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## blaxTARLINES

EDITED BY RUTH SIMBAO AND KWAKU BOAFO KISSIEDU



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**A Quiet Revolution in Arts Education  
The Rise of blaxTARLINES Kumasi**

Kwaku Boafo Kissiedu and Ruth Simbao

A quiet revolution has steadily been rising in Kumasi, Ghana. The fluid, experimental network known as blaxTARLINES is a mutable and transgenerational community of artists, curators and writers that is based in, but extends beyond, the Department of Painting and Sculpture at Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology (KNUST).<sup>1</sup> This special issue on blaxTARLINES, edited by Ruth Simbao and Kwaku Boafo Kissiedu (Castro), brings together five articles authored by twenty blaxTARLINES affiliates who, in their own words, trace the rise of the creative and intellectual network that was sparked by the work of *kaŕi'kaçhä seid'ou*, affectionately known as the godfather of this revolution.

Kissiedu and Simbao first met at the African Tertiary Arts Education (ATAE) meeting organized by the African Arts Institute (AFAI) and the Goethe-Institut South Africa in 2015.<sup>2</sup> Spearheaded by the playwright and arts activist Mike van Graan, the ATAE meeting brought together “high-profile leading African arts educators of formal tertiary as well as nonformal (postsecondary school) institutions in arts education ... to network, exchange and identify key areas of concern and collaboration.”<sup>3</sup>

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**1** blaxTARLINES member Edwin Bojawah, in the painting studio at Rhodes University, South Africa, during the PROSPA Publishing Workshop, November 2018. The artwork is by Masters candidate Stary Mwaba, *Mapping Black Mountain I* (2018), mixed media on tarpaulin, 292 cm x 268 cm. Photo: Stephen Fóláránmi

**2** *kaŕi'kaçhä seid'ou*, Ibrahim Mahama, and Stary Mwaba during a studio critique of Mwaba's work at Rhodes University, 2018. Photo: Lifang Zhang



Participants from ten African countries shared their experiences of being involved in tertiary arts education on the African continent and focussed on the importance of networking, which for van Graan is about “stakeholders taking responsibility for their own lives and livelihoods ... irrespective of whether government comes to the party or not.”<sup>4</sup>

In a plenary panel with Emma Wolukau-Wanambwa and the late Harry Garuba, Simbao shared her ideas of “learning sideways” and curriculum transformation in the context of the 2015 Rhodes Must Fall movement. This paper developed into ongoing interest in collaboration on the African continent and resulted in the multivocal dialogue, “Reaching Sideways, Writing *Our Ways*,” coauthored with fourteen artists, writers, and curators (Simbao et al. 2017). It was at this ATAE event that African colleagues in arts education learnt about the blaxTARLINES network from Kissiedu, who has the reputation of being the informal ambassador, negotiator, and counselor of blaxTARLINES.<sup>5</sup> Our mutual interest in arts education models that emphasize nonhierarchical learning and collaboration laid the foundation for this special issue.

The backdrop of the ATEA networking event is important, as it sets the stage for

discussions on arts education that are not predicated on a dichotomy between formal and nonformal education. The assumption of such a dichotomy overlooks opportunities for meaningful resonance, slippage, and intervention. Although some might have lost faith in the intellectual currency and social relevance of African universities—particularly since the crisis of universities in the 1980s and 1990s (Zeleza 2009)—it would be erroneous to suggest that it is only independent arts spaces on the African continent that are generating exciting intellectual and creative ideas. A spirit of scholarly and creative camaraderie that intersects across various types of learning platforms is growing significantly in Africa and is attracting the attention of people worldwide. As this special issue demonstrates, there are scholars, artists, and curators within tertiary education institutions in Africa who are successfully navigating the formal and the nonformal, as well as the “gown” and the “town” through their embrace of interventionist strategies, daily struggles, and the optimistic belief that there is always possibility for slippage, subversion, and surprise. Reflecting on her visit to Kumasi with participants of the *Àsikò* Art School in 2013, Bisi Silva (2017: xxi–xxii) expressed confidence in such fluid and intersecting models, concluding that the cultural revolution encountered at KNUST proffers “great reason to be optimistic about the possibilities for art on the continent.”

Recently the experimental work of blaxTARLINES was situated within the broader context of contemporary art in Ghana in an *African Arts* First Word (Nagy and Jordan 2018), and in a special issue of *Critical Interventions* edited by Kwame A. Labi, professor at the University of Ghana, Legon. Labi (2019: 1) curated a collection of essays on Ghanaian art that were authored by “six

Ghanaian scholars, and one scholar who has worked extensively in the country” in response to the “minimized contributions of African artists and scholars based on the continent to knowledge production, scholarship, and global discourses on art.” This important emphasis on African and Africa-based authorship in the global academy (specifically in the arts of Africa discourse) grows out of “the emboldening belief in locally grown research” (Kwami 2019: 53). Locally grown research that is cutting edge, such as the work by blaxTARLINES, seeks ways to shift beyond individualistic models of research in the arts and humanities more broadly. The work of blaxTARLINES that is brought together in this special issue contributes meaningfully to questions raised recently in various *African Arts* articles that emphasize the value, and indeed the necessity of experimental and collaborative models that open up spaces beyond solo authorship, capitalist-driven competition, and the commodification of knowledge and creativity (Baasch et al. 2020; Foláránmí 2019; Simbao et al. 2018; Simbao et al. 2017).

For blaxTARLINES, it is the “ardent spirit of experimentation” that has pushed art training at KNUST beyond “colonial parochial definitions and practice of fine art” where the classroom was a site of “struggle ... and ineptitude or bland artlessness” (Bodjawah, Kofigah, and

Ampratwum 2018: 31, 33). Upon his appointment as a lecturer at the Kumasi Art Academy in 2002, Kwaku Bofo Kissiedu, who was about ten years younger than the youngest lecturer in the department at the time, sought ways to inject life back into the fusty art department he had inhabited since he enrolled as a student in 1992. Some of the things that were of concern to him were the armchairlike approach to art making that disregarded first-hand sources, the reliance on printed images and photographs as source material, and the general lack of criticality. Kissiedu was first taught by *kařĩkacha seidou* when *seidou* was a teaching assistant at KNUST in 1994. When *seidou* was employed as a lecturer in the Fine Art Department in 2003, Kissiedu found a formidable senior colleague to work with. As colleagues who developed a legendary friendship, they began to implement the blueprint for this artistic revolution already developed in *seidou*’s PhD thesis.<sup>6</sup>

In November 2018, a group of blaxTARLINES artists and writers traveled to Makhanda in the Eastern Cape, South Africa, where they participated in the workshop Publishing and Research of the South: Positioning Africa (PROSPA) run by the Arts of Africa and Global Souths research program at Rhodes University.<sup>7</sup> The goals of the workshop were to plan this special issue on blaxTARLINES; to

engage in a dialogue about the roles of publishing and collaboration in arts and research programs; and to provide participants with the opportunity to meet with postgraduate students and participate in a studio critique (Figs. 1–2). The workshop was hosted by Ruth Simbao and Stephen Foláránmí (who at the time was a postdoctoral fellow in the program), and they were joined by the Arts Council of the African Studies Association (ACASA) President Elect/VP Peju Layiwola from the University of Lagos. Cognizant that *kařĩkacha seidou* at times refuses to travel (particularly beyond the African continent due to his Pan-Africanist beliefs and ideals), the presence of the blaxTARLINES godfather was momentous. Other blaxTARLINES participants were Ibrahim Mahama, Dorothy Amenuke, Edwin Bodjawah, George Ampratwum (Buma) and Kwaku Bofo Kissiedu (Castro).<sup>8</sup>

During our dialogue on “reaching sideways” and forms of collaboration that resonate with our respective programs, Layiwola remarked on the importance of these collaborations taking place on the African continent, for “most of the times we find ourselves meeting our African brothers and sisters in the US or Europe.” Stepping into his shoes as the blaxTARLINES ambassador, Kissiedu shared an Asante Twi proverb that speaks to the need for academics to collaborate and to be flexible

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*african arts* presents original research and critical discourse on traditional, contemporary, and popular African arts and expressive cultures. Since 1967, the journal has reflected the dynamism and diversity of several fields of humanistic study, publishing richly illustrated articles in full color, incorporating the most current theory, practice, and intercultural dialogue. The journal offers readers peer-reviewed scholarly articles concerning a striking range of art forms and visual cultures of the world’s second-largest continent and its diasporas, as well as special thematic issues, book and exhibition reviews, features on museum collections, exhibition previews, artist portfolios, photo essays, edgy dialogues, and editorials. *african arts* promotes investigation of the interdisciplinary connections among the arts, anthropology, history, language, politics, religion, performance, and cultural and global studies. All articles have been reviewed by members of the editorial board.

in doing so: “*Nnipa ye de nanso yennwe ne nam,*” which can be translated as, “Humans are tasty but their meat is not eaten.”<sup>10</sup> The proverb stresses the importance and pleasure of relationships and connections, as humans are inherently pleasant and sociable beings. This playful proverb suggests that humans are as desirable and pleasing as food that is considered to be a delicacy, but it immediately adds that humans are not meant to be eaten. Importantly, the reference to the human being here is devoid of gender, race, class, or any other consideration. With reference to flexibility in academia, it suggests that academics need be open to wisdom and knowledge from people outside of their circles, and that in expanding connections beyond geographic, cultural and other barriers, we can learn from what it means to be human.

Collaboration needs to grow organically, and it is critical for it to evolve from meaningful relationship. In the current knowledge economy that is “characterized by three interdependent strategies: privatization, marketization, and internationalization” (Sakhiyya and Rata 2019: 285), it is easy for collaboration itself to be treated as a commodity. Knowledge is increasingly measured through metrics and systems designed to reveal which universities are deemed “world class.” While the quantification of metrics might calculate activity, and internationalization might reflect a certain scope of reach, the measurement of activity fails to ask “what it *means*” (Sakhiyya and Rata 2019: 291; emphasis added). Many funding institutions similarly follow internationalization agendas, and although certain forms of collaboration might be highly prized, they are sometimes valued for the wrong reason. While there was a time when universities in the global south<sup>11</sup> might have prided themselves on formal collaboration with institutions in the global north, the tables have turned. Such collaborations might, of course, still hold genuine value, but it is important to soberly recognize the degree to which it has become fashionable for institutions in the north to collaborate with “the south.” In what ways might this fashion drive a commodification of collaboration and a romanticization thereof? How does the locally grown collaborative model of blaxTARLINES demonstrate resistance to commodification and the glamorization of partnership and cooperation?

In our group dialogue that took place in Makhanda, we addressed these questions and talked about some of the struggles of collaboration—either struggles that unexpectedly arise or struggles that are consciously mobilized for common political action. As *seidou* suggested, collective engagement inevitably involves some form of struggle.<sup>12</sup> Ampratwum urged us to consider the history of collaboration in the arts, particularly the organic collaboration that led to revolutions, art movements,

and new initiatives. There are often sacrifices involved in collaborations when they push beyond being perfunctory exercises, and when they seep into the crevices of our daily lives. “People generally want collaborations to be smooth,” stressed Ampratwum, “but we have to *stretch* ourselves for something to *really* happen ... Perhaps we can call collaboration a comforting-discomforting situation, as there is comfort in offering oneself and sometimes discomfort in terms of what one loses.”<sup>13</sup>

While formal higher education worldwide has fallen into the trap of box-ticking exercises that shift knowledge from being “priceless” to “priced” (Sakhiyya and Rata 2019), as the blaxTARLINES collective demonstrates in the five articles that follow, artists, curators, and writers who are based within universities are, indeed, able to successfully intervene from within these structures. Further, these articles reveal ways in which university-based scholars are able to engage within society in pertinent and relevant ways. As Edwin Bodjawah reminded us, there are many different people who operate within blaxTARLINES and intersect with their programs, including, for example, volunteers (some of whom model Ampratwum, who volunteered at KNUST long before he was employed), as well as the collaborators outside of universities and museums that Ibrahim Mahama, for example, works with in his artistic practice.<sup>14</sup>

As Mahama explained at our workshop, depth of relationship and room for spontaneity are critical to the creation of his outdoor installations. For him, connections have been built over many years and extend beyond the university and artworld into communities, including negotiations with chiefs, landowners, and people in the railway sector. While formalized funding in universities can problematically be used to prize certain knowledges over others, “sometimes the lack of resources” explained Mahama, “can be viewed as a resource itself. When you don’t have something then it pushes you to think about the conditions of the thing itself, and those conditions can become pertinent to how you work as an artist.”<sup>15</sup> “Collaborators come from those conditions,” he added, “and the way that you organize the relationships that you build with people contributes to the phenomenon itself. When it is outside [of a museum space], it is spontaneous.”<sup>16</sup>

Perhaps two of the most important ingredients of the blaxTARLINES model of networking and collaborating are spontaneity and life experience. As Dorothy Amenuke stressed, “art is not an object. It is an experience,”<sup>17</sup> and collaboration that fails to extend into the grit of life is inevitably limited in terms of agency, interconnectedness, and long-term reward. When collaboration grows out of condition, it might “start with one thing but goes in a different direction, perhaps producing something else that is closer to you and counter

to what you expected.”<sup>18</sup> This revolutionary spirit of collaboration that is characteristically ground-up and gritty, and is imbued in everything that blaxTARLINES does, is elaborated upon in the five articles that follow. While discomfort, struggle and the sometimes-difficult extension of self still exist, this flow and spontaneity that sums up the way this network operates, was explained evocatively by *kari’kacha seidou* with this tale:

There is a story about the crow and a millipede. The crow has two legs, and the millipede has, let’s say a hundred legs.

Then the crow asked the millipede: “Millipede, which of your legs do you move first?”

The moment the crow asked that and the millipede began to think about it, it got stuck, because it had to go through all hundred legs to think through which one it had to move first.<sup>19</sup>

## Notes

1 Although blaxTARLINES was named in 2015, it has been operating in various forms for over a decade. It acknowledges the support of the following people: El Anatsui, Agyeman Ossei, Godfried Donkor, Odile Tèvie, Kofi Setordji, Adwoa Amoah, Ato Annon, Mahmoud Malik Saako, Marwan Zakhem, Senam Okudzeto, Elvira Dyangani Ose, Willem de Rooij, Sam Durant, Jacob Jari, Lone Dalsgaard André, Niels Staats, Mary Evans, Touria El Glaoui, Stephanie Dieckvoss, Wendelien van Oldenborgh, Helen Legg, Francesca Migliorati, Philippe Pirotti, Martina Copper, Susan Furni, Silvia Forni, Karen Alexander, Nana Oforiatta Ayim, Atta Kwami, Ama Ata Aidoo, Owusu Ankomah, Ayò Akinwándé, Folakunle Oshun Nana G. Asante, Yolanda Choïs Rivera, Evans Mireku Kissi (Dj Steloo Live), Francis Kokoroko, Daniel Mawuli Quist, Jelle Bouwhuis, Kwame Aidoo, Sir Black, Rebecca M. Nagy, Susan Cooksey, Alissa Jordan, Aicha Diallo, Shalom Gorewitz, Ruth Simbao, Peter Campbell, Morten Cramer, Rachel Hadas, Leni Hoffman, Anette Flink, Kerryn Greenberg, Julia Gyemant, Violet Nantume, Frances Bartkowska, Giovanna Tissi, Elsbeth Gerner Nielsen, Lisa Soto, Romuald Hazoumé, Mareike Stolley, Julie Lipsius, Steven Riskin, Elikem Nutifafa Kuenyehia, and Stephanie Soleansky.

2 The African Arts Institute ATAE networking meeting took place at the University of Cape Town from November 20–December 1, 2015.

3 The African Arts Institute, <https://www.facebook.com/africanartsinstitute/>

4 The African Arts Institute, <https://www.facebook.com/africanartsinstitute/>

5 Kissiedu acknowledges the contribution of SaNSa and the Triangle Network to a number of his travels abroad that helped to affirm his belief in what *seidou* was exposing them to and what was happening at the Kumasi Art Academy.

6 See Nagy and Jordan (2018: 1–4) for a discussion of *kari’kacha seidou’s* PhD thesis (*Theoretical Foundations of the KNUST Painting Programme: A Philosophical Inquiry and Its Contextual Relevance in Ghanaian Culture*), and his role in transforming the department.

7 This program has been running since 2017. It is based in the Fine Art Department at Rhodes University and is funded by the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation and the National Research Foundation (NRF) of the Department of Science and Innovation in South Africa. Simbao acknowledges funding from Mellon and the NRF for the 2018 PROSPA workshop. Thanks to Shirley Kabwato for assisting with travel arrangements.

8 Thank you to Pamela Nichols, the director of the Wits University Writing Centre, who ran a couple of sessions during the workshop.

9 Layiwola, PROSPA workshop dialogue at the Arts Lounge, Rhodes University, Makhanda, November 21, 2018.

10 Kissiedu, PROSPA workshop dialogue.

11 We choose not to capitalize “global south,” as our understanding of this concept is not dependent on geographic coordinates. Instead, we view the “global south” as a complex term that draws from historical

social and political injustices associated with geopolitical formations and articulations of power.

- 12 seid'ou, PROSPA workshop dialogue.
- 13 Ampratwum, PROSPA workshop dialogue.
- 14 Bodjawah, PROSPA workshop dialogue.
- 15 Mahama, PROSPA workshop dialogue.
- 16 Mahama, PROSPA workshop dialogue.
- 17 Amenuke, PROSPA workshop dialogue.
- 18 seid'ou, PROSPA workshop dialogue.
- 19 seid'ou, PROSPA workshop dialogue.

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## blaxTARLINES KUMASI special issue participants

**kar'k'achä seid'ou** is a nonobservant artist, poet, silent humorist, and willful homeboy. He is Ghana's key figure in nonproprietary art and the architect of the Emancipatory Art Teaching project which transformed the fine art curriculum of the Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology (KNUST), Kumasi, at the turn of the century. He is a cofounder of blaxTARLINES KUMASI, a contemporary art hub, incubator, and open-source community and heads its teams of collaborators on its projects.

**Kwaku Bofo Kissiedu (Castro)** is a cofounder and the administrative director of blaxTARLINES, KUMASI. He is a senior lecturer at the famed Fine Art Department of the Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology, Kumasi, Ghana, where he, and other colleagues, have pioneered revolutionary changes in fine art pedagogy, turning out emerging artists who are making waves worldwide.

**George Ampratwum (Buma)** is an artist, exhibition maker, art market professional, and a lecturer at the Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology-Kumasi. He is one of the leading cadre of avant-garde tutors, led by kar'k'achä seid'ou in the Department of Painting and Sculpture, KNUST, which spearheaded the radical ruptures and resurgence of young Ghanaian contemporary artists on the world stage.

**Edwin Kwesi Bodjawah** is an artist, associate professor in the Department of Painting and Sculpture, KNUST, and the coordinator of the Opoku Ware II Museum at KNUST. He is a principal trustee and patron of blaxTARLINES, KUMASI. Through de commissioned materials he researches serial reproduction of African mask forms.

**Michael Adashie** is a lecturer and researcher in hand paper making at the Department of Painting and Sculpture, KNUST. He is also a patron of blaxTARLINES.

**Dorothy Akpene Amenuke** lives and works in Kumasi, Ghana. She has an MA in art education and an MFA and a PhD in sculpture. Currently, she is senior lecturer in the Department of Painting and Sculpture, KNUST, Kumasi, Ghana. She directed the International Women Artists Workshop (IWAWO 2009) organized by Art In Aktion and currently coordinates OFKOB Artists' Residency in Ghana. Her work *How Far How Near?* is in the collection of Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam (SMA).

**Bernard Akoi-Jackson** is a Ghanaian artist, curator, and educator who lives and works from Tema/Accra/Kumasi. He holds a PhD in painting and sculpture from KNUST, where he also lectures. His multidisciplinary, audience-implicating works have featured in exhibitions across the world. He has co-curated exhibitions with blaxTARLINES KUMASI. His most recent engagement is co-curating the newly established Stellenbosch Triennale, which opened in February 2020 in South Africa.

**Ibrahim Mahama** is a Ghanaian artist who uses the transformation of materials to explore themes of commodity, migration, globalization,

and economic exchange. Often made in collaboration with others, his large-scale installations employ materials gathered from urban environments. He is the founder of the artist-run project space Savannah Centre for Contemporary Art (SCCA) in Tamale, Ghana, and Red Clay in nearby Janna Kpeɲɲ. He is a PhD student at the Department of Painting and Sculpture in KNUST, Kumasi.

**Kezia Ouomoye Owusu-Ankomah** is a PhD candidate at the Department of Painting and Sculpture, KNUST. She is a multidimensional art practitioner who merges her practice with artists, curators, and other creatives within the context of the ecological, fictional, and historical narratives.

**Robin Riskin** is an independent curator, pursuing her practice-based PhD at KNUST in Kumasi, Ghana, in association with blaxTARLINES KUMASI.

**Kwasi Ohene-Ayeh** is a curator and critic based in Kumasi, Ghana. He is a PhD student at KNUST, Kumasi.

**Adjo Kissar** is a PhD student of the Department of Painting and Sculpture in KNUST. She is an artist whose fascination with drawing has evolved into an interest in community-focused projects. For the past six years, she's been an active member of the blaxTARLINES collective.

**Selom Koffi Kudjie** is an artist and a curator whose practice is informed by drawing as a medium to reflect on the mediation technological objects in our social relations. He is a PhD student at KNUST, Kumasi.

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**Patrick Nii Okanta Ankra** is an artist and curator who has participated in multiple exhibition projects of blaxTARLINES KUMASI and the Department of Painting and Sculpture, KNUST, Kumasi.

**Billie McTernan** is a writer, artist, and editor whose practice considers ways of expanding the possibilities of writing, by experimenting with form. She is completing an MFA at the Department of Painting and Sculpture at KNUST in Kumasi.

# Talking, Stuttering, Speaking Whilst Listening Intently for a Promise of Egalitarian Regeneration

## A Five-Way Conversation

**Bernard Akoi-Jackson, Ibrahim Mahama, Kwasi Ohene-Ayeh, Tracy Naa Koshie Thompson, and *kari'kachä seid'ou***

**T**his has been a conversation long in the making. We have been talking. We have sometimes been stuttering and we've been speaking too. And whilst doing these and many more, we've been listening and very intently as well—because, what is a conversation if individuals only speak at each other? Listening is a necessity. As the actual words begin to gather and somehow crystalize into something more coherent, we have been at it, even in those nebulous moments when concepts may have been stronger than form or when form, seeking realization, would have danced with ideas until something not so palpable, begins to emerge. First, it will look like smoke, or even haze, in the long distance, then slowly but surely something appears ... this is the route that this conversation has taken to get here ...

***kari'kachä seid'ou* (ks):** Probably, we could start this conversation with this quote from 23-year-old Ibrahim Mahama's statement for a BFA exhibition project in Kumasi, Ghana, in 2010.

[My work] raises questions, makes projections and puts everything in life on an equal ground ... Found objects and collected pieces from different places are incorporated into my works to discuss the concept of a free world, society, and further raise arguments about the quality of life (Mahama 2010: n.p.).

That was five years before his global "visibility" in the international Biennale circuits, first at the invitation of Okwui Enwezor, as the youngest artist ever to be featured in the Venice Biennale. Yet, back here in Ghana, before this worldwide prominence, he already indulged in the sophisticated conversations that surround his practice today. Silent conversations and collaborative projects have been going on in the blaxTARLINES community for more than a decade now. The subjects of this five-way conversation have had their share of such conversations and collaborations. Kwasi Ohene-Ayeh, Bernard Akoi-Jackson, and yours truly have been collaborators with Mahama on several projects, including the *Exchange Exchanger* publication (Akoi-Jackson and Ohene-Ayeh

2017). Tracy Naa Koshie Thompson, who features in the debut Stellenbosch Triennale with Mahama, Kelvin Haizel, and Asafo Black collective—a project curated by Khanyisile Mbongwa and Bernard—has co-curated Agyeman Ossei's retrospective with Kwasi Ohene-Ayeh and Adwoa Amoah. Kwasi, what insights can you tease out of the Mahama quote?

**Kwasi Ohene-Ayeh (KO-A):** Many thanks *kari'*. blaxTARLINES espouses the tripartite democratic ideals of political commitment and intellectual and economic emancipation. Exponents of this paradigm trace their practices, whether directly or indirectly, to your Emancipatory Art Teaching Project—whose principal premise can be stated as the "hope to transform art from commodity to gift" (*seid'ou* & Bouwhuis, 2015/2019: 193). Here, pedagogy is operationalized as a decoy for affirmative and emancipatory politics—to liberate and explore the universal and anagrammatic potential of art (*seid'ou*, 2015). All of us in this conversation have benefited from this subversive intervention in the KNUST art curriculum. How does each of you approach the idea of "Democracy" in your practice?

**Tracy Naa Koshie Thompson (TNKT):** *kari'*s "still-life" class opened me to questioning dichotomies of subject-object, nature-culture and so on, which led to my interests in processes of mutation and plasticity. This has involved postproducing contemporary Ghanaian foods into mutant forms. Through this biochemical mutation involving the intelligence of bacteria, yeast, and fungus, now more than ever I am confronted with facing the "sanitization" implementations of the global COVID-19 pandemic. Democracy, as dynamic as it could be, is being forged in new ways as a pandemic forces us to not easily dismiss the active agency of viruses (like-wise microbes, fungi, and prions) which are drastically changing "human" culture: from manipulating human movement, to instilling a fear of fomites like that of paper money, and my bioplastic substrates that can be congenial for microbial colonization and viral persistence. Microbial colonization is often put into contention against the wills and freedoms of humans and my process of

I Bernard Akoi-Jackson  
View from REDTAPEONBOTTLENECK iteration.  
*Untitled: (Vestige: Systems. BLOCKS. Standards)*  
(2015) installation and participatory performance  
in the exhibition *Material Effects*  
Eli and Edythe Broad Museum, Michigan State  
University, East Lansing  
Photo: Aaron Word.



temporarily “sanitizing” substrates with hydrogen peroxide anti-septic agent reveals these concerns and contradictions. The question we all face is, “What does it mean to now live with a ‘virus’?”

**Bernard Akoi-Jackson (BA-J):** “Democracy,” for me, is premised on the potentiality inherent in the equality of intellect for all people, an idea that comes to me via *kɔ̀rɔ̀*’*kachã* seid’ou’s expansion of the Rancièrian concept of “egalitarianism.” This fundamental condition hinges on, or necessitates an equality of access, which in a general sense, should place all people on equal terms of experience. It should be the fundamental condition for all and sundry. This tends to be easy to espouse in theoretical terms, but becomes a rather complex issue in practice. The difficulty stems from the fact that “intellectual equality” cannot be equated to “equality of access.” There is a financial handicap that determines “access” in such a way that excludes the participation of masses of people in any so-called commonwealth. Of course, reference here is not made to what remains of the British Empire, but that which should be commonly available to all humankind. In the neoliberal capitalist economy, the commonwealth is usually annexed by an elite few and everyone else becomes a miserable pawn, excluded from engaging in the common affairs of humankind.

**Ibrahim Mahama (IM):** I find the question of democracy an interesting one, particularly given the form my work takes. Starting with the position of “art as a gift,” it has always been important within my practice to produce forms which take the politics of artistic production into account while also expanding experiences. The various contradictions within capital can sometimes allow us new ways of experiencing what we could easily take for granted in the world. Building both SCCA Tamale and Red Clay in Tamale in the northern region of Ghana was a truly democratic exercise. It borrowed ideas from old, abandoned public spaces like the brutalist silos around Ghana and sections of the railways or even postindependence factories to form these two spaces. The point was to introduce these spaces into communities which have been historically neglected with regards to infrastructure while also exploring the new tensions and aspirations that come with this intervention. After all, democracy is not always about agreeing on common forms but

also exploring existing tensions and using that as a new starting point to reexamine our relationship with the world around us.

**ks:** Exactly, Ibrahim. The political subject of democracy is not a subject of consensus or harmony. Likewise, the field of democracy is not a melting pot. Perhaps, we could make some inferences from Jorge Luis Borges’ famous line: “A book which does not contain its counterbook is considered incomplete . . .” (1964: 29). In a similar vein, democracy promises to be a space of the common, a universal space, yet it cannot but present itself as incomplete—I claim that concretely it is always-already voided of its counterbook. However, paradoxically, democracy’s universalist promise, coupled with its failure to be a “complete book,” makes the promise of social change or revolution possible. This seems to tie in well with your [Ibrahim’s] persistent engagement with failure as a medium for affirmative politics.

I know that as modern Ghanaians, it is more likely than not that we encounter ancestral veneration on a daily basis; we make libation and speak to the departed as if they are neither dead nor alive. Rancièrè’s days seem to be over with curators today but Kwasi and Bernard, like the Ghanaians that you are, you seem to be invoking the “Ghanaian time machine” of making libation to ancestors. I get the impression that you are directing us to restage Mahama’s *Parliament of Ghosts* with a theme called *Specters of Rancièrè*. In any case, Mahama’s recent work demonstrates that excavations of ghostly futures embedded in the past are ways to recode contemporaneity. And Derrida connects to this when he says to Pascale Ogier in *Ghost Dance* that “The future belongs to ghosts” (Derrida and Stiegler 2002: 115). On the subject of democracy, what is to be taken into account is that equality of intelligences or equality in general is not a destination. Otherwise, it behooves some power, privileged class, or humanitarian to bestow it on another. This is the problem I find with liberal politics. Rather, Rancièrè makes equality preemptive, the starting point for all. Equality is an axiom to declare in the affirmation of democracy, universality, and access to the common (2004: 49–66). The *demos*, the subject excluded from universal participation in equality, the subject denied access to the common, the “part-that-is-no-part” affirms democracy when they



2 Workers at Sekondi Locomotive workshop, 2016.  
Photo: courtesy Ibrahim Mahama

declare “but we are all equal?” and affirms it in political action.

To come to your point about access to the commons, Bernard, I see your contribution tilting towards class politics and indeed Rancière’s anarchist model needs supplementing. Class politics seems to be a taboo subject these days because the “culturalization of politics” and its supplement—what Srnicek and Williams (2015) have called “folk politics”—have become common sense. Human finitude<sup>1</sup> remains the dogma that gives grounds to the pervasive cynicism about all grand goals. “True commitment to a cause” is typically characterized as the real tragedy or “monstrosity” of our times (Coombs 2016: 8). The recent array of political struggles in the vein of “folk politics,” as described by Williams and Srnicek, has involved “the fetishisation of local spaces, immediate actions, transient gestures, and particularisms of all kinds.” In sharp contrast, the authors recommend undertaking “the difficult labor of expanding and consolidating gains” rather than focusing on “building bunkers to resist the encroachments of global neoliberalism” or engaging in “a politics of defence, incapable of articulating or building a new world” (2015: 1–2). So economic self-determination and a resolve to invent the future beyond the “distribution of the sensible” are at the heart of democratic politics in the blaxTARLINES Coalition.

Furthermore, Tracy, your contribution exposes what “humanists” like Rancière and a host of artists who are caught in the vicious cycle of “exhibiting their art work to someone”<sup>2</sup> hardly take into account, especially, the agency and *umwelt* of nonhuman actors—animals, technological players, substances, things, and conditions. I take from your work and thought that the universalist disposition of democracy is better served when the *demos* is made to be a subject contemporaneous with and sensitive to both human and nonhuman co-actors.

**KO-A:** *kari*, could you shed some light on the role, as well as promise, of pedagogy in emancipatory politics today? In other words, what does pedagogy as such have to do with artistic freedom in the twenty-first century, and what does it mean to go on what you have called “artistic strike” (to “stop “making art” symbolically and to inaugurate a practice of “making artists”)? And also, how would this relate to the egalitarian notion of the “vanishing mediator”?

**ks:** Well Kwasi, let me take a detour and share a little bit of a history lesson to give some context. It is easy to look at the elevated Ghanaian art scene today and forget about the depths from which we have come. Even though we at blaxTARLINES work with the view that “contemporary art” is not our destination, there is this view in the mainstream art communities and marketplace that Ghana has finally arrived. We know that before the turn of the century, except for the diaspora and a very sparse community of artists on the continent, Ghana was a blank spot on the contemporary art map. All surviving art spaces in the capital that are making the contemporary art scene lively today have emerged in the twenty-first century.<sup>3</sup> The earliest was Foundation for Contemporary Art (established in 2004).<sup>4</sup> I see petty fiefdoms developing around certain individuals, institutions, and cultural brokers, some clearly positioning themselves strategically to build traction. But what can one expect from the field of “contemporary art” which in its conceptual art ancestry attempted to subvert the workings of late capitalism but rather found itself helplessly plunged into the whirlpool of the neoliberal capitalist machine which succeeded it?

Indeed, the role and promise of pedagogy in emancipatory politics, using the blaxTARLINES story, go back to some challenges posed by the postcolonial modernist exhibition cultures, educational and market structures that were in place in Ghana before the turn of the century. The major challenges were a compulsive aversion for radical difference in those cultures, a failure to monitor real-time developments in the international art world, and a lag behind revisionist discourses introduced by the so-called contemporary art turn. Before enrolling at KNUST, I had had the unique experience and good fortune of working in the streets of Accra in the mid- to late-1980s. There, even though some practices were codified, you combined, collided, or crossed media and genres. Some jobs demanded that the artist combine photographic processes with traditional painting techniques, fashion and graphic design, electrical and mechanical contraptions, and engagement with institutions and social processes through canvassing protocols and so forth. “Exhibition” was not separate from studio activity, they were coextensive; the artist’s body could be seen in public performance together with the emergent artifact in real time. To repurpose these cues in the remit of contemporary art, one probably only needed to deoperationalize or deinstrumentalize them. Meanwhile, such cues were proscribed in the KNUST curriculum, where the typical fine art student was the one who, prior to their enrollment, had passed A-level examinations which constituted a set of three-hour “snapshot” exercises, the pictorial example being social realist exercises on a prescribed size and quality of paper and medium. This harked back to the craft-based British National Diploma in Design (NDD) intermediate examinations of the colonial era. The beaux-arts curriculum of KNUST was equally British and prescriptive but with an updated heritage—the commonwealth of art curricula inspired by the First Coldstream report of 1960s. In place of the centralized nondegree NDD curriculum, the Coldstream report recommended a decentralized degree curriculum with Bauhaus foundation course as a necessary footing and a compulsory art history component which was unfortunately Eurocentric. As you can see from Dean E.V. Asihene (2004), the Kumasi version ended with abstract expressionism. Students devised means to explore their unique visions, generically called

“style,” within these bounds set for them. The challenge for me was how to go through the given, rupture it, and set loose its immanent potentials. In this new universe, students would set their own bounds and take responsibility.

Inspired by this project, I formulated a maxim in which I had punned: “In art, any Shit can be a hit, provided there is no S to disturb it” (Amankwah 1996; Woets 2011, 2012). That was at KNUST in the early 1990s. The maxim had carried the simple message that in the field of art, there is “neither Jew nor gentile,” no queen (or king) of the arts. I got into a lot of trouble for various reasons. The slogan found its way into my MFA painting thesis as the concluding remark. But it also embodied my political outlook at the time and the aspiration of a couple of MFA colleagues who were breaking new grounds with work that seemed “deskilled,” “dematerialized,” “playful,” or “conceptual” and thus heretical to the beaux-arts inclined faculty in Kumasi and the extended modern art communities in Accra. However, the maxim became the rallying slogan for the new spirit that intensified with the maturing of the millennial generation, who became the succeeding “evangelists” of contemporary art and the bearers of stigma. I can speak of my earlier collaborators like Hacajaka (in the mid to late 1990s), and Bernard Akoi-Jackson (in the early 2000s) who stormed Accra after their schooling in Kumasi. Of the two, Hacajaka left for the US in the late 1990s so it was Bernard whose genre-defying practice tutored a host of millennials in Accra and sustained the field by working with several emerging institutions and collectives. Today, the stories of Foundation for Contemporary Art–Ghana, Nubuke Foundation, Ehalakasa, @theStudioAccra, Chale Wote Street Art Festival, have had significant intersections with the transformations that had happened earlier in Kumasi through Bernard and colleagues, and proteges.

I had introduced the use of the body in a series of silent guerrilla performances and institutional critique in 1993 and had begun to extend them into concrete social practice by the mid 1990s. Since Ghana was a late arrival in terms of the transgressive artistic avant-garde, this was a pioneering event in Ghana’s modern art circles. The one among them that got fairly documented was the culture-jamming of February 1994 KNUST Congregation (Amankwah 1996; Kwami 2013; Woets 2011, 2012). I remember Laboratoire Agit-art later became a point of interest for me when the texts for Africa ’95 began to circulate globally. I did not know about Huit Facettes until quite later. Other members of a loose group of the pioneer MFA students of KNUST, to which I belonged, also challenged the hegemony of the beaux-arts curriculum with their work. I learnt a lot from Caterina Niklaus, a May ’68 exponent and alumnus of the Goldsmiths of the Damien Hirst ’80s generation, who fired my interest in the so-called second wave and French poststructuralist feminist discourse. Emmanuel Vincent (Papa) Essel (Magee 2010) intensified my interest in Black radicalism. Agyeman Ossei (Dota), a coopted member, was my discussant on Kwame Nkrumah, pan-African literature, and theater. Kwamivi Zewuze Adzraku’s exceptional wit was articulated through parodic juxtapositions of used objects and improvisations with site-specificity. The group found Atta Kwami most agreeable among the lecturers.<sup>5</sup> He was principally a painter and printmaker whose pictorial structure bore superficial resemblance to Sean Scully, somehow at the interface between lyrical and geometric abstraction. For the simple reason that his works appeared nonfigurative (even though their referents were often structural and optical forms and sounds of Kumasi city

culture), they were stigmatized by members of the beaux-arts faculty some of whom were the masters of Ghana’s modern art in the commercial galleries. Some of these Ghanaian masters were also the protagonists of Ghana’s modern art in texts principally written by White anthropologists who found their works to be the veritable illustrations of modern Ghanaian culture. Atta Kwami’s participation in the Triangle Arts Trust workshops of Shave (August 1994) and Tenq (September 1994) had expanded the scope of his experimental practice. Naturally, my colleagues and I would collaborate with him and Agyeman Ossei (Dota) for workshops and the last editions of Kwami’s *Bambolse* journal in 1995. The failure of this group’s interventions to effect lasting changes to the Kumasi curriculum despite our subversive intent convinced me that another way had to be found to resurrect its revolutionary potential. This is where the Emancipatory Art Teaching<sup>6</sup> project I introduced in 2003 in Kumasi, the progenitor of blaxTARLINES, comes in. The role that my early collaborators such as Kwaku Bofo Kissiedu (Castro), Bernard Akoi-Jackson, Dorothy Amenuke, George Ampratwum (Buma), Edwin Bodjawah, and sundry others have played is a subject for another discussion.

By the early to mid 1990s when I was schooling there, KNUST was the only degree-awarding art academy in Ghana so it had a strategic and defining role in formulating and shaping the ideological framework of modern art practice. The major galleries were Frances Ademola’s The Loom, the National Arts Center gallery, and the lobbies of new brands of luxury hotels in Accra such as Golden Tulip Hotel, Novotel, and Labadi Beach Hotel. Ablade Glover’s Artists’ Alliance was established in this period and came to repeat Frances Ademola’s model on a larger scale. These galleries operated first as sales points but they were also unofficial art schools, especially, for young students of KNUST, Ghanatta College of Art and Design<sup>7</sup> in Accra, and self-trained artists who learnt from the typically male Ghanaian masters who got displayed or sold in the galleries. Painting was the queen of the arts so there were indeed Jews, and there were the gentiles who were preemptively shut out. So, it was this exclusionary and gentrifying space that my genre-defying practice, my pedagogical project and the exapted forms of my collaborators and kindred spirits have collectively managed to subvert. This event introduced a blank sheet potentially open to all, including the old hegemonic order which becomes a stain in the new picture if one continues to stand at where they used to be. If today, the generations after me can look back and see the significance of my work within this transformative event, what can I say than that my practice could not have had this reach if its form were not scalable in some way. The scalable form is the cognitive “gift-form” into which I translated my practice after its total dematerialization in the mid-1990s. This form is an embodiment of what Marx referred to as the general intellect,<sup>8</sup> by which he meant “collective knowledge in all its forms” (Žižek 2012a). The “gift-form” of the general intellect is, to borrow Gould and Lewontin’s (1979) architectural-biological trope, a spandrel that can be exapted, more or less than adapted, in ways that it was not intended for. In short, it is an a priori multiple—a void. Even if commodified, it is never exhaustible. It is a code form more than a representational form, yet it can take representational (symbolic) form just as it can translate into material form and forms of life. It is posthuman, in that as code it is already an abstract machine and amenable to automation.

The shift from “making art” to “making artists,” or from the “work of art” to the “art of work,” is one of the contingent means by which I deploy the gift-form in my practice. You see, if you make art, you can claim it to be your work and you can justifiably claim it to be your property in capitalist terms. However, if you make artists, you can’t claim them to be your work; more importantly, you can’t claim them to be your property unless you wish to reinstitute chattel slavery.

I become a vanishing mediator because I am just a node in the complex network of effects that the pedagogic code can instantiate. The effects of my gift come back to overwhelm me and I am both pedagogue and learner. This is why the figure of the Ignorant Schoolmaster appealed to me in the early years of the Emancipatory Art Teaching Project. My “students,” whom I see as collaborators, can use the gift in their own ways like Fröebellian exercises without their physical constraints. Yet, they are entitled to refuse it too.

**KO-A:** Right. This instance of actualizing emancipatory politics in the field of art as cultural commons speaks to Bernard’s earlier point on democracy. Permit me to elaborate a point you have made about the erstwhile KNUST curriculum, *kaři*.<sup>7</sup> In your unpublished PhD dissertation<sup>9</sup> you identify, apropos Elliot Wayne Eisner, three interrelated components of the form and content of the KNUST Painting Programme’s curriculum thus: the explicit or official curriculum, the “implicit” or hidden curriculum and the “null” or missing curriculum (seid’ou 2006: 294–97). In this sequence, the “picture theory of art” constituted the bedrock of officialdom and functioned in the explicit curriculum, while the “virtual but real” hidden curriculum operated on the bourgeois capitalist assumption of the genius artist whose legitimacy is hinged on the production of portable and potentially saleable paintings. This, as you go on to explain, accounts for the invisibility of Huit Facettes, Laboratoire Agit’Art, Maria Campos-Pons, Zwelethu Mthethwa, Pascale Marthine Tayou, Berni Searle, Chris Offili, and other relevant histories in the painting curriculum, in relation to the privileging of pre-World War II Euro-American modernist figures and movements. And this is where the hidden and null curricula overlapped prior to your artistic-pedagogic interventionist project.

**ks:** Yes, you’re right. The PhD research, which revealed all these, was undertaken from 2001 to 2005. A lot of preparation had been made before I joined the faculty in 2003 and launched the Emancipatory Art Teaching Project. I had the opportunity to evaluate data taken when I was not yet a teacher there and compare outcomes with data taken when I became a teacher there. I had tested some of my methods and forms of my politically committed social practice in pilot projects in Fumbisi and Navrongo (Upper East Region) with high school students between 1998 and 2001. Castro [Kwaku Boafu Kissiedu], who was already teaching in the department, proved to be very helpful in the foundational years of the Emancipatory Teaching Project. He was the first lecturer who saw the need to merge his classes with mine. This proved decisive in subverting the atomistic teaching and learning pattern that had characterized the old curriculum. Buma [George Ampratwum] arrived later from his studies in international art markets and art evaluation from Kingston and challenged the curriculum from the market perspective. Bernard, Adwoa Amoah,<sup>10</sup> Dorothy Amenuke, Tagoe Turkson, Fatric Bewong,

and Robert Sarpong of blessed memory were among the early students I encountered in the first three years of my teaching. Bernard and Dorothy were special collaborators because as MFA students (2004–2006) they used to lend a hand in the critiques of undergraduate exhibitions which were spread out on campus, its suburbs and the heart of the city. Without exaggeration, these were already biennale-scale, averaging sixty solo exhibitions by sixty students per annum.

**KO-A:** Let me move on to the question of politics. There is what one can call the historical distinction between aesthetics and politics. But in our so-called contemporary epoch, this distinction seems to have collapsed. For example, with a nod to the Rancièrian genealogy of aesthetics and community, we can broadly speak of three regimes: 1) the ethical regime, which “prevents art from individualizing itself as such,” while functioning to maintain the ethos of community via consensus or harmony; 2) the representative regime, which operates on the logic of a hierarchy of genres and of community; and 3) the aesthetic regime,<sup>11</sup> which paradoxically identifies the “absolute singularity” of art, and is at the same time resistant to establishing any criterion for establishing this singularity based on an egalitarian vision of community.<sup>12</sup> Bernard and Ibrahim, what would you say is the place of “politics” as such in your output?

**BA-J:** For one who makes claims to, and makes evident in physical terms, a penchant to equal participation of all people, the idea of “politics” takes central stage in much of what I deem as my artistic work. But this claim to politics also puts a lot of responsibility in the design, execution, and experience of the work. This means that the aesthetic is politics and not a representation of it. I could illustrate this thus: there is usually a great amount of role-play in some of my artistic work and role reversals tend to be rife. People who, like myself and many others, are often at the butt of jokes (i.e., the so called marginalized, or in classical Marxist usage, the proletariat), may be assigned quite significant functions in my pieces. Much as these roles can be liberating to them, there’s also always a symbolic reality to them. They suddenly become empowered (at least in the moment), only to the extent that they are participating in a piece that is art. What I struggle with is how to facilitate an actual reversal of roles in more material terms (that is, after the symbolic moment). Maybe this is where seid’ou’s mode, which tackles the issues via pedagogy, would have more promise than my purely aesthetic approach, which, as I have hinted earlier, still hinges more on the symbolic.

**IM:** Politics in my work implies the understanding of labor and how to further open it up with various degrees of sensibilities. By intervening in an abandoned site, it speaks volumes and allows the community around it to relate to it in ways they wouldn’t have been able to without the intervention. I believe taking responsibility for things within our communal spaces, and history is very political and so is the neglect in understanding underlining conditions within our society which needs shifting. Politics, in my understanding, is some kind of event horizon, we need a lot of courage in order to escape our current reality at any given time in order to reach an unforeseen future.

**BA-J:** Aesthetics still relates to the symbolic. I am quite aware of the limitations inherent in aesthetics as politics. So that in my

so-called disruptive art practice, there would still be the need to venture a bit more into the real. This for me, will have to play out in the context of the class room, I guess. I am not totally ruling out the possibility of effecting change on the artistic field of play, I am just having to acknowledge the fact that the field of aesthetics still needs much more “disturbance,” and the laboratory of the contemporary class room should present me with the potential to attempt an engagement with the idea of transformation.

**IM:** Aesthetics is certainly political and that has an effect on form. By creating forms which are democratic, politics comes into play. When I conceived *The Parliament of Ghosts* in 2015 it was purely based on the aesthetics of the third-class coach seats from the trains used in Ghana in the twentieth century. With the history of the Ghana Railways and what it has produced over the last century in terms of labor, transportation, and infrastructure, one is simply aware of the kind of its politics. I believe a summary of the political history of institution is the manifestation of the aesthetics of the train seats and many other objects, including archives I have collected over the past years. In this way form can be extended instead of just relying on narrative.

**KO-A:** Let us now come to the participatory dimension of your practices. Taking into account the hierarchical or paternalistic distance that regulates the traditional experience of art, I can think of at least two more possibilities of separation: critical distance (summarized in the formula “not too near, not too far”), and egalitarian distance (which at the same time acknowledges and transcends this objective separation through various strategies: affirmation, reversal, indifference, “retroactive redemption,” and so on). *kaŕi*’s Emancipatory Art Teaching project introduced a reflexive and dynamic form of participation which, for me, employs both critical and egalitarian distances in the relationship between learner and pedagogue (here we can analogically substitute the two terms for spectator and artist respectively) such that the outcome of the engagement cannot be known beforehand since the encounter is premised on the will to participate in such an activity and the independence of the agents. Also necessary to this structure are two terms Ibrahim raises, responsibility and courage. How has this question of participation, human or otherwise, been approached in your respective practices?

**TNKT:** With regards to participation outside human engagement, I am often confronted with statements like, “You are wasting food to make ‘art’ which will not be eaten.” With the metabolism of food, it is difficult to separate that which is human and nonhuman as microbes live both outside and inside humans and nonhumans. They already occupy spaces through spores in the air and everywhere of which the bioplastic membranes I make from food are nutritious grounds for their colonization. They can be the “uninvited” participants changing the work of art; composing and decomposing beyond the control of the artist. In random systems of mold growth for instance, even a minute scale could trigger human allergies without the will of humans, as seen with Anicka Yi’s olfactory invasion into sanitized modern systems.

**BA-J:** My work originates from a host of collaborative gestures. But it is not only the gestures that matter. At the end of the day, “participation” becomes an embodied reality of the piece that emanates. It is central to the work’s existence and it is also the



3 Excavating Nkrumah Voli, 1966–2020 (2020).  
Photo: courtesy Ibrahim Mahama

machine that drives the piece to pieces ... (pun intended). In a typical manifestation of any of my so-called disturbed pieces, like the *Seeing Red* series or the *REDTAPEONBOTTLENECK*<sup>13</sup> (Fig. 1) iterations, there is very little room for “spectatorship” (here, I am referring to that modernist “disembodied eye,” that only “contemplates” an “autonomous object”), since everyone becomes actively implicated, via participation, in whatever is happening. Even where there is a chance of spectatorship, it is deliberately extracted, via technological means (often through live-feed systems) and projected onto an external façade of the venue in which the actual participatory performance is happening. There is no breathing room, literally. There is this cyclical relationship always at play, when my work is in production, because the production and its “exhibition” experience are interlaced ...

**ks:** So Bernard, *REDTAPEONBOTTLENECK* is one of your projects which I keep going back to in my notes. This is probably because bureaucracy and red-tapism, and their supplements such as bottlenecks, tedium, loss, and futility, are phenomena I repeatedly encounter and use in my practice while walking in the institutional corridors of power, the site where contemporary art arrived decades ago but disavows. I must confess that since I am already implicated in red-tapism and bureaucratic futility on the everyday level, I utilize the small window of spectatorship you are prepared to offer in your participatory project. I tend to contemplate and empathize in order to “participate” in your piece. I prefer to watch others take my place and reenact for me the absurdities in a system of self-making and worldmaking to which I compulsively keep returning like the repetitive game the baby plays in the Freudian “fort/da” scenario (Freud 1920/1990). My switch between participation in the everyday setting and the quasi-contemplation of the exhibition setting reminds me of a joke popularized by Simon Critchley (2008):

Two men, having had a drink or two, go to the theater, where they become thoroughly bored with the play. One of them feels an urgent need to urinate, so he tells his friend to mind his seat while he goes to find a toilet: “I think I saw one down the corridor outside.” The man wanders down the corridor, but finds no WC; wandering ever further into the recesses of the theater, he walks through a door and sees a plant pot. After copiously urinating into it and returning to his seat, his friend says to him, “What a pity! You missed the best part. Some fellow just walked on stage and pissed in that plant pot!”



4 Tracy Naa Koshie Thompson  
*Synt Illusion* (2017), installation view of synthetic  
 globule hanging from museum ceiling with  
 Sputnik model  
 Polystyrene (Styrofoam), polyvinyl chloride  
 (PVC) sheet, petrol; dimensions variable  
*Orderly Disorderly* (2017) KNUST end-of-year  
 exhibition organized by blaxTARLINES KUMASI.  
 Museum of Science and Technology, Accra  
 Photo: IUB

So in my practice which I have encoded into the everyday, I am the guy who urinates in the flowerpot of bureaucracy. Spontaneously invested in this activity, I am barred from seeing myself. As Žižek notes, “The subject necessarily misses its own act, it is never there to see its own appearance on the stage, its own intervention is the blind spot of its gaze” (2012b: 555). Then comes *REDTAPEONBOTTLENECK*, which plays back my uncritical investment in the bureaucratic act. Here, it takes my contemplation of the symbolic enactment to represent myself for me. In my contemplation, I become the subject who sees the urinating guy on stage. But you see that even this seeing is still a misrecognition because the subject mistakes the scene for a part of the play.

In the nineteenth century, Marx already began to outline the principal dynamics that, unbeknown to him, would come to constitute the political-economic engine of the neoliberal-capitalist future: “The corporations are the materialism of the bureaucracy, and the bureaucracy is the spiritualism of the corporations ... The corporation is civil society’s attempt to become state; but the bureaucracy is the state which has really made itself into civil society” (Marx 1970: para. 297). We know the part the corporation has played in the deregulation of markets and the globalization of economic exploitation and ecological gentrification. The rise of China’s Communist bureaucracy as the most efficient administrative apparatus of contemporary “corporate” capitalism appears to complete Marx’s model. Here, the corporation and its market forces coincide with the centralized bureaucratic state apparatus (the Chinese Communist Party) without remainder.<sup>14</sup> If centralized bureaucracy, which appears in your participatory commentary as laden with tedium, absurdities, frustration, wastefulness and bottlenecks, is nonetheless the optimal machine for effective capitalist

exploitation, then this field of irrationalities could become a principal locus of critique and transformation towards a postcapitalist future. Your fourteen-year engagement with the nightmares of bureaucracy that come back around as comedy could not have been more prescient. Confronted with your work, I censor myself from invoking Kafka!

**IM:** Participation is key to my artistic process. In 2012 when I began the *Occupation* series the idea was to basically extend the labor forms around the spaces, I was collecting the jute sacks into the production of the work. The material conditions of the market traders, head potters (locally called *kayayei* in the Ga language), hawkers and shoeshine boys were necessary for the physical manifestation of the artworks I was conceiving around the period. That was the same idea which led me to my research and work with the workers at the Sekondi Locomotive Workshop (Fig. 2) and much recently at the *Nkrumah Voli* or postindependence concrete silo in Tamale (Fig. 3). It’s not so much about showing work within the traditional institutional context but allowing the process of the work to unearth new forms.

**KO-A:** With respect to unearthing new forms, as Ibrahim puts it, how do notions of the immaterial function in the way you produce your art?

**BA-J:** I have often acknowledged that no particular “material” may be attributed to my work. This position refers to the notion of “material indifference” that we keep bringing up. For me, inspiration comes in innumerable forms. An idea always remains at the core of what I intend to do. But aside from the prominence of the idea, the material in which the idea manifests is not much of a bother to me. This is not to say, too, that any flimsy material would do. I often have faith that the art would come through. Also, the idea of humor is important for me because I think that through it, we can tackle lot of rather dreary issues. It is a strategy I employ to draw the public into whatever then emerges as the work. So in this sense, working in the context of the “immaterial” serves my artistic and political interests in much more nuanced ways than I would have had if I were to broach a manifestation in traditionally known material forms. By saying these, too, I do not ignore physical materials or objects entirely. I, on the contrary, tend to fall on a variety of objects in the execution of my work. For me, some objects are so specific to a piece, another cannot substitute it. I have, for instance, used such obsolete clerical official implements as typewriters, files, folders, or even rubber stamps in reference to the bureaucratic enterprise of earlier decades. These objects are material. The people and participants are material as well as the ideas that inhere all the projects. So the notion of the immaterial is also immanent in the way the work manifests.

**IM:** I believe in ideas for the sake of what they can manifest into but I also think specific materials/objects allow us certain experiences which ideas alone cannot produce. A lot of my installations have begun with ideas but they later took different forms due to the context of the shows in which these works were presented, or simply in trying just to push the varied experiences contained within the work. The jute sacks and the shoemaker boxes were collected in the same period in 2012 but were produced using varied collaborators due to the material qualities each object had. Until recent years when architecture and infrastructure

became very central to my work, there was always an urge to occupy sites with either physical materials or using ideas as a starting point. Sometimes the ideas from one space informs the form of a piece in another site like occupying the silo in Accra during the *EXCHANGE EXCHANGER 1957–2057* project in 2015 to acquiring one of the silos in Tamale in 2020. The concept of the occupation series has taken a very different form from the symbolic to material.

**TNKT:** I often engage with “immaterial” forces like temperature, gravity, microbial activity, and so on in my work. Plastics have the capacity to precipitate these contingent events through its mechanical properties or capacities of viscosity, elasticity, shrinkage, deformity, weathering etc. Like the dissolved Styrofoam works (Figs. 4–5) I presented at the blaxTARLINES large scale exhibition *Orderly Disorderly* (2017) (see seid’ou et al., this issue), one could visualize the extent of g-force that stretched the Styrofoam globule hanging next to the replica of the Sputnik and the entrapment of air bubbles released through dissolution of the Styrofoam in the foaming process.

**KO-A:** From earlier comments we can distill that since the dawn of the twenty-first century the substance of art in Ghana has undergone a radical transformation from its commodified determinations into a “gift” status, à la *kaŋi*’s experimental Emancipatory Art Teaching project. This ontological transgression has opened the space for the assertion of the multiplicity of art, among many other possibilities. For me, the practice of such affirmative politics has meant the culturing of an indifferent disposition—one that emerges out of deeply caring for what I do and how it interfaces with other people and things—inhuman, posthuman, nonhuman. How would each of you describe the manifestation of this gift economy in the way it features in what you do?

**BA-J:** Art, in my thinking of it and based on the discourses I have become party to over the years of training and practice, is considered in the context of “gift.” Of course, there is a tendency to be drawn into the larger art market economy, which becomes a function of neoliberalism. My own practice has sought to disrupt this canon. This sounds like a huge radical gesture, but in more pragmatic terms, I approach it almost in stealth and cunning. As I have said earlier, I readily employ humor, wit, and double entendre in the production of what becomes or is called my work. It is always a question about how this idea of the “gift economy” functions for me. It is not super easy to answer, but so long as I keep a focus on it, I apply my efforts to its realization. My work is fundamentally considered as a gift to the world. There are situations arising from the work that may bring in some returns for aspects of the work. This is welcome if it would come, but not necessarily craved for. The more people get access to my work and are able to experience it, the better honor I get. Of course, I also wish that they get to share the wit or frustration that it evokes. But there is also always a stealthy way in which the work slips out of confinement into the public, even if institutions would rather it not. I like this very much. There is this strategy I have always employed, and I say it is in stealth. I tend to design into the piece’s manifestation, an aspect that can easily be overlooked, so that it acts as a spillover into the public sphere ... I guess the “gift” is inherent in this sort of gesture, isn’t it so Ibrahim?

**IM:** The idea of the “gift” is central to my practice and has been taking shape since I started working on SCCA Tamale in early 2014. I wanted to use the contradictions of capital through the works I produce for the market to create spaces which expand our experiences of art within the local and also inspire new forms of imagination particularly among children. Most of the old airplanes I bought from private owners in Ghana were given to me at symbolic fees which I think came with a certain sense of responsibility. I immediately realized I had to allow new imaginations to set in to connect sites and allow access which didn’t exist before. What does it really mean to take inspiration from the void to connect the future, past, and present? And does it allow for humanity to rethink its place with other life and nonlife forms? If life is a “gift” what can it propose within these times of crisis?

**KO-A:** At blaxTARLINES we say that “we hack; we liberate; we share, we solidarize, we fail; [and] we resurrect.” These ideas permeate my own work in conditioning an approach to writing, curating, and artistic thought that is phlegmatic to where inspiration is sought—it could be from a conversation with colleagues, hip-hop, highlife music, spoken word poetry, Instagram advertisement, religion, a driving experience, and so on. And for me this form of indifference constitutes a vital attitude in the assertion of collectivist and affirmative values and politics for our time; which in turn conditions the ways in which we can position ourselves to confront “failure,” among others. Ibrahim, you, for example, have done a number of works symbolically, and in institution-building too, beginning with the premise of failure. For Tracy, plasticity as formal quality, as well as conceptual tool, also comes out strongly in your work. And Bernard, a significant portion of your practice is dedicated to what I will call a profanation of what is given in art, literature, etc.—which you prefer to describe as “disturbances.” What can any of you add to explain how these correlates of experimentation find expression in your independent practices?

**BA-J:** I guess, Kwasi, you capture my sentiments about art succinctly with the ideas of “hacking,” “failure,” “resurrection” and my preferred term, “disturbance.” All these speak to the notion of disruption, which is at the center of my practice. The erstwhile canon has privileged a great deal of injustice for humanity and for art. The forms that you mention, “conversations with colleagues,” “hip-hop,” “spoken word poetry,” etc., present a radical potential. This is where transformation and emancipation emerge. We also have to acknowledge the fact that none of the forms offer absolute solutions to the inconsistencies we wish to undo. But by embracing “failure,” for instance, experimentation becomes possible. This is what I was referring to earlier, in that I incorporate certain moments of slippage into the total design of the piece that emerges. I would rather look for potential in what is to come, than broach arrogance in a certain knowledge that disregards many other positions. But what becomes of the essence is also important. When all has been adequately “disturbed,” what do we look up to in the future? I guess this is where Tracy’s invocation of “mutation” could lead us into the immanent potential.

**TNKT:** The notion of mutation involves deviations, like genetic mutation, where deviations could occur as DNA copies itself during cell division. Failures are like these deviations needed to



5 Tracy Naa Koshie Thompson  
*Synt Illusion* (2017); installation view and detail  
 Polystyrene (Styrofoam), polyvinyl chloride (PVC) sheet, petrol;  
 dimensions variable  
*Orderly Disorderly* (2017) KNUST end-of-year exhibition  
 organized by blaxTARLINES KUMASI. Museum of Science and  
 Technology, Accra  
 Photo: IUB

alter and produce forms (new or even reverse-engineered). In experimentations with reverse-engineering food products, I often have to go against my accustomed way of using and seeing food. By allowing failures and glitches, materials reveal to me details of characters they have, more than I could anticipate and control. I could only learn from a wider dynamism of deformation processes and patterns captured within the body of plastics as they interact and freeze the motion of airflows and fluxes of humid-temperature conditions. Is this what failure would mean to you, Ibrahim?

**IM:** I am more interested in what the promises of art are rather than how it appears to be within a specific period. Failure is certainly important as a starting point but it's also material to work with. Building a series of institutions while also producing symbolic works to fund these spaces can be confusing but I rely on the paradox of the process to keep going. The paradox allows for new relations to emerge, which in turn creates shifts within our known image of things. Using airplanes as classrooms is one of the most important experiments I have embarked on yet within my practice, from dismantling them in Accra, to reassembling in Tamale, and now occupying them as learning spaces, it really takes struggles with the premises of failure to create new points.

**KO-A:** You make a good point Ibrahim. Following up on my earlier question on the ideas of hacking, liberation, solidarity, failure, and resurrection à la blaxTARLINES, I want to say that your latter point on creating new possibilities hits home for me. Particularly with regards to the transformative potential of art. And understanding that this transformation comes with the responsibility of affecting history, theory, curating, and much more. Which is what you have been able to do both at the substructural and infrastructural levels of social and economic life with SCCA Tamale and Red Clay. This notion of making possible what the status quo has sanctioned as impossible, is arguably what is most tangible in blaxTARLINES's leap from the hegemonic domain of the cultural into political economy. As symbolized in its mascot,

which draws analogies to the immanent forces consequent on crossing the event horizon of the black hole—where paradoxes, contradictions, contingencies, and potentiality thrive in the secular space of the void—what one can call a multiplicity of multiplicities—mitigated by the ethics of equality and hope. Hence the tension at the heart of art as such, as both singularity and universality, not only has formalist and/or symbolic consequences, but also concrete (materialist) implications. This is perfectly consistent with the blaxTARLINES axiom that “if anything can be said to be art [today] it must necessarily be invented.”<sup>15</sup> I wonder what Tracy might have to add to this.

**TNKT:** I think of the blaxTARLINES use of the black hole mascot as a way to convey its axioms of universality, equality, and emancipation. An individual's emancipation in artistic practice is a reflexive response to all that permeates and obstructs her in the world she is in and the world in her. Understanding such a complex matrix of the world and art incites her to approach art with such meticulousness—going beyond the surface and dissecting through the membranes of her interests. This includes not taking for granted material processes or technologies and their politics, economics, social and life forms—the dense layers that collapse into themselves and drag the fabric of the world along with them such that they set in motion a violent gravitational pull, consequent ripples, and an extensive coding and distribution of material- and life-inducing information.<sup>16</sup>

**ks:** Bravo, Squad. Let me add that the black hole mascot takes the place of the black lodestar that the artist Theodosia Okoh placed at the center of the Ghana flag at the dawn of political independence. The black star is a symbol of solidarity, a coalition of the *demos*, the part-that-is-no-part, and allies solidarizing in common struggle. It is a pan-African symbol of emancipation—a symbol of African Unity traced through Kwame Nkrumah to Marcus Garvey's Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) and its auxiliaries and businesses such as the African Black Cross Nurses, Negro Factories Corporation, and the Black Star shipping line.

A “black star” is approximately a black hole, so it absorbs the symbolism of the black lodestar into its definition. The introduction of the black hole mascot as a stand-in for the black star symbol marks a belated deprioritization of symbolic or hermeneutic thinking in the field of contemporary art and the elevation of concrete-materialist politics shot through with creative abstraction and economic transformation. In the field of contemporary art and cultural politics, it can be made analogous to a transition from the default “folk” and “resistance” politics of infinite demands and “the self-presentation of moral purity” (Critchley 2013; Srnicek and Williams 2015), to a constructive and affirmative politics<sup>17</sup> of collective re-invention of progressive futures. It promises to be a pathway to African Unity by other means.

Let me conclude with a quote from Kwame Nkrumah that reflects the ideas of democratic politics that we have discussed and that guide blaxTARLINES emancipatory projects:

Our Philosophy must find its weapons in the environment and living conditions of the African people ... The emancipation of the African continent is the emancipation of [humankind] (Nkrumah 1978/1964: 78).

## Notes

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- 1 Quentin Meillassoux (2008) contests the dogma of human finitude and correlationism in Western philosophical thought since Kant.
- 2 [ks] Pierre Huyghe's famous statement, "I don't want to exhibit something to someone, but rather the reverse: to exhibit someone to something" (Davis 2014) is instructive here..
- 3 [ks] I am deliberately leaving out the European cultural institutions Goethe Institut and Alliance Française.
- 4 The Norbert Elias artists' residency program was hosted at Kofi Setordji's ArtHaus. It ran contemporaneous with the early years of FCA and ended in 2006. The program hosted Joshua Nyatefe (2004), Ray Agbo (2005), and Bernard Akoi-Jackson (2006) respectively as the resident artists. The ArtHaus-Norbert Elias residency was organized in partnership with Goethe Institut and Norbert Elias Foundation. Before the residency, ArtHaus ran other international artists' workshops.
- 5 Atta Kwami retired from the KNUST Painting and Sculpture Department and from the Art College in 2006 and went into full time art practice between Ghana and the UK and completed his PhD in 2007 under John Picton at the Open University, Milton Keynes in England. He is the winner of the Maria Lassnig Prize (2021).
- 6 In 2004, a year after seidou launched the Emancipatory Art Teaching Project, he partnered with Atta Kwami, Pamela Clarkson, and Caterina Niklaus to launch the first Sansa International Artists' Workshop. seidou resigned in 2007 and his place was taken by Castro. Sansa held two more workshops, in 2007 and 2009. Sansa was in the network of Triangle Arts Trust workshops established by Robert Loder and Anthony Caro in 1982.
- 7 Ghanatta College of Art and Design has been closed since 2016.
- 8 [ks] I use Marx's term in the *Grundrisse* here. In postindustrial capitalism, "general intellect" has ushered in new forms of organization of production, including automation, which are radically different from the classic means of production based on exploitation of labor and surplus value. Advanced capitalism fails to appropriate general intellect fully as private property, even though the rise of Microsoft and Facebook demonstrate that aspects of the general intellect can be privatized through monopoly and rental of the commons. What is today known as "intellectual property" escapes advanced capitalist logic and suggests cues to transcend the horizon of the contemporary capitalist framework and market (Srnicek and Williams 2015; Hardt and Negri 2001).
- 9 [IUB] In 2008, qarī'kachā seidou's PhD dissertation, *Theoretical Foundations of the KNUST Painting Programme: A Philosophical inquiry and its contextual relevance in Ghanaian Culture* (2006), won the Silver Award, i.e., the top award of the Ghana Academy of Arts and Sciences for Graduate Thesis.
- 10 Adwoa Amoah is codirector of Foundation for Contemporary Art (FCA), Ghana.
- 11 The free play of *poiesis* and *aesthesis* in the aesthetic regime, its implied political indeterminacy, and its phobia for the didactic is the critique of Suhail Malik and Andrea Phillips (2013: 111–29) and Tirdad Zolghadr (2016: 67–68) of Rancière's aesthetic politics and of contemporary art which is defined by free play and indeterminacy.
- 12 "By promoting the equality of represented subjects, the indifference of style with regard to content, and the immanence of meaning in things themselves, the aesthetic regime destroys the system of genres and isolates 'art' in the singular, which it resonates with the paradoxical unity of opposites: *logos* and *pathos*." See Rancière (2004: 81).
- 13 The first iteration of REDTAPEONBOTTLENECK was in the group exhibition *Best of ArtHaus* at the Goethe Institut, Accra, 2006. The second iteration was in the Nubuke Foundation group exhibition *Independence/In-dependence* at Artists' Alliance, 2007.
- 14 At a 2016 work conference, Chinese leader Xi Jinping called for establishing a "modern state-owned enterprise system with Chinese characteristics." By "Chinese characteristics" he meant "integrating the Party's

leadership into all aspects of corporate governance" and "clarifying" its legal status within the corporate governance structure. Since then, hundreds of Chinese SOEs have amended their corporate charters to codify a role for the Party in corporate governance—a requirement subsequently made binding on all SOEs under a January 2020 CCP regulation. The document specifying the terms is "Opinion on Strengthening the United Front Work of the Private Economy in the New Era" issued on September 15, 2020 (Livingstone 2020).

15 See curatorial statement for *Orderly Disorderly* (2017), the large-scale end-of-year exhibition organized by blaxTARLINES KUMASI in Accra, Ghana. <https://iubezy.wordpress.com/2017/06/29/orderly-disorderly-curatorial-statement/>

16 [ks] Current quantum gravity inquiry into the black hole information paradox, Einstein-Rosen Bridges (wormholes), quantum entanglement and the holographic principle—such as the ER=EPR and GM=GR conjecture of Juan Maldacena and Leonard Susskind, and Mark Van Raamsdonk's disentangling experiment in AdS/CFT holography—affirm that quantum information and the material of spacetime are correspondent. cr17A dialectic between realpolitik and "dingpolitik" is recommended beyond the strictly dingpolitik model that Bruno Latour outlines (Latour and Weibel 2005).

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# Transforming Art from Commodity to Gift

## *qarî'kachä seid'ou's Silent Revolution in the Kumasi College of Art*

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*The revolutionary, according to Fanon, inserts himself among his people, without noise. This formulation is pivotal, but because it is so casually understated, its myriad implications escape casual readers. Cabral adds that in the revolutionary process, the desire for visibility is a teething disease, and that massive crowds, gathered together to make insurrectionary yearnings before the oppressor, make no sense. Quiet, selective, effective, efficient initiatives do make sense. Cabral is on ancestral ground here: the meliorative secret society is nothing new in Africa (Armah 1984: 63–64; cf. Armah 2010; Outa 1988: 4).*

It was in Kumasi that most of Ghana's significant artists and curators of the millennial generation and their cotravellers had their epiphany. Bernard Akoi-Jackson, Adwoa Amoah, Ibrahim Mahama, Rita Fatric Bewong, Kelvin Haizel, Selasi Awusi Sosu, Robin Riskin, Kwasi Ohene-Ayeh (IUB), Gideon Appah, Larry Amponsah, Jeremiah Quarshie, Adjo Kisser, Patrick Tagoe-Turkson, Patrick Quarm, Yaw Owusu, Bright Ackwerh, Tracy Naa Koshie Thompson, Benjamin Okantey, Issah Alhassan, Emmanuel Opoku Manu, Priscilla Kennedy, the Asafo Black Collective, and Vabene Elikem Fiatsi (crazinisT artisT) are a few examples. The list is still growing, the range of interests, formats, media, and attitudes is ever expanding; their influence is being felt in Ghana's capital cities and international circuits of contemporary art. More women and cultural and ethnic minorities are beginning to take their place in the unfolding ethos.<sup>1</sup> New paradigms of the artist-subject are emerging. These include variations of a social form Jean-Luc Nancy designates as the “inoperative community” (1991), especially mobilized coalitions and loose collectives solidarizing around a common struggle.<sup>2</sup> The liberal-humanist figure of the autonomous artist-genius, master, and sole author—more likely than not, an adult middle-class cis male—has ceased being the hegemonic, default, or dominant artist-subject. Yet, it is still an indelible factor, possibly a figure lingering in the new picture

and probably receding towards its horizon as a vanishing point or as the punctum that disrupts its narrative consistency.

The new crop of Kumasi students and alumni continue to collaborate with, inspire, and be inspired by their peers across a wide range of schools, traditions, and nontraditions of art training; the good old snobbery of Ghana's principal art academy, premised on a self-assured craft ableism and aesthetic bigotry that made the institution almost impervious to progressive developments outside its borders, is nearly a thing of the past.<sup>3</sup> How did Kumasi, for many years the blank spot on the official map of international contemporary art, become a must-go place for the motivated artist or curator? How did it become a hub of emergent art in Africa?

Accounts of contemporary witnesses and textual evidence converge on the figure of qarî'kachä seid'ou (b. 1968) (Figs. 1–2), an elusive and reclusive artist-provocateur, as a principal architect, guide, and vanishing mediator of this “silent revolution” (see introduction to Bouwhuis et al. 2012; see also Woets 2011, 2012; Kwami 2013: 316–33; Johannenssen 2016; Silva 2017; Dieckvoss 2017: 126; Nagy and Jordan 2018; Munshi 2018; Mahama 2019; Diallo et al. 2018). With a salute to the Black Radical tradition, Rancière, and the Slovenian Lacanian school, he has named this curriculum transformation the Emancipatory Art Teaching Project, a durational and pedagogic project contemporaneous with Tania Bruguera's Cátedra Arte de Conducta (2002–2009), Groupe Amos, and Huit Facette in its conception.<sup>4</sup>

A Cornel West of sorts, seid'ou is an artist-intellectual<sup>5</sup> who took art from the streets to the academy and back to the streets and elsewhere. His intellectual and artistic trajectory is a complex one, including a street art workshop and commercial sign painting practice as a teen on the streets of Accra in the mid-1980s (Figs. 3–4),<sup>6</sup> an update of his art training in an epicolonial art school in the early to mid-1990s, an engagement with the corpus of the most sophisticated modern and contemporary philosophers, art historians, curators of contemporary art, mathematicians,<sup>7</sup> and high technologists (Fig. 5), a dedicated study of liberation and

(clockwise from center left)

1 Artist Bright Tetteh Ackwerh's digital portrait of his teacher *kaŕi'kaçhä seid'ou*, which became Ackwerh's "most loved Facebook photo of 2012." Photo: courtesy Bright Ackwerh

2 *kaŕi'kaçhä seid'ou* became a cult figure, appearing in students' cartoons and paintings. Here, Rex Akinruntan draws him as an angel appearing in time to save an MFA student from fainting, 2013. Photo: courtesy blaxTARLINES.

3 *kaŕi'kaçhä seid'ou* worked at Hodep Art Studio, a street sign painting workshop in Madina, Accra, in the 1980s before he enrolled in the Art College in Kumasi. Photo: courtesy *kaŕi'kaçhä seid'ou*

4 Exhibition poster design for *Cornfields in Accra* (2016) inspired by *kaŕi'kaçhä seid'ou's* experience as sign painter in 1980s Accra. Co-designers: *kaŕi'kaçhä seid'ou*, Alvin Ashiatey and Bernard Akoi-Jackson for blaxTARLINES, Kwabee Arts (Afrancho) and Kofi Royal Arts (Ahinsan), sign painters from Kumasi.

The enhanced bone font was popular on the arched boards of Bedford mammy trucks in the 1970s–80s. "seid'ou learned to stand over the bonnet and work on the arch" (Kwami 2013: 325). Photo: courtesy blaxTARLINES

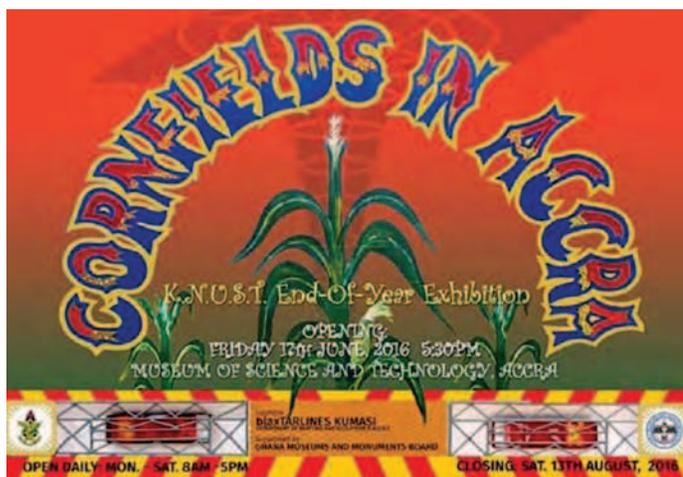
social movements and alternative art schools and art spaces, and a parallel practice of postimagist poetry.<sup>8</sup>

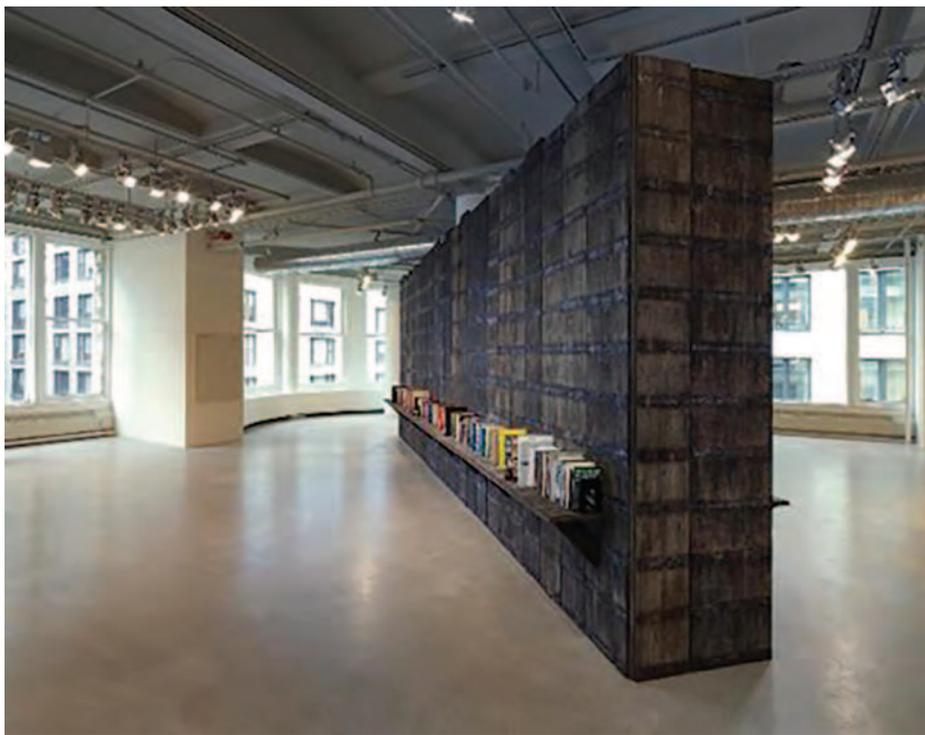
This text by *kaŕi'kaçhä seid'ou's* collaborators, students, witnesses, and subjects of the silent revolution provides a synopsis of key ideas that inspired it and threw it into relief. As witnesses from a variety of standpoints, we feel obliged to write a tribute while the protagonist is still with us and can give feedback to our ruminations. While not oblivious to the postmodern historicist caveat that no single event can explain the complexity of historical phenomena, we also acknowledge the importance of Graham Harman's Gavrilo's Corollary,<sup>9</sup> an argument that casts doubt on the possibility of "total context." As Harman argues, "Of the various contextual factors that surround me right now, not all are having an effect on me" (2009: 210).

Among the several contextual factors that may have played roles in the transformation of the old order, *seid'ou's* arrival on the scene, to borrow Žižek's phrasing (2013: 1), "not only designates a clear break with the past, but also casts its long shadow" on



the generations of artists, curators, and thinkers who follow him or resurrects failed revolutions that were before him in the history of the Kumasi art academy and Ghana's art field. Thus, this collaborative text weaves a narrative between a triggering event and some existential conditions that have coevolved with it. It is presented in four parts. The first section sets the tone with the significance and reach of *seid'ou's* practice and curriculum intervention. The second part takes the reader through the conditions in Ghana's art field and institutions that necessitated *seid'ou's* silent revolution. As the curator Jelle Bouwhuis and sundry others have indicated, "*kaŕi'kaçhä seid'ou* is himself perhaps the most radical embodiment of his teachings" (Bouwhuis et al. 2012: n.p.). The third part presents a synoptic account of *seid'ou's* teaching project and a series of responses from students who experienced it firsthand, especially Kwasi Ohene-Ayeh's autobiographical account (p. 29) and supporting text-box contributions of Bernard Akoi-Jackson (Box 1), Billie McTernan (Box 2), Robin Riskin (Box 3), Ibrahim Mahama (Box 4) and Tracy Thompson (Box 5). The conclusion is an elaboration of some key axioms undergirding the curriculum transformation.





5 Ibrahim Mahama's dedication to his teacher: *Library of qarĩ'kac̣hã seid'ou* in the exhibition *Re:Working Labor* at School of Art Institute of Chicago, 2019. The dedication explores qarĩ'kac̣hã seid'ou's complex intellectual trajectory. "It houses a library of reading materials, from communist manifesto to quantum theory."

## A SILENT REVOLUTION

The change instigated by qarĩ'kac̣hã seid'ou and his team of art teachers, students, and alumni was not a reform, revision, or expansion of the extant curriculum; it was a rupture announcing a beginning from the beginning again. The event created a void through which the radically new could emerge. Being a subject of the radically new can be quite unsettling; one has to learn to come to terms with the premises of the new terrain. And the old is not wished away; one needs to take a different standpoint in order to reengage it; otherwise, it becomes a formless inkblot on a picture's surface. seid'ou, a champion of radical immanence, has captured this succinctly:

What we hope to advance in Kumasi is a field of "general intellect" which encourages student artists and other young artists to work in the spirit of finding alternatives to the bigger picture which excluded their voices, but paradoxically by becoming an anamorphic stain in the bigger picture itself. This way, the stain instigates a new vision, which requires a necessary shift in the spectator's perspective. And this shift in perspective leaves the older picture as a stain in the new picture (seid'ou and Bouhwuis 2014: 115, 116).

While still in art school in the early 1990s, seid'ou, who was tipped to represent his generation in the pantheon of Ghanaian modernist painting greats,<sup>10</sup> questioned the presuppositions of the painting curriculum and launched a radical dematerialization and deskilling of his art practice. On this path, his romantic-realist life drawing and painting exercises in the undergraduate years became a subtle means of coding dissident praxis into a conventional genre. One example from his undergraduate work (Fig. 6) deploys excessive torsion in the structuring of mass and the treatment of surface, while the repeated cropping at respective edges amplifies the anonymity of the female sitter. Another, by Photoshopping *avant la lettre*, fictionalizes and narrativizes a strictly eyeballed life painting and on-the-spot studio exercise—the Sahelian costume, Larabanga-esque mosque and Hollywood

night scene are all spontaneous adaptations. For his Imaginative Composition course, which is a social realist genre in British-derived curricula, seid'ou introduces historical metafiction and dramatic lighting (Fig. 7). He also painted, performed, and collaged the *Afro-Pop* series as an extension of his critique of the social realist hegemony of Ghanaian modernist painting. In this series, his forays into parody and tactical humor were inspired by his prior engagement with urban sign painting and caricature. Themes are purposefully iconoclastic and there is collision and dialogue between text and image on the one hand (Fig. 8), and tokens of a performance-without-the-body and collage on the other hand (Fig. 9). Succeeding the

*Afro-Pop Series* is the *Royal Palm* painting project, which broke the "fourth wall" of Ghana's modern painting by taking the painting act out of the studio and making it a performance exposed to public scrutiny and dialogue in real time (Figs. 10–11). This was a durational project and institutional critique in which he "defaced" all sixty-eight royal palm trees lining the street that leads to the University's central administration block. seid'ou's reflections on human and nonhuman coactivity and the coevolution of the real and the symbolic in the *Royal Palm* painting project also found a place in the project's site extensions to radio, seminars, meetings, and text. For instance, in his MFA thesis, seid'ou reflected,

About a week later, it was found that nature had continued the painting to infinity. The Artist noted that very white webs, in forms of concentric designs, continued to climb the tree like a laddery [*sic*] of life or death; something inevitable. It is a fusion of the Artist's proposal, nature's additions and subtraction, and what the Artist has stored in the subconscious (Amankwah 1996: 7).

As a form of independent practice and critical inquiry, seid'ou's series of guerrilla performances—such as the culture-jamming of the 28th Annual Congregation Ceremony of KNUST (February 1994) (Fig. 12)—institutional critique, social practice, and tactical media staged in the early to mid-1990s was unprecedented in Ghana's canon of modern art. Through silent hacking and recoding of the academic establishment and officialdom, seid'ou introduced the ensuing generations of Ghanaian artists to strategies of social practice, political engagement, and participatory projects. While the possible cues for the performative act abound in codified Ghanaian traditions, especially in festivals and ceremonies, seid'ou's unannounced and inoperative performances are the ones that created the conditions for the use of the body in the contemporary art curriculum of the College of Art. Among artists trained in the new KNUST curriculum who persistently stage their body or other bodies in their projects are Bernard Akoi-Jackson, Rita



(clockwise from top left)

**6** *qarĩ'kac̃hã seid'ou*  
Undergraduate life drawing and painting, College of Art,  
KNUST (1993)  
Pastel; approx. 84 cm x 118 cm  
Photo: courtesy *qarĩ'kac̃hã seid'ou*

**7** *qarĩ'kac̃hã seid'ou*  
*Anokye and O'tutu: A torn page of Asante history* (1993)  
Oils; approx. 203 cm x 304 cm  
Artist's collection  
Photo: courtesy *qarĩ'kac̃hã seid'ou*

Historical metafiction based on the mythologies on the Ashanti Golden Stool, Kumasi (Suame) "Magazine" vehicle repair and metal engineering culture and in Afro-futuristic setting; the original, painted in oils in 1992, is lost.

**8** *qarĩ'kac̃hã seid'ou*  
*SLOW DOWN. HERD-hero CROSSING* (1993)  
Oils; approx. 165 cm x 175cm  
Photo: courtesy *qarĩ'kac̃hã seid'ou*

*Afro-Pop* series punning on Ghana's road signs

Fatric Bewong, Lois Arde-Acquah, and crazinisT artist, the gender nonconforming artist with an impressive string of radical culture-jamming projects (Fig. 13).

*seid'ou's* pursuit of silence and self-effacement reminds one of Bartleby the Scrivener's politics of refusal. His transition from an accomplished painter to a painter on strike set him working within the interstices of art, ephemera, and social formatting. In most cases, *seid'ou's* projects, in his mature years, were coauthored situations and lived experiences involving the interplay of text, performance, image, tactical humor and, a la Moten and Harney, fugitive planning. The most memorable are durational performances and institutional culture jamming, silent reenactments of fictional and historical figures of emancipation and radical sacrifice,<sup>11</sup> generative curating projects, and nonproprietary social practices which defied the demands of the three Ms of institutional contemporary art: (Art) Museum, Market, and Media. The use of durational, ephemeral, and undocumented performative form and his critical humor and silent posture as art world refusenik set *seid'ou's* work alongside the work of Teching Hsieh, Tino Sehgal, and Claire Fontaine<sup>12</sup> respectively, with the difference that the contemporary art world does not know yet what to make of him.<sup>13</sup> As a nonobservant artist committed to



the manufacture of paradigms, tools, and apparatuses disseminated as gifts to other artists, he may best be known as an artist's artist rather than simply an artist per se. He instituted a sharing economy of intellectual commons and consequently led a hushed movement which opened access to a varied, alternative history of thought. The silent institution and expansion of these informal reading groups wrestled the discourse of art from the existing hegemony of "Stone Age to Cubism art history bibles."<sup>14</sup>

Before the turn of the twenty-first century, the default painting practice of the Kumasi School had been the cultural production of portable and sensuous objects legislated by European classical and early modernist pictorial media. Each medium was specific to format and genre; genres were exclusively within-frame single narratives—preferably variants of social realism and ethnographic verism. They were hierarchical according to cultural, market, and institutional privilege, and expatriate connoisseurship. Product was privileged over process, conception, or public affect; auteur over coauthoring. Texts on Ghana's art were typically written by salvage anthropologists and ethnographers identifying iconographic clichés and matching or authenticating them with the existing cultural life of Ghana. By the turn of the century, it was not yet possible to admit photography, film, video, sound,



9 *kārī'kachā seid'ou*  
*Who says a chimney is a non-living thing?* (1994)  
 Collage of clothing pieces; dimensions variable  
 Photo: courtesy *kārī'kachā seid'ou*

This collage is a pin-up of the artist's studio-wear of the early 1990s during his "Afro Pop" phase. The studio-wear bore his drawings and meditations on the African American hip-hop group Naughty by Nature. The collage was conceived as a "performance-without-the-body."

and installations as artistic activity in the Kumasi fine art curriculum, let alone unobtrusive and deskilled projects such as social and relational practices, meditative walks, public discussion, and performances. These formats and others outside the traditional *beaux-arts* canon were at best shamed or stigmatized as degenerate art; at worst, their practice was consigned to self-reflexive loops of artistic "safe spaces." The art of professionals plying their

trade in the mainstream galleries also pandered to the taste of tourists, with portable décor paintings on walls of offices and hotel lobbies being the queen of the arts. This ethos had marked the typical work coming from the art academy and Ghana's art communities as tame, deserving just a footnote in the international art canon.<sup>15</sup> One can only imagine the intensity of the rupture that overthrew the humanist framework that had legislated decorative painting and sculpture and their traditional cognates as the only options. Bernard Akoi-Jackson, one of *seid'ou's* early students and collaborators, describes *seid'ou's* idiosyncratic art practice and critical interventions of the 1990s and early 2000s as a revolution staged by the "part-that-is-no-part," an Event<sup>16</sup> that picked "at stale roots and nurtured ever green leaves" (Box 1). Extended into the Kumasi curriculum, this event, coevolved with the Emancipatory Art Teaching Project, offered in its place a void, a democratic space out of which a multiplicity of forms and nonforms could emerge. In this expanding field of art practice, the concept of studio also expanded beyond the artisanal to include high-tech, ecological, social interventionist, and nonhuman workspaces in and out of the outlying city. Each student in the evolving curriculum had to invent their own exhibition formats and to curate their own shows. Strangeness ensued. Above all, students at all levels were encouraged to cultivate political sensitivity to materials, technologies, and sites of their practice.

#### Box 1

##### *kārī'kachā seid'ou* as Event: An Anamorphic Stain, Picking at Stale Roots and Nurturing Ever Green Leaves

Bernard Akoi-Jackson

In October 2004, at the very onset of the twenty-first century, *kārī'kachā seid'ou* (formerly known as Edward Kevin Amankwah, a.k.a. Kofi Osei), performs a subtle, yet distinguishable and most "disturbing" act. He posts onto notice boards around the College of Art, KNUST, a letter informing his colleague lecturers and by extension, the entire university community, of his name change. Accompanying the letter is a photocopy of an Affidavit, the legal documentation, (headed with the Ghana Coat of Arms and authenticated with the red seal of state authority) (see Fig. 21). Also included in this set of exhibited objects, is a copy of the Gazette entry. In this performance, *kārī'kachā seid'ou* becomes an event. This momentous gesture functions both as a critical metaphor of the burgeoning revolution in contemporary art practice, and one of the sites from where *seid'ou* launches his notion of "exception," "the part that's not a part." His is an insurrection; a disruption not only in the legal order, but more saliently, in the theoretical bases of the KNUST Painting Curriculum. This significant move is a "real" exception through which we can fervently reimagine the general habit of artistic practice in the context of KNUST (thus Ghana), with implication into the larger contemporary art world. *seid'ou's* revolutionary gesture, as well as his ensuing artistic practice, becomes an anamorphic stain, materially embedded within the system, picking at the very stale roots, initiating transformation of habit and nurturing ever flourishing artistic careers.

That *seid'ou's* deed received entry into the national Gazette makes it a very momentous artistic mediation and notable critique of extreme bureaucratic process. The gesture is an exception also in terms of its ability to defy standard codification, yet concurrently uncovering a "specifically juridical formal element: the decision in absolute purity." In this sense, "a part that was not a part" but became a part by legal decree. *seid'ou's* gesture, though not his very first yet, features amongst harbingers of inventive artistic practices emergent within the contemporary Ghanaian and world context. In 1994, *seid'ou*, then still called Edward Kevin Amankwah, a.k.a. Kofi Osei, would don pseudo-Arabian garb at his graduation, garnering both huge applause and disapproval in equal measure from all gathered.

Though these gestures are characteristic of *seid'ou's* critical positions against the norm but through the norm, they constituted some of his more externalized earlier performances. His later work(s) became decidedly unobtrusive and the most impactful. *seid'ou* would eventually, as he says, "stop making art" (in the known sense), so as to embark on his most important project yet: "making artists." He describes his strategy as "Silent Insistence," and the resulting "work" becomes what he has referred to as "Silent Parodies."

I deem as crucial, that moment of disruption when *kārī'kachā seid'ou* decided, with passion, to make a name change, as it has radical potential. Read metaphorically this moment of the name change begins the slow, deliberate march towards material transformation within the KNUST Fine Art curriculum. A change that has urged more and more graduating students from the Department of Painting and Sculpture to boldly pursue sustainable careers in the art field. Hitherto, the recurring lament had been that students complete the art program, only to divert into such totally unrelated fields as banking, finance and marketing, to cite a few. Now, these "unrelated fields" and others are means to make art; and *kārī'kachā seid'ou* has demonstrated it in his praxis.



## EMANCIPATORY ART TEACHING PROJECT: THE STUDENTS' EXPERIENCE

The Emancipatory Art Teaching Project coevolved with seid'ou's stereotypical reenactments of historical and fictional characters within institutional settings. One of the key referents in these enactments was Jean Jocotot, the "ignorant schoolmaster," who on the side of the preemptive equality of intelligence, demonstrated "that an ignoramus could teach another what he himself did not know" (Rancière 2007, 2011). The other was Harriet Tubman, the African American former slave who returned to the plantations on several dangerous trips to liberate other slaves.

seid'ou's reenactments resurrected the promise of intellectual emancipation hidden in a failing curriculum. His classes, critiques, and informal conversations were moments of epiphany for most of us—staff, students, and alumni—collaborating on this text. His experience in the street art communities in Accra also placed him favorably to give students insights into technical and social improvisation. His genre-defying art practice dovetailed into his teaching methods.

In the earliest phases of his teaching project in the College of Art, seid'ou encouraged students to "excavate" the city as Foucaultian archaeologists, make visual and poetic notes, and develop cues for exhibition projects (Figs. 14–15). Thus, he converted his drawing classes into curatorial projects of guerrilla exhibitions on campus and in the city (Figs. 14–19). "Campus and city came alive with over sixty site-specific and off-site exhibitions, their critiques, and overviews each year" (seid'ou 2010: n.p.). Exhibitions and critiques were held in drinking bars, railway tracks, footbridges and locomotive sheds, automobile workshops, on public buses, in science laboratories, graveyards, forests, virtual spaces, and so forth (Fig. 16). This series of exhibition projects, which bypassed Ghana's *beaux-arts* gallery, museum, and institutional systems, became the basis for the MFA Curatorial Practice Programme, introduced in 2014. As part of the curatorial training, he headed the curatorial teams that curated *Silence Between the Lines* (2015) in Kumasi and a trilogy of exhibitions in Accra: *the Gown must*

10 *kaŕi'kachä seid'ou* (néé Kevin Amankwah)  
KNUST Royal Palm Avenue Painting Project  
Painting Performance on sixty-eight trees, social practice and institutional critique.

Photo: courtesy Atta Kwami

This project broke the "fourth wall" of Ghana's modern painting by taking the painting act out of the studio and making it a performance exposed to public scrutiny and dialogue in real time. Off-site components of the project include radio programs, seminars, and meetings on ecology.

11 *kaŕi'kachä seid'ou*  
Royal Palm Painting Project 1995, KNUST [detail]

Photo: courtesy *kaŕi'kachä seid'ou*

This transspecies and speculative thinking about the human-nonhuman creative zone would play a vital part in *kaŕi'kachä seid'ou's* later teaching and practice in KNUST and in the outlook of some of his students.

*go to Town ...* (2015), *Cornfields in Accra* (2016) (see Fig. 4), and *Orderly Disorderly* (2017), that followed from it. Through these exhibitions, he shared his insights on the collective mobilization of labor and resources for large-scale exhibition and infrastructure projects and encouraged curating students to, in his words, "work from bolts and nuts to high theory and back."

With painting as the queen of the European-derived *beaux-arts* tradition in Ghana, film, video, and photography had been consigned to the commercial, journalistic, and advertising subcultures. *kaŕi'kachä seid'ou's* lessons in Philosophy of Painting introduced a module that took students through lens-based and lensless filmic practice from improvised pinholes through DSLRs to medical and astronomical imaging, and the materiality of light, still, and moving image. Since then, many lens-based practitioners have come out of the Kumasi School, some of whom are award-winning artist-photographers. Mavis Tetteh-Ocloo, who authored the curatorial text for Selasi Awusi Sosu's three-channel video installation *Glass Factory II* for the debut Ghana Pavilion at the 58th Venice Biennale (Tetteh-Ocloo 2019), was an exponent of seid'ou's photography module before her curatorial training in Kumasi (Fig. 17). In his lectures, seid'ou knows no disciplinary bounds; he does not hesitate to use logical paradoxes in mathematics and physics such as Godel's proof and quantum



**12** *kqrɪ'kɔchɔ seid'ou* in a guerrilla performance at the 28<sup>th</sup> Annual Congregation Ceremony of KNUST, February 1994. His unsolicited cop performers include Mr. Louis Caseley Hayford, the then chairman of University Council, and Otumfuo Opoku Ware II, the then king of Asante. These unannounced performances also created conditions for the use of the body in the College of Art curriculum, extending to other generations of contemporary art practitioners based in Ghana.

Photo: courtesy *kqrɪ'kɔchɔ seid'ou*

**Box 2**  
**On Casting Forms**  
**Billie McTernan**

*It is September. We are in a classroom where moths fly liberally around a whirring fan and a dimming fluorescent light. In front of us is a whiteboard, about 8ft high, with scribbles barely legible. We face the board, frantically trying to keep up with the thoughts and interpretations coming towards us, floating around us.*

*There are a few significant moments, in life, when you know that something has changed. Have you ever felt that? That the tectonic plates you house inside of you have shifted?*

*The critical and contextual studies class in the Department of Painting and Sculpture with *kqrɪ'kɔchɔ seid'ou* began in 2004. Over the years the teaching has changed, the form is not static. Philosophical and conceptual texts from across the globe; from France, the United States, Germany, Ghana, and Nigeria, and more, come and go.*

*"Consider everything," we have been advised. "You never know where you might find liberation."*

entanglement, abstract objects such as the Klein bottle, Möbius strip, or phase portraits, or tropes of gene activity such as epigenetics to explain issues about contemporary art and curating.

Kwasi Ohene-Ayeh, an alumnus of the BFA 2007 class, shared his experience of *seid'ou's* undergraduate teaching in 2019:

My experience with *kqrɪ'kɔchɔ seid'ou's* Emancipatory Art Teaching Project when I entered the KNUST undergraduate Fine Art Programme in 2005 subtly affirmed a yearning I always had but could neither articulate nor assert before that time. His universalist approach to teaching dissented from the official KNUST art curriculum, which relied imperiously on established styles and formats of the Euro-American modernist canon ending with Abstract Expressionism. Over the years, as we struggled with the rigor of his critiques in the drawing and painting classes, I was enthralled by the depth and range of historical, philosophical, and practical (everyday) references being used and suggested by *seid'ou* to each student regarding their work. This was a class of over sixty students. It aroused my interest in metatheoretical questions and propelled a search for more than what the canvas alone could offer. And this is where I cultivated my interest in writing as artistic medium.

*seid'ou* was the only lecturer in the College of Art then who utilized such an indifferent approach to teaching. He dedicates himself to challenging each student from the point of their own interest and not, as was the norm, to enforce a priori standards of what a student ought to do for a lecturer. In the final year, when *seid'ou* taught us more courses, the emphasis on independent work became more

13 crazinisT artisT (nee Va-bene Elikem Fiatsi). “reThinking-‘naZa”. A still from nonbinary artist’s culture-jamming performance at the 2014 Asogli State Yam Festival. crazinisT artisT’s gender-bending and institutional critical performances were nurtured in the Emancipatory Art Teaching curriculum in Kumasi. Photo: courtesy crazinisT artisT



ingrained. He opened us up to coming to terms with the responsibilities associated with the choice of practicing art. This is when I can say I had begun to enjoy the Painting Programme I had majored in. My attraction to painting was more with it as a concept—as a set of ideas about form, color, and aesthetics—and less as idiom. My proclivities were nurtured, stimulated, and extended all at the same time when seid’ou became my undergraduate thesis supervisor. By this time, although I was unprepared for it then, the transformation had begun and I began to feel more alive in school.

My final year work was an interrogation into the notion of painting itself masked as a collaborative and site-specific installation project (Fig. 18). I worked with Nana Essah (who was an architecture student at the time) and Eric Chigbey (a colleague in the Sculpture Programme) for a project titled *Untitled ... I Can’t Draw* (2009). The work doubled as a mute response to one of my teachers who almost failed me in his course because he interpreted my ambivalent attitude to painting in his class as a rejection of all that was good and sacred in art. The project was my opportunity to create an ambiguous structure that could interrelate painting, sculpture, installation, architecture, and social relations in its form and had been inspired

by Charles Sauvat’s formalist metal sculptures. (Sauvat was a French artist-collaborator of mine at the time). Sited in the courtyard of the Queen Elizabeth Hall on campus, the work took about five days to construct. During this time, passersby would offer to participate in the construction process. It was my first attempt at a site-oriented and relational art project.

For her exhibition project in seid’ou’s Drawing Class, Heartwill Kankam and her team of young women staged a feminist intrusion into Ghana’s all-male public transport (“Trotro”) system. The women, driver, and “mate,” wearing high heels, took charge of a commercial vehicle and plied the major commercial routes of Kumasi from morning to late afternoon (Fig. 19). Kankam’s exhibition statement draws the reader’s attention to gender norms in the Ghanaian cultural mainstream that needed to be challenged through forms of interrogative acts such as hers:

I have always questioned some norms of the society and now it has started manifesting in my works consciously and unconsciously. These questions revolve around the constructions of the society I live in and especially, of gender and what is appropriate to a particular gender.

By 2010, when this project was staged, galleries and cultural institutions in Ghana were not ready for such work and most of them are still yet to confront this challenge. Without this support system, many promising artists such as Heartwill Kankam have dropped out of practice. Noticing this lacuna, seid’ou and his colleagues introduced students to the importance of building such support systems as a necessary supplement to the art they practice.

Today, the ensuing collective and incubator blaxTARLINES KUMASI can boast of a sophisticated art labor movement that lends pro bono services and support for exhibition projects and start-up art spaces in Ghana and elsewhere. It is needless to say that seid’ou’s formal and informal classes, juries, and critiques are legendary. Being a polymath with remarkable breadth of experience from the streets to the academy and back, he formulated and shared freely a teaching system that could translate high-level concepts to material solutions and vice versa.

Box 3

“the guy who took me to a new forest ...”

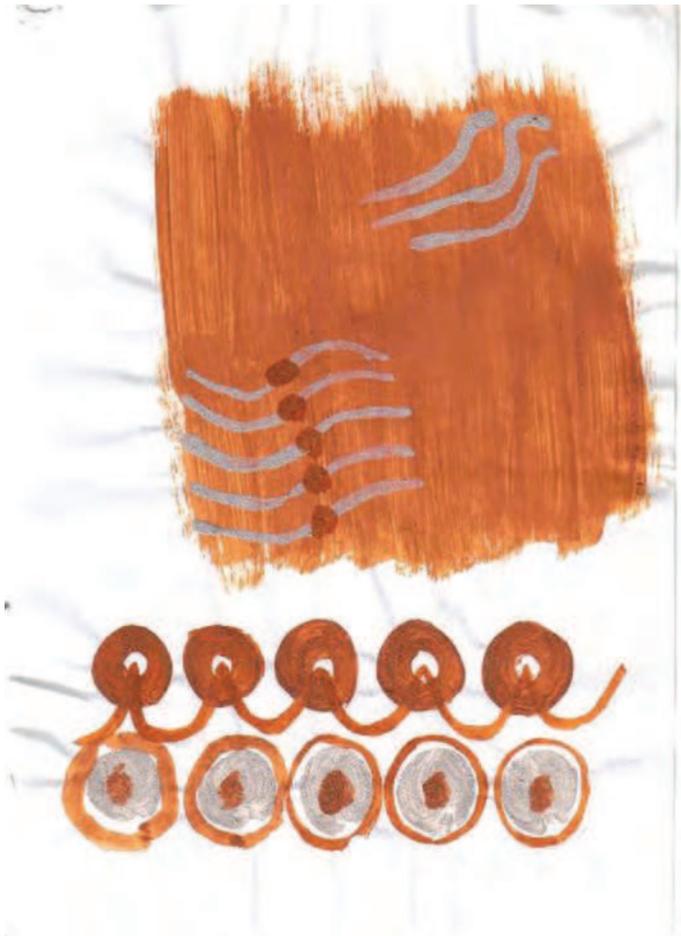
Robin Riskin

“A healer sees differently. He hears differently,” said Damfo in Ayi Kwei Armah’s *The Healers*. Others may look and walk through the forest but a healer sees and hears more.

*kɔri*’ *kachā* seid’ou set us loose in the forest of things and asked us to find our way through. The seeds were planted all around us. We just had to look for them.

*kɔri*, integrating current ideas from object-oriented ontology, “thing theory,” and posthumanism, asks us to consider not only the perspective of the human being toward the objects, but of the objects toward the humans, and toward each other. One of his favorite lines is by the artist Pierre Huyghe, who said he tries not to “exhibit something to someone” but “to exhibit someone to something.” Such conceptual revolutions—which appear futuristic but are at the same time very ancient—have formed the basis of my search into “ecological thinking.” How might we take inspiration from the behavior of plants, fungus, insects, bacteria, etc., in imagining models for art- and exhibition-making toward a more collective world?

*kɔri* asks us not to take anything for granted, to examine all our terms, to consider the context, political climate, and all the other forms or ideas that led up to it or were birthed out of it. *kɔri* and the teachers of the blaxTARLINES KUMASI collective didn’t tell us what to think or know or make, but asked us to find our own imagination, and to practice it, with discernment.



(left)

**14 Janet Djamoe**

Visual notes of the Kumasi cityscape during *kq̄r̄i'kq̄chā seid'ou's* drawing classes (2004)  
Earth and ash on A4 paper  
Photo: courtesy *kq̄r̄i'kq̄chā seid'ou*

The Emancipatory Art Teaching Project was launched as a drawing class in 2003.

(below)

**15a–b** The drawing class took students to the city to find cues leading to their self-curated guerrilla exhibition projects. These scenes from 2004 capture a moment of the drawing class at the Adum Central Railway footbridge, the site where Ibrahim Mahama would undertake a jute sack installation project in 2012.

enactment of “exile from Euro-America” is also a means to over-identify with the derelict domestic conditions that regulated modern and contemporary art in Ghana at the turn of the millennium. *seid'ou* referred to this phenomenon as the “cultural slum” (*seid'ou* and Bouwhuis 2014)<sup>17</sup> of Ghana’s art institutions—a state of exception from the global contemporary art world—as a site from which to work out a silent revolution through its crisis conditions and failures. In order to critically challenge the hegemony of Euro-American institutions as cultural gatekeepers of contemporary art, he encourages his students to work as hosts in their cultural slums more than as guests in the already well-established lofty institutions that proliferate the North Atlantic or elsewhere (Enwezor and Williamson 2016). In alliance with his team of collaborators, he inverted the “nomadic guest” model favored by Afropolitan exponents of “advocacy curating” (Kouoh and Wise 2016) when he instituted *Interactive Series*, a dynamic “seminar program in Kumasi to host [international] contemporary artists, curators, and art professionals for talks, workshops, exhibitions, overviews, and critique sessions with his students” (*seid'ou* and Bouwhuis 2014: 16)<sup>18</sup> (Fig. 20). He is mindful of the contradictions that go together with his desire to be transnational in outlook without moving a step.

## EMANCIPATORY ART TEACHING PROJECT: THE AXIOMS

*Playing host in the slum, no more guest in the hub*

*kq̄r̄i'kq̄chā seid'ou* has chosen to live, study, and practice only from the African continent and, in a reflection tinged with humor, considers himself exiled from the North Atlantic. However, this



(right)

**16** Critique sessions were held at project sites most of which were located in the heart of Kumasi city. Here, *kaŋi'kačä seid'ou* and George "Buma" Ampratwum engage Ibrahim Mahama in a critique session at site of the Adum Central Railway Footbridge, 2012.

Photo: courtesy Ibrahim Mahama

(below)

**17a–b** Mavis Tetteh-Ocloo  
Stills from two-channel silent video installation, *Coming of the morning*.

Photo: courtesy Mavis Tetteh-Ocloo



*Boundaries nowhere, centers everywhere—  
A basis for the gift-form of art*

Adapting Alain de Lille's trope of a great sphere with boundaries nowhere but centers everywhere, *kaŋi'kačä seid'ou* envisioned iterable, propagative, and translatable formats of art practice which auto-distribute infinitely as gift without the author's presence, instruction, further instigation, or control. A typical example is the Name Change Project (1994/2004–present)<sup>19</sup> through which he got his strange name with anomalous orthography notarized in the *Ghana Gazette*, self-distributed over all official

documents of state apparatuses, translatable into sound and other sign systems (Fig. 21). Here, the artist makes a gesture towards complete dematerialization and deskilling of the art object. He proposes it as a paradoxical property form that challenges the smooth operations of existing property relations and conditions for art's commodification.

Concerned with the tendency for art to constitute a site of struggle for the expropriation of intellectual commons, his practice took a pedagogic and processual form in this phase when he took teaching appointment in the Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology in 2003. Acting as an artist-in-residence in the university, he launched the Emancipatory Art Teaching Project, which can be described as the central nervous system animating content of the new Kumasi curriculum and activities of the emergent artist collective and dynamic network, the blaxTARLINES.

*Universality, crisis, and a gift economy*

The substructure of *seid'ou's* Emancipatory Art Teaching Project can be summed up, in his words, as a hope to "transform art from the status of commodity to gift" (*seid'ou* and Bouwhuis 2015/2019: 193). And this can be summarily interpreted as a gesture toward affirming the emancipatory potential of concrete universality—potentially speaking, the exception that is emblematic of "the all." To say that it is a hopeful endeavor is to come to terms with the hopelessness lurking in the pertaining conditions he has had to endure. As Žižek describes it, the true courage is to admit that "the light at the end of the tunnel is probably the headlight of another train approaching" (2017: 3). Creating conditions of possibility within the fabric of such impossibilities is the miracle of revolutions. Referring to notes she took from *seid'ou's* classes, Adjo Kisser recalls one of his popular maxims regarding *seid'ou's* affirmative stance towards crisis.<sup>20</sup>

"What do you do when there are no options?"  
"You invent!"

In the case of *seid'ou's* Emancipatory Art Teaching Project, it means enacting constructive and affirmative politics in the face





of imminent crisis, within the Ghanaian “cultural slum” of contemporary art (seid’ou and Bouwhuis 2014: 112).<sup>21</sup> seid’ou’s focus was on the curriculum of the KNUST Art College, a principal nurturing point of Ghana’s art community, where the institutional framework for contemporary art had been in malaise. Ibrahim Mahama has drawn out valuable insights in seid’ou’s teaching project that inform his persistent engagement with the

promises embedded in failure and crisis conditions (Box 4).

In a conversation with a student on the gift form, seid’ou says of his envisioned gift form;



**18** Kwasi Ohene-Ayeh created a discursive space of conviviality in the courtyard of Queens Hall, KNUST. Undergraduate exhibition project for *kaŋri’kačhä* seid’ou’s drawing class, 2007. Photo: courtesy Kwasi Ohene-Ayeh

**19** Heartwill Kankam. Performative exhibition project, social practice and filmic documentation, *kaŋri’kačhä* seid’ou’s undergraduate drawing class, 2010, Kumasi. Photo: courtesy Heartwill Kankam

20 “Interactive Series”: Bisi Silva and the 2013 Asiko school joined an MFA critique session in Kumasi. The student presenter sitting on the blue plastic paint bucket is Ibrahim Mahama, who was soon to become the youngest artist to be called to participate in the Venice Biennale in 2015.

Photo: courtesy blaxTARLINES.

21 *qarĩ'kachã seid'ou*.

Name Change Project (1994/2004)

Anomalous name notarized in the Ghana High Court. 2004.

Photo: courtesy *qarĩ'kachã seid'ou*.



Even potlatch fails as a gift form. Derrida has already deconstructed the gift on these terms. To him, the gift or gifting is impossible because there is always the reciprocal supplement attached to it. The taker is bound to return the gesture in some other way or form. A gift, in the sense Derrida knew it, is impossible. This is where I come in. I begin from where Derrida left it. If the gift is impossible then that is where a miracle is lurking. A miracle is a miracle only because it is the impossible that happens. So, what is this gift that is an impossible that happens? What constitutes this gift miracle? It is the one that can escape the logic of a priori reciprocity. This means we must look at what kind of form the gift takes and what social forms it can enable, etc. One of the plausible forms is what Marx calls the “general intellect” ... maybe the “cognitive form” if you will. If art, for instance, takes intellectual, cognitive or knowledge form, no matter how you share it, you still have it. The taker is not compelled to return the gesture because both parties have it. This is where the pedagogical project, the Emancipatory Art Teaching Project finds its support as a gifting economy. That is not to say that no aspect of it is commoditizable. Indeed, it is, as demonstrated by the futile attempts to gentrify it as “intellectual property.”<sup>22</sup>

Notably, once a thing is commodified, it enters the circulatory vortex of exchanges, conforming to the logic of profit and capital accumulation. Therefore, art, when strictly thought of as commodity, necessarily encloses that which must, in principle, be accessible and usable to all of humanity, consecrating it for only the few who have arbitrarily acquired the privilege of exclusive ownership. And this has been the oracle of inequality for at least three centuries now. The “gift” regime is about sharing; about artists making the property form of art inoperative. In this egalitarian paradigm, everybody possesses the means to offer and/or receive a gift.

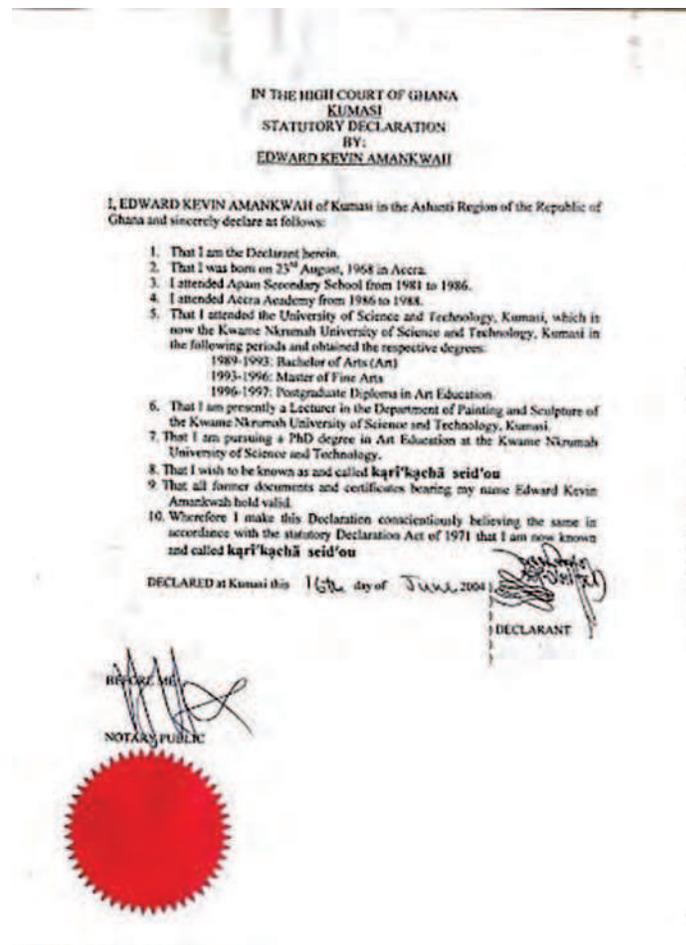
*Nurturing a community of communities:*

*Gown goes to Town—Town flows through Gown*

The pursuit of the ambitious curriculum transformation in Kumasi led *seid'ou* to form collectives with other faculty, alumni, and kindred spirits whose networks and dedicated spirit would eventually be formalized as blaxTARLINES KUMASI in 2015, more than a decade after the launch of the pedagogical project in Kumasi.

The workings of the blaxTARLINES community mark the

postbiopolitical and posthuman phase of struggle and solidarity in spheres where the symbolic or “representational” gets coded into life and material. Thus, the community’s preferred site of political struggle is the coded material.<sup>23</sup> The mode of struggle is, first and foremost, economic and therefore premised on the logic of exploitation. This model challenges the default biopolitical regime of power struggle premised exclusively on the logic of domination and targeted at zones of cultural power where aspects of the body (life or material) get coded into symbol. To *seid'ou*,



Box 4

“... and the ghosts that I knew come back to haunt me now ...”

Notes from the lectures of *kaŕi'kachä seid'ou*

Ibrahim Mahama

Sometimes something is recognized as revolutionary only after the actual revolution has long taken place. So perhaps retrospectively, a history may be chronicled. Perhaps this will be unearthed in the revisions, the rereadings, the reconstitution of narratives that ensue in posterity. In my case, I notice that I keep returning to notes I have made as I sit in *kaŕi'kachä seid'ou's* lectures for instance, or nuggets of wisdom I have picked up whilst in conversation with other members of the faculty or artist colleagues. These notes become like ghosts I have known, and they come back to haunt me ...

From the lectures of *kaŕi'kachä seid'ou* in my postgraduate studies, I have come to realize that the understanding of the notion of “crisis” and how it can be a protagonist in modern production systems makes “crisis” the very crux of my enquiry, and I approach these ideas through artistic production and interventionist gestures across sites ...

*seid'ou's* arrival (or rearrival) on the scene became a moment of rupture, which has since changed the direction of art production, consumption, and discussion in our generation. *seid'ou's* project has been to present multiple perspectives within art historical production systems across multiple geographical locations, while focusing on the infinite possibilities forms of art can take and their aesthetic implications for revolutionary practice.

(Extract from “Labour of Many: Ibrahim Mahama,” Cape Town: Norval Foundation, February 13–August 11, 2019)

this paradigm, Foucaultian in its ancestry, hardly tackles the roots of inequalities adequately; rather, it smacks of a reproduction of the postmodern culturalization of politics and the default ideology of neoliberal and late capitalism.<sup>24</sup>

blaxTARLINES is a transgenerational, transdisciplinary, and open-access entity dedicated to rebuilding the art infrastructure of Ghana and other regions of exception. In its program of material and intellectual emancipation, it lends support to young artists and

Notes

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1 Unlike the former curriculum, which was restricted to *beaux-arts* painting and sculpture media and cut-and-dry skill sets which alienated artists who wanted to explore their unique experiences in the world, the new curriculum offers an open field that permits women, other cultural minorities, and any artist-subject with special inclinations and abilities to explore their specific interests and unique experiences as art. The possible ideas, materials, and tools are endless. This has encouraged diversity in the artist population nurtured by KNUST and blaxTARLINES KUMASI. There are more women artist-practitioners and cultural workers from KNUST than anytime in Ghana's history. The greater number is from the millennial generation, who are beginning to mentor younger generations of women artists. Also, enrollment of women has increased significantly in the department. At high school level, the number of female candidates who sat for the WASSCE Examinations has been higher than the male population since 2019. This year, the figures stand at 188,163 female candidates to 187,574 male candidates (<https://www.waegh.org/wassece>). This increase in female candidates at high school level reflects in the increasing female population at the university.

2 Nancy (1991) refers to inoperativity as a number of individuals bound together by their shared mortality or common struggle but having no shared or collective identity. See also Ford (2015) and Agamben (2005).

3 Most of the existing and burgeoning art spaces, groups, and institutions in Ghana's capital are run by former students of Kumasi and their collaborators who had their art training from Ghanatta and Ankle schools of art, the former polytechnics, or the streets of Ghana's cities. Examples are Foundation for Contemporary Art, Exit Frame, the Studio, Ehalakasa, and the founding team of Chale Wote Art Festival. The collaborations between Kwasi Ohene-Ayeh and Sir Black's Ehalakasa, and Serge Clotey and Francis Kokroko, respectively, produced remarkable results.

4 The Emancipatory Art Teaching Project was conceived in the mid-1990s and launched in 1998 as a response to Agyemang “Dota” Ossei's pedagogical project in a high school in Bawku, North Eastern Ghana. It was updated and relaunched in the College of Art, Kumasi in 2003 and was contemporaneous with the early bottle-cap installations in Nigeria of Ghanaian-born artist El Anatsui. In this new work, Anatsui had transformed from a sole producer of autonomous sculptures to the collective production of magnificent installations.

5 *kaŕi'kachä seidou's* PhD thesis (*seidou* 2006) won the 2008 Silver Award of the Ghana Academy of Arts and Sciences. The Silver Award is given to the best unpublished PhD thesis manuscript presented to a Ghanaian University. Nagy and Jordan (2018: 1) observe that *seidou's* dissertation, *Theoretical Foundations of the KNUST Painting Programme: A Philosophical Inquiry and Its Contextual Relevance in Ghanaian Culture*, “is closely read by faculty and students at KNUST to this day.”

6 At the sign painting workshop, *seidou* painted sign boards and embellished video advertisement posters, a painting method which anticipated Photoshop editing. He painted giant concert cartoon boards and undertook billboard hoarding. He also decorated motor vehicles, “especially tro-tros with ‘addresses’, vignettes, floral patterns and lettering, from rubber mud guards to the arched boards above the windscreens” (Kwami 2013: 325).

7 *kaŕi'kachä seidou* holds a degree in mathematics. The “black hole” mascot he suggested for blaxTARLINES

Box 5

Out of nothingness, particles are born: The phenomenon of black holes that informs blaxTARLINES thought  
Tracy Thompson

The blaxTARLINES community is premised on egalitarian principles of equality and respect of the general intellect of all persons, which demands operating from a void that implodes a thing under its own weight by “gravitational pull” and perhaps emit radiations (even temporarily). Such implosion has meant to even unlearn what we know as art and (re-)discover what such a void offers. Such void propels the individual towards the unknown where experimentation creates infinite possibilities

curators establishing start-up art spaces.<sup>25</sup> A new attitude to teaching and art programming has been cultivated: one that jettisons a pedantic and conformist logic—where the learner must absorb what the pedagogue already knows whether they are interested in it or not—for a more experimentally driven peer-to-peer dynamic system. There is a “coworker” ethic and spirit of filial kinship (Badiou 2006: 19) that enables the teacher to participate in a “community of equals”—where there is freedom for one to pursue an independent destiny—as lecturers and students form collectives to share and execute projects. The sense of shared responsibility and mutual respect is inevitable to this society although it would not be one based on absolute harmony because it is at the same time one that eschews conformity and organicism. blaxTARLINES is nourished by this spirit of collectivism. The intellectual emancipation and political sensitivity to artistic practice it offers has revolutionized artistic and curatorial practices at the Kumasi School and has laid the foundation for criticality there and beyond. And this is a consequence of *kaŕi'kachä seidou* nonproprietary art practice and its gift form. As he continues to remind us: Silence is not absence!

KUMASI is a consequence of his mathematical interests.

8 A sample of *kaŕi'kachä seidou's* post-imagist poems, namely *Appendix Appendicitis*, *Shadows are Telegrams Awaiting Reply 30x30x30 ...*, *Boundaries*, *Sores and Scars* and *Untitled 1*, have been published in Ndikung et al. (2019: 129–30, 219–22, 233–34). His 1998 poem, “Hieroglyphs on Kangyaga Plains,” was a tribute to Ama Ata Aidoo's 1964/1965 poem “Cornfields in Accra” which inspired the eponymous blaxTARLINES exhibition held in 2016.

9 The corollary is named after Gavriilo Princip, who assassinated the Archduke Frans Ferdinand of the Austro-Hungarian empire. This triggered a chain of events that led to the outbreak of World War I. Graham Harman cautions the contemporary thinker against contextualist dogma: “We must restore dignity to individual causes and resist the seductive dogma of total context” (2009: 210).

10 In a foreword to an exhibition text, the renowned Ghanaian painter Ato Delaquis (1994) writes of *seidou*, who was then called Kevin Amankwah, “There are some naturals who seem to be born with a brush in one hand and a palette in another. Kevin is such an artist. Pablo Picasso was another. They seem to draw or paint anything, whether objective or subjective, with extraordinary facility.”

11 Among these figures of radical sacrifice are Harriet Tubman, an escaped enslaved person who risked her freedom in order to free others who were enslaved; Euripides's Medea and Toni Morrison's Sethe, who sacrificed their children out of their fidelity to them; and Joseph Jacotot, the Ignorant Schoolmaster. Like these figures of the “ethical act,” *kaŕi'kachä seidou* sacrifices “art” out of fidelity to “art.” Žižek proposes that “the only way to liberate oneself from the grip of existing social reality is to renounce the fantasmatic supplement that attaches us to it” (2000: 149).

12 Teaching Hsieh's series of one-year performances (1978–1986) and Thirteen Year Plan (1986–1999) have much in common with *seidou's* long durational projects such as the Name Change Project (1994/2004–present)

and the Emancipatory Teaching Project (since 2003). seïd'ou and Tino Sehgal share a practice of undocumented performative form and "constructed situations." However, there are important differences: while seïd'ou's projects, the antecedent, could be propagated by anybody, Tino Sehgal's works are performed at museums and galleries and executed by trained individuals he refers to as "interpreters." seïd'ou's artist on strike subject is contemporaneous with Claire Fontaine's readymade artist. They are also cotravellers in the use of tactical humor, text-based pieces, and critique of the hierarchy between visual and verbal expression.

13 seïd'ou once humorously referred to himself as Hestia, the goddess of domesticity (*oikos*) and community (*polis*), i.e., goddess of the political economy—the firstborn of the first-generation Olympian gods, who nurtures all, but who lost her place in the canon to Dionysus.

14 In his PhD dissertation, seïd'ou critiques the Art History Programme of the KNUST College of Art thus: "[the Art History Programme] had not monitored contemporary practices and revised critical theories seriously. In our assessment, the Section is not satisfactorily equipped with the resource to give critical direction to the twenty-first century Ghanaian painter. On the surface, this seems to place a burden on the painting lecturer who has to double as an art historian, art critic, and philosopher. However, the monitoring of current practices and critical discourse has become an inextricable part of the responsibilities of studio art teaching also, especially, in Africa where institutional practices and apparatuses for curating, art criticism and presentation are still in their infancy" (seïd'ou 2006: 308).

15 Marshall Ward Mount, in his canonical *African Art since 1920*, had marked the Kumasi Art College for special criticism for its rather tame output and its epicolonial and prescriptive program: "The [institution's] instruction has followed essentially the theories of the typical English academic art school. Still lifes, portraits, and nudes have often been done in a lifeless, realistic style with little originality ... It is unfortunate that more artists of note have not been trained in the long history of the department" (Mount 1989: 129, 139). seïd'ou himself was trained under this curriculum and tried to change its direction with his colleagues when they were students. This instigation for change was memorable but failed until seïd'ou became a teacher there in 2003.

16 An Event is a phenomenon that intervenes "to upset the established rhythm of daily life and even questions the eternal order of Ideas" (Žižek 2013: 1). It is also "the effect that seems to exceed its causes", a miracle inseparably bound to "the space of the event" (2014: 4).

17 In a conversation with curator Jelle Bouwhuis, seïd'ou says, "In terms of institutions of contemporary art, I tend to have the view that Ghana is a kind of 'cultural slum,' or in Agamben's terms, 'homo sacer,' the governed but ungovernable" (seïd'ou and Bouwhuis 2014: 112).

18 Participants in this series have included Bisi Silva, Godfried Donkor, Elvira Dyangani Ose, Nana Oforiatta Ayim, Adwoa Amoah, Rochelle Feinstein (Yale), Sam Durant, Rikki Wemega-Kwawu, Papa Owusu-Ankomah, and El Anatsui. Kwaku Boafo Kissiedu (Castro), George Ampratwum (Buma), Ibrahim Mahama, and Bernard Akoi-Jackson have been very instrumental in institutionalizing the Interactive Series. More recently, Kwasi Ohene-Ayeh, in collaboration with The Studio, Accra, and Foundation for Contemporary Art, Accra (FCA) has expanded the locus of Interactive Series beyond Kumasi.

19 The name change project started in 1994 but was ratified in 2004.

20 Adjo Kisser summarizes seïd'ou's affirmative politics thus: "The urgency of inventing new possibilities in response to a milieu of hopelessness within the emaciated art scene of Ghana and its institutions is what undergirds every one of kari'kachā seïd'ou's projects" (George Ampratwum and Adjo Kisser in conversation; March 13, 2019, KNUST, Kumasi).

21 seïd'ou suggests, "My over identification with the 'cultural slum' is an optimistic rather than a cynical one, a constructive rather than resistance politics. It is to affirm and thereby help invent an alternative to the global mainstream than to assimilate" (seïd'ou and Bouwhuis 2014: 112).

22 kari'kachā seïd'ou, in conversation with Robin Riskin, July 9, 2020.

23 seïd'ou proposed the black hole, the mascot of blaxTARLINES, as a materialist update to the symbolic

"Lodestar of African Freedom" incorporated into Ghana's flag and coat of arms in 1957 by Theodosia Okoh and Amon Kotei respectively. Ultimately, the blaxTARLINES economic and intellectual emancipation project is a resurrection of Kwame Nkrumah's adaptation of Marcus Garvey's Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA), which culminated in the abortive Black Star Line shipping line project (1919–1922).

24 seïd'ou's critique of postmodern multiculturalism and contemporary art's complicity in neoliberal capitalist exploitation must be disambiguated from the critiques of postmodernism by the Intellectual Dark Web. 25 Examples of start-up art spaces to which blaxTARLINES lends support are Ibrahim Mahama's Savannah Center for Contemporary Art (SCCA-Tamale), the Studio, Accra; crazinisT Art Studio and Perfocraze International Artists' Residency (PIAR), Kumasi, directed by Vabene Elikem Fiatsi (crazinisT artistT).

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# Exposing Something to Someone While Exposing Someone to Something

## blaxTARLINES Exhibition Cultures There-Then-And-Hereafter

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*all photos courtesy blaxTARLINES except where otherwise noted*

A myriad of curatorial strategies, such as collective curating, interspecies and intergenerational conversations, accessibility programming, exhibition-as-experimental site, class-sensitive audiencing, and the symbolic participation of the Unknown Artist—the “surplus population” of exhibition makers—have marked the blaxTARLINES KUMASI network of expanded-exhibition practice for the past decade and more. As a cross-generational and transcultural community, blaxTARLINES KUMASI operates through affirmative politics but also thrives on a propagative model of social organization responsive to its integral crisis points, gaps, and other manifestations of negativity (seid'ou and Bouwhuis 2014: 113). Thus, the network mobilizes different struggles, sometimes antagonistic ones, for common political action through collaborative projects.<sup>1</sup> Many of the transformations that the blaxTARLINES coalition has brought to Ghana's contemporary exhibition cultures have grown out of the Emancipatory Art Teaching Project, a generative curriculum project launched in 2003 by kaŕi'kaçhä seid'ou at the Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology (KNUST) Department of Painting and Sculpture in Kumasi. In a conversation with curator Jelle Bouwhuis, seid'ou contextualized his transition from the making of the “work of art” to a probing of the “art of work,” his focus on pedagogical practice, and some of its political implications regarding his vision of a sharing community:

Working in the “cultural slum” of KNUST College of Art in Kumasi, my institutional critical response was to go on artistic strike, stop “making art” symbolically and to inaugurate a practice of “making

artists.” My political strategy was what I called “ironic overidentification” with the conditions of the cultural slum. Through that, I hoped to transform art from the status of commodity to gift (seid'ou and Bouwhuis 2019: 193; cf. seid'ou and Bouwhuis 2014: 111–13).

### **KUMASI'S EMANCIPATORY CURRICULUM: ITS PLACE IN GHANA'S EXHIBITION CULTURES**

The Emancipatory Art Teaching Project proposed and introduced a curriculum with an egalitarian drive—an art-focused curriculum that is not prejudicial to any medium, form, style, genre, process, or trend. Above all, each artist was trained as both artist and exhibition-maker, and as neither. Students were encouraged to rethink the exhibition form itself as a format of art-making and to expand its space, scope, and political ambitions beyond its contemporary framing (seid'ou 2015). Among other things, this was a response to a noticeable dearth of curatorial sensibility in the typical artist's training and experience in Ghana. Through complex modes of exhibition conception, making, and dissemination, the new Kumasi curriculum silently reconfigured art-based and art-focused labor (cognitive, technical, physical) in the hope of a radical transformation of local art institutions and communities. Through seid'ou's Drawing Class and his collaborations with colleagues, a series of artist-curated guerrilla exhibitions ensued between 2003 and 2015 (seid'ou 2006, 2010). These interventions bypassed the gallery system and transformed city spaces and everyday situations into magnificent exhibition sites and community projects (seid'ou 2010; Woets 2011: 323; Dieckvoss 2017)<sup>2</sup>. Continuously for more than a decade, an average of fifty concurrent solo exhibitions and public interventions, curated by a corresponding



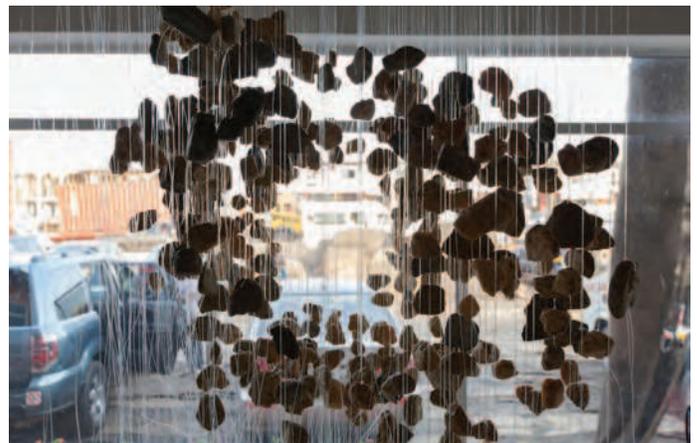
1 Kwamivi Zewuze Adzraku's *Impossibilities* (MFA, 1996, Kumasi) on the *Silence Between the Lines* poster (2015) was the mascot of the exhibition. *Impossibilities* recalls a silent revolution of the pioneer MFA students and their allies that attempted to liberate the Kumasi Painting and Sculpture curriculum from *beaux-arts* hegemony.

2 Installation view (interior): *Silence Between the Lines*, 2015. Hajaar Ameen Kudos Farouk's pair of fibrous installations hanging from ceiling to floor (foreground); Yaw Brobbey Kyei's *Road Sighs* and *Space to Space* on the adjacent left wall; Eugene Edzorho's *Same from Different Angles* (stone and nylon installation) in the background (right); Adjo Kisser's *The Portrait Series* in the background (left), and objects from Emmanuel Opoku Manu's *Fantasy Town* hanging from the rafters. Photo: courtesy Jean-Rivel Fondjo and blaxTARLINES.

3 *Silence Between the Lines*. A view from inside the automobile showroom through Eugene Edzorho's installation rocks excavated from mining sites, *Same from Different Angles*, into part of Ibrahim Mahama's installation *Samsia: Towers of Emancipation* that leads into the streets of the city.

number of students, were held annually in the heart of Kumasi city and KNUST campus. These biennale-scale exhibition projects also inspired emergent exhibition cultures in Accra in the first and second decades of the century through alumni who worked with emergent art and cultural spaces and communities in Accra after graduation (Woets 2011, 2012). These include the Foundation for Contemporary Art (founded 2004), Nubuke Foundation (founded 2006), Ehalakasa (founded 2007), Writers Project Ghana (founded 2009), Dei Center for Contemporary Art (founded 2009), Chale Wote Festival (founded 2011), Ano Ghana (2012), Kuenyehia Trust for Contemporary Art (founded 2013), The Studio Accra (founded 2015), and the cultural programs of Goethe Institut and Alliance Francaise.

An inaugural MFA program in curatorial practice was



introduced in Kumasi in 2014 to cater for students open to curatorial concentration while opening them up to other possible roles in the art field (cf. Woets 2012). This might well be the first graduate course in contemporary art curating in West Africa. Six years later, the graduating curators and their collaborators in the blaxTARLINES network are beginning to transform the texture and temperature of exhibition making in Ghana and elsewhere (Silva 2017; Nagy and Jordan 2016; Johannessen 2016; Munshi 2018). Collectives are forming from the parent blaxTARLINES hub in Kumasi. Furthermore, exhibition start-ups and coalitions are spontaneously emerging in various communities. The collectives are growing into peer-to-peer art-labor movements which network from time to time, and in various topologies, to tackle exhibition, social, and ecological projects. Today, blaxTARLINES exhibitions are known to have reconfigured key aspects of the Ghanaian landscape of art practice and proposed alternative lineages of concepts and histories on exhibition-making and art thought. The possibilities of forging new connections between locality and the emergent postcapitalist and postcontemporary futures appear in the distance.

Before the Emancipatory Art Teaching Project was introduced in 2003, out of which emerged blaxTARLINES exhibition cultures, the pervasive exhibition format had been the contrived *beaux-arts* or touristy one. While the new Kumasi curriculum does not exclude this model from its scope of cultural engagement, its hegemonic role in silencing, censoring, or erasing key futures of Ghana's art establishment is what was in contention. For instance, the ambitious and genre-defying public interventions of the millennial



4 Yaw Owusu's *Untitled 2*, a "hollow phallus" of one-pesewa coins hanging in the atrium of the Museum of Science and Technology, Accra. On the floor are Lois Arde-Acquah's ink drawing on large scrolls and William Duku's bluish watercolor paintings (*Visible Series*). Installation view: *the Gown must go to Town...* 2015.

5 Livingston Amoako's "melting" phallus, *Memories of Yesteryears*, in the atrium of the Museum of Science and Technology, Accra. Installation view: *Cornfields in Accra*, 2016.

generation of artists and curators—presently led by Bernard Akoi-Jackson, Ibrahim Mahama, Kwasi Ohene-Ayeh, and others—were, to say the least, unimaginable in its framework.

Indeed, Ghana's cultural fortunes seem to have waned in the last decades of the twentieth century with the inception of the neoliberalization of state institutions and economies (seid'ou and Bouhwuis 2014; Woets 2011). An ensuing depoliticization and commoditization of art underpinned the hegemony of touristy paintings, sculptures, and artifacts in Ghanaian art schools and galleries. By the turn of the century, the default ethos of exhibition making in Ghana was premised on the trade-fair-flavored salon style; that is, filling up commercial gallery interiors with painting décor and romantic Africanist souvenirs contrived to the tourist's eye, pocket, and luggage bag. Exceptions were few and far between. There was little or no curatorial direction. "Not sellable" in these terms was equated with "not exhibitable." Ambitious works, which challenged established *beaux-arts* genres, media, styles, and formats, were simply inadmissible, stigmatized, or shamed. There was a reflection of this silent censorship in an artist's training in art school, too.

Internationally, the situation was also enforced by the hegemonic role Euro-American salvage ethnographers and anthropologists—principally enthusiasts of the so-called World Art<sup>3</sup> phenomenon, but hardly well-versed in the modern and contemporary art terrain—played in canonizing the complex and vast territory of "African Art" in text and in exhibitions (Woets 2011). It is needless to say that, at best, they failed to critically engage artists whose working formats and perspectives challenged the mythical and "Afrocultural" consensus on authentic heritage and identity. Moreover, they typified expanded and genre-defying modern

art practices as "conceptual art," dismissed them as irredeemably Western and "high art," and omitted them from their canon. This way, they reinforced a growing tendency to homogenize Ghana's modern art field since the colonial and post-Independence era. This aesthetic conformism was under critique as late as 2003, when Bernard Akoi-Jackson remarked in his BFA thesis, "The conceptual has been the African way of expression since time immemorial" (Akoi-Jackson 2003: 23; Woets 2011: 329). By then, the *South Meets West* international art exhibition at the National Museum in Accra (1999), which had featured the media-promiscuous works of transnational Southern and West African artists, had already exposed Ghana's domestic art communities as oblivious to the sophistication of real-time discourses and practices in international contemporary art (Kwami 2000: 45;<sup>4</sup> seid'ou, Ampratwum, Kissiedu, and Riskin 2015: 134).

Meanwhile, some notable exceptions to this cultural conformity had happened in Kumasi in the mid-1990s when a small group of MFA students—Kwamivi Zewuze Adzraku, Emmanuel Vincent "Papa" Essel, Caterina Niklaus, and qarĩ'kachä seid'ou (then known as Edward Kevin Amankwah)—supported by their kindred spirits,<sup>5</sup> tested the boundaries of art practice and exhibition making at KNUST (seid'ou 2006; seid'ou et al. 2015: 134; Woets 2012; Kwami 2003, 2013). This group dematerialized, deskilled, and democratized art practice with an openness and criticality that was unprecedented in Ghana's modern artscape (cf. Niklaus 1995; Amankwah 1996; Essel 1998). Amankwah captured the democratic spirit in a provocative one-liner that concluded his MFA thesis: "In Art, any Shit can be a hit provided there is no S to disturb it" (Amankwah 1996: 28; Akoi-Jackson 2003; Woets 2011: 319, 322; Woets 2012). Among other things, key exponents of the group created unannounced performances, textualized paintings, site-specific and genre-defying projects, and political-feminist interrogation of materiality<sup>6</sup> and systems of art and exhibition production. These interventions challenged traditional definitions and experiences of art as understood in the Kumasi Art College and put pressure on an exclusively *atelier*-focused curriculum that had changed very little since its British-colonial inception. Yet, "a lapse, or silence, settled in, and radical ideas were quickly censored or tamed" after this class graduated and dispersed (seid'ou et al. 2015: 134). The Emancipatory Art Teaching Project, launched at the inception of the millennium, was a resurrection of this silent revolution. Thus, the curatorial use of Kwamivi Zewuze Adzraku's object installation



6 Esther Anokye's installation *Greenware Drawings*, a dystopian landscape, takes center stage in the atrium of the Museum of Science and Technology, Accra. Clay, tree branches, wire mesh, anthills. Installation view: *Orderly Disorderly*, 2017.

7 Convivial situations were built into exhibition experience through works that explored a variety of games. Children group and play around Kelvin Haize's video simulation of *Oware*, a Ghanaian game. *Orderly Disorderly*, 2017.

from this era, *Impossibilities* (1996) (Fig. 1), as the mascot of *The Silence Between the Lines* is indicative of this resurrection and the possibilities for retroactive redemption, as captured in the curatorial text:

Borges summarizes this beautifully, “each writer [artist] creates his [own] precursors. His work modifies our conception of the past, as it will modify the future.” It is in this sense that Adzraku's installation of 1996, *Impossibilities*, the mascot of this exhibition can make sense retroactively through the visions of the younger artists represented here (seid'ou 2015; cf. Borges 1964: 192; Elliot 1941: 25–26).

### THE SANKOFA TIME COMPLEX: EXHIBITION PLATFORMS AS FORGOTTEN FUTURES YET TO COME

In 2015, blaxTARLINES launched a series of three large-scale end-of-year exhibitions in Accra, namely; *the Gown must go to Town* (2015), *Cornfields in Accra* (2016), and *Orderly Disorderly* (2017). The terms of this trilogy were paraphrased in the curatorial statement of the exhibition *Silence Between the Lines* (2015)<sup>7</sup> (Figs. 1–3), where the Ghanaian *sankofa* legend, traditionally interpreted as a mythical bird nostalgically looking back to recollect from a glorious past, was reimagined as a subject “looking back towards forgotten futures yet to come”<sup>8</sup> (seid'ou 2015). These “forgotten futures,” like anagrams, seem indelibly etched in subsequent exhibition and interventionist projects by staff, students and alumni of the Kumasi School.

*Silence Between the Lines* outdoored fresh artistic and curatorial practices that had been brewing in the Department of Painting and Sculpture at KNUST since the turn of the century. The cross-generational exhibition extended from the interior space of the car showroom of Prime Motors Ltd., located at Ahenema Kokoben, Kumasi, into its nearby environs<sup>9</sup> (Figs. 2–3). Among the exhibiting artists was Ibrahim Mahama,<sup>10</sup> who had just completed his MFA in Kumasi and had been invited to exhibit at *All the World's Futures*, the International

Exhibition of the 56th Venice Biennale curated by Okwui Enwezor. At *Silence*, Mahama's outdoor installation of derelict sacks, *Samsia: Towers of Emancipation*, presaged his massive walkthrough installation, *Out of Bounds*, to be held in Venice in May that same year. *Samsia* connected the exhibits and events in the showroom interior through the glass façade and display window to the heart of the city and back.

These large-scale blaxTARLINES exhibitions were launched to encourage student artists and curators to find their own voices and directions, to imagine and create new possibilities in art.<sup>11</sup> The exhibitions featured works of undergraduate and graduate students, teaching assistants, faculty, alumni, and invited guest artists. These cross-generational, genre-defying shows expanded from 17 participants in the inaugural exhibition of *Silence Between the Lines* to over 100 participants in the last of the trilogy of large-scale exhibitions, *Orderly Disorderly*.

The blaxTARLINES exhibitions are not restricted to raising isolated issues in art but are meant to connect to the wider cultural, political, material, and technoscientific substance of our global society. Their curatorial strategies expose and repurpose the inconsistencies and failures that underwrite the logic of contemporary exhibition-making and its virtual support. Working from





the remit of an academic institution, this form of engaged critique could be understood through the political strategy *seid'ou* calls “ironic overidentification” (*seid'ou* and Bouwhuis 2014: 111–13) or in Rosi Braidotti’s formulation, “politics of radical immanence” (Braidotti 2008)—that is, inserting oneself in the site of critique in order to activate its transformation from within. Central to the curatorial strategies was the staging of covert feminist and center-periphery politics in the selection of works and their transgressive allotment to hierarchized spaces such as the atrium, a master signifier in the cultural coding of spatial privileges. In *the Gown*, Yaw Owusu’s *Untitled*, a “hollowed phallus” of near-worthless but glittering Ghana *pesewa* coins was suspended midair in the atrium—repeating on a smaller scale the “oculus” that takes daylight from the ribbon glass fenestration of the top floor down to the atrium (Fig. 4). Livingston Amoako’s phallus of empty and detachable strings of snail shells pierces through the oculus but is cut short at its tip by a lapse or explosion that scatters its members skyward and downward, and an implosion that keeps the base “melting.” It stands withering and “incomplete” while its surviving members, some live snails, crawl off-center across the exhibition space (Fig. 5). At *Orderly Disorderly*, the waning phallus figure in the atrium was displaced by Esther Anokyé’s dystopic landscape installation (Fig. 6), which is in conversation with Tracy Thompson’s teardrops of vibrant matter dripping from the constellation of objects, including a Sputnik 1 model, hanging close to the ceiling.

8 Desmond Maxwell Acquah. *Life* (2015–2016). Mummified “organs without body” cast in granular sugar and food dye. The melting sugars on the floor reflect Darren Shimawuda Ziorkley’s tableau photography, the *Dowagers Series* (Queen Victoria, Yaa Asantewaa) and the *Germane Series* (General) in the distance. Installation view: *Cornfields in Accra*, 2016.

9 Adjo Kisser. *Untitled* (Interactive tableaux). Mechanized motors and blinking sensors embedded into the “eye sockets” of the grinning figures in the tableaux. They are activated by human and nonhuman presence. The leitmotif of the wallpaper is taken from Computerized Tomography (CT) scans of anonymous patients from Ghana’s hospitals. Installation view: *Cornfields in Accra*, 2016.

The exhibitions were distributed in virtual spaces via the internet, radio, television, and other nonconventional physical sites in the city of Accra. Dormant for decades, the Nkrumah Era Museum of Science and Technology was brought back to life with an avalanche of artistic experiments that were staged on floors, walls, ceilings, and exterior spaces. The museum space became a constellation of varied mediums and forms like photography, video and sound installations, convivial scenarios, and games (Fig. 7), critical cooking, illustrations, paintings, sculptures, designs for living, natural and augmented life forms, robotics, graffiti, sound and fragrances, among others. The relations formed from these constellations created a distinctive ambience in the museum.

### EXPOSING SOMETHING TO SOMEONE AND SOMEONE TO SOMETHING IN REGIMES OF CRISIS

blaxTARLINES initiatives and projects suggest means by which the subaltern of global contemporary art can speak for herself. Even so, the coalition’s exhibitions have been ambivalent about displaying or expressing human mastery in any field while ushering in a new era of making, thinking, and learning about art that opens up to emergent forms, genres, subject matter, and many more. In this regard, the inaugural *Silence Between the Lines* exhibition presented the visions of the artists and curators from the Kumasi School as having “no privileged route or direction from which, or towards



(clockwise from top left)  
**10** Selorm Kudjie (Head, Department of Care) feeding the live snails of Livingstone Amoako's installation *Memories of Yesteryears*. *Cornfields in Accra*, 2016.

**11** *The Unknown Artist*. Special participant, Installation view: *Orderly Disorderly*, 2017.

**12** Ibrahim Mahama's installation at the Museum of Science and Technology for *the Gown must go to Town ...* exhibition (2015) is the first in the series of his all-over and immersive jute-sack installations.



which to face, to return, to look at, to forget, to remember, to erase or to have a good grasp of the coming futures" (seidou 2015). The exhibitions thus present art as underwritten by a spirit of indifference or an ethos that is not preemptively prejudicial to any particular medium, content, skill, trade, trend, material, or process.

Thus, the curatorial teams conceive of these exhibitions as experimental sites through which forms of collective curating, accessibility programming, and exposure of the human to the nonhuman and inhuman, and vice versa, could be put to the test. With due deference to the artist Pierre Hyughe, the creative process takes place at a junction between human vulnerability and agency where human subjects are exposed to the unfathomable gaze of "something" while reciprocally casting their own "exhibition gaze." As Lacan puts it (1973: 89), "the picture being in my eye" also means "I am in the picture too."<sup>12</sup> This decentering of the humanist exhibition framework of exclusively "exhibiting something to someone" is hinted at in the works of some participant artists and in the curatorial statement of *the Gown ...*:

These artists probe the dispositifs and uncertainties of the twenty-first century: how to reinvent from surplus created by systems of capitalist production, consumption, and speculation; how to reimagine

processes and relations of biopolitical, intellectual, and artificial labor; how we might organize and inhabit today's ever-growing cities; and how we understand material and immaterial flows through ecological and social trafficways. Moving beyond anthropocentric visions, the artists' multisensory perspectives get down to the level of the earth, animals, plants, winds, machines, sounds, smells, and silences. Paying attention to the small things, the particles, the subtleties, shadows, and stains, they reorient perceptions and positions of experience through potentialities, impossibilities, and paradoxes. With sensibilities toward communal and collaborative systems and processes, residual entities gain new significance, forgotten traditions are injected with fresh life, metaphysical certainties destabilized, and networks of power remapped (the Gown 2015).

A good example in *the Gown ...* is Fred Afram Asiedu's installation that invites and activates ants, termites, and other insects into constellations of decaying wood. Sprinkled with sweet sugars, they gradually draw in live insects, who become present in the exhibition space. The work is as much formed by what is eaten away as by what is appended: an act of carving, of erasure, and of



**13** Goddy Leye. *Untitled*, 2009. Wood and glass hawker's sieve, a ration of millet, intrusive sounds of women hawkers' voices issuing from a speaker below that creates resonance among the grains of millet inside the hawker's sieve. Installation view: *Cornfields in Accra*.

**14** Lois Arde-Acquah. *Help me to Stop*. Performance at the opening of *Cornfields in Accra*. 2016. Photo: courtesy Nii Odzemma and blaxTARLINES.

**15** Jonathan Okoronkwo. *Dead Car Series*. Engine oil on plywood. Installation view. *Cornfields in Accra*, 2016.

**16** Among the items from the Museum of Science and Technology official collection that were displayed alongside the artworks was a model of Ghana's state-owned Black Star Line ship. Installation view: *Orderly Disorderly*, 2017. Photo: courtesy Nii Odzemma and blaxTARLINES.



assemblage. Through experiment and scientific inquiry, the work asks what humans can learn from other biological communities and cycles of consumption. *Paradoxical Muse*, the work of Joshua “Scolons” Osei Mensah Brobbey, who experiments with tropical fruits as fibers for making paper, is a subtler example. He manipulates color, texture, depth, and strength with modulations of heat, cooking, evaporation, and drainage. Variations in time and temperature are used to intensify the paper’s fragility and to “age” the material aesthetically. Orange-yellow tones made of freshly cooked peels split open with speckles and seams, while dark brown sheets of sun- or shade-dried fruits tend to form with relative thickness. Controlled choices are counterbalanced by chance. The process is a duet between the artist and forces of nature—water, air, and light being principal actants. The fragile sheets were hung in free space such that one could walk around them to experience variations on either side—rough or smooth, concave or convex—and smell their citrus whiff while it faded slowly in intensity as the days went by. The work continued to change its shape and form in response to the changing humidity and temperature conditions without direct human intervention.

Audiencing takes place at both human and extrahuman levels and solicits all the human senses, too. In *Cornfields*, Desmond Maxwell Acquah exhibited *Life*, an array of mummified organs cast in granular sugar and food dye. The sugar base of *Life* attracted ant colonies into the exhibition space daily. The melting sugars turned sections of the exhibition space into terraqueous scapes of colors, craters, and crevices for tiny creatures and as reflecting surfaces for human spectators (Fig. 8). While Akwasi Bediako Afrane’s *TRONS* hovered over the exhibition floors among human spectators, Adjo Kisser’s mechanized and robotized “altarpieces” were held in place on exhibition panel while acknowledging human and nonhuman presence by blinking (Fig. 9). The blink, emanating from the pairs of mechanized eye sockets, evokes the artificial camera flash light that illuminates the sitter. Human subjects are exposed to something while something is being exposed to them. The curatorial statement evokes this human–nonhuman nexus again:

The works are diverse and span contemporary art and allied practices which anticipate emergent formats, ideas, and configurations of transformative futures. The artists are not only interested in human life, but also ponder other possibilities where animals, plants, machines, and microorganisms become potential platforms and media for reflection, engagement, and interaction. Mechanical contraptions fashioned out of discarded domestic appliances and stripped



bare of their familiar housing are juxtaposed with manipulations of synthetic fibres or hair attachments. Hyperrealistic tableaux inspired by everyday life are staged within poetic proximity with crystalline sugar sculptures that evoke archaeological discoveries from excavated futures of our contemporary foodscape, whilst smells of ferment fill up spaces and crevices, as yeast continues to perform life-transforming actions on objects made from dough. Motion sensors embedded within quirky “altarpieces” interact with visitors and draw them, through animated stained-glass projections, into new worlds where materials such as paper, resin, or plastic respond to extreme temperature changes to take on new and surprising forms. All these and more communicate with one another in the presence of experimental museological displays of autonomous objects in the MST and GMMB collection (Cornfields 2016).

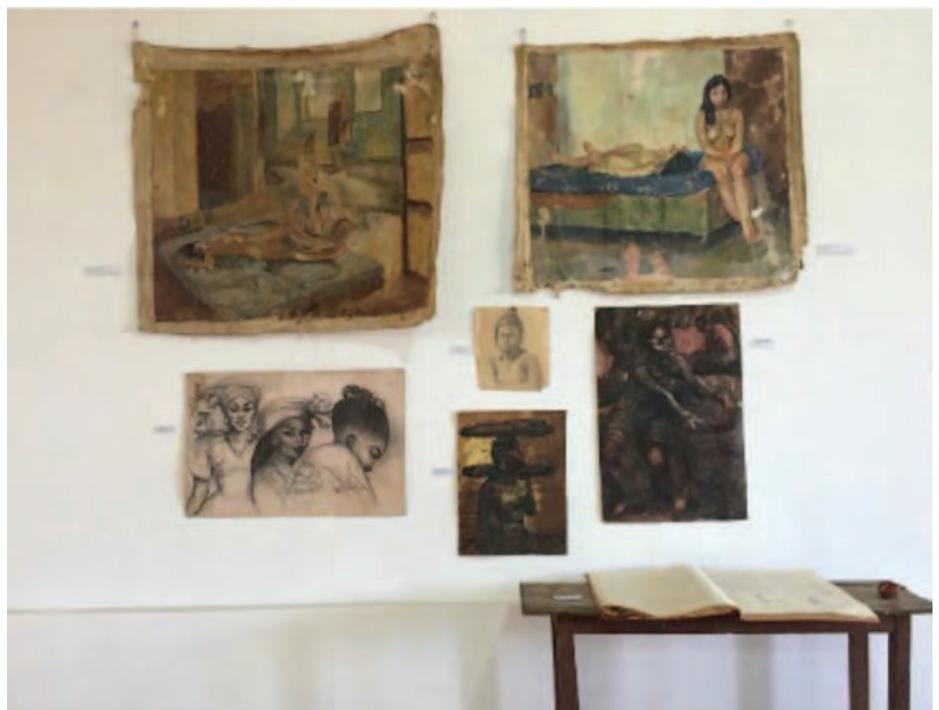
Building from the ground up, back down, and across, through detours and percolations at different levels, there are profound decisions made about large- and small-scale mobilization and management of logistics, labor, care, accommodation, and publicity. Departments were set within the exhibition process in this regard. Key to the human–nonhuman interface was the Department of Care, which was headed by Selorm Kudjie. At *Cornfields* and *Orderly Disorderly*, Selorm Kudjie and his team developed a twelve-hour daily program dedicated to the monitoring and sustenance of animal life and green logistics in the exhibition space (Fig. 10). The team’s duties also included the upkeep of

(above)

**17** Intergenerational Conversations: *Orderly Disorderly* (2017). Esther Anokye. *Greenware Drawings* (foreground). Standing on a miniature anthill is Larry Adorkor’s cock that crowed intermittently. Hanging on the white panel in the background are paintings from the older generation of Ghanaian modernists. From left to right, they are S.K. Amenuke (b. 1940), *Pouring Palmwine* (1970), oil on Masonite; Ablade Glover (b. 1934), *City Carnival* (2016) and *Market Rendezvous* (2016). Oil on canvas; Agyeman Ossei “Dotã” (b. 1960), *Ye mmɔ brane bɛɛ*. (2011/2012).

(right)

**18** Galle Winston Kofi Dawson (b. 1940, special guest artist for intergenerational conversations). Installation View: *Orderly Disorderly*, 2017. This section of *Orderly Disorderly* inspired the solo retrospective, *In Pursuit of Something beautiful, perhaps...*, which opened at SCCA Tamale, 2019.



electronic, digital, and mechanical art forms, portals and devices, and the care of all art pieces and facilities regarding human audiences. Accessibility programming also anticipated human spectators of various abilities, interests, and competencies; Braille and local language translations of curatorial texts and captions of works are central. Because of structural limitations posed by the design of the Museum of Science and Technology building, which has neither elevator nor ramp access to the basement and first floor of the building, the curatorial team also designated a space on the ground floor where physically impaired individuals could experience the works on all three floors of the building mediated through video installation.

The exhibitions were staged as class-conscious, noncommercial, open-access events; a team of curators and artists were out on the streets on each day to canvass for a wide spectrum of publics—from street and open-market vendors, students from primary, secondary, and tertiary schools, institutions for autistic and physically challenged people, auto mechanics, commercial drivers, etc. The fluid exhibition space functioned as a living organism, a laboratory, a classroom, a cinema or theater of organic, mechanical, life and synthetic forms generating dynamic relations.

The last of the exhibition trilogy, *Orderly Disorderly*, had operated on a postcrisis theme captured in the curatorial text as

the state of hopelessness and indifference experienced by sufferers and witnesses of the current global crises of public commons (refugee crisis, economic precarity, threats of ecological crisis in the epoch of anthropocene, new forms of apartheid emerging as invisible walls in the public sphere, gentrification of digital space and intellectual property, etc).

The exhibition proposed the inclusion of a hypothetical and generic participant called the *The Unknown Artist* (Fig. 11) who embodies the void and precarity left behind by the mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion of the contemporary art establishment, by and large,



**19a–b** Agyeman Ossei “Dota” (b. 1960, special guest artist for intergenerational conversations). Installation view: *Orderly Disorderly*, 2017. This section of *Orderly Disorderly* inspired the solo retrospective *Akutia: Blindfolding the Sun and the Poetics of Peace*, which opened at SCCA Tamale and Red Clay Studios, Janakpeng in 2020.

progressively encroached upon by capitalist economic structures. Thus *The Unknown Artist* was presented as an artist figure with no physical presence in the exhibition as such, yet stimulating curatorial reflection on the “part of no part” of exhibition cultures. It was a strategy of using the exhibition as a form to think through immanent contradictions in the moral economy of contemporary art where precarious labor is exploited but rewarded with symbolic castration. By analogy, *The Unknown Artist* stimulates reflection on the extent of political, economic, and ecological expropriation that leaves the vulnerable unaccounted for. For Ranci re (2006), politics begins when this “part that has no part” begins to speak and act for themselves, not spoken on behalf of by the privileged as pertains in mainstream liberal politics, but by affirming the rhetorical axiom “but we are all equal?” by themselves.

The domestic art communities of Ghana are not remote from such forms of deprivation. In fact, the hopelessness of the systemic conditions for contemporary art was legendary by the turn of the century. Yet the experience inspired the formation of blaxTARLINES and the inauguration of its art-labor coalitions for “impossible” exhibitions and projects such as *Orderly Disorderly* and its kin to happen. The political and economic conditions of the neoliberal 1980s through the 1990s had plunged Ghana into Structural Adjustment Programs imposed by the ex-Bretton Woods system. Ghana traded increased GDP figures and lower inflation rates in the books for the privatization or neglect of key state institutions that had thrived in the Nkrumah era, rising rates of key services and basic necessities, the downsizing of labor in the public sector and increased unemployment, and the curtailing of public funding of cultural institutions, personnel, and projects. Public museums and supporting art and cultural institutions and spaces were among the worst hit, but they are also among those that never recovered. In order to keep their practice afloat in the face of state neglect, artists were compelled to evolve commercially driven exhibition cultures targeted at tourists and the expatriate community in Ghana as the only game in town. It is against such a backdrop that *Orderly Disorderly* revisited a unique political

vision that Professor Ablade Glover proposed in the early 1990s. He had mobilized artists around a cooperative model of economic and aesthetic emancipation; artists in the alliance would collectively operate and own the entity horizontally.<sup>13</sup> Unfortunately, the proposal fell through as most of the key artists preferred to go their individual ways to keep the pot boiling.<sup>14</sup>

The apparent lack of institutional and state support and art infrastructure at the turn of the century was instrumental in writing Ghana’s domestic art scene off the international and global map of contemporary art. However, like Derrida’s *pharmakon*, it is both poison and cure—the curse and the blessing that has strengthened the recent blaxTARLINES tradition of collective self-determination as the virtual support for independent art and curatorial practice. Artists pool resources through thick and thin. They seek out and negotiate for spaces, fund projects, form project-led collectives, and make critical decisions on how to present and discuss their work with existing and new publics. There is a communal attitude that undergirds the conception, production, realization, dissemination, reception, and documentation of the art works. If artists train as curators and curators as artists and beyond, they are also encouraged to work “from bolts and nuts to high theory and back.”<sup>15</sup>

### THE blaxTARLINES TRILOGY: ANAGRAMS OF EMANCIPATED FUTURES

*the Gown* (Figs. 4, 12) opened as the first of the trilogy at the Museum of Science and Technology in Accra, in 2015. The





exhibition affirmed an imperative to the African student by the first pan-Africanist president of Ghana, Osagyefo Dr. Kwame Nkrumah, in his speech *The African Genius*, to hyphenate the gap that exists between the academy (the gown) and that of the wider social sphere (the town) (Nkrumah 1963). Hence, Nkrumah encouraged a liberation from the mantle of colonial education. The gown–town engagement was mediated by art objects and projects that occupied the basement, ground floor, and top floor of the building and audiences that cut across social and economic classes. The technoscientific works in the permanent collection of the Museum of Science and Technology were on display at the top floor, with a few dotted among the contemporary art works on the ground floor. Among the fifty-seven artists was 28-year-old Ibrahim Mahama, who wrapped the entirety of his architectural armature, the Museum of Science and Technology building, in his iconic jute-sack material (Fig. 12). This immersive approach would

become more pronounced in his later work after the introduction of drone technology for prospecting and for documentation.<sup>16</sup> The plain-weave material regulated the incidence of daylight and gave a spectrum of tonalities to the visual experience inside. *the Gown* also celebrated Professor El Anatsui, the renowned Ghanaian artist and alumnus of KNUST who received the Golden Lion Lifetime Achievement Award at the aforementioned Biennale.

An extract from an eponymous poem by the feminist literary figure Ama Ata Aidoo inspired *Cornfields in Accra* and its theme of resilience in times of crisis.

... We shall sit firmly on our buttocks  
And plant our feet on the earth.  
Then we shall ask to see him  
Who says  
We shall not survive among these turbines? (Aidoo 2007: 12).

It is a vision of universal solidarity in the face of common struggle, as the curatorial statement describes it—citing lines from the poem—“men without barns” and “women without fallows” (Aidoo 2007: 12) allied in common struggle, scraping through challenges and surviving imminent crises self-assured. The works occupied all three floors and extended into several parts of the city. Among them were nontraditional forms like live land snails escaping from Livingston Amoako’s “withering phallus,” which glided across the museum floors. There is a teleportation through the exhibition’s “time machine” as the live snails crawl into Esther Anokye’s dystopic landscape installation of tree branches, clay, and sprinkled earth at the *Orderly Disorderly* exhibition the following year. Such creative repetitions have become leitmotifs of blaxTARLINES exhibitions. By extension, the time-space of blaxTARLINES exhibitions is structured like a fractal; sections can be zoomed in or zoomed out to birth other major projects, making them a space of infinite possibilities. Today, some key sections of the trilogy, such as the sections on historical reconstruction featuring Ghanaian modernists significant to the evolution of the KNUST curriculum, have developed into large-scale monographic retrospectives by the younger generation of artists and curators.

**20** Caleb Prah  
*Madonna (Market Women)* (2017)  
Aluminium framing, glass, found and repurposed wooden tray, digital photography and picture transfer. *Orderly Disorderly*, 2017.  
Part of the *Madonna Series (Kayayei Madonna Triptych, 2016)*, this piece is in the collection of Harn Museum, University of Florida.

**21** Installation view: *Orderly Disorderly*, 2017.  
Top left: Priscilla Kennedy, component of *Converging Boundaries* series (2016–2017); woven Ashanti kente fabric, artificial flowers, embroidery.  
Top right: Tracy Thompson, section of *Synt Illusion* (three-part installation) (2017); polystyrene (Styrofoam), polyvinyl chloride, (PVC) sheet, petrol.  
Lower left: Kelvin Haizel, *Desperately seeking forevers* (2017); images mapped onto automobile head and tail lights with light fixtures and powered by car batteries [organs without bodies].  
Lower right: Priscilla Kennedy, component of *Converging Boundaries* series (2016–2017). Islamic keffiyeh, embroidery.





*Cornfields* (Figs. 5, 13–15) also featured the sound installation of noted Cameroonian conceptual artist Goddy Leye<sup>17</sup> (1965–2011) (Fig. 13) whose work had been in the blaxTARLINES Collection before his untimely death.<sup>18</sup> For the first time, the constellation of exhibition sites included the older Museum of Science and Technology building, with a folded-plate roofing that was wrapped in Ibrahim Mahama’s jute-sack leitmotif while screening his corpus of projects inside. The exhibition also displayed items from the collection of the museum, including the prototype of the Sputnik 1, the first artificial satellite ever launched by humanity and at a time contemporaneous with Ghana’s independence from colonial rule.<sup>19</sup> The curators “launched” the Sputnik 1 model “into orbit” inside the main museum building and brought more context to the array of items in the Museum of Science and Technology collection, researching into the museological objects and providing comprehensive provenance for them. Among the official museum collection is a bust of Paul Robeson, the famed African American singer, actor, and civil rights activist, by Jacob Epstein,<sup>20</sup> and a model of Ghana’s Black Star Line ship (Fig. 16).<sup>21</sup> An audio recording of Sputnik 1’s radio transmission by NASA on October 4, 1957, kept beeping as the heartbeat of the three-month-long exhibition. In the previous year, sound artist Lawrence Baganiah’s montage of chirping birds and a choir of fitting shop tools had tied *the Gown’s* on-site

and off-site exhibition spaces together. At *Orderly Disorderly*, the Sputnik 1 beep sound was interspersed with the Juno spacecraft recording of the roar of Jupiter’s magnetosphere, and the LIGO recording of the chirping sound of two colliding blackholes and the gravitational ripples in the space-time fabric. Occasionally, a live cock crowed from Larry Adorkor’s exhibit, announcing to visitors that there was life at stake even among the “mute” objects (Fig. 17).

Among other things, *Orderly Disorderly* (Figs. 16–23) honored the lifework of Iranian poet, photographer, and New Wave filmmaker Abbas Kiarostami (1940–2016) whose working process of giving amateurs key roles in his world-famous films resonated with the egalitarian principles of the blaxTARLINES Emancipatory Teaching Project from which *Orderly Disorderly* was birthed. Kiarostami’s vital efforts to intervene in the film form saw him subvert conventions of filmmaking in order to transform and reinvent the medium. *Orderly Disorderly*<sup>22</sup> exhibited examples of Kiarostami’s filmic practice—such as *The Bread and the Alley* (1970), the near-eponymous *Orderly or Disorderly* (1981), and *The Chorus* (1982)—that resonated with the blaxTARLINES egalitarian project.

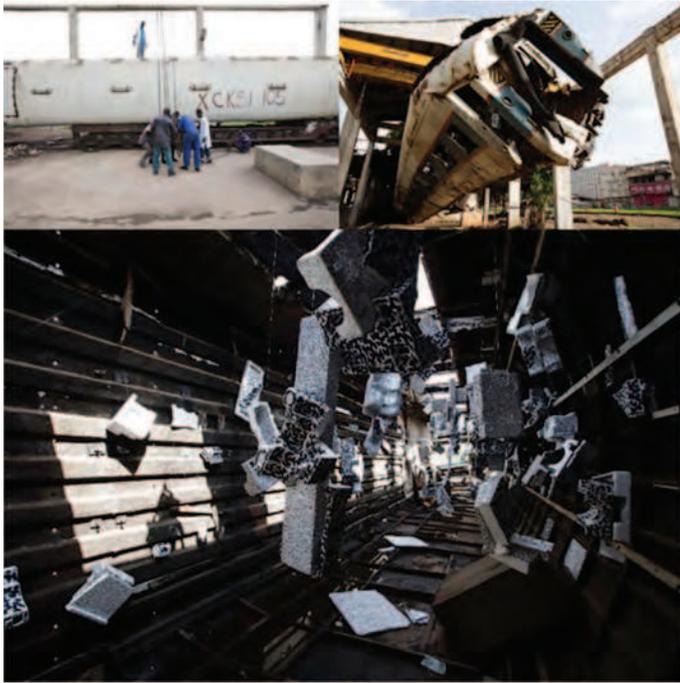
The exhibition occupied all three levels and terrace of the museum and extended into the old museum with folded plate-roof design. Of the 106 artist-exhibitors, 60 were from the BFA 2017 graduating class, 18 were alumni of KNUST, and 28 were special guest artists and discussants, some of whom are lecturers. The exhibition brought together the works of KNUST art diploma and degree pioneers such as Prof. Ablade Glover (b. 1934, class of 1958) (Fig. 17), Galle Winston Kofi Dawson (b. 1940, class of 1966) (Fig. 18) and Sylvanus Kwami Amenuke (b. 1940, class of 1970), the works of graduates of the transitional generation of the 1980s such as Agyeman Ossei “Dota” (b. 1960, class of 1987) (Figs. 17, 19), teaching staff (Figs. 23–24), millennial and Gen Y graduates (Figs. 17, 20–21) and their contemporary Ibrahim Mahama (classes of 2010 and 2014), whose work was featuring concurrently at the 2017 edition of documenta 14 in Athens and Kassel.

Furthermore, an archive of the KNUST art establishment and its links to canonical European, American, and African art institutions, art movements, and artist practitioners and teachers was

22 Va-bene Elikem Fiatsi (crazinisT artist). *NazaKU*. 2014–2017. Performance: *Orderly Disorderly*, 2017.

23 Edwin Bodjawah. *Nimba Series II*. Decommissioned lithographic plates and corrugated roofing sheets. Installation view: *Orderly Disorderly*, 2017.





also exhibited, expanding the historical, geopolitical and thematic scope of the exhibition. Among the archives were handwritten and unpublished manuscripts of poems authored by Uche Okeke, the Nigerian modernist and key figure in the Zaria Art Society who was external examiner in the 1970s. There were also off-site projects around the museum and other parts of the city. The show was characterized by programs such as open-access art history and curatorial classes, technical labs on art handling, exhibition design, and art talks in a Meet the Artist series, forms of accessibility which included Braille translations of curatorial texts and live feeds on social media. The diversity of media, technologies, and life forms demanded a corresponding diversity of approaches to care. The living organisms like plants and animals (cock, snails, strawberries, and Wandering Jew flowers) were nurtured on a daily basis by cocurators and participant artists.

**24** Lois Arde-Acquah and railway engineers. *Fragments*; installation views in the exhibition *if you love me...* 2016. Co-curated by Robin Riskin, Selorm Kudjie, Patrick Nii Okantah Ankrah [students of MFA Curatorial Practice, Kumasi].

Top left and right: Exterior installation view. In order to hoist the train for Lois Arde Acquah's installation, railway engineers from the Sekondi-Takoradi station were assembled to repair the Kumasi station crane that had been out of use for twenty years. They are Mohammed Ahmed, Patrick Duodu, Mark Brimah, Eric Eshun and Alfred Ampah. They were assisted by Emmanuel Afful (mechanic/site manager) and Victor Akanwuba (security detail) of the Kumasi station. Bottom: Interior installation view.

**25** Kelvin Haizel. *Birdcall961: Appendix C*. Installation view. Stellenbosch Triennale, 2020. Curators: Khanyisile Mbongwa and Bernard Akoi-Jackson. Photo: courtesy Kelvin Haizel



## THE "THERE," THE "THEN," AND THE "HEREAFTER"

In order to sustain and grow the blaxTARLINES collective's ethos of radical experimentation across cultures and generations and to develop extensive art practices in regions written off the default map of global contemporary art, the collective is actively building and scaling up hard and soft infrastructure and growing the supporting human resource in Ghana. As Okwui Enwezor began to propose later in his career,

We need not only just institutions, we need thriving and sustainable institutions. It's not just being guests, we have to be hosts as well. We have to play a role. If we want international contemporary art, we have to host it (Enwezor and Williamson 2016).

The artist's economic self-determination and emancipation is key on this agenda but it seems to pose the toughest of political challenges because blaxTARLINES encourages artists and curators in its network to cultivate their own systems of financial generation and mobilization as mainstay for their projects. The vision is that, hopefully, artists and curators can tactfully work their way out of the hegemonic imperatives of institutionalized "markets of philanthropy" and propose and actualize viable alternatives to the existing mechanisms of exhibition financing and funding. As a result of initiatives the blaxTARLINES network has taken in this direction, we see the emergence of infrastructural projects, art-labor coalitions, artist, curatorial, and technical collectives, network of artist outposts, art writers and artist-book publishers' workshops, and curated exhibition projects some of which have expanded key sections of the trilogy into autonomous solo exhibition projects.<sup>23</sup> Graduates of the MFA Curatorial Practice program also collaborate among themselves and with others to undertake exhibition projects principally from their own resources. Key among these exhibition projects was *if you love me...* (2016), the first thesis exhibition of the MFA Curatorial Practice program and a collaborative exhibition project between the Ghana Railway Workers' Union, "squatters" at the locomotive shed, and artists and students of KNUST. The exhibition was co-curated by Robin



**26a-b** Installation views: Akutia: *Blindfolding the Sun and Poetics of Space*; a retrospective on Agyeman Ossei “Dota”, 2020. Left: Red Clay Studios, Janakpeng-Tamale. Below: SCCA Tamale. Co-curators: Kwasi Ohene-Ayeh, Adwoa Amoah, Tracy Thompson. Image courtesy Kwasi Ohene-Ayeh, Elolo Bosoka and SCCA.

Riskin, Selorm Kudjie, and Patrick Nii Okanta Ankrach at the Kumasi and Sekondi Railway Loco Sheds and tracks. *if you love me...* featured thirty artists and collectives, including Lois Arde-Acquah,<sup>24</sup> whose zero gravity *Fragments* of Styrofoam float in a derelict train car also floating in free space and hoisted on a crane which had been out of use twenty years but repaired and resurrected by railway engineers for the purpose of the exhibition (Fig. 24).

Among the collectives, platforms, and residencies that have sprung up from the egalitarian community of the Kumasi School and its allies are the Exit Frame (formed in 2012);<sup>25</sup> Asafo Black Collective (formed in 2017);<sup>26</sup> the Ofkob Artists’ Residency annual programs initiated by Dorothy Amenuke; the perfoCraZe International Artist Residency [pIAR] (2019) founded by gender-bending artist Va-Bene Elikem Fiatsi (CrazinistT ArtistT); the Soul Six, a six-member women’s group who mentor artist-girls at high school; the Anamorphic Stain, an exhibition-oriented artist-team led by Issah Alhassan; and so forth. Also, Ibrahim Mahama’s concern about the lack of infrastructure for artists in Ghana inspired him to establish the Savannah Centre for Contemporary Art (SCCA Tamale), the Red Clay Studio Complex (Janakpeng-Tamale) and, more recently, the Nkrumah Voil, a repurposed Nkrumah-era grain silo structure in Tamale. FCA recently worked closely with blaxTARLINES, SCCA, and Exit Frame on a Crit Lab program that brought together twelve young Ghanaian artists, writers, and curators and international facilitators, including curator Bonaventure Soh Bejeng Ndikung, Renzo Martens, and Nontobeko Ntombela.

The SCCA Tamale opened in 2019 with a follow-up to the special guest exhibition of Galle Winston Kofi Dawson at *Orderly Disorderly*. Titled *In Pursuit of Something “Beautiful,” Perhaps...*, the retrospective solo exhibition was curated by Bernard Akoi-Jackson, one of the co-curators of *Silence Between the Lines*, *Cornfields*, and *Orderly Disorderly*. Since then,



Bernard has, among many other projects, co-curated the Curator’s Exhibition of the first edition of the Stellenbosch Triennale 2020 with Khanyisile Mbongwa. Titled *Tomorrow, there will be more of us...*, the Triennale was described by Khanyisile Mbongwa, the chief curator, as “intergenerational conversation set in an intersectional, ancestral time-zone.” The Curator’s Exhibition of the Triennale opened at the the Woodmill Lifestyle Centre—Vredenburg Road Devon Valley, Stellenbosch, with the Ghanaian participation of Ibrahim Mahama, Tracy Thompson, and Kelvin Haizel (Fig. 25). *On the Cusp*, a cognate exhibition that featured projects by ten young African artists and collectives, was curated by Bernard Akoi-Jackson for the Triennale. This wing of the Triennale featured the Asafo Black Collective from the blaxTARLINES network.

The Red Clay Studio Complex also opened in 2020 with a follow-up to the special guest exhibition of Agyeman Ossei “Dota” at *Orderly Disorderly*. The exhibition, titled *Akutia: Blindfolding the Sun and the Poetics of Peace* (Fig. 26), was a multisited and multigenre exhibition with a vast body of works that extend to the SCCA Tamale and Nkrumah Voil premises. The exhibition was



27 Akwasi Bediako Afrane. *Trons* (2019). Installation views: *UnStand der Dinge—A State of Affairs*, HFBK Gallery, Hamburg, 2019.  
Photo: courtesy Akwasi Bediako Afrane

28 Tracy Thompson. *Indoomie-x noodles* (2019). 10 meters high. Indomie Onion Chicken flavour noodles, Kasapreko lime cordial, food color, vinegar, glycerine. Installation view: *UnStand der Dinge—A State of Affairs*, HFBK Gallery, Hamburg, 2019.  
Photo: courtesy Frederick Okai and blaxTARLINES



curated by a curatorial team headed by Kwasi Ohene-Ayeh, one of the co-curators of *Silence Between the Lines*, *Cornfields* and *Orderly Disorderly*. The other members of the curatorial team are Adwoa Amoah (codirector of FCA) and Tracy Thompson, alumni of the Kumasi School. As the exhibition was prepared and opened in the heat of the COVID-19 pandemic, *Akutia* tested the resilience and adaptability of the blaxTARLINES model. Prior to *Akutia*, Kwasi Ohene-Ayeh was special guest curator of the first edition of Lagos Biennale (2017) and a co-curator of the 12th Bamako Photography Biennale (2019).

There have been international exchanges with institutions, artists, curators and scholars abroad.<sup>27</sup> The exchange with HFBK Hamburg, for instance, birthed a residency program and art talk series in Kumasi and a collaborative exhibition in Hamburg that featured projects of students from the Kumasi School and of HFBK students led by their professor, the artist Sam Durant. The exhibition *UnStand der Dinge—A State of Affairs* featured fifteen artists, six of whom were from blaxTARLINES KUMASI. There were also artist talks on the blaxTARLINES network by Kwaku Bofo Kissiedu (Castro) and Bernard Akoi-Jackson, the co-curator of the exhibition with Julia Gyemant of HFBK. Among the exhibiting artists were Akwasi Bediako Afrane<sup>28</sup> and Tracy Thompson, both of whom had featured prominently in the blaxTARLINES trilogy of exhibitions. For the HFBK exhibition, Afrane transformed obsolete electronic gadgets, which he refers to as “amputees,” into new machine beings he describes as “TRONS” (Fig. 27). His role as artist-subject was to serve as prosthesis to these “amputee-gadgets.” For her part, Tracy Thompson exhibited samples from her recent work. To produce this body of works, she employs bioplastic technology in the mutation of ultraprocessed foods common in the domestic and diasporic Ghanaian and African foodscape such

as instant *fufu*, instant noodles, and cream crackers. By likening her alchemical poststudio processes to Photoshop, Thompson reprocesses a selection of ultraprocessed foods by cooking them with ingredients such as glycerine, fermented lemon, wine vinegar, probiotics, etc. They are further transmuted by the contingencies of time, climatic changes, and space. The objects of her installation at HFBK are thus plastic manifestations of foods evolving beyond human guts, plate, and palate (Fig. 28).

The trilogy of large-scale and genre-defying blaxTARLINES exhibitions and its precursors have made a case for the political solidarity of different struggles about self-determination and the collective mobilization of transgenerational labor, resources, and goodwill for material, intellectual, and sociotechnical transformation. The axiom of interspecies conversations, actualized in curatorial and artistic strategies such as yeast performing life-transforming actions on objects made from dough, or ants, termites, machines, and the elements “collaborating” with humans in the generating of art experience, is a recipe for ecological sensitivity and responsibility. It has inspired the alchemical projects of Tracy Thompson, the mycorrhizal curating of Robin Riskin, the work of Samuel Kortey Baah of the Asafo Black Collective, and sundry others. The Millennials and Gen Y-ers of the blaxTARLINES Network have taken valuable insights from hands-on egalitarian pedagogy within the complex blaxTARLINES exhibition environments and the multiverses beyond. As “plagiarists” or “excavators” of emancipated futures which lie dormant in present crisis conditions as “hidden potentials,” the artists and curators are self-aware that their future-driven visions occupy “a place in time which is incommensurable with the one they occupy in space” (Deleuze 1989: 39; Žižek 2012: 128).

The posttrilogy period and the postpandemic extension could be a litmus test to the staying power and tenacity of the contemporary art scene boosted by blaxTARLINES in Ghana. The possibilities of failure have returned their gaze at every moment of our journey, just as Marcus Garvey’s Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) and its Black Star Line project, which inspired Kwame Nkrumah and which continues to inspire blaxTARLINES, were confronted with their integral accidents. As Virilio said,

To invent the sailing ship or the steamer is to invent the shipwreck. To invent the train is to invent the rail accident of derailment. To invent the family automobile is to produce the pile-up on the highway (2007: 10).<sup>29</sup>

However, the failures themselves—the crisis points, the signs of hopelessness, the void, the cracks, the sites of indifference—also suggest in them some means through which we can emancipate ourselves.

Practicing artists, curators and other art workers and enthusiasts continue to organize themselves by mobilizing or crowdfunding cognitive, technical, and physical labor for art-focused projects that manifest in art infrastructure, logistics, services, goods, life-forms, and ideas, while taking charge of their economic and material destinies. The possibilities are endless and extend to cues and tools that operate beyond the meaning-purveying postcolonial

remit that has framed the greater portion of transnational African contemporary art and exhibition projects of the Global South<sup>30</sup> (Maharaj 2020: 174). And if Audre Lorde believed, as we do, that “The master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house,” in the blaxTARLINES post-Western<sup>31</sup> update, we quip, “What if the master stole the tools from you?”

So, to go with our Sister’s caution<sup>32</sup> and yet supplement it at the same time, we cultivate new relations with the tools at our disposal, those beyond our present reach and those that are yet to come:

“We hack, we improvise, we share, we solidarize, we fail, we resurrect.”

## Notes

The title is inspired by Pierre Hyughe’s famous line, “I don’t want to exhibit something to someone, but rather the reverse: to exhibit someone to something” (first quoted in Davis 2014). However, while Hyughe makes the two categories of *umwelt*, *human* and *nonhuman*, mutually exclusive, blaxTARLINES exhibitions dialecticize them. The phenomenological experience of the human subject is indeed decentered in both cases but in the blaxTARLINES exhibition framework it not jettisoned altogether.

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1 The blaxTARLINES collective is not a wholistic or organicist one—the kind patronized by partisans of New Age Gnosticism or vitalist spiritualism who advocate a nostalgic return to a homeostatic balance premised on a mythical figure of nature or romantic images of “ancient wisdom.” Rather, blaxTARLINES works as a coalition of “organs without bodies” open to contingencies.

2 As Woets recounts elsewhere:

One of seidou’s assignments in the final year’s Drawing Class is to create work(s) in dialogue with a selected site, in the widest sense of the term. Apart from physical locations, students also opt for virtual, conceptual and discursive sites for their projects. They need to register the working process in a diary or notebook by means of sketches and jotting down concepts and thoughts: the questions posed in the journey of making an art work might be more important than the actual end product (2012: n.p.).

3 I employ Hans Belting’s distinction between “World Art” and “Global Art” here (2013). According to Belting, World art is an old idea complementary to modernism, designating the art of the others ... It continues to signify art from all ages, the heritage of mankind. In fact, world art included art of every possible provenance while at the same time excluding it from Western mainstream art—a colonial distinction between art museums and ethnographic museums. “Global Art,” on the other hand, approximates to the field of Contemporary Art:

By its own definition global art is contemporary and in spirit postcolonial; thus it is guided by the intention to replace the center and periphery scheme of a hegemonic modernity, and also claims freedom from the privilege of history.

4 Atta Kwami, then a member of the KNUST faculty, exhibited in *South Meets West*. In his contribution to the exhibition text, he stressed the apparent lack of criticality in Ghanaian media and art communities at the turn of the century and how this impacted on the exhibition’s reception. Kwami also cites the absence of an undergraduate art history program in Ghana’s university structure as the apparent “crux of the matter” (see Kwami 2000: 45). To date, the art history program in KNUST, now called African Art and Culture, is a course in African aboriginal ethnography, oblivious of recent developments in Ghanaian, African, or global contemporary art.

5 The kindred spirits are Atta Kwami, a KNUST alumnus and lecturer in the department until 2006, and Agyeman Ossei (Dota), an alumnus and high school art teacher. Atta Kwami, the author of *Kumasi Realism* (2013), was awarded the 2021 Maria Lassnig Prize. Agyeman Ossei, on the other hand, later graduated with MFA (1998) and PhD (2005) at Kumasi and became

the head of the theater department at the University of Ghana, Legon, and executive director of Ghana’s National Theater, Accra. The retrospective exhibition at Ibrahim Mahama’s SCCA and Red Clay Studio Complex in Tamale, *Akutia: Blindfolding the Sun and the Poetics of Peace*, is about his significant lifework as an artist on the margins.

6 Caterina Niklaus’s MFA project, *More Eyeworks*, (1993–1995) most epitomized these tendencies. Niklaus, an older contemporary of Damien Hirst at Goldsmiths, was an exponent of the post-1968 international feminist network of political activists that operated in Europe. In 2016, Niklaus, a septuagenarian, was among the thirty artist-exhibitors in *if you love me ...*, the first graduate thesis exhibition of the MFA Curatorial Practice program. She has lived in Kumasi since 1993.

7 *Silence Between the Lines* was curated by kɔri’kɔchɔ seidou (artistic director and head of the curatorial team) with co-curators Bernard Akoi-Jackson, Kwasi Ohene-Ayeh, and Robin Riskin (then MFA student in curating).

8 kɔri’kɔchɔ seidou’s reading of the Ghanaian *sankɔfa* legend seems to anticipate Armen Avanessian’s and Suhail Mali’s (2016) idea of a speculative time complex—“time which arrives from the future”—the temporality through which Malik speculates about a possible exit from the contemporary into the postcontemporary. Ibrahim Mahama builds on this speculative temporality in his resurrective engagement with the residues, ruins and carcasses of 20th century history.

9 *Silence Between the Lines* was organized in collaboration with Niels Staats, founder of Eye Contemporary Art, Ghana. Staats, who had worked with exhibition projects team at Lehman Maupin, is currently the floor manager of Stedelijk Museum.

10 Ibrahim Mahama completed his BFA in 2010 and MFA in 2014 in Kumasi. He is currently pursuing a practice-based PhD in Kumasi.

11 The curatorial team of the blaxTARLINES trilogy was made up of a team of three artistic directors who were teaching staff—kɔri’kɔchɔ seidou (head of curatorial team), Kwaku Bofo Kissiedu (Castro), and George Ampratwum—and supporting co-curators who were graduate students—Bernard Akoi-Jackson, Kwasi Ohene-Ayeh, Robin Riskin, Mavis Tetteh-Ocloo, Selorm Kudjie, Patrick Nii Okantah Ankrhah, Frank Gyabeng, and Kezia Owusu-Ankomah.

12 In *Les quatre concepts fondamentaux de la psychanalyse*, Jacques Lacan writes: “Le tableau, certes, est dans mon œil. Mais moi, je suis dans le tableau” (1973: 89). Mladen Dolar translates this as: “The picture, certainly, is in my eye. But I am in the picture” (2015: 129). Alan Sheridan is surely in error when he translates this as, “The picture, certainly, is in my eye. But I am not in the picture” (Lacan 1979: 63; see also Dolar’s comment on Sheridan’s error, 2015: 129).

13 The present Artists’ Alliance Gallery, privately owned and operated by Professor Ablade Glover, his wife Mrs. Leonora Glover, and family, is a botched version of a failed vision.

14 Kwasi Ohene-Ayeh and Ablade Glover in Conversation, *Orderly Disorderly Public Forum*, 2017 [Audio file courtesy blaxTARLINES Archives].

15 kɔri’kɔchɔ seidou uses this aphorism in his class sessions. He also mentioned it in his keynote address at the opening ceremony of the *African Modernism: Architecture of Independence* photography exhibition organized by Goethe-Institut Ghana in collaboration with blaxTARLINES KUMASI at the Museum of Science and Technology in Accra on August 6, 2018. *African Modernism: Architecture of Independence* was curated by Bernard Akoi-Jackson.

16 Some subsequent all-over immersive projects are *Mallam Dodoo, 1992–2016* (2016, National Theater, Accra); *Check Point Sekondi Loco. 1901–2030. 2016–2017* (2016, Kassel, documenta 14); the KNUST Great Hall Congregation Project (2018); and *A Friend* (2019, Caselli Daziari di Porta Venezia).

17 The work of the late Cameroonian conceptual artist Goddy Leye (1965–2011) was very influential for the development of video/media, art film, installation, and community-oriented work in Africa. Beyond his personal practice, Leye was relentless in his efforts to build the foundations of a critical artistic community in Cameroon. He worked to create spaces, situations, and networks where artists, especially young artists, could fearlessly create, experiment, and reflect. These include the ArtBakery in Bonendale, Cameroon, and earlier collectives such as PrimArt and Club Khéops in the 1990s. Leye’s strong notions of artistic practice as autonomous, independent, and in a state of “permanent apprenticeship,” align with blaxTARLINES’s spirit of Emancipatory Art Teaching.

18 Leye’s work was presented first at *Cornfields in Accra* and then at *Orderly Disorderly*. It is a multimedia object Goddy Leye created during the third edition (2009) of the SaNsA International Artists Workshop, convened in Kumasi by Atta Kwami and the SaNsA team. During the two weeks where ten Ghanaian and ten visiting artists interacted and developed projects, Leye made several strolls through Kejetia market and the Bantama neighbourhood of Kumasi. The material culture and bustling commercial activities of the place so impacted him that he acquired a wood and glass “sieve,” a ration of millet, and a speaker with which he created the work. The first Sansa International Artists’ workshop was organized in 2004 by Atta Kwami, Pamela Clarkson, Caterina Niklaus, and kɔri’kɔchɔ seidou.

19 The gesture of setting the Museum of Science and Technology collection in conversation with art works on display was repeated in *Orderly Disorderly*.

20 Other editions of the bust could be found in the Tate Gallery, York City Art Gallery, and the National Portrait Gallery of the Smithsonian Institution.

21 Ghana’s Black Star Line, a state shipping corporation, was established in 1957 to coincide with the year of Ghana’s independence and went defunct in the late 1990s during the neoliberalization of Ghana’s economy. The black star symbol adopted for the Ghana flag, and name adopted for the shipping line, paid homage to Marcus Garvey’s eponymous shipping line and inspires blaxTARLINES.

22 *Orderly Disorderly* was opened by renowned Ghanaian sculptor Prof. El Anatsui, assisted by Prof. Ama Ata Aidoo, the renowned Ghanaian writer; Koyo Kouoh, curator and founder of Raw Material, Dakar; and Mrs. Naana Ocran, director of the Ghana Museums and Monuments Board. The exhibition hosted the cocktail celebration of the fiftieth anniversary of *African Arts* on August 12, 2017. *Exchange-Exchanger*, a book on Ibrahim Mahama’s work published by members of the curatorial team, was also launched during this event.

23 There has been a proliferation of significant solo exhibitions and curatorial projects, such as Eugene Edzorho’s *An Idea Bank* (2015, at the Western Regional Library, Sekondi); craziniST artist’s *Return of the Slaves* (2015, at the Elmira slave dungeon); Ibrahim Mahama’s *Exchange-Exchanger* (2015–2016) and Great Hall Project (2018); Edwin Bodjwah’s *Of blood, soil and more ... SILENCE SPEAKS* (2017, at the Cape Coast slave castle), and Bernard Akoi-Jackson’s semiretrospective, *some of which remained and what is yet to come ...* (2018, at the KNUST Great Hall), among others.

24 Lois Arde-Acquah is the winner of the 2020

Kuenyehia Prize for Contemporary Art.

25 Exit Frame was founded by Adwoa Amoah, Ato Annan, Bernard Akoi-Jackson, Kelvin Haizel, and Kwasi Ohene-Ayeh.

26 The Asafo Black Collective was formed in 2017. Current members are Nuna Adisenu Doe, Samuel Baah Kortey (Kristo), Denyse Gawu-Mensah (ScorpioEyes), Larry Adorkor (Bonchaka), Jeffery Otoo (Money\_Geta) and Daniel Mensah (Scrapa).

27 Other exchange programs with SAVVY Contemporary, Städelschule Frankfurt, the Harn Museum, Rhodes University, and others continue to birth a variety of projects.

28 Akwasi Bediako Afrane was the runner-up awardee behind Jackie Karuti for the Henrike Gros Award, 2020.

29 In another text, Virilio states,

When you invent the ship, you also invent the shipwreck; when you invent the plane you also invent the plane crash; and when you invent electricity, you invent electrocution ... Every technology carries its own negativity, which is invented at the same time as technical progress (1999: 89).

30 Without denying the importance and rewards of the postcolonial intellectual tradition, Sarat Maharaj offered this critique:

In the real world, the political conditions criticized by postcolonialism have not receded, but in many ways are even further entrenched under the machinery of globalization. However, as a leading discourse for art curatorial practice and criticism, postcolonialism is showing its limitation in being increasingly institutionalized as an ideological concept. Not only is it losing its edge as a critical tool, it has generated its own restrictions that hinder the emergence of artistic creativity and fresh theoretical interface. To say "Farewell to Postcolonialism" is not simply a departure, but a revisit and a restart (2020).

31 In an interview with Michelle Kuo in 2015, just before the opening of "All the World's Futures" at Venice, Enwezor described the historical moment as post-Western:

I think part of our sense of uncertainty has to do with this moment of post-Westernism, as I call it, that we're entering. Post-Westernism has to do with the skepticism in the non-Western world toward the essential wisdom that is the monopoly of the West. And so, in order to think about the future, to project forward, we need different lenses—it cannot be a singular lens. It would require a healthy dose of modesty to imagine all the world's futures in this way (Enwezor & Kuo 2015).

32 Lorde's caution reads:

For the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house. They may allow us temporarily to beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change. And this fact is only threatening to those women who still define the master's house as their only source of support (2007: 111).

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# On Stage-Crafting and State-Crafting Beyond Crisis

## Ibrahim Mahama's Word and Deed

*karî'kachä seid'ou*

*all photos courtesy of Ibrahim Mahama, except where otherwise noted*

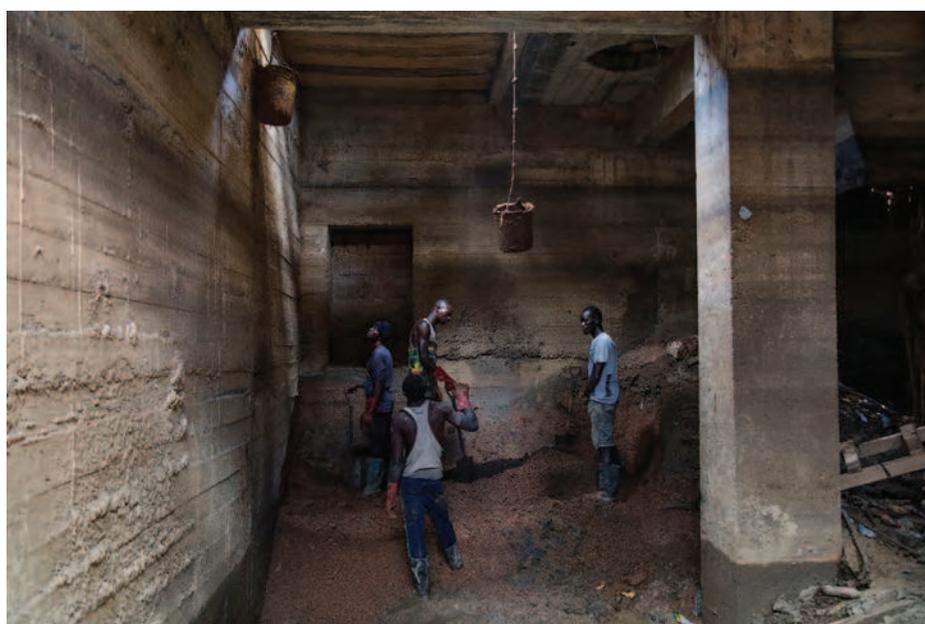
Ibrahim Mahama (b. 1987) will probably find his name in the dwindling list of artists who would be missed when contemporary art, as we have it today, gives way to another regime already pressing into our view from post austerity and postpandemic pasts and futures. For close to a decade, his collaborative critiques and forms of social formatting have been sounding boards for collectivist and emancipatory politics under pre-, intra-, and postcrisis conditions. Indeed, his corpus of massive jute-sack installations in city spaces stands out as the most recognizable among his projects. However, it is just a single node in a complex ecology of formats and practices—in Bourriaud's phrasing, "a salient point in a shifting cartography" (2002: 19). As if responding unambiguously to Tania Bruguera's call to return Duchamp's urinal from the art museum to the washroom, Mahama's location-specific and quasiperformative projects seem to operate on a logic of capital repatriation while continuing to function as sites for ideological overhauling, improvised living, and generative platforms for gift exchange. While aspects of his body of works affirm, to a degree, their autonomous form as alienated spectacles or their alchemical form as "derivatives," "futures," or "tokens" in the international art market, they are also contingent in a dynamic assemblage.

Thus, when in lieu of this complex configuration, Brian Sewell (2014), the controversial critic, merely saw the "pathetic beauty" of an "Arte Povera decoration of old coal sacks sewn together, worn, torn, and filthy" and, again, "missed the political and social argument," he reduced Mahama's expanded practice to a modernist spectacle, a frozen moment, or a snapshot. There is a similar slip in judgement in Danish artist Kristoffer Ørum's (2016)<sup>1</sup> critique of Mahama's Nyhavn's Kpalang project at the harbor façade at Kunsthal Charlottenborg, in which Mahama's installation is reduced to an all-over surface composition reminiscent of large-scale Art Informel or "AbEx" canvases. To him, Antoni Tàpies and Jackson Pollock are the archetypal precursors and muses. Just two years after Sewell's encounter with the jute sack installation at the Saatchi show, an exhibition in Dusseldorf would explore parallels between Mahama's jute sack projects and Alberto Burri's "sacchi"

corpus.<sup>2</sup> All these offer some insights but miss important points, in spite of, or possibly because of art's polysemy. As Mahama demonstrates in his reflections on Burri's work and twentieth-century painting and sculpture, he hardly takes shelter behind postwar cemeteries of artistic brand names, while not being oblivious of or averse to them.<sup>3</sup> Evidently, such interpretations tend to rob the artist's work of the concrete social, material, and ecological encounters he sets in place and the generative modalities embodied in his practice. They miss the multisensory and extrahuman registers that he codes into his body of works.

Another set of tropes consistent in Mahama's projects that frequently eludes the grasp of commentators is his dramaturgical reflection on precarity, death, and temporality and their allegorical cognates in material culture, urban life and architecture, and ruins of twentieth-century mass utopias. This set of tropes establishes methodological connections between the theatrical forms (stage-crafting) he deploys in his public installations and the emancipatory politics (state-crafting) he proposes in his social practice. Together, these modalities of practice affirm collective rights, reclaim encroached commons of nature and culture, and bring notions of private property to weird paradoxes.<sup>4</sup>

This text meditates on Mahama's complex dramaturgy, which foregrounds these tropes and reflections and points to ways in which Mahama hyphenates the "reality" of the theater and the "fiction" of the social. It is an insider's fragmented notes stitched together and wrapped around a dramatic structure of three acts and an epilogue. This stylistic device reflects the patchwork, archival, and theatrical methods that underpin Mahama's installations and social interventions. The text suggests that Mahama's projects are epitaphs to precarious labor and disposable life under neoliberal capitalist sovereignty. Yet these epitaphs or "immersive taxidermies" and their cognates are also Mahama's means of testing his emancipatory vision for the reverse-gentrification of encroached commons as well as a portal into a speculative postcontemporary and postcapitalist horizon anticipated in contemporary discourse. As a corollary, Mahama invents a parallel exchange economy channeled through a witty alchemy while combining the mixed



economies of the contemporary art market and negotiations with state agents, corporate bodies, private owners, and traditional custodians of land and indigenous knowledge systems. This distinctive provenance of practices makes Mahama an artist who, among other things, uses contemporary art rather than make contemporary art.

**ACT I: SCENE I  
EXCAVATING FROM PASTS WHICH  
FORFEITED THEIR PRESENT AND FUTURES  
WHICH HARBOR NOTHING TO COME**

The surgeon represents the polar opposite of the magician. The attitude of the magician, who heals a sick person by a laying-on of hands, differs from that of the surgeon, who makes an intervention in the patient. The magician maintains the natural distance between himself and the person treated; more precisely, he reduces it slightly by laying on his hands, but increases it greatly by his authority. The surgeon does exactly the reverse: He greatly diminishes the distance from the patient by penetrating the patient's body and increases it only slightly by the caution with which his hand moves among the organs. In short, unlike the magician (traces of whom are still found in the medical practitioner), the surgeon abstains at the decisive moment from confronting his patient person to person; instead, he penetrates the patient by operating—magician is to surgeon as painter is to cinematographer. The painter maintains in his work a natural distance from reality, whereas the cinematographer penetrates deeply into its tissue (Benjamin 1969a: 233).

The past is littered with the debris of these futures, while our present incorporates the unstable collective memory of hopes that have long since been abandoned (Power 2010: 90).

Boltanski and Chiapello observe that the new spirit of capitalism has seamlessly integrated advances in capitalist critique into its accumulative and exploitative mechanisms (2007: 419–82). In this light, Hito Steyerl enjoins us to “simply look at what contemporary art does, not what it shows” (2010: 31). This poses a real challenge for today’s politically committed artist. Along with its retrotransfiguration and hypercommodification of the commonplace (Malik 2017; Relyea 2013; Danto 1983), its complicity in urban gentrification processes, and the hipsterization of its creative class (Deutsche

1 Ibrahim Mahama  
*Non Orientable Paradise Lost 1667* (2017)  
Centro Banco do Brasil. Belo Horizonte, Brazil

2 Ibrahim Mahama  
*Excavating Nkrumah Voli. 1966–2020* (2020)

and Ryan 1984; Florida 2005), the default sociality of contemporary art has become a most agreeable channel through which new modes of capitalist extraction and exploitation are engineered or birthed (Malik 2017; Zolghadr 2016, 2019; Boltanski and Chiapello 2007; Martens 2019). That contemporary art has arrived at the corridors of power is a fact one can hardly deny without compromising one’s integrity. Taking contemporary art as a starting point rather than a conclusion, Mahama announces a necessity to invent new art-political imaginaries invested with concrete operations that can unfetter, scale-up, and transmit emancipatory capacities across time and space. In conversation with curator Antonia Alampi, he articulates a vision of capital and resource repatriation to locations written off the default map of global contemporary art thus:

The point is to use the contradictions of the flow of capital in the art world to create spaces in Ghana that can eventually affect the material values within artistic practice and inspire the imagination of generations yet to emerge.<sup>5</sup>

For Mahama, rewriting or reprogramming the time-signatures of contemporary capitalist existence and the default time-concept of the “contemporary” in contemporary art is a key path to new art-political imaginaries. As Suhail Malik and a circle of Left Accelerationists have observed, the principal drivers of complex capitalist societies such as ours are systems, infrastructures, networks and ecologies rather than individual human agents. Therefore, human experience of time premised on consciousness, memory and other intuitive forms of human temporalization loses its primacy (Avanessian and Malik 2016: 7–9). Similarly, Mahama’s emancipatory projects are inspired by the counter-intuitive time implicit in extrahuman systems and models such as artificial intelligence, derivatives markets, preemptive policing, and the prochronic time of creative fiction and experimental cinemas. In a



recent reflection on his practice in which he draws analogies to the Tesseract<sup>6</sup> “time-machine” in the 2014 sci-fi film *Interstellar*, he says:

It’s almost like a certain time travel where you’re almost trying to go back to the past through the present. And also using the future, which is yet to come ... It’s like a loop ... So that’s how I think about these systems like building art works from all these old residues ... to somehow relook at the situation to see if we can revive those spaces, give them new functions also to create new other spaces (Mahama and Bailey 2020).

Mahama interprets his engagement with the residues, ruins and carcasses of colonial and postcolonial utopias, and of market globalization, as a form of redemptive autopsy conducted on the materiality of time. According to Benjamin (1969b: 261), these ruins and residues are speculative-time-embodied. They are pasts charged with the here-and-now which the revolutionary blasts out of the “continuum of history” in the process of forging new futures. Time arrives from these forgotten futures encrypted in the ruins and residues of failed pasts that the artist finds as potentials lying dormant in the present (seidou 2015; Avanessian and Malik 2016; Bayard 2005, 2009). Using material and immaterial residues from the past, Mahama reimagines, recodes, and reconfigures the future by manipulating it directly in symbolic, infrastructural, and social projects.

The Otolith Group refers to such time-traces within which human-sentient time is deprioritized or out of joint as “the temporality of past potential futurity” (Power 2010). Something homologous to this time-logic undergirds the different strands of Mahama’s politically committed practice—from his “stage-crafting” projects (spectacular and immersive jute-sack installations in cityscapes and interiors, and monumental assemblages of derelict objects [Fig. 1], through his alchemical manoeuvres in the art and commodity markets, to his “state-crafting” projects (reverse gentrification projects and the reformatting of architectural, social, and ecological ready-mades). One such time-machine is *Nkrumah Voli*, a decommissioned Nkrumah-era grain silo which Mahama has purchased from the state and excavated for a transdisciplinary “greenhouse” in progress (Fig. 2). Abandoned fifty-four years ago after the overthrow of Ghana’s first president, Kwame Nkrumah, the brutalist and skeletal structure is an incomplete version of a series of grain silos built by Eastern European architects in several



**3** Ibrahim Mahama  
*A Straight Line Through the Carcass of History. 1918–1945. 2015–2018*  
Hospital stretchers used to transport wounded soldiers during the World War II and materials and objects from fish smoking cultures on West African coasts. Installation view. Daad Galerie Berlin, 2018.

**4** Ibrahim Mahama  
*Parliament of Ghosts (2019)*  
Whitworth Gallery, University of Manchester.

regions of Ghana. They were proposed as means to hedge cash crops and grain on the international market during the Cold War era. Since Mahama resurrects and repeats the past in inoperative ways, the derelict silo becomes a space of impossibility through which new potentials are nurtured and released. Addressing his audience at an inaugural *Nkrumah Voli* lecture, he shares these insights:

Literally, you’re sitting in an impossible space, the body is not supposed to be here. In the history of the design of this building, none of us should have been sitting in this place and time (Mahama 2020).

Suhail Malik and Arman Avanessian have argued that such a speculative time-complex that “changes the direction of time”—one that surpasses the existential or phenomenological limits of “past–present–future” structure—is a necessary condition for exiting the “contemporary” to the “postcontemporary” and therefore “postcapitalist” futures (Avanessian and Malik 2016; Srnicek and Williams 2015; Rifkin 1995). If this appraisal is correct, it places Mahama among artist harbingers preparing the ground for an emergent postcontemporary art.

In Mahama’s installation environments, the smell of ghosts<sup>7</sup> from futures afar is discernable. The counterintuitive forms of dating that appear in the titles of his iterative projects such as *A Straight Line through the Carcass of History: 1918–1945. 2015–2018* are not simply a record of provenance (Fig. 3). They are also projections, indicating that they bear witness to Mahama’s strategic acts of “plagiarizing,” mining, or excavating from futures that were bypassed, suspended, forgotten, erased, or emancipated (seidou 2015; Bayard 2005, 2009). Thus, in one familiar context, Mahama’s time-space transcends phenomenological limits and enters the speculative realm of specters, the living-dead, and the inhuman. In *Parliament of Ghosts* (Fig. 4), a postrelational project that resonates with Derrida’s hauntology (1994, 2002), Mahama combines



**5a–b** Ibrahim Mahama  
*Occupation and Occupation* (2014)  
 Adum-Kejetia Railway Footbridge Project. Epic  
 street-theater and mass street-gallery. Kumasi, 2014.



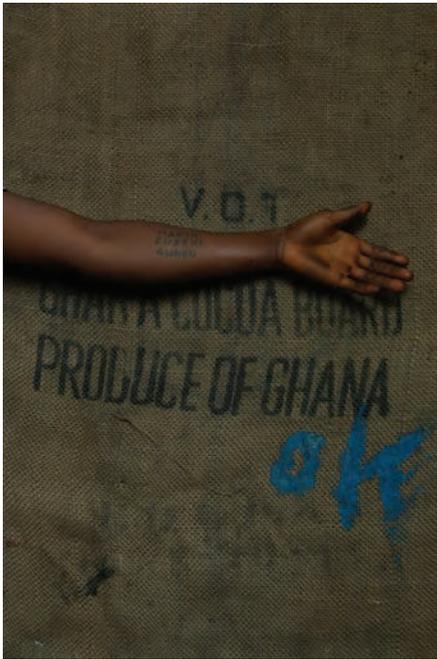
roles of dramaturge, actor, medium, archivist, and architect and stages a *danse macabre* with ruins, failures, and traces of Ghana's mass utopias and "carcasses" of colonial and postcolonial history. The remains of the ephemeral project are later repatriated from the Whitworth Gallery in Manchester to the Red Clay Studio Complex in Tamale, Ghana. This time, it is a sunken cenotaph and a permanent component of the 200-acre open-access infrastructure. Echoing aspects of Ghana's colonial heritage of design, Mahama's "tomb" of seating tiers, cast in iron and concrete, functions as an agora. This time, the open-air amphitheater of ghostly and living "parliamentarians" encircles a pond of water lilies at play signalled in Ghanaian modernist Agyeman "Dota" Ossei's painting<sup>8</sup> on show. Like the surgeon or cinematographer in the Benjamin epigraph or a pathologist conducting autopsies on corpses, Mahama diminishes the magician's or painter's natural distance from reality—he gets his hands dirty by "penetrating into its web and cutting deeply into its tissue." His postmortem is thus conducted as an epic theater which has lost its fourth wall of critical distance.

**ACT I: SCENE II**  
**SPECULATIVE DRAMATURGY: AUTOPSY,**  
**ALCHEMY AND COLLECTIVIST SOCIAL**  
**FORMATTING**

Mahama is a principal figure among artists working from the African continent—and on blue-chip trails of its diasporas and antipodes—who brazenly write labor, its precarious conditions, and the promise of economic emancipation back into the prevailing ethos of international contemporary art.<sup>9</sup> His projects also entail a form of alchemy that transforms tokens of the legitimation apparatus, extractive economies, and the global value chain of market capitalism and contemporary art into affirmative social reconstruction projects in regions and regimes silently written off

their gentrified maps. This is radical critique in action, a materialist intervention which challenges, with a nod to Renzo Martens, *trompe l'oeil* regimes of critique commonplace in the "critical art" communities of "white cube" environments and "biennale" circuits (Martens 2019; Ivanova 2015). Mahama's praxis is a paradoxical one of capital hacking and repatriation and reverse gentrification invested with the promise that another art world economy, and therefore another art world, is possible.

Mahama's reflections on precarious labor, via spectacular interventions into the commons of the urban environment, are staged like epic street theater and mass street galleries; the division between actors and audience is blurred (Figs. 5, 8). As Buck-Morss describes such a scene, "roles constantly change as individuals are swept up in the rhythms, sounds, and fragmented images of the crowd" (2002: 144; Mally 1990: 125).<sup>10</sup> Considering the giant scale of Mahama's urban projects coupled with their collectivist production, assemblage logic, and mass audiencing, the individual is lost in the crowd and "liberal-individualist prejudices" seem suspended. Žižek (2018) has described how such intense immersion of autonomous individuals into the social body could constitute "a shared ritualistic performance that should put all good old liberals into shock and awe by its "totalitarian intensity." Yet, the patchwork image conjured up by Mahama's giant jute-sack tapestries or modular assemblages of objects in crisis says it all: The individual lost in the crowd is not necessarily protofascist. The scene that ensues is a living montage—a multiplicity, not an organic whole. As Benjamin notes, a montage is constructed "piecemeal, its manifold parts being assembled according to a new law" (1969a: 233). Mahama then becomes a dramaturge whose stage-crafting combines multiple forms of reenactments under contemporary market globalization. In this scene, actors such as refugees and precarious workers—whether present or absent, living or dead, both and neither—play themselves. Reality is inscribed at the heart of fiction, transforming, in Viktor Shklovski's phrasing, "the living tissue of life" in the city into "the theatrical" (Buck-Morss 2002: 144). However, the theatrical form is not an end in itself; it is connected dialectically to a state-crafting practice which concretizes specters of "the theatrical" into new "tissues of life." This is the logic behind the commons reclamation, reverse-gentrification and capital repatriation projects. Form does not directly coincide with narrative content. The excess of narrative content that escapes the theatrical is translated into extra formal devices.



**ACT II: SCENE I**  
**GHOSTS SMELL FROM FUTURES AFAR—**  
**MOLTED SKINS, ARCHITECTURAL**  
**TAXIDERMIES, AND EPITAPHS TO LABOR**

Architects often take little account of the body, or the way bodies integrate with the spaces they construct. My worry is that in cities like Caracas, Lagos, and Accra—or in other places where there are large slums—the state, rather than being a protagonist for the people becomes an antagonist by favoring gentrification over human welfare. I have inherited and grown up within this environment of failure, and as an artist I ask myself how I can take this failure and subvert it, how it might lead into change? Crisis and failure are points of departure for me (Bower and Mahama 2016: 26).

In the analysis of labor relations, significant insight has been gained since Lefebvre shifted focus from Marx's factory environment to actual life in the city and the collective rights to the city's reservoir of common wealth. It is in this vein that Hardt and Negri describe the urban environment as "a factory for the production of the common" (2009: 250). Under neoliberal capitalist administration of these commons, however, expended labor and expended life manifest as magnificent but gentrified structures, logistics and sites in the built environment, as encroached services, ecologies, and goods, and as neglected regions, objects, and materials. The same system also sets up conditions of general precarity that manifest in the disposability for human subjects, exposure to death, or the possibility of radically transforming into an "unrecognizable persona whose present comes from no past."<sup>11</sup> Mahama's interventionist projects offer and test proposals for making common again public infrastructure, logistics, life forms, and production relations that face the crisis of encroachment, gentrification, neglect, or extinction. Symbolically, the projects are epitaphs to labor and reflections on exclusions, expiry, and precarity associated with market globalization and the mixed economy of global contemporary art. Within the complex configuration of his redemptive infrastructure projects, the jute sack material is an allegorical and forensic motif but also a unit of economic sign and symbolic exchange. His

**6 Ibrahim Mahama**  
 (l) *Maria* (Maria Fuseini Awabu); (r) *Azara*  
 Mahama draws parallels between the skins of "porters of goods" (tattooed skins of Ghana's women porters) and "vessels of goods" (the "molted" and signed jute sacks) in this series of photographs that pays homage to migrant porters and project collaborators.

**7 Écorché**  
 Drawing in Juan Valverde de Amusco's *Historia de la Composicion del Cuerpo Humano* (Antonio Salamanca & Antonio Lafreri: Rome, 1560, p. 64) attributed to Gaspar Becerra  
 Photo: courtesy US National Library of Medicine, Creative Commons under Public Domain Mark 1.0

expanded practice is an exercise in speculative dramaturgy and collaborative critique. They combine forms of "autopsy," archiving, alchemy, and social formatting.

In Mahama's allegory, the decommissioned jute sacks he deploys are the shed skins of global agrocommodity trade, especially those denied their visas to cross the Atlantic after transporting cocoa beans and other cash crops that fill up containers waiting in the harbors.<sup>12</sup> The global capitalist market is the beast that sheds its skin after it has grown a new one in its place. It is the apparatus that initiates the subsequent precarious conditions of its shed skins. In their second life, the molted skins left behind generate a residual market economy. They are purchased at a symbolic fee by local grain merchants and overworked until they are unable to store or transport food any longer. Consequently, they are taken over by local charcoal traders who patch their holes up and set them to work until they lose their quality as vessels altogether. They are emptied at this point of their second death and exchanged for Mahama's fresher sacks on offer which are themselves "molted skins" purchased from the harbors. Mahama collaborates with a section of Ghana's precariat, especially migrant women head porters (*kayayei*) living on the edge like the derelict jute sacks, to sew and patch them together into giant tapestries that encase over-scaled city structures as their new skins. Thus, one seems permitted to read these jute sack-draped structures as immersive taxidermies of molted skins.



8 Ibrahim Mahama  
*Check Point Prosfygika. 1934–2034. 2016–2017* (2017)  
 Performance with ready-made labor and ready-made site of production at Syntagma Square, Athens. *documenta 14*, 2017.

In Dagbani, the language that Mahama and other Dagombas of Ghana speak, *kpalang*, the word for “sack” or “vessel,” is polysemic and connects to human life when it is also used to refer to “skin” or “body.” In a 2016 interview with Lotte Af Løvholm, Mahama refers to the signatures appearing on the jute sacks as repeating the marks that appear on the skins of Ghana’s human precariat (Fig. 6):

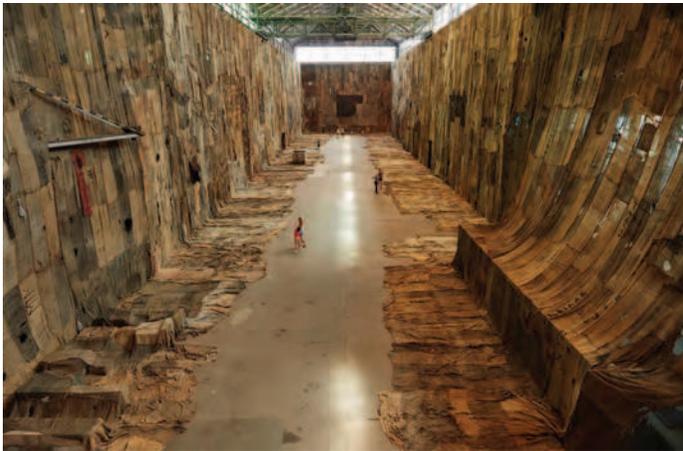
Because of political and economic crisis that has existed for some time in Ghana, people have developed a culture of writing part of their history on their body, their name or their parents’ names. In case something happens to them, they can be traced back to their relatives. Some of them tend to transfer these writings onto the sacks and that is the writing you see (Løvholm and Mahama 2016).

An allegorical image comes to mind when one encounters Mahama’s giant and immersive taxidermies of “molted skins” in urban space. It is a return of the repressed—an intrusion of the city by the living dead, by the breaths of the left behind, the departed, or the ancestors in the whispers of the swaying jute sacks. Mahama’s architectural and jute sack taxidermies are countermonuments of absent bodies<sup>13</sup> or of “death on display.” They are like giant *écorchés* who got back their lacerated skins but who return our gaze as monstrous spectacles—as ciphers of the unhomey<sup>14</sup> (Fig. 7). Through a seeming “new lamp for old” transaction, Mahama contributes to the “molting” process by exchanging newer sacks—bought fresh from sack dealers at the harbor—for worn out and mended charcoal-bearing sacks which have nearly surrendered their capacity to contain or to enclose. For the journey from edibles to charcoal is nearly always the sack’s journey towards death, exclusion, rejection, or exploitation. Here, the artist participates in ending the material’s working life before immortalizing it as art, while initiating another death-prone trajectory for the newer sacks. On the one

hand, this scheme expands or sustains the fungibility of the sack material. On the other hand, it echoes a vicious cycle endemic to capital itself, like a system paying the plaintiff with her own money (Zupančič 2018). Mahama wittily opens the lid on the possibility of an artist’s complicity in the exploitative mechanisms of the contemporary capitalist apparatus.

It is important to Mahama that the “molted skin” material is not a discarded or found thing but a commodity bought and exchanged for. By self-consciously choosing not to use “discarded or salvaged materials” or “found objects” but by generating materials via participating in, activating, and rerouting the capitalist conditions of commodity exchange and value production, he seems to extricate himself from an enduring image, the stereotype of African artists of residual and accumulative practices as nothing more than salvage or “upcycling” bricoleurs.

Incidentally, the advent of Mahama’s immersive taxidermies and their global visibility was coeval with the elevation to cult status of another materialist skin metonym in the discourse surrounding the built environment—the architectural envelope. At the turn of the century, it had displaced the postmodern fascination with surface representation and the multicultural identity politics that came with it. If, in the modernist era, cross sections, plans, *pilotti*, and *façade libre* were the architect’s principal means of spatial distribution and political engagement, in the epoch that followed the postmodern, envelopes had become both the limit and means of spatial, class, and cultural politics. Alejandro Zaera-Polo had argued that the politics of inclusion and exclusion in architecture is located more in the envelope’s materiality and organizational value than in its iconographic content (Zaera-Polo 2008, 2009). In its prehistory in the last decade of the twentieth century, pro-globalization architects embracing anarchocapitalist politics and its spaghetti-Deleuzian poetry of fluid fields, porous boundaries, morphogenesis, and autopoiesis had put more premium on the technical means by which to dissolve the architectural envelope in order to conduct material and immaterial flows between the outside and the inside. Paradoxically, this design mantra soon evolved into an apparatus for the gentrification of urban commons and partition of space into cupolas, territorialized filter bubbles that concentrated wealth and natural resource and deepened exclusions



of the “toxic” outside (Sloterdijk 2011, 2014, 2016).<sup>15</sup> The epochal phase of these paragons of “permissive enclosure” was launched as borders reemerged within the logic and mechanisms of horizontal flows and borderless universes. Architecture conceived as a deregulatory force and autopoietic processes conducting flows through porous borders, is at the same time the apparatus that concentrates wealth at the expense of urban commons.<sup>16</sup>

By visually transforming architecture and structures across eras, provenances, regimes, and geographies, into “brutalist” jute sack envelopes, Mahama exposes the ubiquity of the mechanisms of enclosures and exclusions. He realizes this “brutalist” homogenization by redoubling walls, roofs, and skins of the built environment with derelict and molted jute sack patchworks which void the façade of its symbolic significance or displace a building’s faciality altogether. This corpus of immersive taxidermies and, to a large extent, its cognate *écorchés* of decommissioned silos, reverse-gentrified infrastructure projects, and object assemblages resonate with the necropolitical capitalist thesis Achille Mbembe develops in his recent book project *Brutalisme* (2020).<sup>17</sup> The grid structure of the jute sack patchwork resurrects a familiar modernist aesthetic,<sup>18</sup> yet its softness, perforations, lesions, scars, and biomorphic folds complicate its narrative consistency and stylistic identity. What would have been a typically rigid, pristine, mute, and immutable modernist motif appears expressive, hyperbolic—even “baroque”—and under construction in Mahama’s speculative taxidermies. They seem opaque from a distance, yet on a more intimate encounter, they are rather gauzy and sinewy, obliging viewers to see through them from either side. Thus, they only pretend to conceal what they cover or contain. The redoubled skin, patched, sutured, and punctured in several places, reveals the traumatic and precarious underside of the labor relations—of voided subjects—that have come to constitute these commons of the built environment. The taxidermies, epitaphs to divested labor and monuments to absent bodies, become giant *memento mori*. Under neoliberal capitalist sovereignty, they are postapocalyptic dioramas or *vani-tas* still life objects installed in real time and in literal space; they are like gravestones marking the absence of populations emptied of life.<sup>19</sup> They are metonyms of actual lives already lived; lives potentially emptied of political substance. As doppelgangers of “bare life,” they make us see our own bodies and lives as a traumatic encounter with our own excess, as living beings always-already dead or as undead zombies<sup>20</sup> (cf. Malabou 2012a, 2012b), phantoms, or ghosts reading their own epitaphs.

**9** Ibrahim Mahama  
*Civil Aviation Project*, Airport, Accra, 2014, an iteration of the *Occupation* series

**10** Ibrahim Mahama  
Walkthrough scene, Adum bowstring footbridge, 2014, an iteration of the *Occupation* series

**11** Ibrahim Mahama  
*No Friend but the Mountains 2012–2020* (2020)  
Installation view, 22nd Biennale of Sydney, Cockatoo Island  
Photo: Zan Wimberley; courtesy Ibrahim Mahama, White Cube, and Apalazzo Gallery, Brescia

**12** Ibrahim Mahama  
*Out of Bounds*. Walkthrough installation and scene allusive to the propitiatory walk in Dante’s *Inferno*. Venice Biennale, 2015. Last iteration of the *Occupation* series

13 Ibrahim Mahama  
*No Parking, No Stopping, No Loading*  
Abandoned Nkrumah-era silo structure, Ho

14 Core group of young women head porters (*kayayei*) and North-to-South economic migrants (readymade labor) whom Mahama regards as collaborators working in readymade production sites.  
*Beposo Bridge Project (1936–2016)*

To modern sensibilities, taxidermy and its accompanying fetish of trophy culture are cruel. Taxidermy has had a devastating impact on many species and also betrays the beast inherent in human forms of sovereignty (cf. Derrida 2011; Mbembe 2019; Agamben 1998). So, the analogy might seem to be an insensitive one. But it is drawn advisedly here. Without a doubt, there is systemic cruelty at the heart of the neoliberalization of capital and its unbridled globalization of markets, the zenith of the late twentieth-century economic system which invented the intermodal shipping containers of global commodity trade. Needless to say, the “beast” that sucks up raw materials from the global souths, “shedding” the transporting sacks as surplus and initiating their perilous conditions in the local grain and charcoal markets, is the same system that administers economic and labor conditions that deposit surplus populations, emptying out their human and political substance.

Structurally, capitalism needs to render more and more workers useless to keep pace with itself and become more efficient. Thus, unemployment and various forms of precarity<sup>21</sup> are structurally coded into the “dynamic of accumulation and expansion,” that is, into the very nature and heart of capitalism (cf. Jameson 2011: 149; Lazzarato 2012). The more efficient capitalism needs to be, through higher productivity, accumulation, and expansion, the more it needs to expose more populations to precarity and the threat of death. In its post-Occupy and post-austerity form—precisely, the Neoliberal 2.0 Capitalist form—history seems to have been made; for the first time capitalism echoes the form of precarious subjectivity itself.<sup>22</sup> While Aaron Schuster (2016) sees in this short circuit between precarity and capitalism the end of an epoch, Žižek (2017) sees in the contemporary precarious subject the exception and surplus of capitalist universality,<sup>23</sup> the embodiment of universal freedom and capitalist inoperativity through the new uses they are inclined to put their bodies to (cf. Agamben 2015). In Žižek’s evaluation (2020: dedication page), they are those “whose daily lives are so miserable that they ignore Covid-19, regarding it as a comparatively minor threat,” yet,

they are free to reinvent themselves all the time, to search for new form of expressing their creativity, but the price they pay for it is that their daily existence is marked by eternal insecurity, helplessness, and anxiety (Žižek 2017: 262).

To be sure, there is no star in Mahama’s dramaturgy even if his sanctimony around Ghana’s women migrant porters, the *kayayei*, seems to “privilege” them as the natural embodiment of economic precarity; even if he singles them out of his expanding network of precarious contributors as his “collaborators.” The Squatted



Prosfigyka project<sup>24</sup> in Athens for documenta 14 creates an expanded image of populations potentially subject to global economic precarity (Fig. 8). Here the levelling and depsychologizing of social classes, races, and gender in the activity of hemming jute sacks together at Syntagma Square gives an indifferent and universal form to an activity previously the preserve of women migrant porters in the Ghana projects.

But precarity takes different forms, some of which play out as radical antagonisms within itself. Mahama’s point is to use the blind universality of human precarity as a point of departure for emancipatory art propositions. Citing May 27, 1525, the day of Thomas Muntzer’s failed Peasants’ Revolt, as historical muse and subject for his documenta 14 projects, he intimates:

Crisis and failure have always been material and political. The struggle for freedom promises renewed potential for social justice and equality but also the possibility for completely counter outcomes. The struggle must continue to intervene in existing conditions and propose alternative futures, leaving stains and residues that distort the known image. These may induce a shift in perspective, a re-orientation to the relations of production (Mahama and Ndikung 2017: n.p. [August 28]).

Under capitalist sovereignty, precisely, the global finance and austerity capitalism of our present historical moment, all are marked for death. Like the COVID-19 pandemic, one is only lucky to get spared. The Occupy Wall Street slogan, pitting the 99% against the 1%, has resonance here. Precarity is a potential condition for all humanity. The commons of humanity itself is under the threat of proletarianization and the subject of history is nearly a zone of indifference.



15 Inaugural Exhibition at SCCA Tamale (2019): *Galle Winston Kofi Dawson: In Pursuit of Something “Beautiful,” Perhaps...*, curated by Bernard Akoi-Jackson. GWK Dawson is a Ghanaian modernist painter trained in Kumasi and the Slade in the 1960s

16 Red Clay Studio Complex. A 200-acre network of artist studios and residencies, community art and design school, technology hub, children’s playgrounds, film and performance theatres, archaeological museum, community farms, and a center for renewable energy. [Project under construction].

## ACT II: SCENE II “OUT OF BOUNDS”: MAHAMA, DANTE, AND ENWEZOR TAKE A STROLL THROUGH “INFERNO” AND “THE GARDEN OF DISORDER”

At the 2015 Venice Biennale, Mahama’s giant taxidermies came to the attention of a worldwide audience. With the *Out of Bounds* project,<sup>25</sup> the last iteration of the *Occupation* series, the young Ghanaian artist had lent skin to skinless medieval masonry; it had seemed the vacant masts of the legendary Venetian shipyard of yore, in Dante’s Stygian account, “the ribs of that which many a voyage has made,”<sup>26</sup> had got their sails back, this time ragged and doleful ones. Meanwhile, local Ghanaian audiences had witnessed several iterations of Mahama’s public interventions, especially, the maiden editions of the *Occupation* series (Fig. 9), prior to the Venetian epic event curated by Okwui Enwezor and his team. The open-air walkthrough genre was an early development in Mahama’s public installations, especially the Adum Railway foot-bridge series in 2013 and 2014 (Fig. 10). At the 22nd Biennale of Sydney (2020), Mahama restaged the walkthrough installation and scene *No Friend but the Mountains, 2012–2020* in an interior space at Cockatoo Island (Fig. 11).

Meanwhile, when the derelict jute sack tapestries, metonyms of the “left behind,” made their ironic entry into Venice as triumphant icons of alienated labor and as forensic registers of global and local trade routes, they also left behind the precarious workers and collaborators who had hemmed them together at needlepoint and had signed their names and initials on them. The latter were denied entry visas on account of their *sans-papiers* status in Ghana, as incomplete citizens and therefore socially toxic subjects to barricade—“out of bounds”—from fortress Europe. Yet their absent



bodies, caught in precarious economic conditions back home and exposed to the threat of expiry, disposal, or death on daily basis, remained spectral in the Venice taxidermy. Nonetheless, *Out of Bounds* had also evoked memories of collective labor conditions peculiar to the Arsenale of antiquity, the largest preindustrial “rust belt”—at its peak, a Renaissance-era industrial complex which is said to have anticipated the assembly line of Fordist industrial revolution. Like the repurposed jute sacks, the “rust belt” of the Arsenale is a fossil, relic, or residue of past circuits and trajectories of an economic system, this time of specific production relations between people which had lagged behind the changing forces of production between things.

Occasionally, Mahama’s giant “skin” sails flapped to the beckoning of the Adriatic winds, breathing in and puffing out the breezy currents through its gaping holes while humming, whirring, and whispering back and forth between the mirroring pair of medieval corderie walls. Indeed, it was impossible to miss the vast sea of wretched and saggy sacks surging steeply downward, and almost obligingly, towards the visitor’s feet, 21 meters below.<sup>27</sup> But more significantly, it was impossible to miss the walkthrough, between and within the nearly animate installation, because it flanked the entry-exit corridor that took visitors to and from the official Biennale exhibition sites and the national pavilions in the Arsenale.

A visitor connecting to the Arsenale from the Giardini’s central pavilion where the three-plus-one volumes of *Das Kapital* were being read out, or from the opulent yachts of billionaire collectors anchored along the *fondamenta*, would be caught in Mahama’s 317 meter-long “propitiatory” walk. And the irony of this scenario would not have been lost on Marx or Benjamin, the muses of *All the World’s Futures*, nor on Enwezor, the curator, who bade all to reflect on the “current disquiet that pervades our time.”<sup>28</sup> Mahama’s *Out of Bounds* walk-through scenario echoes the propitiatory walk of Dante (the living), guided by Virgil (the departed), through the iron-colored valley of the Inferno, toward Purgatory and Paradise. Furthermore, the walk-through scenario seems to bring Dante’s *Divine Comedy* trilogy into a surprising tête-à-tête with Okwui Enwezor’s troika of curatorial filters: “The Garden of Disorder” (Inferno); “Capital: A Live Reading” (Purgatory); “Liveness: On Epic Duration” (Paradise).

Sharing something with Francis Alÿs’s *paseos*, Mahama had transformed what would have been a routine walk into an ironic artistic form, into a whimsical procession of attentive or distracted walks of art pilgrims, patrons, and passers-by embedded in the suffering of others, and potentially, of themselves (Fig. 12). And for this “chorus of idle footsteps,”<sup>29</sup> detours are out of bounds.



**ACT II: SCENE III  
WHEN GIFTING BECOMES FORM:  
READYMADE LABOR, READYMADE  
ARMATURE, AND COMMONING OUR LOST  
AND FORGOTTEN COMMONS**

The *Occupation* series and subsequent projects conceal a social practice of commoning<sup>30</sup> under the veil of spectacular installations. The repurposed jute sacks, metonyms of absent bodies, and their dissipated labor, frame real-time living conditions in the city space.<sup>31</sup> A complex dramaturgy ensues. The interventions challenge the various means by which exclusive property rights, centralized state regulation, and neoliberal economic forces encroach on the city's collective commons and transform them into private property and gentrified public spaces and goods.

In the somewhat blue-collar phase of his early projects, Mahama organized modest labor forces toward transforming Ghana's privatized commons<sup>32</sup> or state-administered public spaces and infrastructure into transitory and open-source art production and exhibition sites. The "readymade labor" of the city's surplus populations came into creative dialogue with the city's "readymade armature" (Fig. 13). Beside doubling as framework for installations and exhibition sites, the "readymade armatures" also function as sites of production for new work (Fig. 14), archives of decaying histories reordered and reprogrammed for new projects, cues for future forms of spatial design for his proposed commons and prompts for new forms of social engineering. These six modes of the readymade armature are intertwined in Ibrahim Mahama's ongoing projects. The mournful jute sack tapestries, sewn by the hands of the "readymade laborers," mediated between these darkening and paling shadows of urban commons.<sup>33</sup> And that is how the giant taxidermies were born.

Concomitant with the *Occupation* series and *Out of Bounds* are Mahama's "silent" infrastructural interventions in Ghana that exposed paradoxes and contradictions at the heart of the politics of commoning itself, especially, when different formats of commoning competed for significance in the same location or among members of the same activist community, or when private rights and state regulation, quite ironically, became the acquiescent means of protecting endangered commons. In some of the artist's public projects, hawkers and squatters exercising their "Rights to the City" and thereby occupying State-designated "out of bounds" spaces staged silent acts of sabotage and protest against Mahama's installations, which temporarily encroach a public space



**17a–b** A retrospective on Ghanaian Modernist Agyeman "Dota" Ossei's lifework opened concurrently at SCCA-Tamale (l) and Red Clay Studio Complex (r) where conversation between the artist and co-curator Kwasi Ohene-Ayeh was held at the repatriated *Parliament of Ghosts*. *Akutia: Blindfolding the Sun and the Poetics of Peace* (September 2020–March 2021) was curated by Adwoa Amoah, Tracy Thompson, and Kwasi Ohene-Ayeh, exponents of the blaxTAR-LINES KUMASI coalition.  
Photo: courtesy Kelvin Haizel for SCCA Tamale

to common it. Here, two formats of commoning public infrastructure with different intents come into confrontation. Till date, Mahama's most notable projects that have explored the paradoxes of public commons are, respectively, the Savannah Center for Contemporary Art (SCCA) (Figs. 15, 17a) and the Red Clay Studio Complex (Figs. 16, 17b) in Tamale in northern Ghana. The SCCA is first a "repatriated white cube" (Martens 2019). It is an exhibition and research hub, cultural repository, publishing house, and artists' residency dedicated to retrospective exhibitions on twentieth century Ghanaian and African modernism in art, design, and technology. The Red Clay Studio Complex, on the other hand, is a 200-acre network of artist studios and residencies, community art and design school, technology hub, children's playgrounds, film and performance theaters, archaeological museum, community farms, and a center for renewable energy. The SCCA and Red Clay Studio sites are especially committed to educational commons. There is special focus on expanding the worldview of children in provincial districts. Children from surrounding villages are subjects of transdisciplinary and open-access education in drone technology, flight simulations in decommissioned planes, video and photography, agriculture, and contemporary art as a supplement to their formal education in public schools. Mahama thus maintains links with the parent blaxTARLINES community in the Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology and other public institutions as partners in the generation and operation of the multidisciplinary curriculum at the Red Clay Studio Complex and the cultural programming of SCCA.

Through these infrastructure projects, Mahama has exercised full private property rights by negotiating with state agents,



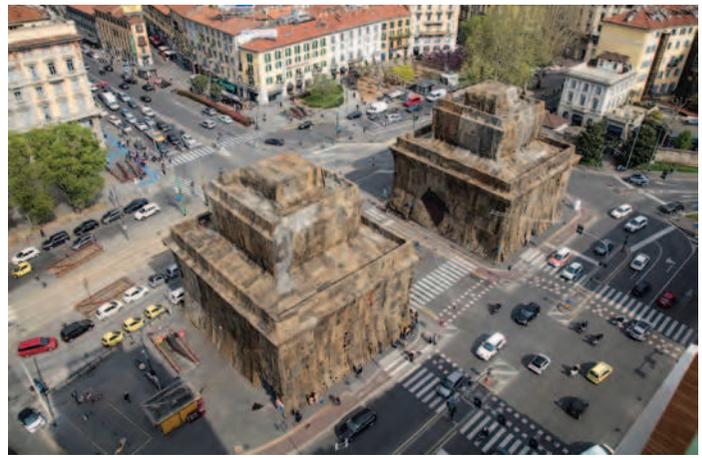
**18** Ibrahim Mahama  
Mallam Doodoo 1992–2016.  
National Theater Project, Accra, 2016.

**19** Ibrahim Mahama  
*A Friend*  
Giant taxidermies at the Porta Venetia Gateway,  
Milan, 2019.

corporate bodies, private owners, and traditional custodians of land as a paradoxical means by which to recommon or reverse-gentrify public spaces, goods, and social services facing threats of private encroachment and gentrification. In most cases, the postcolonial State under neoliberal pressure has construed public infrastructure, goods, and services as cash cows, failing which they are divested or abandoned to decay. Thus, abandoned silos, such as the *Nkrumah Voli*, and industrial and estate projects of the colonial and Nkrumah eras have also become sites, muses, and means for a new series of redemptive infrastructure and social projects.

### **ACT III: SCENE I FROM SPECTACLES AND WALKTHROUGHS TO ENCLOSURES AND BACK: THEATER'S APOTHEOSIS AND PROFANATION**

In 2018, Mahama was invited to embark on the Great Hall installation project at the Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology (KNUST), Kumasi. At the time, he was completing a DAAD residency in Berlin. The SCCA and Red Clay Studio Complex were under construction. His body of work had seen several phases of transformation and his new projects were still in the process of transmuting beyond the recognizable jute sack installations. After *Out of Bounds*—within the historical moment when the shift from exchange economies to debt financing, rent and gig economies, and their baggage of austerity measures, seems to have reached its highpoint—the artist's meditations on immaterial forms of labor and flows of finance capital also intensified. Labor, and with it all urban conditions that thrived exclusively on the use of bodies, had become homologous with precarity. They had become more defined by global economic conditions of universal indebtedness than by direct exploitation by owners of means of production. Subsequently, the labor alliances and collectives Mahama formed for his new projects, too, took a more precarious form, that is, becoming more fluid, contingent and unpredictable. Collaborative labor widened in scope to embrace the acknowledged input of all involved in the collective reproduction



of the commons of contemporary urban life and potentially at the mercy of disposability in the hands of the global finance and debt industry. Beyond *kayaye* and blue-collar laborers, the list of collaborators began to include bureaucrats, academics, librarians, architects, engineers, political activists, security personnel, and care givers. However, in the context of Mahama's projects, they all learn to perform new tasks.

After *Out of Bounds* at Venice Biennale 2015, Mahama's jute sack installation form had become less of a "look at" banner veiling a façade, or a pair of "walkthrough" borders, than an all-over shroud enclosing the entire volume of structures. This time, echoing Zaera-Polo's trope of the envelope architecture, the all-over skin frames and reconfigures the activities inside. Contemporary imaging, screen, and cartographic technologies such as drone and Google map navigation had become key in the prospecting, mapping, and documentation of sites and projects, and in his video productions, too. *Exchange Exchanger: No Stopping, No Parking, No Loading, 1957–2057*, a cycle of simultaneous projects in Accra and Kumasi, was born, eclipsing or complicating the more blue-collar logic of the *Occupation* series and setting the pace for Mahama's mammoth scale *mise en abyme* projects in which the artist uses jute sack taken from all major public installations till date. Examples are the *National Theater Project* (Fig. 18) and *Check Point Sekondi Loco, 1901–2030. 2016–2017* Torwache, Kassel, and more recently, the Porta Venezia gateway installation in Milan (2019) (Fig. 19). Notable in this chapter was his complicated relationship with dealers and collectors in the international art market, which expanded the alchemical subtext of his projects beyond the "new lamp for old" jute sack exchange economy he had inaugurated in Ghana's local markets.

In the new installation projects, Mahama's working platform began to take the form of an editing console on which he performed techniques of sampling, reformatting, and reprogramming through cuts and recuts, rewinding, translation, subtitling, and acts of repetition which birth difference. Audiences were no more mere lookers; they were participants in a new form of epic theater. For the KNUST Great Hall installation, Mahama used his jute-sack installation to frame a commemorative event of University officialdom layered with colonial and postindependence education and social and spatial histories. He injected performative forms of art into the rehearsed itinerary of state and university bureaucracy. As part of the project, he would assist the university chancellor, who is also the monarch of the Asante State, in a sod-cutting ceremony and



20 Great Hall. Tropical Modernist Architecture, Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology, Kumasi. Design: Max Gerlach and Gillies-Reyburn, c. 1965

21 Ibrahim Mahama. KNUST Great Hall Installation Project, 2018. Commissioned by Vice-Chancellor Kwesi Obiri-Danso for the KNUST 52nd Congregation Ceremony.

also give a commencement speech to the congregation of graduating students inside the jute-sack wrapped Great Hall. It was on the occasion of the one-week-long annual Congregation series, which ends with a Special Congregation for Post-Graduate students. The Special Congregation is usually attended by the King of Asante and the President of the Republic of Ghana or his representative.

The Great Hall, the site of the Congregation and Mahama's Installation Project, is an Nkrumah-era centerpiece of campus modernist architecture (Fig. 20). It was designed by Danish architect Max Gerlach and his British partner Gillies-Reyburn in the 1960s. It is a flat horizontal in Alejandro Zaera Polo's typology of architectural envelopes and an epitome of *façade libre* and *plan libre* design, a quasi-floating fortress resting on a miscellany of sturdy cubic *piloti*. Particular attention had been paid to the tropical natural lighting of the building through its two registers of ribbon glass windows and, on the ground floor, a running fence of striped wood-and-glass doors outlining the entire length of the auditorium. Mahama's all-over jute sack drapery had made the wall and roof indistinguishable, blurring or displacing its clean and sure cubic lines, softening the structure's obstinacy and also subduing the inflow of daylight (Fig. 21). The building's volumetric and cast concrete framework, which seems to embody the rigid bureaucratic structure of the institution and affirm its patriarchal and moral seriousness, remains veiled behind the mournful drapery. Yet, few parts of the coarse khaki-grey terrazzo, its austere blend of brutalist and modernist cubic design, are exposed to the elements and return their gaze on onlookers.

The modularity of the jute sack units remains stressed with a forceful grid-patterned needlework such that the modules seem resonant of indelible modernist subtexts in contemporary life. There is also an eerie aura to the giant jute shroud, in its "gothic" modulation of line, pleat, wear, and tear, and in its disassembled color chart of ruin, oldness, and incompleteness. Parts of the quarter-turn and spiral staircases of the east wing foyer could be seen through the worn and torn tapestry, which also doubled as a temporary habitat for birds, insects, and reptiles. Somewhere, Mahama's work mode evokes a clone stamping process in Photoshop, referencing ghettoaesque sampling points in the literal African city space, duplicating tone, shade, and dimension; replacing material with material, object with object, and adjusting opacity with a careful draping of building parts—concrete walls, glass windows, open corridors, passageways, sunscreens, and corners in shadow—with pixelated sacking material. The unmistakable smell of the jute sacks seemed cordoned off by the air-conditioned auditorium, yet the jute sacks

exhibited their optical presence inside through the ribbon glass windows and doors. The cantilevered and sun-screened corridors of the southern façade and the respective east and west wing foyers, unmistakably inspired by the geometric logic of Asante kente motifs, also show through the bruised and torn second skin. The desaturated kente-esque motifs resonate in Ghanaian architect Opare Larbi's façade design of the Prempeh II Library extension, which shares a manicured lawn with the northern façade of the Great Hall. The lawn had been an open-access site for Mahama's MFA thesis exhibition in 2014, yet this time, in the rainy season, it was a site barricaded for its preservation, frustrating the artist's desire to repurpose the site as a converging point for selfies and camaraderie. However, Mahama's outdoor video documentary of past and present public projects continued to be shown to audiences waiting to welcome the colorful procession of Convocation returning from the Great Hall in pomp and pageantry. Mahama had prepared the site in such a way that the colorful procession of Convocation, special guests, and the monarch would link this site to the ceremony inside the Great Hall.

### ACT III: SCENE II THE STATE, ACADEMIA AND MONARCHY IN MAHAMA'S THEATER OF EDUCATIONAL COMMONS

At the 52nd KNUST Special Congregation held on July 14, 2018, the congregants inside the jute sack-draped Great Hall sang the Ghanaian national anthem and the University's repertoire of chorales in unison. On the official program, a solemn Black national anthem, "Lift Every Voice and Sing,"<sup>34</sup> was nested between the national anthem and the rather light-hearted "Gaudeamus," a *memento mori* which doubles as a bacchanalian song for fresh graduates going out to face life. This was routine. But this time something outside the repertoire was introduced by no less a figure than the chancellor and king of Asante, Otumfuo Osei Tutu II. It was the "Kwadwom"<sup>35</sup> eulogy, a baroque and slave-trade-era chant



and epic poetry unique to the Asante monarchy. The last time it featured conspicuously in any University event was at the monarch's investiture as chancellor; that was thirteen years past. For the first time in Mahama's career, his giant taxidermy installation and hushed theatrical form had directly encountered Ghanaian aboriginal cultural system as cotravelers, with the latter spontaneously offering a retinue of actors and a grand panoply.

The "Kwadwom" chant was accompanied by ivory horn refrains performed by an "Ntahera" ensemble of seven horn blowers stationed in the upper terrace of the west wing foyer overlooking the central auditorium. The seven "Ntahera" horns—the "seseɛ" (the sayer), the two "afre" (the callers), the three "ayeso" (the responders) and one "bosoo" (the reinforcer)—weave themselves into a contiguous chorus. The horn chorus streamed eastwards over the heads of congregants seated in the auditorium and towards the dais from where the two "Kwadwom" versifiers, Eric Frimpong and his brother Pius Fofie, sang. The barefoot and bare-chested bards had taken their place beside the monarch, who was robed in the chancellor's ceremonial colors and about to deliver his speech (Fig. 22). One led, the other echoed. They rhymed each line with a nasal ending which anticipated the consecrated, mournful and dissonant tones of the Ntahera horn chorus. Intermittently, the duo would chant a chorus in unison. The archaic Asante-Twi lyrics express condolences, attest to the Asante king's distinctive lineage, and affirm the memorable deeds of ancestors and departed. If Mahama's installation projects are epitaphs to labor, the "Kwadwom" chant is an ode to the departed; at this juncture, Mahama's practice of invoking the departed in the jute sack patchwork installation had found resonance in a surviving aboriginal tradition within a republican matrix. It is a stage framing another stage—a *mise en abyme*.

The Asante nation, a former empire, and a nodal point in the trans-Atlantic slave trade and anticolonial wars, has had not less than sixteen monarchs since King Osei Tutu I ascended to the stool ca. 1701. It was from the lineage of this matriline that KNUST got its large tract of land, a feat that seems nearly impossible in the twenty-first century. Back then, it was an act of commoning education in the late colonial era. The newly independent state under Nkrumah updated the colonial college, the Kumasi College of Technology (KCT), to a republican university, KNUST, in 1961. The props and seating arrangements on the dais and the order of



(clockwise from top left)

**22** The Chancellor-King Otumfuo Nana Osei Tutu II giving a Speech at a KNUST Congregation Ceremony. In the foreground is the wooden stool donated by Otumfuo Sir Nana Osei Agyemang Prempeh II. It is symbolically guarded by a "linguist" during Congregation ceremonies.

Photo: courtesy *qqr'kqchä seid'ou*

**23** Wooden stool donated to Kumasi College of Technology on October 8, 1952, by Otumfuo Sir Nana Osei Agyemang Prempeh II.

Photo: courtesy *qqr'kqchä seid'ou*

**24** Emblem of the Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology, Kumasi

Source: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Knuist\\_seal.jpg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Knuist_seal.jpg)



ceremony are made to tell this story and more. A small commemorative wooden stool on the dais, decorated with silver repoussé and watched over by a kente-clad ceremonial linguist, embodies this history (Fig. 23). It had been presented to the then Kumasi College of Technology on February 8, 1952, by Nana Sir Agyemang Prempeh II, a grand-uncle of the chancellor, who gave the land. Nkrumah-era Africanization insignia, such as the KNUST crest—with its eagle, Nyansapo ("wisdom knot") stool, and *adwunu* leaf charges, a pair of outside callipers for a shield, and an African pot of fire for a crest—testify to the deliberate departure from European heraldry and therefore to cultural self-determination in the making of the modern republican state and university (Fig. 24). Yet the structure of heraldry still haunts the emblem from within. Hierarchies were well-defined in the seating arrangement and distribution of color. While the elevated dais seated guests of honor, it was ill-disposed to people with physical disability. The chancellor-king, enthroned in the center on an upholstered throne with volute armrests and spindle stems, was flanked by a line of personnel which included the vice chancellor and the minister of education, who had taken the place of the president.

Notably, the typology of the key congregation songs, together with the "Kwadwom" supplement, echoes the triadic structure of sovereign power regulating education resources in the Kumasi university; a christianized republican state apparatus represented

## EPILOGUE

Just three months later, the drama on the dais played out differently in the literal world, perhaps echoing a famous line from Edward Bond that “If you can’t face Hiroshima in the theater, you’ll eventually end up in Hiroshima itself.” It is the tragedy of October 22, 2018. On this day, KNUST students went on rampage, concerned about alleged infringement on students’ rights and the conversion of traditionally male halls into mixed halls. In an attempt to speak truth to power, violence was unleashed on the various forms of infrastructure and logistics that had, for them, embodied the mechanisms of their unfreedom. The domino effect was a chain of antagonistic events, power struggles, and mediations involving the players on the dais representing monarchy, state, and academia. The event cast a long shadow on subsequent policy on public universities perhaps gifting the government the alibi it had always sought for in its quest to allot more power to the state at the expense of academia. The university is still recovering from the wounds of October 22nd while the Great Hall stands unscathed, triumphant in the midst of a scarred university. At the subsequent congregation, barely six months later, the Great Hall was jute sack bare and warmer. With Mahama’s second skin off the Great Hall walls and ribbon glass windows exposed to the sun, the “Kwadwom” eulogy and Ntchera refrain seem to have been stripped bare of skin and poise. The chancellor-king, repeating a line from Maya Angelou, urged graduating students to “give us a tomorrow more than what we deserve.”<sup>36</sup> In this light, Mahama’s projects and time-machines appear to have been interventions into that tomorrow which is probably out of date. And he might be remembered by the way he describes himself: “a contributor,” not a philanthropist or a benevolent humanitarian.

on the dais by the minister of education and state officials, a bureaucratic academia with African liberation ethos represented by the vice chancellor and management and student leaders, and a modernizing monarchy represented by chancellor-king and his entourage. A common issue about public education that concerns these three figures is how the centralized bureaucratic means of state governance of public spaces, goods, finance, services, and populations can handle the pressure from neoliberal economic and political mechanisms which shrink the financing of and access to public spaces, goods, and services. The phenomenon of diminishing the available common, renting it, encroaching it, divesting it, or abandoning it to rot if deemed unprofitable is more of a rule than exception. Thus, there was a subtle drama on the stage when the three figures of educational sovereignty had to take turns to speak to this subject that Mahama’s recent corpus of work addresses. On his part, the chancellor-king urged the state to accelerate the expansion of infrastructure projects in anticipation of an explosion of university student populations in the coming years due to the government’s free senior high schools policy. The vice-chancellor made a roll-call of the university’s initiatives in infrastructure projects through internally generated funds and called for more state support. As if responding to the monarch’s (his uncle’s) veiled critique of the state, the minister enjoined all to think outside the box on infrastructure and suggested to university management to make prudent use of existing infrastructure through creative means like judicious time-tabling and planning of calendars, and distance learning. His responses to concerns about the increasing female populations and the possible redesignation of traditionally male halls into mixed halls animated the auditorium with his evasive humor.

## Notes

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1 See also a counter-critique of *A Didactic Spectacle* by the curators of the exhibition, *An Age of Our Own Making* which featured *Nyhav’s Kpalang*, in Ndikung et al. 2016.

2 Refer to Mahama’s exhibition *Food Distribution Corporation* (K21 Kunstsammlung, Dusseldorf, Germany), an immersive and site-within-site work that employed sound bites of Ghanaian migrants and precarious workers who had worked on the project but had been left behind in Ghana, an Nkrumah-era silo structure nested in a former parliament building in Dusseldorf. See also Mahama’s reflections on Alberto Burri’s oeuvre in the video #32: *Alberto Burri im zeitgenöss.* Kontext: *Ibrahim Mahama*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cgdTG9wmt-w>. The video was made to accompany *Food Distribution Corporation*.

3 Mahama’s formative years and professional practice were nurtured in the KNUST Kumasi Art College under the auspices of the blaxTARLINES KUMASI team, an art collective, community, and network dedicated to nonproprietary means of making and distributing art. Besides a solid treatment in postwar art histories, the postmodern, and the transnational turn of contemporary art, the Kumasi curriculum has a special focus on contemporary collectivist, participatory and politically engaged practices. Among artists, curators, and collectives exposed to students in their early training are Groupe Amos, Hiwa K, Huit Facettes, Ruangrupa, Anika Yi, Superflex, Pierre Huyghe, Groupe Material (NY), Ala Plastica, Santiago Sierra, and Critical Art Ensemble. Students are trained to curate their own shows in the heart of the city and beyond. As of this writing, Mahama is pursuing a practice-based PhD with blaxTARLINES.

4 “Commons” has its origins in medieval society and denotes common or public goods and resources. The term has come to be associated with the notion

of common rights over public resources. In Žižek’s theory of the antagonism of the commons adapted by Tupinambá (2017), there are two main sources of the commons—the commons of nature and culture respectively. The commons of nature and culture are distributed internally and externally with respect to humans yielding four categories of commons and their corresponding components of production: a. external nature (raw materials and ecology); b. internal nature (concrete labor, genetic pool, etc.); c. external culture (abstracted labor); d. internal culture (social knowledge and information). In a capitalist universe, the respective commons deposit these corresponding forms of enclosure, privatization or gentrification: a. land enclosure; b. biotechnology; c. structural unemployment; d. intellectual property. However, there are these antagonisms inscribed in the respective commons which either reinforce the capitalist structure or undermine it: a. natural and man-made catastrophes; b. ethical impasses; c. monopoly of alienation; d. legal inadequacies.

5 Antonia Alampi in conversation with Ibrahim Mahama, 2019.

6 The Tesseract is an enormous, hypercubic, gridlike structure and a means of communication for the bulk beings to express action through gravity with NASA. The bulk beings can perceive five dimensions as opposed to four and see every moment in the past, present, and future. The bulk beings can influence gravity within any of those time frames.

7 Besides, the visual spectacle, Mahama’s installations are noticeably scented. Mahama’s Afro-Gothic leitmotif of the “smell of ghosts” is also a familiar trope in Amos Tutuola’s “The Smelling-Ghost” in *Palm Wine Drinkard and My Life in the Bush of Ghosts* (Tutuola 1993: 29–35).

8 Agyemang “Dota” Ossei’s water lily painting is titled in Asante-Twi as *Aboa a onni dua no Nana Nyame na opra neho* (1993).

9 Meanwhile, Mahama’s valorization of work might seem outdated when weighed against the trendier Left Accelerationist visions of postwork and therefore postcapitalist futures underwritten by full automation and Universal Basic Income. However, his vision finds

support in Alain Badiou’s critique of Alex Williams’s and Nick Srnicek’s version of postwork and postcapitalist program. Indeed, the idea of disappearance of work is not clearly in opposition with capitalism as such. Postcapitalism is better defined by the end of private property and waged labor than by the end of work. Also, work cannot be eclipsed by full automation because automation itself creates new forms of work. Work is an indivisible remainder in humanity’s struggle with external world. Badiou concludes that the idea of the future as a world without work belongs to the “Western world” and thus the wanderings of refugees and “surplus populations” seeking work are not reflected by this promise (Srnicek, Williams, and Badiou 2016).

10 Buck-Morss (2002) refers to the reenactments of the storming of the Winter Palace, scenes from the 1917 October Revolution, in which actors played themselves. The November 7, 1920 enactment was coordinated by army officers as well as avant-garde artists, musicians and directors, including Malevich and Meyerhold.

11 Malabou (2012b: 14, 16–18) cites Gregor Samsa’s “becoming-animal” in Kafka’s *The Metamorphosis* (1915) as “the most successful, beautiful, and relevant attempt to approach this kind of accident.” She reiterates Gregor Samsa’s instant transformation into a huge insect as a fitting example of an identity that comes from no past or “psychic consequences experienced by those who have suffered brain injury or have been traumatized by war and other catastrophes.”

12 At the point of their failure as vessels, the jute sacks are surplus, like the shed or molted skins of reptiles and other animals.

13 There is something to be said about how Mahama interprets the place of the body in the materiality of the sacks and its relation to the built environment and other urban commons. In Anthony Vidler’s Eurocentric typology, he infers the following schemas of the human body from architecture and urban planning:

1. The perfect Vitruvian body of the Classical/Renaissance regimes;
2. The abstracted bodily sensations corresponding to healthy states of mind in the Modern regime

3. The enchanted or animated body – the morphed, disfigured or dismembered body— of the Post-modern animist regime (Vidler 1990: 3–10). In all these schemas, it is the notion of a “body present” that is deduced. However, Mahama writes the “absent body,” the “departed body,” or the “the body disposed” by the late capitalist apparatus back onto the built environment.

14 Homi Bhabha’s postcolonial reworking of Freud’s *heimlich/unheimlich* dyad as the “unhomely” draws attention to a certain “defamiliarization” perpetually inhabiting the “familiar.” See Bhabha (1994).

15 Jeremy Rifkin proposes a postcapitalist solution by retrofitting the building envelopes and structures with smart sensors and converting buildings into intelligent edge data centers through ubiquitous internet of things (IoT) infrastructure. In this framework, each envelope architecture, as all other buildings in the city, becomes a node in a widely distributed sharing network of renewable energy and technologies of communication and mobility—the three principal ingredients of Rifkin’s Third Industrial Revolution or Collaborative Commons (cf. Rifkin, 2019).

16 Activist groups such as Gulf Labor Coalition have drawn attention to the low pay and inadequate housing conditions given to migrant workers on these projects, the corrupt and misleading practices of labor recruiters, and the growing economic and class divides in Abu Dhabi. The group’s critique of the housing conditions of Saadiyat Island’s migrant workers in the Saadiyat Accommodation Village compound, which could hold up to 20,000 workers is well known.

17 Achille Mbembe uses the architectural metaphor of “brutalism” to refer to the apocalyptic singularity instigated by the necropolitical capitalist apparatus (Mbembe 2020). The ultimate project of brutalism—through contemporary dematerialization mechanisms such as “cracking,” “fracturing,” and aspects of “technological acceleration” like “computation”—is the transformation of humanity into artifacts or raw material amenable to ubiquitous capitalist extraction.

18 As Krauss (1979: 60) says, the modernist grid, no matter the size, scale or number of units is a fragment “arbitrarily cropped from an infinitely larger fabric.” Thus, Mahama’s patchwork tapestry continues to explore this emblem of twentieth century modernism.

19 I rely here on a line of thought in Jacques Lacan’s *Écrits*, and adopted by the Slovenian School of Lacanians, especially, Žižek, to mean “every word is a gravestone, marking the absence or corpse of the thing it represents and standing in for it” (Myers 2003: 83). See also Lacan 2005: 126; Dolan 1998: 11–40.

20 Malabou’s “new wounded,” the posttraumatic subject, embodies the image of the living dead (2012a, 2012b). According to Joan Copjec (2012), they are different from the “old wounded” of Freudian psychoanalysis, the hysterics, in that they are “radically devoid of reminiscences” and of life’s “meaning too.”

21 As David Harvey notes, “The ever-expanding labor of making and sustaining urban life is increasingly done by insecure, often part-time and disorganized low-paid labor. The so-called ‘precariat’ has displaced the traditional ‘proletariat’ in the new capitalist economy (2012: xiv).”

22 It took the austerity phase of capitalism to disclose that labor is fundamentally precarious. In this scenario, labor is indelibly intertwined with dynamics of life and death. Zygmunt Bauman defines this period as “one of ‘liquid modernity’, a society of generalized disposability, driven ‘by the horror of expiry’” (Bauman 2005: 3; cf. Bourriaud 2009).

23 Jacques Rancière (2009) theorizes that those who belong but are excluded—the demos, the “part that has no part,” the universal exception—constitute the subject of democracy. Politics, or the struggle for emancipation, begins when the demos itself acts to affirm the universal premise that “we are all equal.” See Harney and Moten’s (2013) idea of undercommons.

24 As part of his participation in the Athens chapter of documenta 14, Mahama undertook internship, from November 2016–April 2017, with an anarchist community of squatters, refugees, ethnic minorities, and *sans-papiers* occupying the Squatted Prosyfygika tenement. While there, he was involved in mobilizing funds to restore tenement facilities, attended anarchist meetings, and participated in their struggles against coordinated attacks by cops, neo-Nazis, and members of the Golden Dawn. The Syntagma Square collaborative performance was an extension of the Squatted Prosyfygika Project. Mahama was also signatory to the letters written to Athens mayor Giorgos Kamini and Greek prime minister Alexis Tsipras protesting the public killing

of Zak Kostopoulos, the LGBTQI+ activist and drag performer who was savagely beaten by several men in central Athens on September 21, 2018.

25 *Out of Bounds* was Mahama’s first outdoor public installation in Europe. An artist book publishing project was launched with contributions from the blaxTAR-LINES publications team and edited by Osei Bonsu, a young curator (Bonsu 2015).

26 To paint the gloomy picture of immersion in dark boiling pitch, the punishment reserved for swindlers, Dante refers to the Arsenale in *The Divine Comedy*. The great poet had visited the Venice Arsenale in early 1321 and witnessed the legendary shipyard where “unsound vessels” were under repair. Today, a plaque in the Arsenale commemorates Dante’s visit with lines from his *Inferno*:

As in the Arsenal of the Venetians  
Boils in the winter the tenacious pitch  
To smear their unsound vessels o’er again  
For sail they cannot; and instead thereof  
One makes his vessel new, and one recalls  
The ribs of that which many a voyage has made  
One hammers at the prow, one at the stern  
This one makes oars and that one cordage twists  
Another mends the mainsail and the mizzen ...  
(Canto 21, verses 7–15)

Also, I use the term “stygian” in the dark, infernal, and hellish sense Soyinka uses it in his prison poem “The Shuttle in the Crypt”; see also Henderson 1990.

27 The scenario recasts a scene in Walter Benjamin’s *Theses on the Philosophy of History*, which Okwui Enwezor quotes as epigraph for the curatorial synopsis of *All the World’s Futures*:

Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise; it has caught itself up in his wings and is so strong that the angel can no longer close them. The storm drives him irresistibly into the future, to which his back is turned, while the rubble-heap before him grows sky-high. That which we call progress, is this storm (Benjamin 1969b: 257–58, qtd. in Enwezor 2015).

28 Mahama’s successive walkthrough installations in Ghana—the Adum Central and Adum-Kejetia (Kumasi) railway footbridge projects (2013 and 2014)—prefigure that of *Out of Bounds*.

29 I owe this expression to de Certeau (2011: 97).

30 “Commoning” is a term popularized by Linebaugh (2009). It is the process of reclaiming a resource, making it a commons, and creating a community to manage such resource. Commoning is thus a set of social practices entailed in the process of establishing and governing a commons. These practices entail, for the community of commoners, the creation of a new way of living and acting together, thus involving a collective psychological shift; it also entails a process of subjectivization, where the commoners produce themselves as common subjects (Federici 2012; Euler and Gauditz 2017).

31 In a reflection on the jute-sack material (Mahama 2018), he says of the jute sacks:

I was first of all drawn to this material in terms of “the common”: In Ghana almost every home has it. It has a lot of uses. When you take a bus on a rainy day and you need to clean the mud off your feet there is a jute sack there to do that work. If there is a fire you can quench it with a wet jute sack. I was drawn to its function and later on also for its aesthetics when being used for transporting charcoal. You find different points of aesthetics within the surface of the sacks’ fabric: some areas have turned white which means they have been outside for 6–7 months. The aesthetics of the sacks are acquired over time, from its various owners. I am interested in how crisis and failure are absorbed into this material with a strong reference to global transaction and how capitalist structures work.

32 According to David Harvey, Capital ruthlessly feeds upon and extracts rents “from the common life that others have produced” (2012: 78).

33 I appropriate this phrase from Birago Diop’s “Breaths [Forefathers]” (1960): “The dead are not gone forever/They are in the paling shadows/And in the darkening shadows ...” (trans. Moore 1963). David Harvey also refers to public spaces, public goods and other urban commons as the “shadow-form” of urbanization (2012: 80). I extend Diop’s and Harvey’s “shadow” trope to encompass precarious human inhabitants of the city whose labor conditions are encoded into the city infrastructure and into Mahama’s projects.

34 “Lift Every Voice and Sing” is a hymn by J. Rosamond Johnson (composer) and James Weldon Johnson (lyrics), two African American brothers of the Harlem Renaissance Era. It was the theme for a sculpture by Augusta Savage for the 1939 New York Art Fair.

35 The provenance of “Kwadwom” in Asante oral tradition traces the form to the insanity of one Kwaw, a courtier in the palace of King Osei Tutu I (born c. 1660—died c. 1717) who used to chant very soulful verses during his struggle. The king canonized Kwaw’s songs and ruled that these songs should be sung to him in times of war, or whilst presiding over official duties of the state, or during festivals and durbars. The senior nursing sister at the king’s palace, who served as the official curator of the elegies, taught her descendants about the art of singing the “Kwadwom.” Till date, the custodians of “Kwadwom,” Opanin Kofi Fofie and Opanin Kwame Obo, are the direct descendants of one senior nurse Nana Daakowah (Agyeman-Duah 1976; Ampene and Nyantakyi III 2016).

36 Maya Angelou’s commencement speech at the University of California Riverside 1977 graduation.

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# Back-and-Forth

## Cutting Our Coats According to Some Cloths and Other Smaller Things ...

*Dorothy Akpene Amenuke and Bernard Akoi-Jackson in conversational dialogue*

**T**his text and image contribution is a conversation between Dorothy Akpene Amenuke and Bernard Akoi-Jackson, contemporary Ghanaian artists, whose bodies of work straddle the academy and the field in almost equal measure. On the one hand, it focuses on their respective artistic praxes, exploring the actual and potential relationships between them, and on the other, investigates their pedagogical strategies and how their approaches to work influence their teaching and other forms of knowledge dissemination. The text emanates from a two-way interview between the artists and is punctuated by anecdotes about, and photographs of, their work ranging between the years 2014 to 2019. Themes that are tackled include, but are not limited to, collaboration, materials, techniques, and aesthetic concerns.

**Bernard Akoi-Jackson (BA-J):** Much has been discussed about your production strategies and the way you invite different groups of people into your studio to help with aspects of the work. You work with family, volunteers, and even students. What is the motive behind this mode of working?

**Dorothy Akpene Amenuke (DAA):** As art is not just about objects but about issues and people anywhere and everywhere, much of my work engages the everyday and several individuals. Materials are mostly familiar ones that are experienced in day-to-day activities and could be easily taken for granted. Contemporary art enables a condition of interdisciplinary approaches to working and this is pragmatically implied when many people with varied ideas are involved. The different people come to my work with their various abilities, skills and experiences. Also, having my studio located within my home makes it possible for my family to be almost always present, ready to help and be part of my artmaking and life. My need of extra hands is due to the scale of works produced. It necessitates the use of volunteers who may not necessarily have formal art education or background. They may be into other informal art or craft practices, or none at all, but this gives me the opportunity to exchange some new skills with them, as they also bring along many teachable methods into my space.

Sometimes, undergraduate students of Fine Art from my classes, whose interests lie in my mode of working, come to assist in my studio. As my ideas and work tend to touch on issues of the everyday, my interest is in how other people come to it individually. The works thus have the touch or opinions of others as a constituent part. My scroll series for instance, started with *The Scroll* (2016) (Fig. 1), which was created by repeatedly casting a door in my house seven times, with handmade papers realized from a handmade paper workshop organized by Professor Mary Hark from Wisconsin University. These doors were then stitched together by some members of my family and other studio assistants (Fig. 2). The inspiration for this work stems from a common saying—“broken door falling off”—in my home which calls attention to things/issues that need repairs/critical consideration. The ultimate motive may probably be to get people to understand the extent to which art involves anyone and everyone anywhere.

Can you share the way you work, in terms of material, approach to technique and, in recent times, teaching?

**BA-J:** I have come to realize that my interests in material have been driven by “indifference” per *kaŋiŋkaçhä seid’ou*, and a noted disregard for a “hierarchy of media,” even though I did not necessarily refer to it in those specific terms. My engagement with the blaxTARLINES KUMASI community has, however, drawn my attention to these, and now the ideas are crystalizing around those particular terms. Working from such a point of departure then gives me the freedom to engage whatever is available (or if unavailable, could be imagined or invented), as the materials with which to work. In truth, I’ll suggest that I have an enigmatic relationship with materials—no particular material can be assigned to my practice. This way, I find that we have similar ways of working in which skills and techniques and even materials must not be taken for granted. I have worked with a range of materials from different types of fabrics (just like you), through pseudo-official documents, clerical stationery, hardware tools, and electronic, digital, or even outmoded gadgets and ground plans for nineteenth and twentieth century office layouts, classroom layouts, and a whole lot. This



1 Dorothy Amenuke's *The Scroll in Silence Between the Lines*, 2015, Kumasi.  
Photo: Dorothy Amenuke

2 Dorothy Amenuke working with her children in her studio.  
Photo: Ameyo Dzikunu-Bansah

for installation and performance) (2014) (Figs. 3–4), which was a piece made from the assorted fabrics I had bought from Tenkatemarkt, I incorporated it into the “walk” I performed through the central aisle of that very market on the last day of my residency. During the performance, those from whom I had bought stuff could recognize their wares within my piece. This gesture brought them into a particularly special relationship with the whole thing that was going on. This is artmaking that becomes emancipatory indeed.

Let me share another anecdote: I recall two recent instances where particular participatory installations I was putting up required setting up and using both outmoded typewriters as well as digital printers<sup>2</sup> (Figs. 5–7.) In theory and in the conceptualization phase, everything seemed right and possible. I dreamt of how queues will form and the audience, who have now transformed into participants, will easily slide their hands into silken hand gloves and type, from memory, texts they have taken from a set of books laid out. It all looked good in the potential projections until the machines had to be actually used in the real space and time of the

mode also demands that a lot of responsibility be taken toward these so-called new materials; a great deal of research has to be conducted and tests made, just so that nothing is taken for granted. This also means that new skills have to be learnt if the need arises, just so that we can critically deal with a particular material, technique, or object that had not featured as a part of my original training in painting and sculpture. Through my work, I get to meet new people through buying, say, fabrics for a piece. After the piece has materialized, there must be a way in which this comes back into the community that inspired its making.

Let me narrate a case in point: on a 2014 Artist's Residency at the Thami Mnyele Studio<sup>1</sup> in Amsterdam, there was this open-air market (Tenkatemarkt) just outside the residency apartment that I plied on a very frequent basis. I also acquired some fabrics and tools from this place. After having created *Global Cloth* (object





3 Bernard Akoi-Jackson, *Global Cloth* (object for installation and performance) (2014), assorted fabrics.

Photo: Bernard Akoi-Jackson

4 Bernard Akoi-Jackson, performance with *Global Cloth* (object for installation and performance) (2014), assorted fabrics, object for installation and performance.

Tenkatemarkt, Amsterdam.

Photo: Annemarie de Wildt

performance. Suddenly there was actual panic, as we had to start searching for people with expertise in typewriting.

At a point, we also had to get onto YouTube, to check out a video on how to operate a set of Canon inkjet printers. We noted, too, that due to the current prevalent use of laptop computers, human ergonomics had adapted to the soft punch required to type on digital gadgets, as opposed to the real man-or-woman-power needed to hard-punch the keys on a typewriter. All these realizations came out of the actual making of the work, not prior to it. The technical requirements therefore become as varied as the different projects that constitute whatever situations I produce or coproduce with my “accomplices” and audiences or participants. The lessons I am able to pick up from these situations then become the bases of my engagements in the classroom. Sometimes, too, some complications may arise in the classroom, and these are then tried out and tested during the art situations. It is a back-and-forth movement, quite like weaving on the loom. This cloth production metaphor grounds the affinities between our ways of working on literal terms, in that fabrics are physically implicated within our practices, and on conceptual levels, in that there’s always movement from artist(s), collaborators, and the public in an inevitably intertwined manner. Also, teaching has not necessarily been very distant from my practice. There is almost always some sort of knowledge exchange when it comes to my artistic work. But teaching art in the context of a tertiary institution brings





about an entirely new dynamic to knowledge transfer or dissemination. Much as it is potentially enabling, there's also the possibility of stultification, especially when we have to deal with standard curricula, administration and the bureaucratic categorizations that enable the functioning of institutions. What I have noted is that my elected way of working, via the emancipatory approach, allows me to navigate all these in a dialectical embrace ...

Why do you think it is necessary for your students especially, to collaborate on the production and installation of your work?

**5** Objects (including typewriters) arrayed out in the installation for the performance: *Untitled: REDTAPEONBOTTLENECK—On Dictatorship And Other Extreme Tropes of Authority (2<sup>nd</sup> Crusade: Close Proximity In The Very Site Of Specificity)—Quoting Articles. Gazing Back. Calling Forth* (2019), at the OWELA Festival, National Theatre of Namibia, Windhoek.  
Photo: Bernard Akoi-Jackson

**6** Brünn Kramer (co-curator of the exhibition *Converge* participates in Bernard Akoi-Jackson's *On Dictation—Dictatorship And Other Extreme Tropes of Governance Authority, 1st Crusade: Remote Proximity In The Stead of Site-Specificity. (Writing Lines. Doing Time)* (2018). The Raw Spot Gallery, Arts of Africa and Global Souths. Rhodes University, Makhanda, South Africa.  
Photo: Bernard Akoi-Jackson

**7** Assistants/"accomplices" figuring out how to operate Canon printers for the performance *Untitled: REDTAPEONBOTTLENECK—On Dictatorship And Other Extreme Tropes of Authority (2nd Crusade: Close Proximity In The Very Site Of Specificity)—Quoting Articles. Gazing Back. Calling Forth* (2019), at OWELA Festival, National Theatre of Namibia, Windhoek.  
Photo: Bernard Akoi-Jackson



**DAA:** It is a good thing for students to be conversant with their teacher's work and the processes as that could be their immediate point of reference. My students, in collaborating on the production and installation, practice critical decision taking, which they study in theory in my Research Methods class, and the hope is that they are able to interpret these experiences in their Studio Practices class. My engaging them presents them with points that they must necessarily link together, to forge their own perspectives on issues. Their time in my studio sometimes allows them to take some initiatives and make creative decisions. My studio becomes a creative hub for them, where they test their skills and abilities. They tend to learn and apply techniques and processes that might not be in the mainstream and therefore may enrich their knowledge in the field. My subsequent scrolls were created with them





in my studio. Each student worked on a *pandamus* mat creating a story. These were then joined together into one long work/story of 27.3m. This work was shown in my solo exhibition *Twists Turns and Broken Doors* as *Scroll 2* (Figs. 8–9). The same applies to the work *Habitation-Inhabitation* (Fig. 10) in the same exhibition. My students were involved with the production and installation. There are times when we only sit to discuss the ideas, intentions, materials and processes. This normally takes an informal, conversational procedure where they are able to bring out what they think and suggestions they have in mind.

Do you also involve students in the production of your work and what is your approach in this sense?

**BA-J:** Students have been involved in my production on many different levels. As I hinted earlier, some of the work would have been inspired by something that happened during a class session. These ideas would later be workshopped or developed in separate sessions and incorporated into an aspect of a new piece. But the real essence of my practice is the implication of all sorts of people into the piece. Here, students have been active participants, as well as assistants or, more appropriately, “accomplices” in what I do. As accomplices, they are volunteers, who would help facilitate the onward movement of the situation that I

wish to instigate. What they receive from me are sketchy instructions, scanty hints, and the barest pragmatic information needed. The nitty-gritty details are usually deferred so that they have no choice but to depend on their own critical thinking and crucial decision making. Such techniques, what I refer to generally as “disturbed methodologies,” have also been employed in the contexts of

(clockwise from top left)

**8** Student from the Department of Painting and Sculpture assisting in installation of Dorothy Amenuke’s *Scroll 2*, in *Twists Turns and Broken Doors*.  
Photo: Dorothy Amenuke

**9** Dorothy Amenuke, *Scroll 2* in *Twists, Turns and Broken Doors*, 2017, Nubuke Foundation, Accra.  
Photo: Mary Hark

**10** Sculpture students from the Department of Painting and Sculpture assisting in installation of Dorothy Amenuke’s *Habitation-Inhabitation*.  
Photo: Dorothy Amenuke





my classroom teaching. Much of this has been used in my classes in KNUST and is even more effective since, as you are aware, we teach collaboratively in the Department of Painting and Sculpture. In this sense, we're able to harness our diversity and bring a series of complementary viewpoints to what we teach. This approach was of particular import in an instance when I had to teach a class at the Odense campus of the Danish National School of Performing Arts

11 *All my possessions in Odense*. Personal effects of a student of *Points of Ellipses...* (2018). The Danish National School of Performing Arts. DDSKS, Odense, Denmark. Photo: Bernard Akoi-Jackson

12 Students from my TKU group: *Points of Ellipses...* (2018), in high concentration on a task. The Danish National School of Performing Arts. DDSKS, Odense, Denmark. Photo: Bernard Akoi-Jackson





as part of their Cross Disciplinary Analysis Research program.<sup>3</sup> In the program, I taught a class that I titled *Point(s) of Ellipses ... (How to do stuff with the stuff we have and stuff we don't have)*. A crash course in *Disturbing the Piece ...* (Fig. 11). Whilst based on ideas of play, humor, and criticality, the class was organized as a series of tasks, critique sessions, workshops, and practical “riddles” that had the students/participants sometimes going beyond their wits (Fig. 12). Things were not easy to find, but in this way, they learnt by doing and engaging in activities they would otherwise have never engaged in on a normal day. This was experiential learning on a very fun and indirect level.

How do the different people come into your fold to work with you? Is there any criterion by which selection is made?

**DAA:** As mentioned earlier, varied people work with me in the studio (Figs. 13–16). There are different aspects of the work process and so the demand for varied abilities. Many times, I work with people with some basic art background. It ranges from undergraduate students on internship, to artists who have graduated from school. Some senior high school visual arts students on vacation also come from time to time. Some other people who are not formally educated in art but have skills in sewing, stitching, or working with fabrics are also engaged from time to time, as my processes demand the use of both hand and machine stitching

(clockwise from top left)

**13** Initiate working in Dorothy Amenuke's studio.

*Photo: Dorothy Amenuke*

**14** Dorothy Amenuke's daughter, Edem Amenuke, assisting in her studio.

**15** Sculpture students from the Department of Painting and Sculpture assisting in Dorothy Amenuke's studio.

*Photo: Dorothy Amenuke*

**16** Dorothy Amenuke working in her studio.

*Photo: Ameny Dziku-Bansah*

techniques. So there's no hard and fast rule about criteria—one only has to have a great sense of interest, and a willingness to learn and share some knowledge too. Members of my family have always been very supportive, especially my children. They have grown up being part of the activities that make up my work in the studio, although their academic work in school is more into the sciences.

I know you also involve other people as assistants or facilitators in some of your performative work. How do they feature in the work and what is their stake in it?



**17** Bernard Akoi-Jackson, *Stealth Interventions: Copper Steps on Golden Lawns* (2019), Performance at the 20th anniversary celebrations of Asantehene Otumfuo Osei Tutu II, Manhyia Palace, Kumasi. Photo: courtesy artist and State Protocol Department.

**BA-J:** I work with people, yes. As I said earlier, people feature in my work on many levels. Most of the time, we are not necessarily working to produce an object, as in the norm of studio practices. What we set up are situations that present a series of experiences to others. It is very important therefore, that anybody who comes in voluntarily to help, has an open mind. They should be versatile and open to challenges beyond their mundane dealings. This is because despite the apparent structure that any of my pieces possess, there is usually no predetermined end product in sight. The project can ultimately yield something of great success or it could also fail entirely, but this is welcome. It teaches us about life and potential. The people who help me (the accomplices), must therefore, have a huge sense of humor, or else we'd spend the entire time worrying

about so many unnecessary things. The participants also invest a lot of their time and patience into the piece. This is because the initial pseudostructure of the piece unleashes a sense of control, which leads to a sort of contemplation that people are generally used to already. This initial spell is often broken after a while, when the realization that everything is an absurd mess comes. When this happens, participants can either opt to remain in the mess or opt out. What usually prevails is the curious quest to satisfy the competitive spirit in the human, and this causes them to remain glued to the frustrating instructions. Both accomplices and participants partake in this absurd system of staying through the system. It is as though they must go on and make the “coats” for which they have cut their own cloths ... but even in situations where I have not literally “worked” with people, they still become implicated. Here, I’m referring specifically to a performance: *Stealth Interventions: Copper Steps on Golden Lawns* (2019)<sup>4</sup> that I did at the Manhyia Palace in Kumasi, Ghana, on the occasion of the celebration of Otumfuo Osei Tutu II’s twenty years as Asantehene (Fig. 17). Being such a chance insertion into a real life situation, it reminded me of a similar intervention I did in February 2015 in Berlin, Germany, where a separate performance I was doing in commemoration of the 130th anniversary of the ills of Otto von Bismark’s Berlin Conference (November 1884–February 1885), interfaced with an actual demonstration in the streets of Berlin against racist street names in the German capital (Fig. 18). I was implicated within these interventions in as much as I also implicated the people who were caught within the purview of the performances and their aftermaths.



Being a practicing artist and a tertiary level teacher of art, to what extent does your studio practice dovetail into your pedagogic endeavours?

**DAA:** What do I seek as an artist? Many times, I find myself questioning and investigating issues from everyday happenings (both past and present) and materials, situating my work in contemporary theory and practice. This leads me to the materials and processes and exhibition strategies I use. What influences, ideas, decisions, materials, events, theories, technologies, etc., inspire, inform, or facilitate processes and production? I encourage my students to come up with their own works based on varied explorations, taking into consideration the cultural and theoretical matrix in which their works would exist. They are

guided, many times, by discussions on what happens around them and the position they take. Experiences from working in my studio lead some to their choices of materials and processes and exhibition strategies (Figs. 19–20).

Kindly share with me the ways in which your own practice engages with your own pedagogy, too.



**18** Bernard Akoi-Jackson, performance to commemorate the ills of the Berlin Conference (2015). Berlin, Germany.

Photo: Die Schwarze Deutsche Initiativ

**19** Bernice Dzifa Djokoto, 3rd year 2nd Semester sculpture project, 2016, KNUST Museum.

Photo: Dorothy Amenuke



**BA-J:** I guess I have hinted on these in some of the earlier responses—however, I may touch on a few of them again. There is a symbiotic relationship established between both the space of teaching and practice. There's always a movement from and to both spaces. Things that happen in the classroom may influence a new piece, or the matters-arising from a piece could influence something that will be discussed in the classroom. What I seek for in all

this, is that point where students and or participants (and myself hopefully), are able to make the links between things. So mine is to really facilitate encounters and situations that make these possible. It doesn't also mean that these methods are entirely successful or insulated from failure, but in the spirit of anticipation, they point to the potential of something strange emerging ... it is really why I so love points of ellipses ...

#### Notes

This article forms part of a collection of papers planned at the Arts of Africa and Global Souths PROSPA publishing workshop held at Rhodes University, South Africa, in November 2018. The workshop was funded by the Andrew W. Mellon foundation and the NRF/DSI SARCHI chair program in Geopolitics and the Arts of Africa.

1 [BA-J] In September of 2014, upon ending a year-long residency with the Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam in the Netherlands, I was also awarded a special one month residency by the Thami Mnyele Foundation in Amsterdam. Located in an old nineteenth century school building on the Bellamystraat in Amsterdam Oud-West, the residency provided ample living and working space. Since my work is largely inspired by the outdoors, I took a lot of walks in the streets and neighborhoods around the studio, Tenkatemarkt being one of those. On the last day of my residency, on a very cold Amsterdam morning, I performed a walk down the aisle of the market with a piece of fabric I had created whilst on residency. It had bits and pieces of fabric I had originally bought from stalls in this particular market.

2 [BA-J] Specific reference here is to the participatory performance pieces *On Dictation Dictatorship And Other Extreme Tropes of Governance Authority, 1st Crusade: Remote Proximity In The Stead of Site-Specificity*, (*Writing Lines. Doing Time*), and *Untitled: REDTAPEONBOTTLENECK—On Dictatorship And Other Extreme Tropes of Authority (2nd Crusade: Close Proximity In The Very Site Of Specificity)*—Quoting *Articles. Gazing back. Calling Forth*. These pieces were realized on separate occasions. The former, manifested on Saturday, June 20, 2018, from 14:00–15:00 hrs in the context of the *Converge* exhibition (June 28–July 8, 2018), curated by Brünn Kramer and Ruth Simbao at the RAW Spot Gallery, Rhodes University, Makhanda, South Africa. The latter happened on Saturday, June 8, 2019, from 18:00–20:00 hrs at the National Theatre of Namibia during the Owela Festival (June 4–8, 2019). In both pieces, audience members (participants) were

expected to put on white “colonial” gloves and type, from memory, texts that they had sourced from a variety of books installed as part of the situation.

3 [BA-J] From August 22–December 7, 2018, I taught the course *Point(s) of Ellipses...* (How to do stuff with the stuff we have and stuff we don't have). A crash course in *Disturbing the Piece ...* in the context of the Cross-Disciplinary Artistic Analysis Research program at the Danish National School of Performing Arts. The aim of the modular exchange was to facilitate students of performing arts to work across disciplines with a particular contemporary world phenomenon. Students do this from their subject-related points of departure. This injects new insights into their normal ways of working and they are also encouraged to disseminate whatever they have learnt in formats that are most suited to their new ways of seeing. To this end, I introduced the students to the way in which I work by making them participate in activities that brought them squarely into confrontation with some of the issues we had selected to deal. The idea was to be a bit more playful even in dealing (critically) with the times that we share. With the premise that the contemporary is our reality, there's a need for artists and arts professionals to be even more observant, vigilant, politically sensitive and engaged. Our discussions led to us recognizing the need to be concerned with the ramifications of our actions and the need to take responsibility for these. Instead of calling in research, I called our finding-out sessions “Bumping into people along the way.” We made acquaintance with Ama Ata Aidoo (*No Sweetness Here*); we suffered with Ayi Kwei Armah's Baako Onipa (*Fragments*); we learnt a little sarcasm with Mark Manson (*The Subtle Art of Not Giving a Fuck*) and also figured out if it was really ever possible to do nothing with Augusto Boas (*Rainbow of Desire*). We continued through the texts of Haruki Murakami (*Kafka on the Shore*) and Franz Kafka (*The Trial*), to investigate the human and nonhuman conditions that bring us into critical confrontation with the injustices of bureaucracy, economic exploitation

of all people, and general inequalities. The study of the work of fellow artists or practitioners was touted as “Roaming and Spying.” Here we “spied” on the work of such people/groups as *karf'kachä seid'ou*, Candice Breitz, Ibrahim Mahama, Emeka Ogboh, Hiroshi Sugimoto, Hannah Hürtzig, Rimini Protokoll, Com Com, Hito Steyerl, Haroun Farocki, Mischa Kubal, Kelvin Haizel, Agyeman Ossei, Renzo Martens and his IHA or Jonas Staal's New World Movement, SUPER-FLEX, Santiago Sierra, Francis Alys, Paul Chan, The Gob Squad, Xu Bing, The Portsmouth Sinfonia, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Irit Rogoff, Claire Bishop, and Nicolas Bourrioud. For further inspiration, we watched Billie August's *Night Train to Lisbon*, Terry Zwigoff's *Art School Confidential*, or David Frankel's *The Devil Wears Prada*. Presented in this motley array of experiences and activities were the many possibilities for the awakening of artistic and political sensibilities. The students also had the chance to make individual and collective artistic decisions which led to the creation of a final project made up of actual and fictive situations.

4 [BA-J] On Sunday, April 21, 2019, I performed *Stealth Interventions: Copper Steps on Golden Lawns* at the Manhyia Palace in Kumasi. As an unsolicited piece, the performance was a truly interventionist gesture, pregnant with the potential of failure and dire consequences. No dire consequences transpired because by the very gesture and its insertion into the grand events at a very opportune time (I entered the arena simultaneously with the entourage of the president of the nation, H.E. Nana Addo Danquah Akufo Addo), the entire celebration had been so implicated that there was no chance for any mishap. Retrospectively, I can smugly speak about it, but the intervention was itself quite a risky, if not reckless move. But this is the stuff of which successful performances are made. *Stealth Interventions: Copper Steps on Golden Lawns* accorded me one more teachable moment to share in the classroom, the strategies that I engage in the production of my work.