

Documenta II, Kassel, du 8 juin au 15 septembre 2002

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Documenta II

Kassel

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A colour photo by South African photographer David Goldblatt, from a series titled *Jo'Burg Intersections* (1999–2002), shows high-rises of Johannesburg towering over an enormous garbage dump. Almost imperceptibly, two human shelters merge with the trash. Light fixtures and billboards in the middle ground indicate a sunken highway that separates the solid buildings from the chaos in the foreground like a moat around a medieval castle. But the luscious details of the dump – the plastic wrapping, the Styrofoam containers, even the white stripes on a discarded jogging suit – identify this refuse as the discharge of a global consumerism that originates on the other side of the highway. What makes this picture an emblem of Documenta 11, where it was shown, is that it shows the contemporary world as a trash heap of global production and consumption, a dump that is inhabited by all of us, albeit on different sides of the dividing line between haves and have-nots.

In what could be a final blow to Eurocentrism in art, Okwui Enwezor has opened Documenta to the realities of a consolidated, global world. The Nigerian-born curator's intent "to enlarge the space of critical debates of contemporary art" led him to push territorial as well as disciplinary boundaries. Documenta 11 was conceived as part of an ongoing process to situate art within current debates on far-ranging global problems dealing with economy and ecology, democracy, human rights, displacement, war, and urbanization. Four "platforms," manifestations that included seminars, screenings, and exhibitions, were organized in cities around the world prior to the fifth event held this summer at its usual location in Kassel, Germany. Here, the debates continued among expositions that included few installations or new media and even fewer paintings, but a preponderance of film, video, and photography.

David Goldblatt

Jo'Burg Intersections

49 colour print

42 x 29.5 cm each

1999–2002

Commissioned by Documenta 11,

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Surveying the rows upon rows of framed black-and-white and colour images in the various galleries, one wonders what has happened to the postmodern deconstruction of photography's veracity. Most are straight photos, many of which record social and political activities in which the photographers themselves have taken part. The large colour photos by Huit Vacettes, a collective involved in integrating social work and art in rural Senegal, are an example of this, as are Lise Ponger's photos of the streets of Genoa after the G8 summit in August, 2001.

Others could be placed in a historical tradition. The prominent display of the complete "Fish Story" by Allan Sekula, a well-known proponent of politically engaged documentary photography, serves here perhaps as a contemporary model. Historical connections are underlined by the inclusion of veterans such as the pioneer of colour documentary photography, William Eggleston. His work can be linked to Olumuyiwa

Olamide Osifuye's dazzling photographs of inner-city Lagos and the work of Ravi Agarwal, who presents a series of colour photos of slum dwellers in South Gujarat. These photographers bring a critical eye to documentary photography and record the hidden causes and consequences of headline-grabbing political and economical decisions and events.

The overriding urgency to make concealed social realities visible that marks this exhibition only occasionally makes way for metaphor, as in Jeff Wall's light box titled *Invisible Man*, alluding to a 1952 novel by Ralph Ellison. It depicts a black man living in a basement apartment in Harlem, underneath a ceiling bedecked with 1,369 light bulbs. But some of the metaphoric efficacy of Wall's work is immediately reigned in by its placement within Goldblatt's series of 1970s and 1980s photographs of black workers in Boksburg, South Africa.

As politically engaged as Documenta 11 is, many of the photographs bring out an alluring baroque quality from the mess we have made of this world. To name but a few, there are Michael Ashkin's forlorn black-and-white photos and video of New Jersey's industrial wasteland; the moody film and colour photos by Zarina Bhimji, who returns to the Uganda that her family fled in the 1970s; and Touhami Ennadre's heavily contrasted close-ups taken in the aftermath of 9/11 in New York. These works convey a disturbing beauty, but what pulls them back from the brink of an aesthetization of politics is the context of severe reality that permeates the exhibition as a whole. This actuality is grounded, in large part, in the persistent power of the camera to provide accounts of reality, as subjective and bluntly political as they may be.

After Documenta 11, it is inconceivable that contemporary art could ever return to a Western isolationism and yet maintain a critical and imaginative function in this global world. For too long, the West has twisted representations of the rest of the world to suit its own taste. The biting realism of Enwezor's exhibition is a necessary starting point for a changed course in which artists from all over the world are given an authentic voice.

Petra Halkes