

# On Stage-Crafting and State-Crafting Beyond Crisis

## Ibrahim Mahama's Word and Deed

*kq̄r̄'kq̄chä seid'ou*

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

**ACT I: SCENE 1  
EXCAVATING FROM PASTS WHICH  
FORFEITED THEIR PRESENT AND FUTURES  
WHICH HARBOR NOTHING TO COME**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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



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

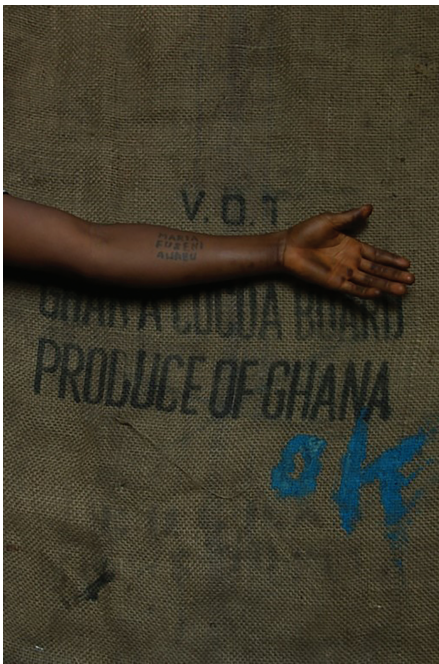
roles of dramaturge, actor, medium, archivist, and architect and stages a *danse macabre* with ruins, failures, and traces of Ghana's mass utopias and "carcasses" of colonial and postcolonial history. The remains of the ephemeral project are later repatriated from the Whitworth Gallery in Manchester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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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





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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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



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

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

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



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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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



(clockwise from top left)

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

Photo: courtesy *qqr'kqchä seid'ou*

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

Photo: courtesy *qqr'kqchä seid'ou*

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

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



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

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

## EPILOGUE

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

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

## Notes

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

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

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

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

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

5 Antonia Alampi in conversation with Ibrahim Mahama, 2019.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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