

# The Globalization of the False: A Response to Okwui Enwezor\*

George Baker

\* This paper was delivered at Columbia University on February 14, 2002, in response to Okwui Enwezor's presentation, both aspects being part of the Sawyer Seminar on cultural effects of globalization, organized by Professor Andreas Huyssen.

<sup>1</sup> Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (New York: Zone Books, 1994), 120.

<sup>2</sup> Guy Debord, *Comments on the Society of the Spectacle*, trans. Malcolm Imrie (London: Verso, 1990), 17.

*This society eliminates geographical distance only to reap distance internally in the form of spectacular separation.<sup>1</sup>*

*Whenever individuals lose the capacity to see things for themselves, the expert is there to offer an absolute reassurance.<sup>2</sup>*

—Guy Debord

I would like to begin rather inauspiciously by admitting how massively unqualified I am to respond to such a lecture. At the same time, I will also immediately claim that perhaps my lack of qualification is a virtue here, as the situation of globalization has much to do with the promoting or demoting of a certain set of skills and institutional positions. I will admit right up front that I am a "biennial Luddite." I have been a practicing art critic for about six years now, and yet I do not go to mega-exhibitions. I resent their insistence that it is to them that all artistic attention must be paid. I resist their claim that it is now only through them that artistic importance is to be measured. I get lazy in the face of their attempt to make all intellectuals involved in the field of art into itinerants, in an updated version of the Grand Tour or a parody of forced migration. I shiver at the thought that resisting biennial culture, or "festivalism" as it has also been called, is now to be equated with resisting challenges to Western imperialism and cultural hegemony. I avoid mega-exhibitions during the few times when I have had the opportunity actually to be near one of these beasts. On the other hand, I rarely have the opportunity to be near one of these beasts. And this dynamic of exclusion—as opposed to all that has just been said about "inclusion"—is one important phenomenon that I want to address in my response.

I do not think we will get very far in our understanding of mega-exhibitions if we do not attempt more rigorously to define globalization itself. It seems to me important to view it as a *process*, differentiating the term "globalization" from "the global," somewhat like we do "modernization" from "the modern." And then the question becomes, what exactly is entailed in this process? Is it not, as Gayatri Spivak has claimed, the "financialization of the globe"? Is it not, indeed, the *Americanization* of the globe? In this lecture about exhibitions and globalization, we did not unfortunately hear much—if anything—about art and artists, and so let me cite now the words of an artist attempting to define globalization: "First and foremost, globalization is the penetration of the multinational corporate economy

into every nook and cranny of human life. It is the latest incarnation of an imperative that has long been accepted as a vital necessity....the first law of proto-capitalism: Markets must multiply through foreign trade or they will stagnate and die...What is largely missing from the current picture is any sense of material resistance to the expansion of the market imperative."<sup>3</sup> These are the words of the photographer Allan Sekula.

Even with this small range of definitions in hand, a number of questions arise. Why do you insist on referring to globalization in terms of rupture, as—in your words—the “historical rupture par excellence”? This language of rupture sounds to me a lot like the language that once surrounded the discourse of postmodernism within the art world. The “rupture” of postmodernism is now replaced by the “rupture” of globalization, and an aesthetic or even anti-aesthetic term gets replaced now—significantly—by an economic one. And yet perhaps neither term should be properly viewed as a rupture but as an intensification of a much longer historical process. Rupture connotes amnesia to me. And globalization seems much more a strategy of what Theodor Adorno would have called “false totalization” rather than the fragmenting force claimed for it here.

My second major question would be: who and where is the audience for mega-exhibitions? I ask this question faced with the crucial importance spectatorship and audience issues occupy by the end of the lecture, while any trace of an audience seemed strangely absent to me in the earlier half of the talk. I would venture the following reasons for this absence: Mega-exhibitions entail a violent assault on the traditional notion of an audience for art, even an assault on the idea that art needs an audience or a public at all. If “mega” here means big, we are faced with exhibitions that are *too big*, that suffer from a gigantism that echoes and serves the contemporary gargantuan scope of a newly global economy. Mega-exhibitions cannot be taken in, digested, understood, or read in any complete manner, and this sublime scale serves the function of obfuscation. They are constructed by curatorial authors as labyrinthine narratives whose plot evades any attempt at being followed, never mind critiqued. The baroque curves of contemporary architecture seem simple compared to the layout of current exhibition design, and the parallel weighty tomes of contemporary architects—*S, M, L, XL*—are rivaled by mega-exhibition catalogues that mock the now quaint scope of even biblical narrative by calling themselves simply *The Book*—I refer, of course, to the catalogue for Documenta X, a book by the way too large for many to be able to afford to purchase it (in fact, with a book this size, you don't own it, you only glance at it in libraries, in other institutions, which seems a telling destination to me). This phenomenological violence that mega-exhibitions pose to their spectators is only augmented by the social violence entailed by art's increasing mediation through this form. One often hears that biennials create access to artistic culture for local audiences. And this they certainly do. But it seems necessary to contemplate as well how this mediation of art actually bars access to culture for

<sup>3</sup> Noel Burch and Allan Sekula, “Notes on a Film,” *October* 100 (Spring 2002): 83.

local audiences, providing full access only to an increasingly narrow cadre of experts and professionals, creating a class conflict between those tied to the space of particularity and those whose job it is to circulate endlessly through the spaces where art only ever partially reveals itself. Mega-exhibition culture seems to me bound up with the question of exclusion: as contemporary museums become much more inclusive than their traditional mandate allowed, biennials succeed to the place of arbiter of the canon, to the judgment seat of artistic importance and status. But who else is excluded in this process of the professionalization and specialization of art that biennial culture entails? Your choice of words in the lecture gives some clues. You speak of "biennials" as offering "transnational encounters between artists, art markets, institutions, and various professionals." I find it telling that this transnational encounter excludes the public as traditionally conceived; it seems to have no place in this new space. Later you also speak of hoping to locate the nature of mega-exhibitions within a quite specific nexus: that of the "market, institutions, and media." You speak of the various "actors" working through this globalized space: "curators, exhibitions, museums, collectors, media, market..." Some very important actors have fallen out of these last equations. Artists, for one. Critics as well, and perhaps especially. They are not needed or wanted anymore. For in the moment of globalization and the rise of the mega-exhibition, what we actually witness for perhaps the first time is the *total institutionalization of the practice of art*, the onset of art's *total administration* or *total bureaucratization*. Curators replace artists in such an economy in the same way as experts replace critics.

Reproduction becomes more crucial than production, the container becomes more important than the contained. These critical goals of postmodernism from twenty years ago, what it called the shift from "work to frame," have now been transformed into the opposite of criticality: they have become the iron-clad law of administrative recuperation. In such an economy, I have to admit that it becomes quite distressing to hear a curator denounce "institutional critique"—as well as notions of "medium specificity," "artistic autonomy," "artistic particularity"—as a reiteration of "occidentalist" modernity and as amounting to a "theology of modernism" propagated from the view of the Western avant-garde. (Obviously, I hear the journal *October*, of which I am now an editor, and the work of Rosalind Krauss as the target of such remarks.) All of these artistic strategies *are* strategic and contingent, poised today against the homogenization of capitalist globalization as they were deployed yesterday against the nation-state and the fascist rigidity of capitalist industrialization. In this denunciation of institutional critique as occidentalist, in this frustration with the recalcitrance and historical memory associated with artistic specificity, I hear the new rapaciousness proper to the ascendancy of the global curator. If I am wrong in this regard, we should discuss our differences on this matter.

Two models for the structure of mega-exhibitions seem to run through the lat-

ter half of your talk. I will summarize your positions as the Trauma Model and the Nation Model. These models raise at least two questions for me. First, while I agree with your important observation that postwar biennials seem to emerge in locations of historical trauma, I wonder if your optimistic portrayal of this emergence can stand. Are biennials the place where the "work of the imagination" takes hold in the wake of historical trauma, a model of transition, or are they rather manifestations of official culture that are bound up with historical trauma in a much more insidious way, as tools to cover over ruptures, to spread amnesia, to deny the magnitude of historical loss through a false euphoria of plenitude? In this more pessimistic perspective, the mega-exhibition and the biennial would be the form of cultural mediation proper to the gap of historical trauma, not its "working through." It thus makes sense that an exhibition like Documenta was for decades an exportation of New York to German soil, an Americanization of the European world exhibition following the logic of the long Americanization of the world that is now known as globalization.

My second question undercuts the first: Are not most biennials and mega-exhibitions actually built upon the Nation Model that you trace to the Venice Biennale and its immediate offspring, the São Paulo Bienal? To ask this question is to position biennial culture in opposition to the positive globalization you otherwise espouse, to see biennial culture as a kind of Olympics that *preserves and serves* the Western imperialist model of the nation-state rather than challenges it. This is a point that you indeed stress. And yet the second implication of this question is to wonder whether we are then stuck with a biennial culture that is either archaically nationalistic and explicitly occidentalist (the Nation Model)—and that thus *reveals globalization as a process of Westernization, not its critique*—or a mega-exhibition structure that conversely instantiates the global mediation of art in the form of historical trauma and amnesia. I am provisionally associating the biennial with the Nation Model, the mega-exhibition with the Trauma Model, but this does not seem to me to be a very productive dilemma or position to be in, and perhaps biennials should in such a situation not be embraced as a solution but as the problem.

If these are two models for the production of mega-exhibitions, two models similarly bifurcate your approach to their reception: the Frankfurt School model of the "public sphere" and Guy Debord's society of the spectacle. These models, however, are notoriously incompatible. The question we are left with: Are mega-exhibitions part of the bourgeois public sphere that was formerly embodied in the museum, or are they signs of the utter dissolution of that public sphere into the rigid passivity compelled by spectacle? I'm not sure that one has to choose one or the other—we might be engaged in a battle where these two sides of the equation are still at war, where we can choose in fact to preserve the public sphere function that all exhibitions conceivably serve. And yet you devise counter-strategies for both sides of this equation, offering up the crucial notion of a diasporic public sphere on the one hand, and a counter-hegemonic spectatorship on the other.



*Documenta 11, Kassel, Germany, 2002. (Photo: Miwon Kwon)*

Both of these strategies depend upon fragmentation, and your lecture ultimately arrives at the opposing of Diaspora to the condition of the Global, an opposition that I find incredibly useful and important, as a process of fragmentation is opposed to one that depends upon totalization. In fact, throughout your entire talk, I wish you had spoken about diaspora as opposed to globalization, for I think your earlier theorizations of globalization as rupture are actually more about the challenges to occidentalism posed by diaspora and not by the more thoroughly economic process of globalization. And yet, just as there are "false totalizations," such as the captation of the public sphere in the model of the nation-state or the rigidification of community into the "agora of spectacle," I would also suggest that there are "false fragmentations" as well. I would like to know why the notion of the diasporic public sphere needs to be expressed in biennials, why it is only through such mediation that we are meant to see, in your words, "the possibility of a paradigm shift in which we as spectators are able to encounter many experimental cultures, without wholly possessing them." I would like to know more about how a counter-hegemonic spectatorship can be sustained, and why again biennials and mega-exhibitions are the place of their devising (and here I guess I am asking you to speak about some of your own curatorial strategies in your work

within the mega-exhibition format). For the fragmentation of the institutions of art and culture enacted by biennials today is, as I have implied, another mode of these institutions' consolidation; the perceptual sublime of the mega-exhibition seems dedicated to a fragmentation that blinds, rather than empowers, its spectators.

I don't think we can just wish away the spectacularization inherent in this mode of fusing institution and media that all mega-exhibitions entail. For Guy Debord, media was a euphemism for spectacle. And by the term media, he would explain, we try "to describe a mere instrument, a kind of public service which with impartial 'professionalism' would facilitate the new wealth of mass communication which has at last attained a unilateral purity." However, here "decisions already taken are presented for passive admiration. For what is communicated are orders, and with perfect harmony, those who give them are also those who tell us what they think of them."<sup>4</sup> Total institutionalization, total administration, integrated spectacle. This is the historical juncture from which mega-exhibitions arise. And while ultimately I accept and support your privileging of the diasporic, the counter-hegemonic, and the fragmentation of all false totalities, I wonder why it is assumed that this force is to be found in the culture of biennials, in the mediation of the mega-exhibition. We might have to devise new strategies and new diasporic, as opposed to global, forms. So for one last time: I would like to stand against the mega-exhibition, to reaffirm the right to laziness of the biennial Lud-dite, but hopefully not to end up buttressing the Occidental, or worse to appear like the raving lunatic from that brilliant film *Network*, stepping into the media pulpit only to urge spectators to act out their impotence, run to their windows, throw up their arms, and yell "I'm mad as hell and I'm not going to take this anymore!" It is instead to urge us to doubt that global biennials prove that the society of the spectacle was a European, imperial phenomenon. An anti-imperialist spectacle might now be envisioned, but I would not see this as a mode of freedom or criticality, nor as the mode in which the projects of the diasporic subject would prosper, rather we must be aware and resist a situation that Debord actually knew and wrote about and warned against as, in his words, a "globalization of the false" that could only lead to "a falsification of the globe."<sup>5</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Debord, *Comments on the Society of the Spectacle*, 6.

<sup>5</sup> Debord, *Comments on the Society of the Spectacle*, 10.