

From the Editors

When we announced, in issue no. 44 of this journal, the March 15, 2019, death of our dearest friend, brother, and colleague Okwui Enwezor, we promised to find an appropriate way, beyond mourning, to commemorate him and celebrate his work and legacy. Two years have passed and we are still working, in collaboration with various institutions on different continents, on some long-term initiatives to conserve his library and archive and to collect his published and unpublished writings in dedicated volumes. These are challenging tasks, but we are fully committed to their realization in the coming years.

The decision to devote an entire issue of *Nka* to Okwui was one of the initial plans we had, yet only the fortuitous alignment of happenstance and intention made this current issue possible. In April 2020, just as the world was shutting down in response to the spreading devastation of the COVID-19 pandemic, we heard about a panel dedicated to Okwui's work at the 108th College Art Association Annual Conference in Chicago, February 12–15, 2020. After reviewing the panel information from the conference website, we contacted the two chairs, Jane Chin Davidson and Alpesh Kantilal Patel, both art historians based, respectively, at California State University, San Bernadino, and Florida International University. Soon, we invited them to guest edit the section of this issue, consisting of articles by established and emerging scholars who either critically engage Okwui's work as a curator, or see his ideas as foundational to ways of understanding the role and place of art in a global and postcolonial context.

For many today who associate Okwui's name with unparalleled mastery and command of the praxis and discourse of contemporary art, it may be anything but surprising that his work has become the subject of vigorous scholarly examination in academic theses and dissertations, book chapters, and art journals, and, yes, profiles in glossy fashion and lifestyle magazines. That is as it should be. Even so, we must note how truly remarkable and exceptional Okwui's career was and how dramatic his impact has been on the art world of the past three decades.

In early 1994, Okwui reached out to a number of us—young artists, critics, and scholars scattered on three continents—who through our individual practices sought to rethink the shape of things in the different art scenes we inhabited: if in Africa, how to invigorate criticism and scholarship on contemporary art to compete favorably on the global stage; outside of the continent, how to pull our intellectual resources to fundamentally challenge the poor reception and perception of the work of African and African diaspora artists. To take on these urgent tasks, he needed each of us to join him in the birthing of a journal of contemporary African art that he would call *Nka*, the Igbo word for art or craft. *Nka*, he argued, would “work towards building the kind of forum necessary to help unite and engage the different spectrums of African viewpoints on 20th century cultural practices.”¹ Yet, he did not invite only African viewpoints; he called on anyone willing to devote a “critical intelligence and open-minded analysis” to the study of contemporary African art to join us in the work of establishing a vigorous discourse.²

Twenty-six years later, we believe that *Nka* has more than fulfilled Okwui's original dream, not only because it has become, indisputably, the foremost platform for critical discourse and scholarship on modern and contemporary African and African diaspora art. The small team Okwui convened in 1994, in its work within and outside the journal, helped establish what is now a vigorous field of study in the academy and a thriving sector in the international art industry. *Nka* has indeed come a long way from the early days when Okwui solicited donations from family and friends to ensure that we kept to our publishing schedule. Artists first profiled in our pages and contributors who published their first articles here have respectively become well-known names and leading scholars. *Nka*'s success, which we hope will outlive us, is indeed a monument to Okwui's visionary work and to his rich, impactful, though brief, earthly sojourn.

It is with all this in mind that we are excited to work with the guest editors of the scholarly articles published in this special issue. Chin Davidson and

Patel, two scholars and curators of global contemporary art whose key works have focused, respectively, on Chinese diaspora and transnational South Asia, represent the type of emergent critical practice Okwui anticipated in the early 1990s. Just as Okwui invited collaborators with an African perspective and others who might open up and redraw the boundaries not just of African and African diaspora art but, quite importantly, the global art scene, our guest editors have demonstrated, through their own work, an intellectual affinity with this journal's mandate. While their College Art Association conference panel theme aligned with our broader wish to support scholarship on Okwui's work, it is equally important to note that their collection of articles is as much about him as it is a space for critical analyses of key episodes, ideas, and histories of contemporary art of the past twenty-five years.

What these articles make clear is that in his lifetime, and because of the significance and impact of his work as a curator, critic, and scholar, Okwui became an idea, in other words, a research subject open to anyone invested in contemporary art. During our many years together, we witnessed how his difference-making practice made of him an intrepid public intellectual and the finest advocate of our collective vision of a more equitable, diverse, and decolonized art world.

With that said, Okwui was for us primarily a brother and friend with whom we shared bitter and joyful experiences of striking out, as young Africans, to claim the right to self-assertion in the art world dominated by the late twentieth-century anxious remnants of Empire. Just as our network of collaborators at *Nka* grew over the years, so did the circles of colleagues and peers—artists, critics, curators, intellectuals, art historians—with whom Okwui interacted from the early days to the very end. We invited a few of these individuals, who became part of our world of meaningful friendships, to contribute to the second part of this special issue, consisting of personal tributes to Okwui.

Over the years, we published memorials on individuals whose work contributed in no small way to the scholarship, discourse, and practice of modern

and contemporary African and African diaspora art. However, our decision to include a collection of personal tributes to one individual in this issue is unprecedented for *Nka*. It is, for us, a unique and appropriate way of paying our respects to the founding publisher and, until he passed away, coeditor of this journal. More important, it is to insist that while Okwui has become a research subject, an idea, he was a colleague, friend, and brother to a community of active players in the world of contemporary art—individuals whose life and work Okwui touched with his.

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Notes

- 1 Okwui Enwezor, "Redrawing the Boundaries: Towards a New African Art Discourse," *Nka: Journal of Contemporary African Art* 1 (1994): 7
- 2 Enwezor, "Redrawing the Boundaries," 7.