

Vice-Chancellor, I have the honour to present, for the award of the degree of Doctorate of Literature, *honoris causa*, Okwui Enwezor.

Following the announcement that Okwui Enwezor was to become the first African director, in 2015, of the Venice Biennale, the *Wall Street Journal* published an article with the banner headline: 'How Okwui Enwezor Changed the Art World'.ⁱ This headline would have been more accurate had it included the word 'international', as in: 'How Okwui Enwezor Changed the *International Art World*'.

Now director of the Haus der Kunst in Munich, Enwezor has curated major exhibitions throughout the world. He was artistic director of the 2nd Johannesburg Biennale in South Africa in the late 1990s, of Documenta11 in Kassel, Germany, of the International Biennale of Contemporary Art in Seville, and he has curated similarly important exhibitions in South Korea, Paris, Tokyo and elsewhere. Commenting on this extraordinarily successful trajectory, Enwezor pointed out recently that "No one is born with a straight arrow to his quiver. It is a combination of relentless work and good fortune."ⁱⁱ

Not surprisingly, his reputation for massive energy, and for the ability to conceive and deliver on large projects, is legendary.

But while his curatorial projects have been global since the very beginning, importantly, they have also repeatedly thrust African and diaspora artists to the foreground, including several major local artists, whose international careers have flourished as a consequence: Enwezor has incorporated the work of South African artists in major exhibitions on African photography at the Guggenheim in New York, and the Walther Museum. And he has curated or promoted shows on leading South African photographers such as David Goldblatt, Santu Mofokeng and Zwi Mkhize. He also included photographers and other South African artists in his curating of Documenta in Germany in 2002. His recent block-buster exhibition *The Rise and Fall of Apartheid: Photography and the Bureaucracy of Everyday Life*, which he co-curated with local academic Rory Best – and which started at the International Centre for Photography in New York in 2012, has subsequently travelled to South Africa. It would not be inappropriate to say that this must rank as one of the major exhibitions of all times.

A frequent traveller to South Africa, Enwezor knows the country's art world, its politics, and its history – especially the legacy of apartheid – very well. As curator of the Second Biennale in Johannesburg in the late 1990s, he effectively raised the level of debate, of artistic practice, and of curating in this country to an international level.

Born in Nigeria in 1963, Enwezor's family moved 45 times during the Biafran war. Clearly a seasoned traveller at a very young age, he persuaded his parents to allow him to board a plane in Lagos and, after a stop in Liberia, to travel to America to pursue a degree in political science in September 1982. He was 18 at the time. Known for his keen attention to personal style, reports have it that he arrived in New York in a black double-breasted mohair suit and oxfords. The recent *Wall Street Journal* article on Enwezor to which I referred earlier on, includes a photograph of him in a stylish suit titled: Fine and Dandy.

But contrary to the impression this might create of a possible lack of seriousness in Enwezor's life project, he is far from frivolous. "Coming from Nigeria" he said recently, "I felt I owed no-one an explanation for my existence, nor did I harbour any sign of a paralyzing inferiority complex. What was apparent [to me] was that most Americans I knew and met were actually not worldly at all, but provincials living in a very affluent, but unjust society".ⁱⁱⁱ

In New York, Enwezor developed a reputation as a poet, but soon became interested in the contemporary art world, founding *Nka, a Journal of Contemporary African Art*, in 1994, with the aim of educating the insular, white-dominated art world about contemporary African and African-American artists. Often referred to as N-K-A, it is not commonly known that 'nka' is in fact an Igbo word which, as Enwezor has pointed out, "means art, but also connotes to make, or create. Part of the reason I called it that name was to foreground the fact that my language is not mumbo jumbo. It has meaning".^{iv}

The rest, as they say, is history, for with the founding of *Nka*, Enwezor not only launched his own reputation as a major force in the international art world, but also began his hugely successful project of fostering global interest in the art of Africa, including the work of several major artists from this country.

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ⁱ Zeke Turner, Wall Street Journal, 8th September, 2014

ⁱⁱ Charl Blignaut, "The Interview – Okwui Enwezor: Cruelty and the Ordinary", City Press, 2nd February, 2014

ⁱⁱⁱ Blignaut, "The Interview", City Press, 2nd February, 2014

^{iv} Turner, "How Okwui Enwezor Changed the Art World", Wall Street Journal, 8th September, 2014