

## **‘A Collage of Globalization’ in Documenta 11’s Exhibition Catalogue**

### **Antigoni Memou**

The 11<sup>th</sup> issue of Documenta — the recurring international exhibition of contemporary art that has been held in Kassel, Germany since 1955 — was conceived as a critical space, within which contemporary art and its relationship to postcolonialism and globalization could be problematized. Its sheer scale preceded any previous issues of Documenta: it took place over eighteen months from March 2001 to September 2002, was curated by Okwui Enwezor and five co-curators — Carlos Basualdo, Ute Meta Bauer, Susanne Ghez, Sarat Maharaj and Octavio Zaya — and consisted of five platforms staged in different world cities. The first four platforms were devised as community-based public discussions and workshops with film and video programmes in Vienna, Berlin, New Delhi, St Lucia, and Lagos, while the fifth one — the exhibition — took place in Kassel. These five themed platforms allowed eighty international contributors across many different disciplines to debate the challenges of contemporary democracy, issues of truth, reconciliation and justice, postcolonial cultural formations and global megacities.<sup>1</sup> The primary aims underpinning all five platforms — despite the diversity and complexity of discourses and the range of artistic practices included — were to challenge Documenta’s Western-centrism, both in the spatial and in the cultural-historical sense, and to question universalizing conceptions of cultural and artistic modernity. Enwezor took the 9/11 events in New York as a starting point for rethinking an alternative postcolonial world, positing ‘Ground Zero’ as a symbolic site of

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<sup>1</sup> These discursive *loci* that preceded the exhibition in Kassel brought together a great number of collaborators, institutions and foundations, and were perceived as an integral part of the exhibition, rather than as supplementary or complimentary to it.

resistance to Western hegemony and adopting Hardt and Negri's concept of the 'multitude' (Hardt and Negri 2000) as the main opposition to the globalized 'Empire' (Enwezor 2002: 47 & 45).

It is this commitment to radical art and politics, as well as the proliferation of art in the documentary form, which caused considerable controversies over whether the documentary mode was prioritizing politics at the expense of the art or whether Documenta 11 was not radical enough due to its overreliance on Western models.<sup>2</sup> While the artistic and theoretical contributions (as well as the interrelationship between them) have been afforded adequate attention in the existing literature, the photojournalistic images taken from renowned agencies and printed in the opening pages of Platform 5's catalogue have not been the subject of any criticism to my knowing. Given that the discussions about Documenta 11 have revolved mostly around the documentary character of most of the diverse image-making practices included in the exhibition, this is a surprising omission. This essay, therefore, examines the political implications of the curatorial recontextualization of these images, that is, their transition from reportage to art and from the institution of the newspaper to that of an exhibition catalogue. It asks to what extent the decision to start the catalogue with photographs of recent political upheavals and social issues may be related to an increasingly privatized and fragmented public sphere that has led to a demise of politically committed photojournalism. The essay also examines the constructed nature of this

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<sup>2</sup> In reactionary art criticism, Documenta 11 was perceived as undermining the aesthetic value of the artworks and prioritizing their politics, by promoting documentary work that fitted perfectly within a left-wing curatorial agenda (Kimmelman 2002). One critic claimed that "faith in art has been lost", with artists being replaced by documentary makers or simply presented "as poor sociologists and poor anthropologists" (Amman 2002). On the other hand, critics on the left pointed to its spectacularism, its lack of radicalism and criticality despite its explicit commitment to diversity. For Rasheed Araeen, the main issue has been the lack of radical ideas on how a show of contemporary art might be able to reveal and subvert the epistemological and institutional structures that underpin the Western-centric art world and are responsible for the marginalization and negligence of artists who are non-white, non-European or non-American (Araeen 2005, 57; see also Downey 2003, 89). According to Stewart Martin, Documenta was caught in the paradoxes of the radical avant-garde: on the one hand, it aspired to the transformation of social relations and as such it was tied, in keeping with a radical project of globalized postcolonialism, and on the other, it remained heavily reliant on the art institutions it criticized and on unforeseeable future political struggles (Martin 2003, 18).

collage of globalization and the ways in which the combination of news images and their relocation into the art context may shed light on the unseen, overlooked and marginalized processes of globalization.

### **A Photo-Story of Globalization**

The opening pages of Documenta 11's catalogue feature an assemblage of 77 colour photographs depicting events which took place around the globe in the years immediately preceding the opening of the show. The majority of the photographs date from the years 2000–2001, but a number of reach back to 1997. Sourced from renowned press agencies such as The Associated Press, Reuters, DPA, Corbis and Getty Images, all the photographs were taken and destined to function as photojournalistic images. For the purposes of the exhibition catalogue, they were compiled by the editor Nadja Rottner and collaged together in grids of two to six photographs on each page. The seamless presentation of the photographs side by side did not leave space for commentary or text. Hence, merely the dates of the individual photographs as well as short descriptions are given at the bottom of the page, which is essential in providing the context for images that are not self-explanatory. Sometimes accreditations to the photographers and the agencies are added as well, but the crediting is not consistently carried out, and quite often either the photographer or the agency is not mentioned.

The grid format is reminiscent of the socially critical photo-stories published in illustrated magazines during their heyday, from the 1930s through to the 1960s. Illustrated magazines such as *Life*, *Picture Post* and *Berliner Illustrirte* — facilitated by the technological advances in the 1930s, including the emergence of portable cameras and printing innovations — reproduced high quality pictures, which they combined with other pictures in developing a story. The editors of

these mass-circulated magazines amassed a great number of photographs, which they cropped, combined and published in ways that would suggest particular readings. Photo-essays by recognized photojournalists, such as Eugene W. Smith's stories promoting pressing social issues and particularly the struggle against racism, had a great impact on the readers of *American Life Magazine*.<sup>3</sup> The editorial assemblage of the images from a wide range of sources in the Documenta 11 catalogue resembles the way editors of the illustrated magazines took control over arranging and presenting photographs together. It is unclear whether the captions in the catalogue follow the agencies' instructions, but the way these images are collaged together may be read as a photo-story about the social and political conditions in the years preceding the opening of Documenta 11.

In terms of subject matter, all the photographs depict contemporary socio-political issues. Pictures of Chinese immigrants in a cargo container in California, illegal Kurdish immigrants in Greece, Albanian refugees in Italy and asylum seekers in South Australia are set alongside photographs of 9/11, the Israel-Palestine conflict, the Algerian civil war, clashes between ethnic Albanian rebels and Macedonian troops, as well as of the poor in Zimbabwe, the homeless in Los Angeles, Muslim prayers in Pakistan and industrial workers in Vietnam and Korea. There is a great emphasis on photographs of refugees and asylum seekers (covering cases from Australia, the US and Mexico to Greece, Spain and China), the Israel-Palestine conflict, the anti-globalization movement and other protest movements across the globe, and not least the terrorist attacks in New York in 2001.<sup>4</sup> Considering that all these photographs are produced by professional

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<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless, influential photojournalists of the time grew highly dissatisfied with editorial control over the subject-matter, style, presentation and captioning of the photographs in the magazines. Because the photographers felt these practices distorted their intentions, they moved on to found agencies such as *Magnum* (established in 1947) in order to protect their copyrights by prescribing the ways that photographs were to be reproduced.

<sup>4</sup> Some of these themes recur among the artworks included in the main exhibition. For example, Multiplicity's *ID: A Journey through a Solid Sea* (2001–2) depicts the wreck of a ship loaded with refugees that sank in the Mediterranean Sea; Chantal Akerman's *From the Other Side* (2002) portrays Mexicans' attempts to migrate to the United States via the Mexico/US border; and Fareed Armaly's collaboration with the film-maker Rashid Mashawari

photojournalists and distributed daily via their agencies across the globe to be published as single images within mainstream media, compiling them into a photo-story is a remarkable curatorial decision. Why would the curators include these images at the beginning of the catalogue? Or, to paraphrase Felix Gonzalez-Torres's question: does the exhibition catalogue of one of the most influential contemporary art shows really need to display images that we can see in news media? (Downey 2003, 91).

### **The Demise of Critical Photojournalism**

The dissemination of photojournalistic images depicting social and political issues via galleries, exhibitions and photobooks is scarcely a new phenomenon and can be related to the weakening of photojournalism in the mainstream media since the 1960s. The ascendancy of television and the demise of the weekly illustrated magazines in the 1960s contributed decisively to the decline of critical photojournalism, which led critics such as Andy Grundberg to declare the death of 'Old Photojournalism' and the development of 'New Photojournalism'. The main difference between the new and the old forms of photojournalism is not that New Photojournalism has a different style or conveys a more sophisticated meaning, but that its circulation takes place primarily in art spaces (Grundberg 1990, 186). This phenomenon has been intensified by the impact of neoliberal globalization on Western printed mass media over the last three decades, namely the concentration of media ownership as a result of the expansion of multinational corporate market practices in every economic sphere. The oligopolistic structure of the media and its overdependence on advertising as its primary source of income have left very little space for

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in the project *From/To* (2002) addresses the displacement of Palestinians since the founding of the State of Israel in 1948.

any sustained criticism of neoliberalism's set of values. Herman and Chomsky have analysed the shared interests of major media corporations and political elites, and have reflected on how these links have had a profound impact on the general agenda, content and function of the Western mainstream press. (Herman and Chomsky 1988)

Serious photojournalistic stories have been detrimentally affected by this continuously changing media landscape. The immediate effect is that photojournalists nowadays compete for much less editorial space given that the great majority of photographs printed in dailies are related to the content of the newspapers' lifestyle, fashion and celebrity supplements. Given the heavy emphasis placed on advertising, photographs that challenge the prevailing corporate ethos may be looked at unfavourably. In other cases, only single spectacular images find their way to publication, at the expense of critical photo-stories. The decline of printed photojournalism has also been hastened by the popularity of new technologies, the Internet and social media, which have greatly facilitated the production and global dissemination of a whole range of practices: from photojournalistic images to photographs taken on mobile phones by civilians. The mainstream media increasingly rely on amateur images and videos, which are available to them at no cost, leaving less editorial space for photojournalistic images.

The rise of the new technologies and the Internet in the 1990s and early 2000s was concomitant with upheavals of the period, including the emergence of the anti-globalization movement, 9/11 and the resurgence of radicalism in Iraq. These developments spawned a huge volume of political imagery in the public domain, most of which became available to a wider public through the Internet. Hito Steyerl argues that new documentary forms have recently been channelled to the art sphere. In her view, this is due, on the one hand, to the availability of cheap digital cameras and accessible software for documentarists, and on the other, to an increasingly

privatized public sphere (Steyerl 2008, 14). Images that are left out of the mainstream media are therefore either circulated on the Internet or displayed in art exhibitions.<sup>5</sup>

### **Marginalization of Political Imagery in the Neoliberal Mainstream Media**

Some of the images reproduced in the catalogue allude to the news stories that remained largely marginalized in the years that preceded Documenta 11's opening. Photographs of peaceful protesters which — like Marco DiLauro's photograph of the anti-globalization demonstrations in Genoa in 2001 (Image 1) — challenge the ethos of neoliberal globalization, its social injustice and ecological destruction, have not always been deemed newsworthy by Western mainstream media, which usually prioritize the spectacular or violent. The photojournalistic coverage of the anti-G8 demonstrations in Genoa, for instance, focused on spectacular images of destruction and violent clashes between the protesters and the police and the shooting of a young protester, Carlo Giuliani, by the Italian *carabinieri* (Memou 2013, 48–63).

These protests took place from 19 July to 22 July but were not covered extensively and certainly not photographically until the day after Carlo Giuliani was shot. On 21 July 2001, the majority of European papers featured the photograph of the dead protester on their front pages as part of full stories on the protests (*ibid*). Their sensational framing of this photograph is indicative of the emphasis placed on the spectacular in the mainstream media: the photograph of his body was inserted in photo-stories containing iconic images of burning cars and street battles between

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<sup>5</sup> “Antiphotjournalism” is but one indicative example of an exhibition that has focused on critical practices challenging the traditional notion of photojournalism. The exhibition was curated by Carles Guerra and Thomas Keenan and took place in La Virreina Centre de l'Imatge in Barcelona (5 July–10 October 2010).

masked protesters and the police suggesting a direct link between the performative violence of some protesters (in particular, the Black Bloc) and the shooting of Carlo Giuliani.

The spectacularism of violence in news reporting goes hand in hand with the visual marginalization of peaceful protesters resulting in homogenized hegemonic narratives of protest that can shape public opinion. The mechanisms in place here are quite subtle: topics sympathetic to neoliberalism's ethos are given frequent coverage and in-depth treatment, while stories that resist and challenge the system are covered only briefly and unfavourably, unless they contribute to the media's spectacle. Photographs of peaceful protesters such as that by Marco DiLauro do not fit into the stereotypical narratives about violent resistance that is depicted as threatening to democratic society. Therefore such images tend to fall into the black hole of news coverage. (Memou 2013, 48–63)

Richard Drew's controversial photograph known as *Falling Man*, also included in these first pages of the Documenta 11 catalogue (Image 2), may be seen as another exemplary case of what is normally overlooked in the mainstream media. Taken on the day of the terrorist attack in New York City on 11 September 2001, the photograph depicts a man jumping to his death from the window of the North Tower of the World Trade Center. Drew's lens caught one of the many people who jumped to escape smoke and fire before the building collapsed, capturing in the most iconic way the terror that the victims had to face on the day. The iconic power of the image was immediately recognized by the Associated Press photographer, who hoped that his picture would become one of the most reproduced images of the events (Junod 2012, 167–176). However, the photograph was not widely published, appearing only in the New York Times and a small number of other newspapers in the USA and around the world the next morning (*ibid*). In the days that followed, many of those newspapers that had printed it 'were forced to defend themselves against

charges that they exploited a man's death, stripped him of his dignity, invaded his privacy, turned tragedy into leering photography' (*ibid*, 171). As a result of these complaints, the photograph remained largely unpublished in the subsequent months due to self-censorship on the part of the mass media. The most prominent reasons given for its impermissibility were respect for the survivors and the relatives of the deceased, and the issue of good taste (Sontag 2003, 61–62). These editorial decisions reflect long-standing perceptions about the ethics of representing dead bodies or people in pain. Images of pain and death in remote, exotic and poor places are more likely to be reproduced, reaffirming that unjust suffering takes place only outside our Western world (*ibid*).

These two images seem to represent the two sides of the 'news telling' coin. DiLauro's photograph of peaceful protesters was not spectacular enough to be rendered newsworthy, while Drew's iconic image challenged established codes of Western media to refrain from showing the vulnerability of their own citizens too clearly. Considering Enwezor's proposal that the anti-capitalist 'Multitude' (Hardt and Negri, 2010) and 'Ground Zero' be taken as starting points for regrounding an alternative new world order (Enwezor, 2002: 45), it is perhaps no coincidence that these specific images and their related stories were placed at the centre of Documenta 11's narrative. Placing images of the anti-capitalist movement and 9/11 in the opening pages of the catalogue can be seen as a prelude to the essays and the artworks, which also address some of these issues. By compiling material that tends to be marginalized or subdued by the mainstream media stories, the catalogue presents an alternative portrait of globalization.

### **A Collage of Times and Places**

Another very significant element in these pages is that the photographs do not appear alone, but collaged together with other photographs. The editor of Documenta 11's catalogue seems to

have gone through a process of selecting and arranging a great number of photojournalistic images, often presenting as many as six different photographs on one page. Richard Drew's photograph, for instance, appears alongside five others on a double page. There is a photograph of two women walking in front of a wrecked building, with a caption informing the reader that the photograph relates to the Russian military occupation of Grozny in Chechnya and its failure to contribute to the restoration of peace. Another one shows an old woman holding a photograph of a young man, in reference to the kidnapping of plantation workers by right-wing paramilitaries in Colombia. Moreover, there is a photograph of young men, with a caption about the 60,000 people killed in the civil war in Algeria; another one shows Congolese soldiers guarding a train convoy. Finally, the sixth one depicts a Chinese immigrant being searched by California's border police. (Image 2)

Grouping urges viewers to look for relationships, continuities and ruptures. Readers are confronted with a pixelated grid of images that initially seem unrelated, provoking them to make sense of the links, flows and cross-references between the diverse subject-matter. The gaze shifts from a long-distance shot of the falling man to the close-up of the Congolese gun. The shifting perspectives make viewers zoom in and out of the pictures, and so it is difficult to remain unaffected by them. What all these photographs have in common is the vulnerability of the human body in conflict zones and on Western borders. Viewers might even share this vulnerability as they look at the soldier's gun pointing back to the photographer's camera, almost an extension to themselves.

Thus one could say that the viewers are almost violently forced to pay attention and to put aside the traditional detached mode of looking at photojournalistic images rapidly and fleetingly, while scanning the page for the accompanying headline, caption or article within the newspaper. The catalogue urges viewers to move their gaze from one image to another, acknowledging

relationships between the images and shared themes as well as their own involvement in these global dynamics from which they cannot escape. The collage curtails spatio-temporal differences, compressing them into one image by linking together seemingly unrelated events. The disjointedness of time and place suggests that each image is only part of a larger picture of globalization and that meaning is fabricated through the visual, social and political links.

Because the ability of a single photograph to provide information about the complex entanglements of globalization is limited, combining photographs of different places and moments in time allows the collage to capture globalization's multilateral reality more comprehensively. Moreover, the constructed nature of these pages calls to mind Berthold Brecht's criticism of photography's ability to represent reality. In his now celebrated statement that a documentary image of a factory cannot reveal much about the actual conditions of production inside its walls, Brecht denounces the view that mere fidelity to appearance can somehow help in understanding complex modern reality (Benjamin 2009: 190). We would learn more, Brecht believes, from "something artificial, invented" or "constructed" (*ibid*).

## **Towards a conclusion**

The constructed, fabricated, fragmentary character of the grid presentation permits a spatial and temporal condensation of globalization to be visualized appropriately. In contrast with mainstream news media, which prioritize single, often spectacular images, the catalogue provides a narrative of globalization by combining a large number of images taken from different spatio-historical contexts. The viewer also encounters images that have been overlooked by the mainstream media, mostly due to their association with stories that do not fit the neoliberal spirit.

The collage may be read, therefore, as an attempt to make visible what is hidden, excluded from public view or even censored within an image-saturated society, while at the same time reducing the distances and time differences that would normally separate the events they represent, thus inviting viewers to think about the complex entanglements of the globalized world they live in.

While the editorial collage of photojournalistic images seems more appropriate than the single photojournalistic image to address this complex reality of globalization, the editors' overreliance on Western photo agencies suggests a failure to reflect on the latter's entanglement in hegemonial structures of image distribution. Why did Documenta 11 — which aspired to include in the exhibition a multiplicity of viewpoints from artists all over the world — still draw so heavily on Western lenses to represent refugees, migrants or civil war victims in remote countries of the globe? After all, is Western photojournalism not part of the “epistemological structures” and “the narrow focus of Western global optics” that Enwezor (2002: 44) aimed to question through the show? Is it even possible that an exhibition of contemporary art can denounce Eurocentricity when it relies on existing Western structures for its realization? Documenta 11 and the documentation it produced (in the form of the archive, the exhibition catalogues and the website) attest to the challenges of situating documentary practices within a wider political critique of neoliberal globalization.

BIO

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