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Photo: Hans Haacke.

IN MEMORY OF OKWUI ENWEZOR, 1963–2019

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Coco Fusco

In the days since the news of Okwui's death was made public, he has been eulogized as a brilliant curator and thinker who transformed the landscape of contemporary art. And that he was—a true cultural giant in a field where many imagine themselves to be grander than they actually are. The reality that he was a self-made immigrant without the usual art-world pedigrees made his acumen and meteoric rise all the more inspiring. Okwui established a global view of artistic practice as the standard for the field, making narrower models of internationalism feel obsolete.

Though New York served as a base for much of his career, he never treated it as the sum total of what counted in art. On the contrary, he took American art institutions to task for their chauvinism, and gave a much-needed kick in the pants to artists of all backgrounds whose concerns he saw as

too parochial. His vision of what an exhibition could *do* was exhilarating, and his insistence on taking art seriously was a welcome relief from market-driven frivolity. He worked harder than seemed humanly possible, and sometimes exhausted his colleagues in the process. He also expected audiences to open themselves to difficult subjects, challenging tactics, and unusually long hours of viewing. There were critics who, for example, grumbled that his Documenta was just too much, but their complaints sounded like petulance from lightweights to those of us who wanted more from art.

Okwui showed everyone how art could speak eloquently and urgently about the world, and this earned him the respect of colleagues and artists across the globe. I count myself among those artists whose endeavors would never have been given a significant platform had it not been for his tireless advocacy. Many of the artists of my generation who are now championed by institutions that once ignored our interests, our methods, and our cultures of origin know in our hearts that Okwui lifted us out of relative obscurity just two decades ago. Let us not forget that.

Okwui will not only be remembered for his astounding intelligence—he was also remarkable for his commanding presence, his wit, his sartorial panache, his graciousness as a dinner-party host and his talents as a chef, his love of poetry, and his extraordinary ability to land anywhere on planet earth and understand the significance of what lay before him. Since he passed, my mind has been flooded with memories of him—laughing, arguing, cajoling, and scolding me when he thought I should know better or push myself harder. I hope to be haunted by that voice for the rest of my days.