



# Okwui Enwezor

OKWUI ENWEZOR IS DEAN OF ACADEMIC AFFAIRS AND SENIOR VICE PRESIDENT AT SAN FRANCISCO ART INSTITUTE. HE IS ARTISTIC DIRECTOR OF THE 7TH GWANGJU BIENNALE AND ADJUNCT CURATOR AT NEW YORK'S INTERNATIONAL CENTER OF PHOTOGRAPHY, WHERE HIS EXHIBITION "ARCHIVE FEVER: CONTEMPORARY ART BETWEEN DOCUMENT AND MONUMENT" OPENS IN JANUARY 2008.

**1** Documenta 12 (Kassel) Roger M. Buerger and Ruth Noack's Documenta was a triumph of curatorial tricksterism, a low-wattage but relentlessly engaged act of unbuilding the structure of the megaexhibition. Via modes of archival archaism, the curators reconfigured a range of disparate practices in sometimes luminous installations. I still cannot get Kerry James Marshall's *Garden Party*, 2003, a large painting installed in a small space in the Neue Galerie, out of my head. Its effect, when I chanced upon it, was reminiscent of the feeling of encountering Velázquez's *Las Meninas*: It is as if when the visitor enters the room, all the figures in the painting turn in unison to greet him. That D12 was frustrating and enervating there is no doubt. That it was also provocative, rewarding, and important is becoming ever clearer in retrospect.

**2** "Gordon Matta-Clark: 'You Are the Measure'" (Whitney Museum of American Art, New York) Matta-Clark's greatness has been well rehearsed in a number of exhibitions over the last several years. Such posthumous surveys are sometimes numbing in their hagiographic piety, but not Elisabeth Sussman's recent Matta-Clark show. Her open-plan installation made visible the flow of meaning conjured by the artist as he acted upon the architectural decay of postwar tenements and industrial structures and the interstitial sites of anomie that he designated "fake estates."

**3** "Hammons" (L&M Arts, New York) What Hammons, in collaboration with his wife, Chie Hammons, offered in the marmoreal galleries of L&M Arts was a kind of Sadean coup de théâtre, a tableau of fashion and cruelty. The stagecraft's principal element was a collection of slightly shopworn fur coats draped over battered vintage dress forms. From a shaved mink painted with

a thick smear of yellow acrylic to a sable sporting harrowing marks, as if sewn from the pelts of roadkill, all the garments showed signs of disrepair, alterations, and violence; but the stately bearing of the dramatically spotlighted pieces belied the strange, deathly aura emanating from them. I thought of Federico García Lorca's line in *Ode to Walt Whitman*: "The rich give their mistresses small illuminated dying things. . . ." No one is better than Hammons at wresting poetry from obsolescence.

**4** "Robert Gober: Work 1976–2007" (Schaulager, Basel) Gathered by Schaulager director Theodora Vischer, Gober's sprawling turns in Americana, neo-Surrealism, sexual repression, racial violence, religious ambivalence, domestic politics, and childhood trauma resulted in a retrospective that was both deadpan and enchanting—a quality underlined by a series of temporary rooms lit in a way that seemed to create echoes of some other time and place.

**5** James Casebere (Sean Kelly Gallery, New York) It's not easy being a pioneer, especially when you make it look so easy. This show, one of the year's most accomplished, overlapped with the celebration, at the clinical emporium of modernism that is today's MoMA, of Jeff Wall's achievement, and reminded me of Casebere's own achievement. Viewing his recent images of Levantine interiors, I could not help but marvel at the realization that the artist has been making singularly compelling, psychologically charged photographs from nothing more than austere architectural models and artful lighting for thirty years now. His work is profoundly conceived around the architecture of absence and silence so as to ingeniously exploit the lugubrious sense of the uncanny such spaces provoke.

**6** Steve McQueen (Venice Biennale and Renaissance Society, Chicago) Jointly con-

stituting McQueen's follow-up to the monumental *Western Deep/Carib's Leap*, 2002, the meditative new works *Unexploded* and *Gravesend*, both shown in Venice in the summer and in Chicago in the fall, are cinematic triumphs. To move from the eerily tremulous *Unexploded*, filmed in Basra, Iraq, to the epic *Gravesend*, filmed in the Congo, is a dazzling somatic and retinal experience, producing a sense of foreboding, poetic visual pleasure, and sonic disruption. Forcing a disquieting synoptic encounter with the shadowy world of coltan mining in Africa and the endless, mindless carnage in the erstwhile Mesopotamia, McQueen insists that the politics of the aesthetic and of the social are never mutually exclusive in the repertoire of a serious artist.

**7** Chris Ofili (David Zwirner Gallery, New York) Ofili's first solo exhibition at Zwirner heralds a major shift in his singularly sensuous discourse on painting. The painting-cum-artifact-cum-object on which his earlier practice was moored has moved off its floor-bound elephant-dung pedestals, and with that repositioning, the artist has traded the horizontality of the flat ground on which the totemlike earlier paintings were enacted for the verticality of the wall and the inimitable seduction of the picture plane, related to painting's historical framing. However, this is not a backward step toward Greenbergian modernism; it is, rather, a nod to the insouciant African modernism of the 1960s. For all the Matisse-inflected structure and the *luxé, calme, and volupté* of these new works, it is in the paintings of the Nigerian Uche Okeke and the Zimbabwean Thomas Mukarobgwa that the secret of Ofili's new work lies.

**8** "Take Your Time: Olafur Eliasson" (San Francisco Museum of Modern Art) Eliasson's penchant for grand gestures and spectacle can sometimes detract

from a full appreciation of the rigor he brings to his experiments with conditions of seeing. Oscillating between ineffable sculpture and material architecture, his works use four basic elements—light, color, space, and time—to investigate phenomenology and sensation and the complex relations of the gaze and the body. Tightly curated and thoughtfully installed by Madeleine Grynsztejn, this midcareer survey revealed the deceptive simplicity of Eliasson's art without obscuring the rich profundity of his propositions.

**9** 10th International Istanbul Biennial My esteemed colleague Hou Hanru declined to make assertions about the future of the megaexhibition in organizing the Istanbul Biennial, instead using the occasion to propose a kind of exhibition-as-fugue. The approach was especially effective in the Atatürk Cultural Center, a modernist gem where fifteen artists' works, many considering the legacies of utopian architecture, were installed. The oneiric setting was perfect for meditating on the seeming twilight of the Turkish secular state.

**10** Marcia Kure (Bravin Lee Programs, New York) In the quietude of June, when it seemed as if everyone had decamped to Europe, this young Nigerian artist made her remarkable New York solo debut. Kure's métier is drawing, and she draws with ease and authority using the brownish pigment of the kola nut. Here she showed a group of works titled "Vogue Series." But there is nothing remotely indebted to fashion in her solitary anthropomorphs, posed like sentinels from an era of repressed decorum, sometimes accompanied by allegorical beasts. Disporting themselves in explorations of violence, torture, feminine authority, and colonialism, Kure's figures are at once strange and familiar. □

1. Kerry James Marshall, *Garden Party*, 2003, acrylic and paper on canvas, 9 x 10'. 2. From Documenta 12. View of "Gordon Matta-Clark: 'You Are the Measure,'" 2007, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York. Photo: Sheldon Collins. 3. View of "Hammons," 2007, L & M Arts, New York. Photo: Tom Powell. 4. View of "Robert Gober: Work 1976–2007," 2007, Schaulager, Basel. Foreground: *Prayers Are Answered*, 1980–81. Photo: Tom Bisig. 5. James Casebere, *Luxor #1*, 2007, color photograph, dimensions variable. 6. Steve McQueen, *Gravesend*, 2007, still from a color film in 35 mm transferred to video, 17 minutes 58 seconds. 7. Chris Ofili, *Rosary*, 2007, oil on canvas, 27 1/2 x 19 1/2". 8. Olafur Eliasson, *your mobile expectations: BMW H\_R project*, 2007, mixed media. Installation view, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. Photo: Ian Reeves. 9. Exterior of Atatürk Cultural Center, Istanbul, 2007. Photo: Serkan Taycan. 10. Marcia Kure, *006*, 2007, kola-nut pigment, watercolor, and pencil on paper, 15 x 11".

