

Friday, 25 January 2019
7:00 pm
daadgalerie

On Universality and Multiplicity:
Curating from the Void

Lecture by Kwasi Ohene-Ayeh and
Tracy Naa Koshie Thompson



On Universality and
Curating in the Void

Essay by Kwasi Ohene-Ayeh

How does one assert the right to exist and to participate in political and social life in a communitarian space designed to circularly reinforce material, cultural, and intellectual inferiority to others? What if the subject(s) in question does not simply desire inclusivity or uniformity with the “bigger picture” (of which they are already constitutive, albeit exteriorized through dispossession) but expresses the conviction to pursue their own (perhaps radically indifferent) will independent of that oracle of inequality? Put in another way, how can they break free from the hierarchized structure of difference through which they have been subjectivized? Here, I am concerned not with the subject who has resigned himself or herself to taking their situation for granted and who wishes to delegate this task of an-

nouncing to a proxy, but with the one who, by *force of will*, acts in rejection of the conditions to which he or she has been condemned by the contingency of historical events. In light of these dynamics, such a hopeless situation—the one of absolute despair, from which they can always prove their ineffectiveness or paralysis—paradoxically offers a new opportunity; one that alters the underlying terms of relations in the hegemonic system. With nothing more to lose, they may resort to the declaration of an opinion sufficient in its assumption; the equality of all peoples. This truth image congeals the emancipatory conviction upon which they act. The intelligence required in this pursuit—the ability to summon ‘attention’ and to conduct ‘research’ undergirded by the ethics of “learning, repeating, imitating, translating, taking apart, [and] putting back together”ⁱ —is the “natural method”ⁱⁱ to be put to use.

At such a time in history when we are threatened by cultural (identitarian differences related to ethnicity, race, sexuality, language, etc.), environmental (anthropocene), technological (metadata, privacy, mass surveillance) and geopolitical threats every step of the way, equality, as a political idea, is still crucial if not central to everyday life. In lieu of the foregoing let us now direct our attention to art.

Art is a site of secularity; that is to say, a worldview within which the temporal immediacy of the “here and now” finds its true meaning in multiplicity. That art is and must remain a secular space attests to its universality. But the fact that something can be generalized does not necessarily authenticate its efficacy, for capital[ism] and colonialism, its cognate, could be said to possess ideals that aspire to a kind of universality as well, albeit a desolate one that contrives everything to its monopolistic ruleⁱⁱⁱ. The truth claim of art’s secular nature can only be verified by means of practice, and one needs only to emancipate oneself with this thought by granting the caveat that the definition of the freedoms inherited from this condition must be forged on a radical commitment to the *void*—the substance of multiplicity that does not privilege any center. If we consider art (in this sense, the singularity that simultaneously emanates from multiplicity) as a language while insisting on the ethics of the ‘natural method’, we are presented with an arbitrary means of communication, an ‘improvisation’, of which any person is potentially capable, independent of what is determined in the mainstream of artistic practice and its market-validation trends. Each one would be, so to speak, free to paraphrase, equivocate, and approximate to be able to formulate understanding. And each expression would be meaningful in its own right.

For an institutionalized example of a community founded on this ‘ex-centered’ egalitarianism (and the one from which my own practice sources fervor) let us consider blaxTARLINES KUMASI. blaxTARLINES is the experimental contemporary art incubator responsible for demystifying artistic practice from the straitjacket of classical and pre-1960s European modernism in the College of Art at the Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology (KNUST) in Ghana. Inspired by

the artist *kaŕi'kaçhä seid'ou's* Emancipatory Art Teaching project^{iv}—whose political ambition is to “transform art from the status of commodity to gift”^v —a collective of tutors initiated a “silent revolution”^{vi} at the Kumasi School. In this paradigm, art is “de-substantialized and emerges from a void: a state of indifference that is not pre-emptively prejudicial to any particular medium, content, skill, material, trend or process”^{vii}. This is to say that blaxTARLINES posits the universality of art as a condition through which to argue for the practice of equality—of intelligence, of things; animate, inanimate, human-centered, post-human, natural, artificial, and so forth. To understand what it is that injects this gesture with revolutionary verve, I will briefly sketch out the armature on which Ghana’s history of modernism is modelled.

At the dawn of the millennium, the College of Art at KNUST—presumably the oldest existing art department in sub-Saharan Africa—having ossified much of the utilitarian lifeblood of late Victorian era British education, had yet to update its curriculum to engage real-time developments in global contemporary art. Born in the art department of the Prince of Wales College (later known as Achimota College), in the antebellum period in colonial Gold Coast, the School had yet to transcend the prescriptive ‘Manual Training’ rationale of educational systems earlier introduced through mercantile and Protestant missionaries (from Basel, Bremen and Scotland) and kept in place by colonialists in British West Africa. This retinal and totalistic worldview of art education was impervious to heuristic thought and constricted its learner to a literalist ‘Hand and Eye’^{viii} ethos of art-making. Hand and Eye Training became the ‘proto-art curriculum’ proposed by the British colonial government in its 1887 Educational Code. It would later be put into effect as a specialist teacher training program in Gold Coast training colleges from 1909 onwards. The course was generally intended for the instruction of children, not for professional or independent fine art practice. The theory of “Hand and Eye” was based on 19th-century “child-centered educational schemes” such as those initiated by Swiss pedagogue Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi and his German protégé Friedrich W. A. Fröbel, employing principles of “gridded lines, divided squares and angles, [the] child’s innocent eye and self expression”^{ix} with the prerogative to manually train one’s limbs, in strict coordination with the eye, to acquire habitual technical or contour drawing skills unaided by any drawing tools^x. The instrumentalist ambitions of this educational approach in Britain (incongruously adapted for its non-industrialized colonies in Africa and South-East Asia), as well as in United States of America, emphasized the remunerative value of courses like calligraphy, penmanship, cartography, illustration, handiwork, etc., which were targeted at workingclass children to satisfy the growing labour demands of industry and commerce at the time^{xi}.

Although changes to the 1887 Educational Code had been made by the early 1900s^{xii} (reforms upbraided in that period by the first art master of Achimota College, nativist G. A. Stevens, as “very casual, slight and off-hand” and lacking any “proper [sic] relation between the academic

i Jacques Rancière, *The Ignorant Schoolmaster: Five Lessons in Intellectual Emancipation*, 2007, trans. Kristin Ross, Stanford University Press, California, pp. 54, 68.

ii For Rancière, “the natural method of the human mind [is] that of all people who look for their path themselves” based on the universal principle of the equality of intelligence. *Ibid.* p. 105.

iii Kwame Nkrumah, Ghana’s first President, formulates it as follows: “Imperialism is moribund capitalism; neocolonialism is moribund colonialism. Both sharpen the contradictions in their nature, which eventually lead to their destruction.”—Kwame Nkrumah, *Class Struggle in Africa*, 1970, Panaf Books, London, ISBN 0-901787-12-4, pp. 70-1.

iv See *kaŕi'kaçhä seid'ou*, 2006, *Theoretical Foundations of the KNUST Painting Program: A Philosophical Inquiry and Its Contextual Relevance in Ghanaian Culture* [Unpublished PhD Thesis]. Kumasi: KNUST.

v See Els Roelandt and Renzo Martens (eds.), *Enjoy Poverty: A History of its Reception*, Sternberg Press, New York, forthcoming, RENZO MARTENS: TRETIAKOV IN CONGO? *kaŕi'kaçhä seid'ou* and Jelle Bouwhuis in Conversation (interview held in 2016).

vi See *kaŕi'kaçhä seid'ou et al.*, *Silent Ruptures: Emergent Art of the Kumasi College of Art*, 2015, *International Journal of Humanities and Social Science*, Vol. 5, No. 10; October, USA, ISSN 2220-8488 (Print), 2221-0989 (Online), Center for Promoting Ideas, USA, www.ijhssnet.com, accessed on 16/09/2018.

vii *Orderly Disorderly* (2017) curatorial statement, organized by blaxTARLINES KUMASI, retrieved from <https://iubezy.wordpress.com/iub-projects-2/2017-2/od-curatorial/>, accessed on 15/12/2018.

viii “In European and American literature, “Hand and Eye” is a commonwealth of craft-based programmes variously referred to as *Slöjd*, *Husflid* (Scandinavian), *Travail Manuel* (French), *Manual Training* (English), *Arbeitsunterricht*, *Gewerbeschule* or *Handfertigkeitsunterricht* (German).” See *kaŕi'kaçhä seid'ou*, *Gold Coast Hand and Eye Work: A Genealogical History*, 2014, *Global Advanced Research Journal of History, Political Science and International Relations*, ISSN: 2315-506X Vol. 3(1) pp. 008-016, January, available online at <http://garj.org/garjhsir/index.htm>, pp. 010-011. Accessed on 16/09/2018.

ix *Ibid.* p. 014.

x It was also consistent with Enlightenment modernist binaries such as the opposition between Liberal education and technical or “practical” education (of which the latter was privileged *de facto* in Gold Coast education), fortified in the colonial anthropological dualism of “African (primitivist) culture - European (civilized) culture”. *seid'ou* critically treats the unsuccessful attempt to “syncretize” these dualisms at Achimota College in the Gold Coast via influential colonial art masters who attempted to challenge the authority of the Hand and Eye curriculum such as G. A. Stevens and H. V. Meyerowitz in *op. cit.*, *seid'ou*, “Theoretical Foundations” (2006), pp. 115-130.

xi “In its 19th century dogmatic form, governments invested “hand and eye skill” in the mechanical, manual and ornamental arts with overt instrumental and remunerative value in socio-economic and educational policy. This was especially intended to aid the growth of industry and manufacturing and, in the bourgeois formulation of working class aspirations, to churn out bread-winners who could keep the pot boiling.” *Op. cit.*, *seid'ou*, “Hand and Eye Work” (2014), p. 011.

xii *seid'ou* observes that “the central objective to shift education from “bookish” to “vocational” has been a perennial one in Gold Coast and Ghanaian education history. We find it in all major education reports and reforms in the 20th century, among them the Education Rules of 1909 which established Hand and Eye training, Committee of Educationalists’ Report,

art subjects of the schools and the indigenous village arts and crafts^{xiii}), and also in post-colonial KNUST when the B.A. Degree Program was implemented, followed by the *Africanization* of art curricula in the 1980s^{xiv}, this rote-learning tradition has survived in pre-degree and degree programs mediated through primitivist, Regionalist and Social Realist styles, significantly contributing to the proliferation of the “touristy Afrokitsch” aesthetic in Ghanaian art schools and commercial galleries. It is a tradition that formally privileges the beaux arts canon while romanticizing indigenous subject matter in content^{xv}. This example is a microcosm of what was typical in the general artistic landscape in Ghana.

The present syllabus of the Kumasi School, however, is experimental in approach, inclusive, and does not preemptively censor nor privilege any artistic interest or discipline. Expanding to accommodate extra-pictorial experiences such as relational, context- and site-oriented practices, local artisanship, performance, curating, text, post-humanist media, lens-based media, among others, students (BFA/MFA/PhD) are strategically trained to develop a “self-conscious art practice” as well as sensitivity to the nuances of international artistic, market and exhibition trends, while not disregarding their immediate socio-political context; in other words, to be dispositionally indifferent to the sources of information and experiences that could equip them with the skills and tools needed for their work. *seid’ou’s* emancipatory teaching method has, for the past fifteen years, trained student artists to transcend stultifying dualities such as artist-curator, theory-practice, painting-sculpture, teacher-student and so forth by inspiring an independent attitude to the practice that requires one’s *willingness* to develop projects from “bolt and nut to high theory”^{xvi}, given the hopeless circumstances in which they find themselves^{xvii}. A filial kinship consequently emerges where students and lecturers work together collectively and are engaged in peer-to-peer learning at variance with the *tabula rasa* logic of pedagogy. By converting one of his classes into a curatorial project, *seid’ou* has triggered an unprecedented maelstrom of about 50 artist-curated exhibitions each academic year since he joined the KNUST Faculty of Art in 2003^{xviii}. The exhibition form is itself perceived as manipulable.

Building on this legacy, *blaxTARLINES* is vitalized by the desire to invent models of artistic and curatorial practices, based on the injunctive position of political subjectivation (where one elects and speaks for oneself by the active process of universalization described above), that would suitably amplify particularities of its artistic milieu. The pioneering trilogy of large-scale end-of-year exhibitions since 2015—namely *The Gown must go to Town* (2015), *Cornfields in Accra* (2016) and *Orderly Disorderly* (2017)—have inspired a new wave of exhibition-making practices in Ghana. Among some of the curatorial strategies invented to articulate these “anagrams of emancipated futures”^{xix} are intergenerational participation, collective curating, accessibility programming (audio recordings, translation of exhibition materials into braille and local languages, etc.), exhibition-as-

experimental-site, exhibition-as-archipelago, and the introduction of the concept of the Unknown Artist (which emphasizes the notion of the exhibition as a site of immanent contradictions).

It goes without saying that if the ontological basis on which we formulate a conception of art is radically altered (summarized in the formula of its transformation from “commodity to gift”, bearing in mind that the class dimension of this opposition subverts the operational logic of capital accumulation at play in commodification—where exchange value (money) considerations take precedence over use value through the chain processes of production, distribution, exchange and consumption—with the ‘gift’ which, in this opposition, situates art in the domain of the commons and massifies through its activation of use values), there would be consequences for the nexus of relations between the siting of art, theory, spectatorship, authorship, and of course, curating. I have already claimed that the universal does not have a privileged center^{xx}. If anything could potentially be art, it follows that anybody could potentially become an artist. If the elements from which we create and instigate artistic experiences are derived from everyday life, anyone could then become an interlocutor, audience or collaborator if they find whatever intervention interesting enough to engage—it could be a child, adult, persons with intellectual and/or physical disabilities, and so on. Curatorial work, then, must duly respond to this multiplicity.

Contemporary art—which can be loosely categorized as the epoch after postmodernism which correlates with the age of financial globalization—has, since its inception, and at least in principle, taken seriously the promise of de-centering art towards multiplicity (something implied in post-colonialism and multiculturalism, and institutionalized in the large-scale international exhibition formats (biennials, triennials, quinquennials) that emerged in the mid-to-late 20th century). This potentiality has, however, been tamed by the reactionary tendencies of finance capital. As I see it, the truly emancipatory possibility the void offers today, contralateral to the “politics of accumulation by dispossession”^{xxi} natural to the capitalist ‘free market’ (which is synonymous to art-as-commodity), lies in the willful or political indifference it affords—something similar to a toddler’s relationship to objects/things in the world but determined by the two-pronged conditions of freedom and responsibility on its terms of equality. It is possible, as demonstrated in the *blaxTARLINES* example, to exult in the immanent force the void conditions even in a world dogmatically committed to partisanship.

1920, and the 1987 Education Reforms for pre-tertiary education in Ghana, and its affirmation in the later Educational Reforms Review Committee Report (1994). We observe that true to the objectives of the 1987 Education Reforms, the equivalents to the fine arts in the Report, namely, Picture making and Sculpture, are listed among vocational subjects and apparently obscuring their Liberal (cultural) dispositions.” *Op. cit.*, *seid’ou*, “Theoretical Foundations” (2006), p. 19.

xiii G. A. Stevens, 1930, “The Future of African Art. With Special Reference to Problems Arising in Gold Coast Colony”, *Africa: Journal of the International African Institute*, vol. 3, no. 2, pp. 150-160.

xiv “In the first decade of E. V. Asihene’s tenure, Goldsmith’s College continued to be the central source of external examiners. Some notable external examiners from Goldsmith’s are Arnold Keefe, the famous painter Dorothy Mead, [...] Adrian Ryan, A. Hogkinson, Michael Macleod and Robert Brazil. In the early 1970s, Nigerian external examiners such as Demas Nwoko, Ben Enwonwu, S. I. Wangboje and Uche Okeke began to join European examiners and in the mid-1970s, succeeded them. In the 1980s retired lecturers of the School of Art and Craft, KCT and the Painting Section of the College of Art, respectively such as Mawere Opoku (R. T. Ackam, *Personal Communication* 22nd November, 2005) and E. Owusu-Dartey became external examiners, succeeding the Nigerians”. *Op. cit.*, *seid’ou*, “Theoretical Foundations” (2006), p. 236.

xv “The Department of Painting and Sculpture states on its website that “[w]ith an increasing focus on Africanist narrative realism in painting and official statuary in sculpture, the authority of European traditional and early Modernist media, genres and formats remained unchallenged. The [KNUST College of Art] curriculum’s range of painting genres still remained within the bounds of still life, landscape and pictorial composition with the stylistic dominance of geodesic (freshman) cubism, the so-called Tek Style which undergirds most murals on campus”. See Department of Painting & Sculpture, KNUST. About Us. Retrieved from <https://painting.knust.edu.gh/about>. Accessed on 17/07/2017.

xvi An aphorism used by *seid’ou* himself.

xvii Which is the severe lack of state, private or other such institutional or infrastructural support for contemporary art practice. But *seid’ou* also emphasizes the collectivist disposition of *blaxTARLINES* by issuing the rejoinder that the aspirations of this project must also “be distinguished from the romantic *Juche* idea of “self-reliance” which is usually deployed to describe initiatives of the cultural other.” See *kaŕi’kacha seid’ou & Jelle Bouwhuis*, in *Jelle Bouwhuis and Kerstin Winking* (eds.), *Silent parodies: kaŕi’kacha seid’ou in conversation with Jelle Bouwhuis*, 2014, Project 1975: Contemporary Art and the Postcolonial Unconscious, Amsterdam and London: SMBA and Black Dog Publishing, p. 116.

xviii “I converted my Drawing Class into a curatorial project of guerrilla exhibitions on campus and in the city. Campus and city came alive with site-specific exhibitions, their critiques and overviews each year”. See *ibid.* Also see *op. cit.*, *seid’ou et al.*, “Silent Ruptures” (2016).

xix See *Silence Between the Lines* (2015) curatorial statement. Exhibition organized by *blaxTARLINES KUMASI* in Kumasi. Retrieved from <https://iubezy.wordpress.com/iub-projects-2/2015-2/curatorial-projects/silence-between-the-lines-anagrams-of-emancipated-futures/curatorial-statement/>. Accessed on 15/12/2018.

xx For Alain Badiou, “[...] all true universality is devoid of a center”. See Alain Badiou, *Saint Paul: The Foundation of Universalism*, 2006, trans. Ray Brassier, Stanford University Press, California, p. 19.

xxi I borrow this term as used by David Harvey in *Seventeen Contradictions and the End of Capitalism*, 2014, Oxford University Press, USA, e-pub (iBooks).

Kwasi Ohene-Ayeh is an artist, curator and writer based in Kumasi, Ghana. He is the current grant holder of KfW Stiftung's program 'Curators in Residence: Curating Connections' in collaboration with the DAAD artists-in-Berlin program. Ohene-Ayeh has co-curated *Silence Between the Lines: Anagrams of Emancipated Futures* (2015) and *Orderly Disorderly* (2017), both organized by blaxTARLINES KUMASI. He was guest curator for the inaugural Lagos Biennial (2017) and recently curated *Spectacles. Speculations...* (2018), featuring 16 artists from Ghana, Holland and Colombia, in Kumasi. He is currently a PhD student at KNUST and publishes essays on www.iubeezy.wordpress.com

Tracy Naa Koshie Thompson (Ghana) explores the latent ability of ubiquitous materials (synthetic or natural) to transform into unrecognizable, strange, new and mimicry forms. For this purpose, she employs alchemical processes of dissolution and crystallization of the varied morphology of things. Thompson's emancipated approach to making art creates a disposition that transcends given notions of the art apparatus itself and questions what it could potentially be. She has participated in two large-scale exhibitions organized by blaxTARLINES KUMASI in Accra, namely *Cornfields in Accra* (2016) and *Orderly Disorderly* (2017). Thompson is an MFA student at KNUST and is currently participating in the intercontinental exchange program at Städelschule in Frankfurt, Germany.

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Lecture by Kwasi Ohene-Ayeh and
Tracy Naa Koshie Thompson

Conceived by Kwasi Ohene-Ayeh,
curator in residence of the program
Curating Connections 2018/2019,
organized by KfW Stiftung and
DAAD Artists-in-Berlin Program

The program Curators in Residence: Curating Connections is an initiative of the foundation KfW Stiftung and the DAAD Artists-in-Berlin Program. It seeks to stimulate intercultural dialogue by providing one emerging curator per year from Latin America, Africa, the Middle East, and Asia with the opportunity to spend six months in Berlin. Besides encouraging high-level networking, research and critical reflection, the program facilitates interdisciplinary encounters between the guests of the DAAD Artists-in-Berlin Program and the Berlin cultural scene. Previous grant holders include Zasha Colah (Mumbai), Dana Whabira (Harare), Mustafa Hussain Shabbir (Singapur) and Florencia Portocarrero (Lima).

Imprint:
Author: Kwasi Ohene-Ayeh
Editing: Kwasi Ohene-Ayeh
Coordination: KfW Stiftung

Cover image:
Simon Bowman, *Untitled*, 2016,
photographic print on blue-black
paper, 72in x 48in, detail, for
Cornfields in Accra exhibition (2016),
image courtesy blaxTARLINES
KUMASI

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