stands outside the formal circuit of art production in India – is commendable, since it recognises the process of 'revolutionising from the outside' that, as I have surmised, will eventually alter the history of Indian art.



(Facing page) Such stickers were pasted in spaces of public transit in Kassel. Images courtesy Raqs Media Collective. (Above) Allan Sekula. Fish Story. Triptych. Conclusion of search for the disabled and drifting sailboat Happy Ending, November 1993. From 'Middle Passage' chapter 3 of Fish Story.