

Transversions

Post Exhibition Notes



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The conceptual framework proposed and developed under the title of "Trade Routes" for the 2nd Johannesburg Biennale, 1997, by its artistic director Okwui Enwezor, may be interpreted as being concerned with an examination of the history of "globalization", the nature of "Diaspora", and the dynamics of contemporary geographies. In retrospect, this direction was made even more resonant by two factors: first, the location, and secondly the organizing committee's choice of a director who was not only a black African, but also a national of another African nation.

On the one hand, Enwezor's directive was to create a Biennale around a selection of artists that was based not on their representation of nations, but on their activity as interpreters of a new transculturalism. On the other, the location where this was manifested, was undergoing a traumatic engagement with its own demons, in the form of "The Truth and Reconciliation Committee" hearings, and the general legacy of Apartheid. The tone of post-apartheid South Africa is both introverted and xenophobic. Localized issues are dominant, not

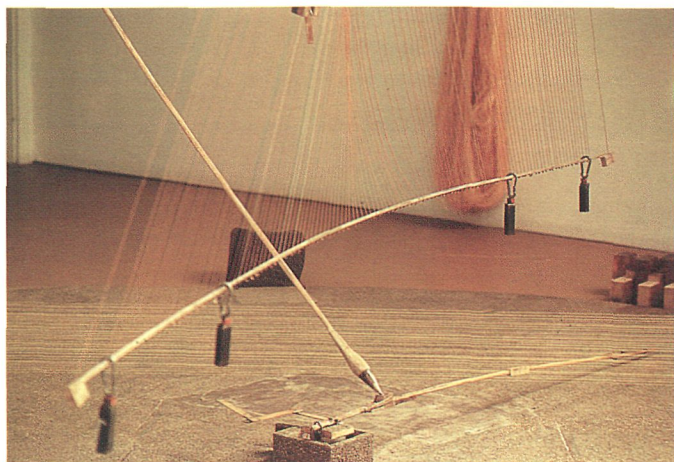
*global concerns, and least of all, any ideas of transnationalism. In this context it was not surprising to hear opinions expressing resentment at Okwui Enwezor's appointment, not overtly because he was black (though apartheid has not died in many hearts and minds), but specifically because he was a foreigner - from another African country (Nigeria). There was even some discontent that there was not more representation of South African artists, despite the fact that the Biennale had accommodated a sizeable percentage of South Africans. The irony is evident - an international Biennale of art that is *investigative of globalization, placed in a locality that is turned in on itself - an interjection of polarities.**

While South Africa is just emerging from a period of imposed cultural isolation, and brutal political and racial repression, it is nevertheless, a hybrid of African, European, and Asian influences, and has, in the past, been the gateway to trade routes in the East. It is perhaps by recognizing and evaluating this confluence, that South Africans will extend their vision beyond the boundaries of national identity, towards the



Osvaldo Romberg (Argentina). *Black Maccha Piccha*. 1997. Installation. 2nd Johannesburg Biennale. *Transversions*. Photo: Wayne Oosthuizen.

problematics of global citizenship. Although the initial local reactions to this Biennial may be of incomprehension and resentment, I am certain that it will have a positive long-term effect both within and beyond its location. The example and achievement of the 2nd Johannesburg Biennale has been to exhibit work of artists who are informed as much by their localities, and origins, as they are by participation in a global dialogue. Some of these artists are located in centers like New York or London, but have come from Asia, or Africa. They embody the new Diaspora, and express the contradictions and interaction of identities and language brought into flux with other cultures, in foreign lands. These artists represent not nations or "foreignity", so much as themselves, but their works make apparent the complexity of a cultural interchange whose



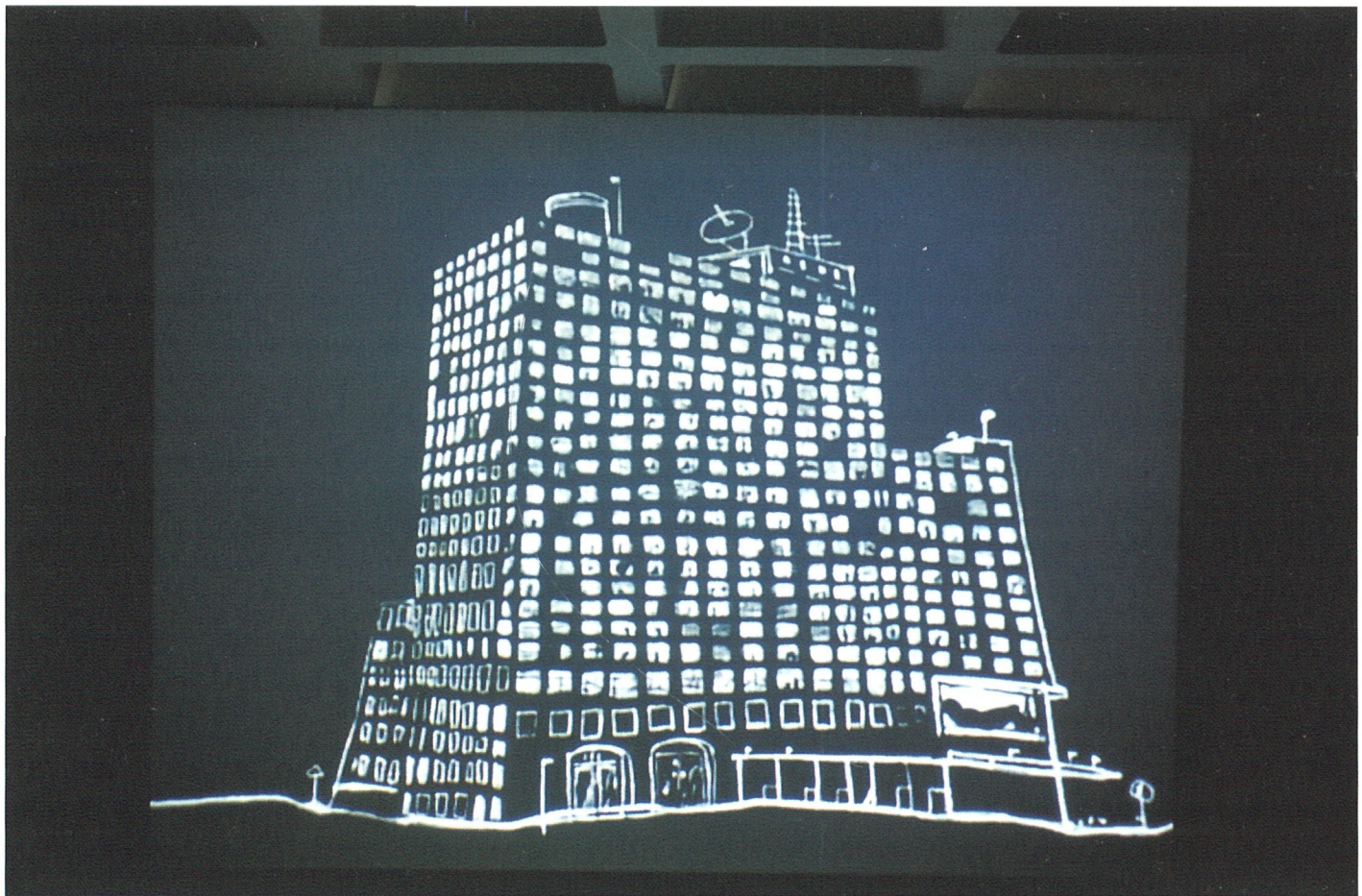
Choong Sup Lim (South Korea). *Untitled Installation: Ddang China (Earth Skirt)*. 1997. Installation, 2nd Johannesburg Biennale. *Transversions*. Photo: Wayne Oosthuizen.

political dynamics are often emphasized by colonialist and imperialist legacies.

It was not the purpose of "Transversions" to provide a clear narrative or illustration of the nature of global cultural exchange, but rather to bring together work that concerned itself with the interrelationships of political, cultural, physical, and personal, environments. "Transversions" does not represent a clear structure, but its coherence is provided by disparate components that combine to convey a sense of a cultural multiplex. It may also be an incidental portrait of an era distinguished by the hyper-transit of thought and bodies, of

information delivery at such speed and abundance that it may exceed our ability to assimilate it. We conduct transactions and communications and receive information by pushing buttons that transfer data at incredible speeds over great distances through the medium of digital space. Picture this data flow through a myriad of conduits and cables: through various server-computers; through gates, switches, satellites, telephone-lines, and Internet pipes; all the vast arterial connections you can think of. Just to impart a few bytes of data to a distant computer somewhere on the other side of the planet. Imagine this multiplied millions of times, a multiplex of data streams in digital space, alive with the light of electrons dancing in frenzied transmission. Think of the robots continuously scouring the limitless terrain of the Internet for every deposit of information, steadily rewriting our histories, presenting the regurgitated knowledge for instant retrieval by means of data recovery devices called 'search engine'. How are we translated, modified and re-embodied in these crossings?

Most major cities seek to establish an international cultural presence. They invite artists and curators from around the globe to participate in their biennials, and transmit the results to the world via art magazines, catalogues, television, and the Internet. They import exhibitions from abroad and export representations of their own cultures in exchange. It's like a crossbreeding of viruses - a system of mutually assured infection. Exhibitions of the Koryo Dynasty, Edo Period, Vincent Van Gogh, or Andy Warhol, may be concurrent in one major city. In this scenario, all cultures, all human information, are brought into a transparent zone where they are chronologically equivalent. Without an anchor in 'place', culture loses its authority and is relevant only to the extent that it serves the whimsy of the artist or curator. Indeed, if there will be a global culture, it will be constituted of systems of displaced meaning, of signifiers out of context that take on shallower but more diverse inferences. There is a process whereby cultures are natively formed, manufactured and exported to other cultural factories that also act as distribution centers. These hubs are themselves undergoing transformation from the passage of imported value laden artifacts, but



William Kentridge (South Africa). *Ubu Tells the Truth*, 1997. Video, 2nd Johannesburg Biennale. *Transversions*.

nevertheless manage to add their own markers in the form of evaluations and critiques before re-exporting them. The artifacts are hopefully returned intact to their point of origin (though it is true that the loot of colonial periods often remains hidden for decades in the basements of capital museums) but their ideas and cultural meanings also get returned - albeit in an unrecognizable, mutant condition. The host culture gets infected with a strange cocktail of its own cultural markers and the tags they have accrued in passage. Does this effect a dilution of the original culture or is it just a feature of its evolution? A century or more ago the process was surely the same - but not so discernible: the process of import and export was a much slower affair, usually taking decades. Today, of course, ideas are transmitted across the globe instantly and in rapid succession. The speed of transmission even surpasses the ability of present human assimilation, though computers can be

programmed to archive and respond to this data. We have grown accustomed to this 'white noise' of information and, perhaps only occasionally, our attention is grabbed by a subtle change in its frequency and we wonder excitedly about this nugget of a meme that has caused us to stop and reflect, if only for a moment. The rest slips under conscious consideration and is absorbed subliminally, washing around the supports of our identity. Societies survive, not because of their resistance to new ideas, but because of their ability to accommodate them, reforming their cultural identities as they are being eroded. Only in the severest isolation has any purity of cultural identity been attempted (as in Korea's "Hermit Kingdom" of the Chosun Dynasty [1392 - 1910]), and that is disputable, as journeymen and merchants are the inevitable carriers of foreign things. Today's cultural journeymen are the traveler curators who hop from one art fair to another, purveyors of exotic


concepts that are not just uprooted from one location and planted out of climate, but are a mutual exchange of societies that already have cultures formed of displaced signifiers that are proxies for meanings that have their 'true' context in other societies. The exhibition site, or museum, in this regard, is transformed from a temple of aesthetics to a transactional meeting place, a venue of encounter and passage, where conceptual and cultural visions are negotiated. Perhaps a homogenizing palimpsest of international creativity, or rather, environments where national territories appear and dissolve like *shifting coastlines*.

The manner in which we perceive distance and spatial hierarchies, has also been forever altered. It is no longer relevant to distinguish the center from the outside. Indeed, it may no longer be possible. All that we imagine, produce, and think - all our transactions - are combined in an overload of

information that spills out of terminals all over the world. We are redefined both by our input and its transmutation. Our new culture - perhaps a global culture (because regional differences eventually become less specific), is founded on our restructured, hyper-linked histories. The product of an alliance of human minds and digital networks. Our locations and cultures have been telematically connected and our accumulated skills and imagination are embodied in the plexus of this network, not just in isolated exchanges. There is a sense of transparency, and of production and existence at the interstices of informational systems. It is no longer a question of cultural dominance, or even multi-cultural dilution, but of transactions that elude geographic, historical, political, and time-zone limitations. In the digital age we have all become colonizers and are in return colonized. Indeed there are now cultural networks, such as PLEXUS (<http://plexus.org>), or the Foundation for Digital



Diller & Scofidio (Poland/USA). *Pageant*, 1997. Video installation. 2nd Johannesburg Biennale. *Transversions*.



Gutete Emerita, 30 years old, is standing in front of a church where 400 Tutsi men, women and children were systematically slaughtered by a Hutu death squad during Sunday mass. She was attending mass with her family when the massacre began. Killed with machetes

in front of her eyes were her husband Tito Kahinamura, 40, and her two sons, Muhoza, 10, and Matirigari, 7. Somehow, Gutete managed to escape with her daughter Marie Louise Unumararunga, 12. They hid in a swamp for three weeks, coming out only at night for food.

Culture (<http://digicult.org>), that exist solely in the digital realm, thus obviating the need for the strange migration patterns of art world crowds from one international exposition to another. These networked online environments are both an expression of the desire for decentralization of the major culture contact zones and the achievement itself - of creating a broad spectrum of informational exchange and creative initiatives that have a direct political and cultural impact on society. Within these networked spaces there are evolving new articulations of relationships and language through the use of both temporary and fixed zones that are illuminated by local and global interventions. A practice and knowledge is evolved in alignment with the reconstruction of identities around the connection of diverse modalities, and the discovery of new forms of spatial representation. Communication enhancements such as spatial actors, are increasingly employed to negotiate virtual environments, necessitating the formation of politicized procedures and permissions. These avatar devices travel within spaces that are independent of national boundaries and cultures. They may be tagged at the source, but this may only serve to disguise their true identities. They may be chameleon in the sense that they change their profile according to those they encounter, even acquiring the attributes of others in the process. Within the boundless digital spaces are superimposed conventional Renaissance perspectives as a way of normalizing the zone within the confines of the popular imagination - the difference being that there are multiple vanishing-points and positions that may be selected at will and the gridlines therefore intersect in infinite variations that defy cubic space. The individual projection is the androidal complex of digital agent, body, and image that behaves independently of its operator but may nevertheless have a deep anchor in the puppeteer's psyche. This is indeed a very curious predicament - we have characters that can act independently with personas that may be the fantasy projections of their owners - that travel in 'free' space - just like the gods of yore, and then their potency and ability to act as a conductor to source, of undesired energies, is revealed - the "kickback" - and we need to set protective limitations and terms of access. The habitation of networked space then



Sawad Brooks (Colombia/USA). *Prosthesis*. 1997. CD-Rom. 2nd Johannesburg Biennale. *Transversions*. Photo: Wayne Oosthuizen.

implies a formatting of it according to experimental protocols and the invention of structures to facilitate its socialization. Nevertheless, passage within, and experience of networked environments, has rendered fixed identity, either personal or national, an obsolete and archaic concept.

The ambition of "TRANSVERSIONS", is an attempt to create a broad interface to decipher and reflect the interweave of contemporary experience. It is an investigation of the real, virtual, logical and biological realities that comprise contemporary existence. The works of the artists presented here deal in various ways with the transactions of territories, zones, histories, and cultures - and the transmutation of identities that these effects. For example, while Osvaldo Romberg, Alfredo Jaar, Les Levine, Michael Joo, and Dennis Oppenheim, have distinctly different languages and agendas, they are each concerned with the relationships of context, event,

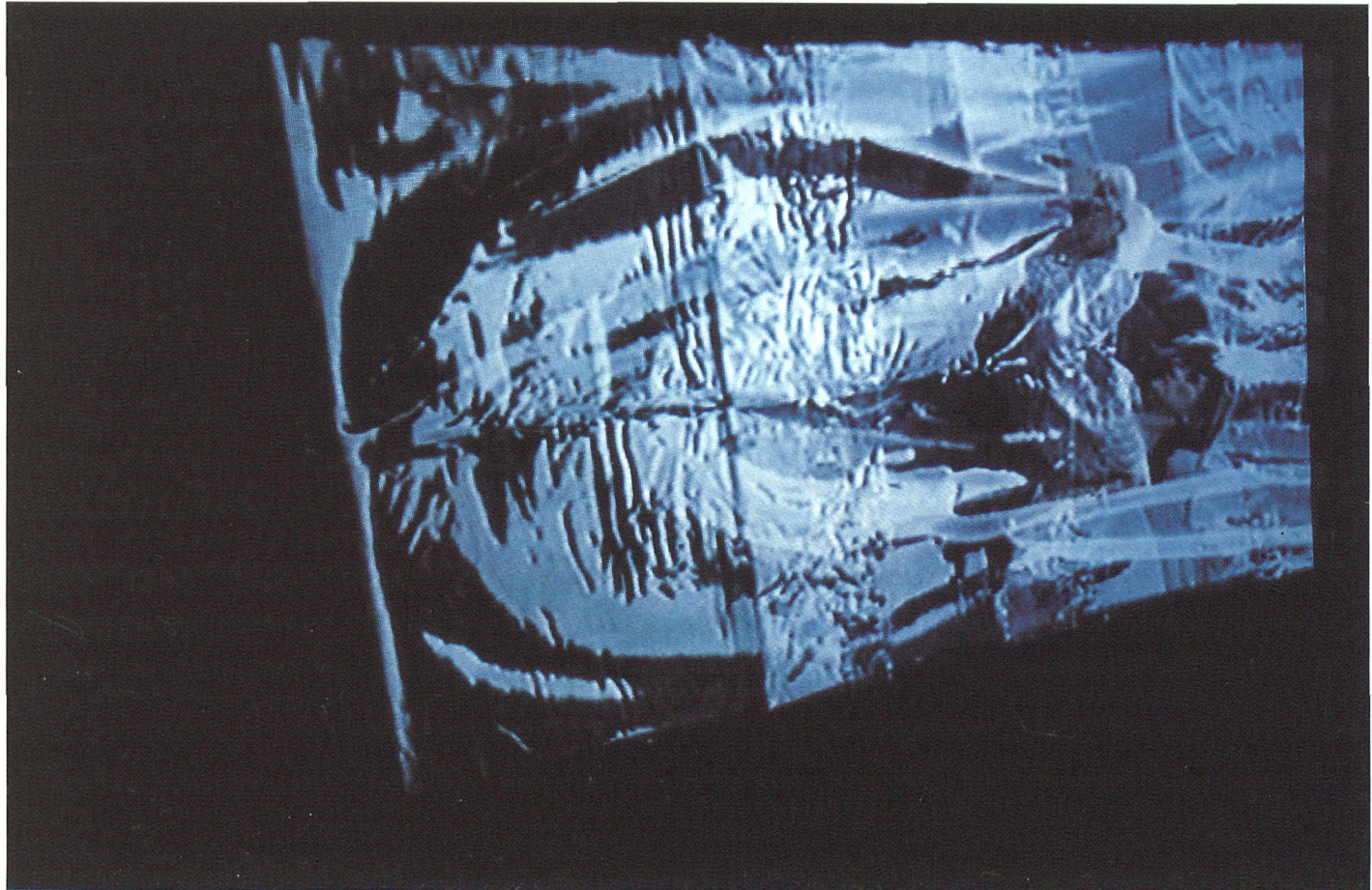
passage and message. Romberg has constructed a newly confabulated history in which all cultural icons are reassigned identities, and nationalistic ideas are dismantled creating a conceptual zone that confounds timelines and geographic borders. Alfredo Jarr's photo journalistic art investigates the location of genocide and massacre, through the artist's personal involvement as a witness. His work converts the exhibition location into a gateway to the killing zone and implicates the observer as a proxy witness to terrible inhumanities through the eyes and memories of the survivors. Oppenheim's "Ginger Bread Man" is an article to be consumed that in the process of regurgitation and microscopic viewing, becomes a pattern of material and organic structures that mirror human networks. The mass media campaign billboard works of Les Levine, are contrived to subtly pervert the media and cause the viewer to re-evaluate their response to both the commercial and the

aesthetic object. Michael Joo's work expresses migration through transparent zones of transformation, in which identity is both transported, assumed, and assimilated.

The transversion of urban and architectural space, corporate and cultural meshing is investigated in the works of Sabine Bitter, Helmut Weber and Sawad Brooks, as well as that of Diller and Scofidio. The digital artists, such as Sawad Brooks, Maciej Wisniewski, Tirtsä Even, and Lee Boot, articulate conceptual, linguistic and networked environments in ways that both exploit and subvert structures. This dialogue of relational language structures is extended in the work of Xu Bing, who has created a classroom in which the symbols of Chinese and English are merged into a script for communicating in both languages. Minnete Vãri transposes political, racial and sexual identities that combine to unravel

their construction. In singularly different forms, the relationships of time, memory, body, and psyche, and society are explored in the works of Choong Sup Lim, Hale Tenger, Young Jim Kim, and Montien Boonma, Luca Buvoli and William Kentridge.

"Transversions" attempts to assess our location and negotiation of real and digital environments and endeavours to portray the manner in which all these disparate realities are enmeshed in a sharing and confusion of codes and signifiers. Transversions is about transient crossings. It is a portrait of the reinvention of our cultures: of their embodiment and representation in physical space; and their metamorphosis, redistribution and dissemination in a digital era in which physical and cerebral activities are progressively polarized.



Sabine Bitter & Helmut Weber (Austria). *On Condition - spacing/bypass*, 1997. Video installation. 2nd Johannesburg Biennale. *Transversions*. Photo: Wayne Oosthuizen.