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 karı'kachá seid’ou

This 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 …

karî’kachá seid’ou (ka): 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 karî. 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): karî’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 (likewise 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
temporarily "sanitizing" substrates with hydrogen peroxide antiseptic 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 kári’kachá 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. Rancière’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 Rancière*. 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, Rancière 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...
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conditions. I take from your work and thought that the universalist
actors—animals, technological players, substances, things, and
early revisionist discourses introduced by the so-called contem-
porary 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 pro-
cesses with traditional painting techniques, fashion and graphic
design, electrical and mechanical contraptions, and engagement
with institutions and social processes through canvassing proto-
cols and so forth. “Exhibition” was not separate from studio activ-
y, 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 prob-
able 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 co-
lonial era. The beaux-arts curriculum of KNUST was equally
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 “human-
ists” like Rancière and a host of artists who are caught in the vi-
cious cycle of “exhibiting their art work to someone” hardly take
into account, especially, the agency and *umwelt* of nonhuman
actors—animals, technological players, substances, things, and
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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 free-
dom 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 el-
evated 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 destina-
tion, 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 cap-
ital that are making the contemporary art scene lively today have
emerged in the twenty-first century. The earliest was Foundation
for Contemporary Art (established in 2004). 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 “con-
temporary 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 pol-
itics, using the blaxTARLINES story, go back to some challenges
posed by the postcolonial modernist exhibition cultures, educa-
tional and market structures that were in place in Ghana before
the turn of the century. The major challenges were a compulsive
version for radical difference in those cultures, a failure to moni-
tor real-time developments in the international art world, and a lag
behind revisionist discourses introduced by the so-called contem-
porary art turn. Before enrolling at KNUST, I had had the unique
experience and good fortune of working in the streets of Accra in
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“style,” within these bounds set for them. The challenge for me was how to go through the given, rupture it, and set loose its imminent 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 Ako-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, Nubufoke 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 (Mage 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. 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 project I introduced in 2003 in Kumasi, the progenitor of blaxTARLINES, comes in. The role that my early collaborators such as Kwaku Boafo 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 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, 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 reinstate chattel slavery.

I become a vanishing mediator because I am just a node in the complex network of effects that the pedagogic code can instatiate. 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, kərli. In your unpublished PhD dissertation 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 Ofili, 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, Dorothy Amenuke, Tagoe Turkson, Fatin 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 Rancièreian 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, 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. 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). kərî’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 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 REDTAPEONBOTTLENECK1 (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!”

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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. 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 kâf’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 imminent 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
alters and produce forms (new or even reverse-engineered). In experiments 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.”

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.

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 deprivatization 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 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).
Jinping called for establishing a “modern state-owned economy” and the Nubuke Foundation group exhibition at the Goethe Institut, Accra, 2006. The second iteration was in the group exhibition at Artists’ Alliance, 2007.

Rancière (2004: 81). ghadr (2016: 67–68) of Ranciere’s aesthetic politics and the phobia for the didactic is the critique of Suhail Malik’s regime, its implied political indeterminacy, and its 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 the making of the general intellect has ushered the “general intellect” has ushered here. In postindustrial capitalism, “general intellect” has ushered the “general intellect” has ushered here. In postindustrial capitalism, “general intellect” has ushered the “general intellect”. Williams 2015; Hardt and Negri 2001).

In 2008, kąrî’kạchä seid’ ou’s PhD dissertation was in the singular, which it resonates with the aesthetic of represented subjects, and pathos. “See [Exhibition Catalogue: Painting Class of 2010, KNUST], n.p.; Kumasi: Department of Painting and Sculpture, KNUST.


