

UN-ALIENATED AROMATIC: CORNFIELDS IN ACCRA**Edwin K. Bodjawah**
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ABSTRACT

‘Cornfields in Accra’ epitomizes the new art phenomenon in the Kumasi Art School which reflects contemporaneity and the freedom that artists have, based on high experimental dispositions, communality and resilience. This paper reviews the visionary and transformational ethic which, informed by contemporary art theory and practice, and the desire for a liberation from the colonial vestiges of “hand and eye” art pedagogy, reinvigorated the Department of Painting and Sculpture, and repositioned them on the world map of artistic freedom and merit. The paper takes a close look at ‘Cornfields in Accra’ and the infrastructure that facilitated it. Premised on Ama Ata Aidoo’s ‘Cornfields in Accra’ the exhibition celebrates the emergence of new art forms that break the monotony of stereometric sculpture and planimetric painting hegemonies as the only building blocks of art making. It therefore let go of the notion that media and formats for art are already established and fixed. Through the use of imagery, metaphors, traditional and new media technologies and an ardent spirit of experimentation, art works for the show are made and exhibited communally and in collaboration with students from other fields of study and professional artists. The exhibition, which thrives on the cross genre fertilization of art, technology and science; echoing the philosophy on which the Kwame Nkrumah University was founded, becomes the polestar of our study of the processes that culminated in the transformation of faculty and pedagogy into a cynosure. With an amazing team spirit, passion and optimism ‘Cornfields in Accra’ sealed the seid’ou led rapture in the Department by opening up the boundaries of art making, display and reception.

Keywords: Cornfields, communality, collaboration, painting and sculpture, exhibition.

They told us
red clay
will shine,
shine silica,
shine gold,
red clay will shine.

It will shine
where you polish
how-when-where
you polish. (Aidoo, 2007)

INTRODUCTION

Second in the trilogy of exhibitions, *Cornfields in Accra* is significant because it epitomised the changing landscape of fine art in Ghana and as well as initiating boundary breaking pedagogical ideas which challenges global paradigms in contemporary Art. This has helped

dispel the notion that earlier exhibitions in Kumasi and Accra were either flukes or could not be sustained. ‘Cornfields in Accra’ exhibition captured the multiplicities of vanguard artistic practices and lingual from the Kumasi Art School.

Shifting from *Nicolas Bourriaud’s famed concept on ‘relational aesthetics’*, the exhibition could be theoretically framed as a post relational aesthetic phenomenon; yet not object-oriented ontology, it assumes a relational universe where cohabitations of un-alienated humans interacting and negotiating new relations with animals, plants machines, micro-organisms and wide range of partners resiliently resisting reification and *technostructures*, whiles forming new possibilities (Bourriaud, 2014). The exhibition hence becomes an aromatic collective of human, machine plants interactions and experience without preferring a center status to any object or activity and yet not alienation the complexity of human encounters. This exhibition was made possible through a silent revolution in pedagogy at the Department of Painting and Sculpture, activated by seid’ou since he joined the Faculty in 2003. Students of the Department have been aware of the norm shifts and the changing scope of contemporary art but had remained fettered to the old pedagogy and curriculum that constrained them to the hegemonies of stereometric sculpture and planimetric painting. Commenting on the colonial pedagogy that had been in vogue seid’ou says,

...for decades the curriculum in the College of Art was premised on decontextualized and unexamined assumptions, some of which date back to the British “hand and eye” training in the Gold Coast. (seid’ou, 2006)

Malinowski-inspired instruction and art practice had been instructive in fostering national pride in students like Kofi Antubam, E. V. Asihene, and J. C. Okyere, who became influential artists and teachers in the early post-independence era. Meyerowitz’s instigation was key to the “creative anachronism” which became an important feature of the official art of Ghana’s nationalists and of Nkrumah’s African Personality regime. However, in its depoliticised and commoditised form in the neo-liberal 1980s and 1990s, this feature became a placeholder for a new hegemony of touristy paintings, sculptures and artefacts in Ghanaian art schools and galleries. By the turn of the century, the *South meets West* exhibition in the Accra Museum had exposed the Kumasi College of Art as unprepared for the critical issues raised in contemporary art communities.

Art education in Ghana had not discarded its colonial apparel and disposition even in the twenty-first century. Its ideology was basically functionalistic and thus vocationally inclined, as it were, towards job creation and a quest to train workers for the newly created industries. When seid’ou offered a vent of liberation from the old restrictive norms it was not without resistance from reactionary observers and intra-faculty sceptics who naturally branded the new ideas a debasement of values or a promotion of vulgarity. Definitely aware of the politics that had come to be associated with art production and exhibition which Bishop (2012), describes in *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship* and cognisant of the reconfiguration of museums and the art market after the landmark exhibitions of *Magiciens de la Terre* by the Pompidou Centre in Paris (1989), the subsequent responses in *The other Story* by Rasheed Araeen at the *Hayward Gallery*, London (1989), the fall of the Berlin wall in the same year and their ramifications in the art world, and encouraged by the enthusiastic reception by the students of their new regime of liberation, qarĩ’kachā seid’ou and his cohort of like-minded colleagues and students remained resolute in their drive for new ways of art teaching and art making. For some reason or somehow, the art community in Ghana had appeared aloof from the activities in the larger community of art and this reflected on the catatonic state of art pedagogy and art making in Ghana till the turn

of the century. Subsequently, and characterized by a spirit of contemporaneity, collaboration, sensitivity to materials and increasing public engagement in the fine arts in Ghana, new experimental modes started gaining impetus among younger faculty and students of the Kumasi Art School. The goal has been to delimit faculty from the colonial parochial definitions and practice of fine art as well as the creation of the practitioner imbued with the spirit and tendencies of his era. At the very core of this drive for a radical change is the underlying ethos of what constitutes the space for teaching and for production. The art classroom had become a site of struggle as it had itself transformed into a site of an irreconcilable antinomy of creativity and ineptitude or bland artlessness.

In line with Giroux's idea, the new art classrooms became redefined as "cultural sites: arenas of contestation and struggle among differently empowered cultural and economic groups" (p. 74) rather than their former designation as instructional sites. The individual and the collective consciousness needed to change for any significant transformation to take place. No longer would the dominant faculty retain unfettered authority and power to exercise hegemonic tendencies that would normally influence the consciousness of students and thereby take control of their conscious desires. The needs and desires of the student are as crucial to the transformation experience as are the cognitive aspects of learning as "needs constitute each person's dispositions and personality". (Giroux, 1983)

Radical shifts in art pedagogy and production have been acknowledged in previous studies. In her *Reflections on Semiotics, Visual Culture and Pedagogy*, Deborah L. Smith-Shank asserts, *Art education is reluctantly but steadily shifting from the modernist discipline-based field towards a more interdisciplinary and semiotic approach to visual culture studies. This interdisciplinary approach ...connects directly with Peirce's ideas on pragmatism, plays of amusement, and especially this notion of the importance of the community of enquiry.* (Smith-Shank, 2007)

Smith-Shank further consents in her abstract to *Semiotic Pedagogy and Art Education* to Peirce's insistence that educational institutions were places of learning and not for instruction, indicating that, "if Peirce's argument is accepted then it is necessary to redefine the role of teachers, students and subject matters in relation to learning". (Smith-Shank, 2007)

Through his "Emancipatory Art Teaching" methods, seid'ou encouraged individual students to conduct mini exhibitions in alternative spaces in the Kumasi metropolis and beyond. Thereafter, *Silence between the Lines*, a group exhibition comprising of a selection from the graduating class (2015) and alumni was held in Kumasi in collaboration with Neils Staats to engage the public with the new art. This was followed by another exhibition — the first of a trilogy, dubbed *The Gown must go to Town* which was held in Accra later in 2015. *Cornfields in Accra* was held in 2016 after these two major public shows. According to the curatorial statement, the exhibition borrows its title from the prolific Ghanaian writer Ama Ata Aidoo's poem *Cornfields in Accra* which embraces activism and hope in all spheres of life for development and in anticipation of celebrated futures. The exhibition also honoured the memory of Goddy Leye (1965-2011), a Cameroonian conceptual artist whose selfless interventionist practice was very critical in the development of film, video, communal work and discourses in contemporary art practice on the African continent (Akoi-Jackson, seid'ou, Kissiedu, Ampratwum, 2016). Inspired by collective teaching and learning through a series of lectures and juried sessions as part of the department's new pedagogical and exhibition strategies, *Cornfields in Accra* was organized in collaboration with the Ghana Museums and Monuments Board and its subsidiary, Museum of Science and Technology in Accra.

Originally scheduled for 17th June, 2016 to 13th August 2016, it was extended to 31st August by popular request from the public. The exhibition featured 34 selected artists from the graduating class, 18 students from the 3rd year class of Bachelor of Fine Art in collaboration with students enrolled in Engineering and Biological Sciences programmes. In line with the Department's vision to mentor its products even after school, 21 alumni with active studio practices and 8 professional guest artists also participated in the show. The exhibition was directed by kɔri'kɔchɔ seid'ou and co-curated by a team from blaxTARLINES, the Project Space for Contemporary Art in the Department of Painting and Sculpture, Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology, Kumasi. As a result of the communality that embodied the whole project, most of the works exhibited were mounted collectively; and to the extent that organizers wanted to make art accessible to all, the exhibition which opened daily, was free to the public amidst off site projects on social and electronic media in anticipation of an inclusive public participation. The opening witnessed over 1,500 visitors filling the two-storey building and its compound. Among patronisers were children, hawkers, students, labourers, the middle working class, art enthusiasts, international artists and art institutions and people from all over the globe. In the course of the two and half months of "Cornfields", important exhibition texts were translated into Braille and local languages while other means were developed to expand art accessibility beyond only those who could see physically to include those who could visualize with other senses to generate wider experiences of art on the continent. With a shoestring budget, the organizers were determined to achieve the objective of bringing art to a wider audience than *The Gown must go to Town* which took Accra by storm in 2015. *Cornfields in Accra* recorded over 15,000 visitors at the end of the show.

THE MAKING OF "CORNFIELDS"

According to Akoi-Jackson et al (2016), the works presented were;

...diverse and span contemporary art and allied practices which anticipate emergent formats, ideas and configurations of transformative futures. The artists are not only interested in human life, but also ponder other possibilities where animals, plants, machines and micro-organisms become potential platforms and media for reflection, engagement and interaction. Since this precedence has been set, it is possible to begin tracing within the methodological strategies of blaxTARLINES KUMASI, an optimistic rather than a cynical impulse; an ethos of resolve and of resilience more attuned to constructive politics than to resistance. This is a sense, we believe, that Ama Ata Aidoo's poem "Cornfields in Accra" lends to our project; the ability of a community allied in common struggle— "men without barns" and "women without fallows"— to scrape through challenges and survive imminent crises self-assured.



Fig 1. Installation of Sputnik 1. Courtesy Frank Gyabeng and blaxTARLINES.



Fig 2. Carting and preparation of exhibition panels. Courtesy Bernard Akoi-Jackson and blaxTARLINES

With a collective spirit and a commitment to make things work, the blaxTARLINES inspired by Ama Ata Aidoo's poem and the rich resources of the modern environment, provided through technological interventions in the cities and slums of Africa, exhibits made up of different mediums ranging from photography, video and sounds from everyday tableaux, micro-organisms, artificial hair and mechanical products to robotics and anything digital worth exploring. These staged principally on all three levels of the Museum of Science and Technology, Ibrahim Mahama's jute sack installations draped the administrative and old block of the Museum as well as other architectural forms including the amphitheatre behind the administrative block and the paved area between the old and new blocks. Within the old

block, Mahama projected a continuous video of various processes of making and installing his projects over the last three years. His installations extended to cover the long aisle leading to the main entrance of the museum, a semblance of the ceremonial red carpet laid for honorary guests on special occasions. Motor vehicles, pedestrians and visitors to the exhibition moved freely on these sacks as they went through the exhibition. With the spirit of collaboration and communal agenda as stated earlier, the exhibition stands, panels and installations were made by students, participants, technicians and friends of blaxTARLINES under the direction of curator and lecturers involved (figure 2). “Cornfields” exhibited quite a number of the Museum of Science and Technology’s collections and these included a replica of *Sputnik 1* shown in figure 1, humanity’s first artificial earth satellite donated by the then U.S.S.R (‘Russia’) Embassy in Ghana in 1981. Sputnik 1 translates as “satellite” in the Russian language (Koren, 2015). According to the curators, “Sputnik 1 shocked the world quite like how Ghana, a new African state, amazingly constructed one of the world’s largest artificial lakes. The Soviet Union launched Sputnik 1 into an elliptical low earth orbit on 4 October 1957, barely seven months after Ghana’s independence. The launch of Sputnik 1 is an indelible referent in Cold War politics also anticipating GPS-based technologies of the so-called Information Age” (Akoi-Jackson et al, 2016).

Outside the museum hang Daniel Osei Poku’s installation of hundreds of cattle horns on two columns at the extreme ends in front of the building reminiscent of Gothic church towers. Using cattle horns as symbols of movement, his work interrogates social and economic structures which create bureaucracies and intervene in our everyday lives. These include movement of humans, goods, animals, services and migration. He interrogates the city scape which have roads, railways, pedestrian walkways, paths and extends these to the complexities of movement across borders. Osei Poku also pays attention to conditions and processes that intervene and eventually produce these constructs. Hung from the side of the building on Barnes road was a huge colourful banner by Adjo Kisser. Like fantasies in children’s cartoons to more complex combinations of images and technologies, she interrogates the state of feminism in a post representational world and how it relates to various spaces in the contemporary world beyond the physical jurisdictions of race, gender and inequalities. She repurposes images, fuses together several characters which seek to subvert post-colonial, patriarchal and neoliberal tenets among others. According to her;

There is a lot of excitement that comes with working with characters – characters that are different, similar or perhaps the same. Though fantasy is pivotal, my work is not hinged on fantasizing about characters, their apparel or the width of their grins. It is about understanding what William Kentridge describes as ‘the impulse behind mark making’. It has to do with understanding the logic behind the physicality of this activity of leaving behind ‘an external proof of one’s existence’. It is about looking at how this domestic concern is translated into larger political questions. It is the meeting point of concise lines and uncertain conclusions. This current transition from a representational to a post-representational understanding of the world is only so important to feminism because the photographs of the model look nothing like her. And because this link between the sign and its referent is non-existent, understanding and theorizing of feminism must equally be updated (Kisser, 2016).

In this show and for her installation within the building, she collaborates with students from various backgrounds in science and engineering to reproduce interactive images that have genetic connotations, parts that move, light up and generate sounds by a simple hand wave

when one draws close to them (figure 3). These were installed on a huge wall paper print developed from images of micro-organisms in collaboration with a biology laboratory. Kisser's practice posits that feminism should move beyond representational and 'super structural level of culture, language and religion' to reflect evolving technologies and post representational world. According to her, existence meant one is connected to everything in the world and nothing is off limits. With this in mind and being aware of the disparities that exist in the world she goes on to reimagine and reinvent feminism outside the female body to include other narratives;

A feminism that is in solidarity and in touch with other struggles, other means of liberation. A feminism that searches for and deals with economic differences rather than cultural differences. This feminism exists and is aware of the difference a technology mediated world can make. In fact, it learns to thrive in it. In this world, digital technology isn't just one of the many phenomena that is in vogue and later vanishes like a whiff of smoke. It is beneficial to all and these benefits are not restricted to a small group of people, race or gender. Technology is potentially progressive, present, open and a very active and living part of our reality. It is as much a potential cure as it is a poison. It exists to be used, studied, understood, worked with and manipulated by everyone. It presents a world which closes the once existent gap between men and women, science and literature, a world that starts off with everyone on an equal plane because of the connectivity it comes with. It recognizes the potential digital technology possesses to steer our understanding of life, our subjectivities and of our surroundings. It moves conversations of feminism beyond the female body into considering the narratives outside of this body, the place of machines, bacteria and other life forms within this discussion. This feminism embraces the complications that digital technology introduces. So, I like to believe that the character(s) within my work could exist as text, a scent, taste or sound. It is this belief that makes it possible to work with a cross fertilization of genres and mediums (Kisser, 2016).

Kisser's practice, like many other artists presented in *Cornfields in Accra* epitomize the ideals of BlaxTARLINES the main collaborators of the exhibition; to go beyond the superstructure and investigate the infrastructure, relations, formats of art production, engagement and identify with modernity without any misgivings or fear of losing one's identity. In other spaces, her simple satirical charcoal drawings on wood and paper on washroom doors, alleys and some corners within the museum amplify the attempt at ridiculing stereotypes and introducing new dimensions to drawing and its reception as she puns with possibilities in a concept Baudrillard (1994) calls the "precession of simulacra". Here, the simulacrum is neither a reflection of reality, nor a reference to it, but a creation of a new real by models that are not based on reality. Reality takes after the simulacra (Bodjawah, 2017). In this vein, Kisser's characters could be classified as same, similar, different or do not have original models at all, and this opens up more opportunities for experimentation.



Fig 3. Adjo Kisser. *The Kinaesthetic Series* (2016). Acrylic paint, glitter paper, metallic paint, CT scans printed on blue-black paper, proximity sensors, aluminium sheets, wires and wood on wooden panels. Size: Variable. Courtesy blaxTARLINES and the artist.

...And so
we planted our corn.

Not whole seeds from
last year's harvest;

No.

For we are men without barns
women without fallows... (Aidoo (2007))

With very little resources and no major justification but to hope for the best, organizers were optimistic that a lot could be achieved with goodwill, hard work and their spirit of collaboration. With regular studio visits, lectures, art talks and juried sessions which often spanned three continuous days every fortnight from October 2015, final selection for the exhibition was done in the middle of May 2016; a very effective peer review mechanism was therefore employed in the selection process of artists. Nevertheless, the arduous task of directing, construction of exhibition stands, mounting and installation of works at the museum itself would take another month too.

Another artist whose time-based video projections and installations brought new dimensions to *Cornfields in Accra*, especially during the opening of the exhibition is Kelvin Haizel whose work keeps developing from his painterly beginnings to time based video projections and interactive installations. On the night of opening 'Cornfields' and in collaboration with

staff of the museum and colleagues, he presented images from a 12-channel large scale video projection split into 48 screens at the atrium of the Museum of Science and Technology. These interactive and colourful videos simulate hands playing the 'oware' game and it virtually activated the external walls of the museum (figure 4). This experience was carried further to the first floor of the museum where there was a model of 'oware' and two stools for public interaction throughout the exhibition. One striking feature in this exhibition was that although the artists presented were far more than the *The Gown must go to Town* exhibition held in 2015 at the same venue, there seemed to be a stronger connection between the Museum's permanent collections on display and the works of artists presented this time. It was intriguing to see Desmond Acquah's ephemeral colourful reproductions of human organs in relation to the Museum's permanent collection of same. From Adjo Kisser's installations to Afrane's varied interactive pieces which included discarded computers, old projectors and machine parts which he motorized and the museum's own collection of a gramophone and related accessories on the first floor, the inter-connections were even much more captivating. This relationship was extended to the other floors as well.

Critics who condemned the opening up of modes of making art from the stereotypes of painting and sculpture to include other mediums and formats may begin to revise their notions after visiting 'Cornfields'. Kevin Abankwa, Jonathan Okoronkwo, Bright Ackwerh and Afia Prempeh among others, took their layered drawings and paintings to new levels with the aid of digital technology. Working in acrylics and oils, Abankwa initially takes images of pop mediated social life which Debord (1967) talks about, manipulates them through different applications such as photo editing and finally paints them on canvas with traditional mediums of oils and acrylics. In combining traditional and contemporary trends he reinvents new ways of looking at photography and portraiture beyond traditional notions. Afia Prempeh on the other hand juxtaposes modern African political leaders against Western European historical styles. In the process she questions modernity and the capitalist modes of governance that embody democracy and associated regimes in Africa. Jonathan Okoronkwo's large scale charcoal drawings of car parts on plywood with a dystopian inclination comes with his interest in these old and abandoned cars left to rot in garages. His large-scale drawings of car parts with charcoal and dirty oil do not only resonate with Aidoo's poem of corn growing in backyards and greasy fitting shops alone, they give different life forms to these cars again and underpin the ethos of success through passion and resilience as well. Bright Ackwerh's satirical drawings are commentaries on socio cultural and political events which transcend national and global issues. His drawings and prints, developed with the aid of software seek to test the boundaries of tolerance at all levels and have drawn significant attention from a cross section of the public worldwide. The sheer variety of mediums, techniques and themes associated with each artist's work in this exhibition simply opens up new ways of engaging the contemporary world.



Fig 4. Kelvin Haizel. Video projections at the atrium of the museum. Courtesy the artist and blaxTARLINES



Fig 5. Lois Selasie Arde-Acquah. Live performance on the opening night. Ink on fabric. Size: variable. Courtesy blaxTARLINES.



Fig 6. Simon Bowman Junior. 2016. Prints on X-ray films. Size: variable. Courtesy Bernard Akoi- Jackson.



Fig 7. Visitors interacting with Yaw Owusu's installation on a panel. One pesewa copper coins and abrasive agents. Size: variable. At the foreground are Desmond Acquah's reproductions of human organs from sugar. Size: variable. Courtesy and blaxTARLINES.

Where's the freedom and where's the justice? Yaw Owusu's one pesewa copper- coin installations seem to ask. As the least denomination of Ghana's currency, the one pesewa coin is virtually worthless as it has no market value as a medium of exchange in recent times. Yaw Owusu acquired these coins through exchange at commercial banks and repurposed them for his invigorating installations which questions the politics of capital in relation to governance, democracy, independence and what it means to the proletariat. The coin has the coat of arms of Ghana with the inscription *freedom and Justice* on one side and the image of

the Adomi bridge across the Volta river on the other. He chose to use only the side with the inscription *freedom and justice* for his artistic expression. This he does by subjecting thousands of the coins through various chemical processes to simulate aging and weariness. These procedures add colour and enrich his installations as he sticks them carefully against different forms and surfaces. In this exhibition, he stuck the coins on a huge rectangular surface simulating a network of geographical mappings as they connect to each other (figure 7). By repeating these identical units, he lays emphasis and empathizes with the plight of ordinary and marginalized communities. In the end, value is given to the valueless through his art.

...Mine was by a mango tree,
a hillock of a rubbish dump,
a deserted vacant-lot,
with the unmentionable contents from diverse chamber pots... (Aidoo, 2007)

CONCLUSIONS

Yet the corn did sprout and bear fruits in the slums, greasy fitting shops, along the roads and virtually anywhere one planted. The guiding philosophies for this exhibition was Ama Ata Aidoo's poem which does not only speak of resilience and communality to achieve one's goals but also through self determination to survive amidst fear of failure and hopelessness identified with most struggles for emancipation. The struggle to develop and transform the perception of art from faculty to the public through changes in the pedagogy that prevailed in the Department of Painting and Sculpture was fraught with its own internal challenges. This ranged from states of unbelief and denial that there could be other possibilities of art making other than the western traditional models bequeathed in the colonial educational legacy to display formats of engagement. There were also resistances to change from some older and surprisingly younger faculty, to lack of basic infrastructure for exploring new media technologies and processes for art making.

In this exhibition the results of the seid'ou led revolution and subsequent products are shared freely with the public. Visits and comments by Tate Modern, Al Palazzo Gallery, Harn Museum, El Anatsui, Ablade Glover, Ama Ata Aidoo and many art enthusiasts tend to validate the show. Finally, the cross genre exhibits in 'Cornfields', coupled with off-site interventions and diversity displayed give credence to a more heteronomous and collaborative practice, generative engagement of art and making art more accessible to the public. The exhibition therefore echoes the philosophy on which Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology was founded. Critical and interdisciplinary pedagogy would go a long way to wholly transform exhibitions and artistic languages of our time to reflect the present and emancipated futures.

...Finally,
when we have reaped,
gleaned and threshed our corn, and roasted it aromatic...

Then
we shall ask to see
him

Who says

we
shall not survive among these turbines. (Aidoo, 2007)

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