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, Adjo Kisser, Billie McTernan, Bernard Akoi-Jackson, Kezia Owusu-Ankomah, Selom Kujie, Robin Riskin, Tracy Naa Koshie Thompson 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. 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 kar’i’kach’ak 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.
This text by kărî’kạchä 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,\(^9\) 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 Bouhwuis and sundry others have indicated, “kărî’kạchä 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.
A SILENT REVOLUTION

The change instigated by kāri’kāchā 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,10 questioned the presuppositions of the painting curriculum and launched a radical dematerialization and deskilling of his art practice. On this path, his romantic-realistic 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, seidou 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. seidou’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, seidou 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, seidou’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, seidou 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, seidou’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

5 Ibrahim Mahama’s dedication to his teacher: Library of kāri’kāchā seid’ou in the exhibition Re:Working Labor at School of Art Institute of Chicago, 2019. The dedication explores kāri’kāchā seid’ou’s complex intellectual trajectory. “It houses a library of reading materials, from communist manifesto to quantum theory.”
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, 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 respectively, with the difference that the contemporary art world does not know yet what to make of him. 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.”

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 iconicographic 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,
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. 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 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. Strangeens ensued. Above all, students at all levels were encouraged to cultivate political sensitivity to materials, technologies, and sites of their practice.

Box 1

kărî’kächä 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, kărî’kächä 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. 2). Also included in this set of exhibited objects, is a copy of the Gazette entry. In this performance, kărî’kächä 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 kărî’kächä 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. Ethiserto, 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 kărî’kächä 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 go to Town ... (2015), Cornfields in Accra (2016) (see Fig. 4), and Orderly Disorderly (2017), that followed it from. 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. kari’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 expost 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
entanglement, abstract objects such as the Klein bottle, Möbius strip, or phase portraits, or tropes of gene activity such as epi-genetics 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 kàri’kàchà 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
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 seidou 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.
EMANCIPATORY ART TEACHING PROJECT: THE AXIOMS

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

kęrī’kachā 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 enactment of “exile from Euro-America” is also a means to overdetermine 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)7 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)18 (Fig. 20). He is mindful of the contradictions that go together with his desire to be transnational in outlook without moving a step.
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, kàrî’kâchä 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) 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.

“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). 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 kərɛ́kɛ́chà seid’ou’s drawing class, 2007.
Photo: courtesy Kwasi Ohene-Ayeh

19 Heartwill Kankam. Performative exhibition project, social practice and filmic documentation, kərɛ́kɛ́chà seid’ou’s undergraduate drawing class, 2010, Kumasi.
Photo: courtesy Heartwill Kankam
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 commoditizeable. Indeed, it is, as demonstrated by the futile attempts to gentrify it as “intellectual property.”

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. 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,
sometimes 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 post-positivity. In my case, I notice that I keep returning to notes I have made as I sit in karî'kâchä seid’óu’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 karî'kâchä seid’óu 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 cruc of my enquiry, and I approach these ideas through artistic production and interventionist gestures across sites...

seid’óu’s arrival (or rearrival) on the scene became a moment of rupture, which has since changed the direction of art production, and consumption, and discussion in our generation. seid’óu’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.


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. We are grateful to karî'kâchä seid’óu for offering us detailed information on his work and that of others, reading the text at every stage, giving us feedback and clarifications and helping us draw important historical connections. These exchanges have been very useful in composing the text.

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 specific inclinations and abilities to explore their specific interests and unique experiences as artists. 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 who are beginning to mentor younger generations of women artists. Other cultural minorities, and any artist-subject with specific inclinations and abilities to explore their specific interests and unique experiences as artists. The possible ideas, materials, and tools are endless. This has encouraged diversity in the artist population nurtured by KNUST and blaxTARLINES KUMASI.

2. Like 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 specific inclinations and abilities to explore their specific interests and unique experiences as artists. The possible ideas, materials, and tools are endless. This has encouraged diversity in the artist population nurtured by KNUST and blaxTARLINES KUMASI.

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 Ghana and Ankole schools of art, the former polytechnics, or the streets of Ghana’s cities. Examples are Foundation for Contemporary Art, Exit Frame, the Studio, Ethakasâ, and the founding team of Chale Wote Art Festival. The collaborations between Kwasi Ohene-Ayeh and Sir Black’s Ethakasâ, and Serge Clottesy and Francis Kokrokoo, 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” pedes’s pedagogical project in a high school in Bawku, North Eastern Ghana. It was updated and relaunched in the College of Art, Kumasi in 2000 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. Karî'kâchä seid’óu’s PhD thesis (seid’óu 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 seid’óu’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, seid’óu painted sign boards and embroidered video advertisement posters, a painting method which anticipated male culpability (https://www.waegch.org/waesc). This increase in female candidates who sat for the WASSCE is from the millennial generation, nurtured by KNUST and blaxTARLINES KUMASI.

7. Like 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 specific inclinations and abilities to explore their specific interests and unique experiences as artists. The possible ideas, materials, and tools are endless. This has encouraged diversity in the artist population nurtured by KNUST and blaxTARLINES KUMASI.

8. A sample of kârî'kâchä seid’óu’s post-imagist poems, namely Appendix Appendix, Shadows are Telegrams, Awaiting Reply. 000:00:00.00 … Boundaries, Sores and Scares and Untitled I, have been published in Ndikung et al. (2019: 129-30), 219–22, 233–34). His 1998 poem, “Hercyphyons on Kangara Plains,” was a tribute to Ama Ata Aidoo’s 1964/1965 poems “Corridors in Accra” which inspired the eponymous blaxTARLINES exhibition held in 2016.

9. The corollary is named after Gavril Princip, who assassinated the Archduke Francis 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 seid’óu, 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; Euri pedis’s Medea and Toni Morrison’s Sethe, who sacrificed their children out of their fidelity to them; and Joseph Jacobot, the Ignorant Schoolmaster. Like these figures of the “ethical act,” kârî'kâchä seid’óu sacrifices “art” out of fidelity to “art.” Zdek proposes that “the only way to liberate oneself from the grip of existing social reality is to renounce the fantastic supplement that attaches us to it” (2000: 149).

12. Teching Hishe’s series of one-year performances (1978–1986) and Thirteen Year Plan (1986–1999) have much in common with seid’óu’s long durational projects such as the Name Change Project (1994/2004–present).
and the Emancipatory Teaching Project (since 2003).

14 In his PhD dissertation, seid’ou critiques the Art History Programme of the KNUT 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 satisfactory equipped with the resource to give critical attention to the twenty-first century Ghanaian painter. On the surface, this seems to place a burden on the painting students. This instigation for change was memorable but failed until seid’ou became a teacher there in 2003.

15 Marshall Ward-Mount, in his canonical African Art since 1920, had marked the Kumasi Art College for special criticism – “the rather tame output and its epiphanous and prescriptive program.” “The [institutions] instruction has followed essentially the theories of the typical English academic art school. Still likes, portraits, and moral 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, 130), seid’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 seid’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, seid’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, ‘home space,’ the governed but ungovernable” (seid’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 Fishen (Yale), Sam Durant, Ríkki Wemega-Kwawu, Papa Owusu-Ankomah, and El Atsau. Kwaku Bofo Kissiedu (Castro), George Ampratwum (Buma), Ibrahim Mahama, and Bernard Akoi-Jackson have been very instrumental in institutionalizing the Interactive Series. More recently, Kwasi Ofori-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 Kissey summarizes seid’ou’s affirmative politics thus: “The urgency of inventing new possibilities in response to a milieu of hopelessness within the emancipated art scene of Ghana and its institutions is what undergirds every one of kári káchá seid’ou’s projects” (George Ampratwum and Adjo Kissey in conversation; March 13, 2019, KNUST, Kumasi).

21 seid’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” (seid’ou and Bouwhuis 2014: 112).


23 seid’ou proposed the black hole, the mascot of bláztARLINES, as a materialist update to the symbolic ‘Legodot of African Freedom’ incorporated into Ghana’s flag and coat of arms in 1957 by Theoideas Okoh and Amon Kotex respectively. Ultimately, the bláztARLINES 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 seid’ou’s critique of postmodern multiculturalism and contemporary art’s complicity in neoliberal capital exploitation must be disambiguated from the critiques of postmodernism by the Intellectual Dark Web. 25 Examples of start-up art spaces to which bláztARLINES lends support are Ibrahim Mahama’s Savannah Center for Contemporary Art (SCCA-Tamale), the Studio, Accra; crazini’S Art Studio and Perfocraze International Arts (PIAR), Kumasi, directed by Vabene Ekiem Fiatis (crazini’S artist).

References cited


