

Beyond The Masquerade: Simulation and Reproduction of African Mask Forms

E. K. Bodjawah¹, k. Seid'ou¹, F. E. Kofigah² & S. Sosu³

Abstract

The serial sculpture project under review repurposes the range of materials, formats and production relations in West African masking systems which have survived modernity. Inspired by Benjamin's productivity thesis and by the media plurality of Russian Constructivists, American Minimalists and others, the artist extends African mask forms beyond the autonomous and medium-specific object congenial to the white cube gallery space. With a nod to Lévi-Strauss and accumulative practitioners of international art, the masks are made through hybrid processes of appropriation and bricolage. The artist transforms decommissioned lithographic plates purposefully collected from Ghana's printing industry into serial facemasks. By default, the used plates also archive symbolic, social and technical histories of an evolving African modernity. Artisanal techniques of mechanical reproduction akin to industrial embossment and stamping are adapted in an assisted reproduction of the serial facemasks. The mask forms end up as strange objects, as parts of site-specific installations or as supports for performances. Consequently, through this sculptural simulation of African mask forms, the artist presents a distinctive interpretation of reproduction and media plurality in relation to Contemporary Art of Africa and new possibilities in 21st Century art experience.

Keywords: mask, masquerade, reproduction, simulation, theatre.

1. Introduction

In Chinua Achebe's *Arrow of God*, Ezeulu advises his son "The world is like a mask dancing. If you want to see it well, you do not stand in one place". Ezeulu, the chief priest of the god Ulu and custodian of Igbo tradition in Achebe's "colonial Nigeria", must have used the simile to explain to Oduche his son why he must be sent to a mission school. Clearly, this was to instruct him on the need to adapt to the conditions of the times as a means to intervene in it and hence invent the future. But relating it to art, the simile can also be extended to typify the contingent manner of a spectator's durational experience in the theatre of site-specific work (Fried, 1967; Kwon, 2002). For his body of facemask installation and site-specific projects, the sculptor adapts strategies of production and presentation analogous to Ezeulu's simile. By this means, he hopes to intervene directly in the literal and material conditions, and infrastructural means of artistic production and, hopefully, transform the extant canons of his present artistic milieu.

Ezeulu's 'dancing mask' simile seems apt for the body of works under discussion because first, it is a mask-referencing set of sculptures in subject and motif. Second, it is theatre-referencing in its assisted production, installation and participatory spectatorship; as Bakhtin (1984) observes, in a theatrical time-space such as the masquerade or the carnival, everything and every moment is unstable. Third, the project's medium peculiarity and heteronomy is tradition-defying and open to emergent media, materials and techniques unfamiliar in mainstreams culture production in modern Ghana. The artist's corpus is also inspired by the discourse and practice of the Russian Constructivists, the American Minimalists and Pop Artists which operate beyond the autonomy and medium specificity of the modernist art object. The project incorporates strategies of collective art manufacture and participatory audiencing adapted from canonical West African systems of cultural production.

¹ Department of Painting and Sculpture, KNUST, Kumasi. Corresponding Author: edwino4u@gmail.com

² Department of English, KNUST, Kumasi

³ Department of Creative Arts, UEW, Winneba, Ghana

With few modifications, the productivist thesis Walter Benjamin develops in *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* and *Author as Producer*, respectively, is a useful device which weaves together the many strands of technical and political standpoints underpinning the artist's body of works. An important premise of this paper is that the emblematic cross-genre character of contemporary art, instigated by the penetration of contingent social and material contexts in 1960s America and elsewhere, was already at play in African masking systems and other tradition-based modes of cultural production. In these systems of cultural production, the communities and social fabric were in themselves woven around several artistic practices in terms of rituals, festivals and other collaborative performances (Vogel, 1981; Willett, 1985).

The research leading to this paper is based on sustained study of an artist's recent oeuvre through studio and exhibition visits, interviews, perusal of the artist's notebooks, diaries, published and unpublished texts, and more. In what follows, the authors employ Baudrillard's orders of simulacra in exploring layers of signification which underpin pre-modern and modern masking experience. With a nod to Lévi-Strauss, the artist's hybrid process of material appropriation and bricolage is put in comparative context with the respective permutations of Iconographic, Carnavalesque, Nominalist and Bricolage schema by means of which significant cultural producers of international art make their work. This sets the background against which the artist's productivist and politically-committed process is outlined and interpreted. The artist's political commitment, resonating in Ezeulu's advice to his son, is also summed up by Benjamin (2008) thus:

[W]e must rethink the notions of [artistic] forms or genres if we are to find forms appropriate to the [artistic] energy of our time... we are in the midst of a vast process in which [artistic] forms are being melted down, a process in which many of the contrasts in terms of which we have been accustomed to think may lose their relevance.

2. The Mask Motif as a Sign of Sacrament, Malfesance, Sorcery or Simulation

Generally, a mask, as an image or sign, has the orthodox connotations of reproduction, seriality or repetition. Theoretically, these connotations also resonate in Baudrillard's "Sacramental Order" and "Order of Malfesance" respectively. In the "Sacramental Order", the mask motif can be understood as a faithful image, copy of something. The death mask and its cognates of standard realist reproductions are good examples. In the "Order of Malfesance" the mask motif is an unfaithful copy, a stylization or distortion which "denatures" the reality it refers to. As such it functions only as a hint of something hidden from the observer. Examples are ancestral African masks which are made to invoke the presence of spirits of ancestors with an assemblage of canonical motifs, gestures or objects conventionally associated with each ancestor. While the canonical mask might not literally resemble the ancestor or spirit, the community understands the mask-ancestor relation by convention. The stylizations associated with these canonical masks became the stereotypes of African art in colonial anthropological texts and museums which inspired the early French avant-garde painters such as the Cubists and the Fauves. However, the mask motif can also connote a more disruptive form of reproduction as in "simulacrum", "simulation" and "dissimulation". Examples are Baudrillard's respective orders of "Sorcery" and "Pure Simulation". In the "Order of Sorcery" the image (mask) is a "simulacrum". The simulacrum pretends to be a faithful copy when in truth there is no reference at all to any particular original. Examples occur in modern computational photography and in plastic surgery or Zeuxis' painting of Helen of Troy (then regarded as the most beautiful woman in antiquity) which is indeed a composite image of the finest features of five different virgins. This composite "maiden" has no reference to any person in reality. "Pure Simulation" designates the hyperreal whose signs refer to other signs only, but not to the actual things represented, for their existence. The works of Richard Prince and Sherrie Levine in which photographs are made out of existing photographs and adverts or the works of Takashi Murakami developed from Japanese Anime and Manga, Ai Weiwei's and Xu Bing's sculptural simulations of Chinese mythological creatures, Phillipe Pareno's *Anlee* are exemplary. Pure Simulation also occurs in digital currencies Bitcoins, the avatar community in Second Life and theme park characters such as occurs in Disneyland and so forth. As the reader would come to notice, some references and sources of masks for the artist's work under review can be best described as simulacra or pure simulations.

3. Strategies of African mask appropriation: Iconographic, Carnavalesque, Nominalist and Bricolage

The European Modernist avant-garde appropriation of ethnographic African masks is a familiar motif in the history of the visual arts of the 20th century. The ensuing practice, popular among the Cubists, the Fauves and the Expressionists, is known first for its colonial-primitivist legacy.

Furthermore its corpus of works is typically medium-specific with particular privilege given to the autonomous and rectangular painting format or to the single narrative and homogeneous sculptural form. However, succeeding this corpus are at least four principal strategies of appropriation of African mask forms, namely: the Iconographic, the Carnavalesque, the Nominalist and the Bricolage.

Among these alternatives, the Iconographic scheme, especially popular among the visual artists of the Harlem Renaissance, is closest in contemporaneity and in spirit to the early Modernist avant-garde practice. First, it shares with the latter the so-called “formal discipline” of African masks which had entered European avant-garde consciousness through the mediums of Western museum collections, colonial-ethnographic photography and the patronizing texts of such primitivist-formalists as Roger Fry. There were also resonances of the avant-garde deportment in the exotic or nostalgic fascination of the Harlem Renaissance artists with the image of African masks. However, in the latter case, the fascination was born out of “blood and soil” desire to relate symbolically to the ancestral African homeland. Here, we may recall the works of Palmer Hayden’s *Fétishes et Fleurs* (1926), Malvin Johnson’s *Negro Masks* (1932) and *Self-Portrait* (1934) and Lois Mailou Jones’ *Fetishes* (1938), which followed up on Alain Locke’s manifesto of 1925, *Art of the Ancestors*, which had elevated “ancestral” African art as being at par with Greco-Roman classical art. Locke’s text promoted the “formal discipline” of African masks and other ancestral art forms as an alternative apprenticeship for the so-called New Negro artist (Powell, 1997; Mercer, 2008). However, the corpus of paintings and other artifacts premised on Locke’s thesis could not transcend the early Modernist orthodoxy of medium-specificity. There was a missed opportunity to absorb the multi-media, cross-genre and improvisatory techniques which lay at the heart of African masking systems to inform art production, technique and media. To recap, masks and masquerades like the Ijele come across as cross-genre and multi-media practices involving sound, textiles, carving, assemblage, dance and performance. They also have specific social and political roles regarding the mediation of the material and the spirit world. All this promise of medium and format multiplicity, layering and transformation was masked over or censored when the European medium-specific fine art formats were taken for granted and assimilated comfortably in educational systems across the continent. Similar observations can be made about the iconographic practice of the Ecole de Dakar artists and the work of other African modernists of the early post-Independence generation such as the Ghanaian painter Kobina Bucknor (known for his *Sculptural Idiom* paintings) and the *Natural Synthesis* of the Zaria Art Society. While iconography changed for these African artists, the European medium-specific format they adopted remained uncontested. In Benjaminian terms, this gesture is neither revolutionary nor emancipatory enough until the media, formats and techniques of production have been contested, transformed and subverted (Benjamin, 2008). And this gesture extends beyond transforming the iconography, theme, or style to the literal transformation of the “expanded field”, the theatre of technical and material infrastructure and processes, and the social relations which underpin artistic production and dissemination.

Regarding the appropriation of African art, the colonial-primitivist subtext and the early Modernist aesthetic remained persistent motifs in the cultural metropolises of the Global North and in their antipodes until the persuasive critiques following the MoMA Primitivism show of 1984 and *Magiciens de la Terre* (1989). Notably, the Carnavalesque, the Nominalist and the Bricolage strategies of African mask appropriation predominantly appear in the post-*Magiciens* era towards the turn of the century. These three major forms of practice carried the appropriation of the African mask into an “expanded field”, the theatre or contingent situation of art production. In the Carnavalesque model the masked body, literal or metaphorical, is put into performance or, by extension, staged for the photographic tableau, video or film. The works of Rotimi Fani-Kayode (*Ebo Orisa*, *Dan Mask* and *Golden Phallus*), Leonce Raphael Agbodjelou (*Demoiselles de Porto Novo*) and Jelili Atiku’s masked performances are exemplary. The Carnavalesque model is usually associated with the literary work of Mikhail Bakhtin who interprets the carnival to mean a space where political power of officialdom or the status quo is suspended.

The Nominalist appropriation of the ethnographic African mask repeats the gesture of Duchampian ready-mades. Picasso/*Whose Rules*, a component of Fred Wilson’s institutional critical installation *Mining the Museum*, comes to mind. In this component of the project the African American artist installed a photo blow-up of Picasso’s *Les Femmes d’Alger (O. J. R. M.)* and stuck an ethnographic mask on a nude figure in the “painting”. The mask, which he might have “mined” from the museum’s collections, is possibly a Songye Kifwebe mask. Through the cut-out eyes of the mask the spectator could watch a video of Wilson himself and some Africans asking questions such as “if my contemporary art is your traditional art, is my art your cliché?” (Wilson, 1994, p.9). Wilson is aware that in the making of *Les Femmes d’Alger* Picasso, like other artists of the aforementioned primitivist avant-garde, had been inspired by the colonial legacy of ethnographic collections and tribal masks from so-called “savage” cultures.

In *Mining the Museum*, he exposes the Eurocentric structure of museums which perpetuate cultural imperialism through canonification and its obverse of concealment. In the last appropriation strategy the artist is a bricoleur. The semi-autonomous and artisanal mask is made through processes of bricolage akin to the description of anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss or the deconstructed version of Jacques Derrida. In this regime artists transmute “waste” materials found in their locality to construct masks which sometimes end as strange objects, as components of installations or as props for performances. Examples of artists in this practice are Romuald Hazoume who extrapolates masks from the extant form of fuel canisters and the Mozambican sculptor Gonçalo Mabunda who uses decommissioned ammunition and military equipment to construct facemasks. Other bricoleurs of the mask form are Sokari Douglas Camp, Calixte Dakpogan, Joseph-Francis Sumégné and Zak Ove. There are also artists who combine aspects of or navigate between the Carnavalesque, the Nominalist and the Bricolage. Some expand the artisanal bricolage with input from mechanical and electronic reproduction and manufacturing processes. Kader Attia’s mirrors and masks installation project is a hybrid of the Nominalist and Bricolage. Nick Cave’s sound-suits and Serge Clotey’s performances staged for film and the tableau while wearing Hazoumean gallon-facemasks combine aspects of the Carnavalesque, the Nominalist and Bricolage. Mohamed El Baz’s *Mystery Skull* (2014) and *Mystic River 1 & 2*, components of the *Bricoler L’Incurable* installation project, are a mix of bricolage and mechanical production with photography and neon. The artist’s *Masking beyond the Masquerade Project* combines strategies of nominalist appropriation and bricolage.

4. Masking, the Theatre of Benjamin, and the Situation of Debord

While the Fried-Greenberg School was somehow Luddite, preferring to mortgage art to the pure vision and genius of the unassisted artist, Benjamin was sanguine about the penetration of art by the new industrial technologies, modern media and the expanding community of collaborators and participants in the production of art. Benjamin’s thesis is simple:

One might generalize by saying the technique of reproduction detaches the reproduced object from the domain of tradition. By making many reproductions it substitutes a plurality of copies for a unique existence. And in permitting the reproduction to meet the beholder or listener in his own particular situation, it reactivates the object reproduced. These two processes lead to a tremendous shattering of tradition, which is the obverse of the contemporary crisis and renewal of mankind (Benjamin, 1936).

Benjamin suggests that authentic or autonomous art, like the established forms and media which Fried and Greenberg came to support and which still feature as the dominant and privileged forms of modern art production in Ghana, has its basis in ritual or tradition and that technical reproduction processes appropriated from the “theatre” of mechanical reproduction tend to erode authenticity (aura) by displacing ritual with politics (1936). But the theatre of technical, material, social and aesthetic infrastructure is also the domain of capitalist modes of production and exchange. Thus in Benjaminian terms, the disruption of capitalist modes of aesthetic production constitutes an important aspect of emancipatory politics itself.

Guy Debord shares similar concerns about Capitalist appropriation of the theatre of modern consumer society and draws a sceptical conclusion. According to him, the extant Post-War consumer society which had succeeded Benjamin’s generation and which reproduced the market logic of his time had reified authentic life in the theatre into mere spectacle (Debord, 1967). By spectacle, Debord meant a “social relation among people, mediated by images” of the new mass media. Actual experience and perception in the theatre had been commodified as brands and reproduced, disseminated and exchanged on a mass scale. There is subjugation of consciousness, precisely, alienation. “Living” had been transformed into “having” which was also premised on “appearing” through the mass media and their commodity markets (Debord, 1967). These corporate-supplied and mass-mediated images were disseminated as homogenized representations or commodified images facilitated by consumer-capitalist media and markets. This was the age of radio, film and television, but it was also the inception of branding and other techniques of monopoly capitalism. In the art and cultural field, Pop Art and the Punk and Hippie movements appear in this milieu.

Debord’s aesthetic-political recommendation was for artists and other progressives to form a revolutionary collective whose subversive tools would be ironic mimicry or satirical parody. The idea was to subvert the authority of the spectacle by making the spectacular image say or represent the opposite of what it was meant to say for the status quo. The subversive parodic image was meant to be a scarred reproduction of the spectacle - a way to mask the mask of the official spectacle.

This perspective threw into fashion a trend of appropriation art in the postmodernist 1970s through the 1980s as found in the works of Jenny Holzer, Sherie Levine, Barbara Kruger, Louise Lawler, and Jeff Koons. But it also ushered in the age of culture jamming, subvertisements and ad busters. A caveat to Debord's Situationist aesthetics and politics was that this strategy of re-routing the relation between social consciousness and mass-mediated and commodified images was soon recuperated by the consumer capitalist machinery and political conservatives to the extent that it became the staple of corporate capitalist logic in advertising and fashion economies. This is partly because Situationist strategy only mimicked the extant mass media and hence left Capitalist production infrastructure intact. It had tackled and transformed the images of consumption through acculturation of politics. Also it had worked with the assumption that authentic life in modern capitalist society always pre-existed or preceded the representation, the copy, the illusion, the reification or the mask. But what of a situation or theatre in which the copy, the illusion, the reproduction, or the mask is all there is? What if there is imitation without a model? Examples of "imitation without a model" are not hard to find in contemporary society. Today biological patents in synthetic biology abound with a wide range of examples. There are synthetic life forms such as mycoplasma laboratorium which has the inventor-corporation's watermarks, signatures and websites encoded on it. In humans, there are transsexual hybrid identities that only became possible in the 20th century. In the contemporary market economy we have the new Communist Capitalism led by China which only rose at the end of the Cold War. These examples have no models in history. Baudrillard describes this possibility with a concept he 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.

Benjamin's politics seems more resilient than Debord's which stays on the surface of image manipulation. Benjamin insists on the "politicization of culture" and thus stresses on transforming the infrastructure of the spectacle itself. This has consequences on the configuration of the spectacle too. However, if in Benjamin's era, a principal infrastructure of aesthetic-politics was mechanical reproduction, today the digital, communication and information technologies of simulation and automation and new social infrastructure expand the range of strategies of deracination of authenticity beyond photography, film and radio. In this complexity, Benjamin's identification of politics with disruption of technical means is not straight forward. The artist's practice harbours this emancipatory promise too. The mediums he repurposes have not only intervened in the social fabric of the people through colonialism and modernity, they also disrupted the culture of interdependency that generally characterized the African continent. Embedded in all these histories are the respective provenances of the selected face masks. The layers of spontaneity that come with the production of the simulated masks add more complex layers to their original contexts as objects displaced from the embodied theatres of Africa's masquerading systems. In the end, each mask in his installations represents an individual or community interacting, mediating in a larger social network and at the same time connecting time, space and geographies. He goes on by selecting masks that typify these displacements for simulation and eventual reproduction.

5. Simulation and Reproduction of African Mask Forms

Formally, the classical symmetric forms of African masks lend themselves easily to mechanical and industrial techniques of reproduction. Symbolically, their mediation through colonial museums alludes to the debt bondage of artistic producers to systems of economic exploitation when these artefacts enter capitalist economies usually administered by cultural institutions of the Global North. In the body of works under discussion, the artist transforms selected images, signs or tourist market models of ethnographic face masks from West and Central Africa into serial sculptural objects. Since his starting point is not the original mask but copies or simulations of them, he attempts in his reflections to complicate or interrogate the nostalgic outlook of the Harlem Renaissance or Ecole de Dakar artists. Evidently, falling on reproductions, simulations and models in the tourist market as reference points for the artwork alerts the artist to the fictions of originality implicit in the practice. Yet the resultant artwork can raise important questions or construct new visions about modern African identity.

Combining strategies of a tourist, an internet surfer and an ethnographer with Minimalist aesthetics the artist repurposes reproductions of masks he finds in internet databases, museum catalogues, and in the tourist market. He considers the provenance of the referenced facemasks and their images as meaningful to his work.

He chooses images of facemasks known to have been marked by colonial and ethnographic mediation and processes of museumification, facemasks traded in auction houses, appropriated in modernist avant-garde paintings, or canonified in ethnographic and art history texts and therefore copied and sold in the tourist market. This provenance adds complex layers to their original contexts as objects displaced from the embodied theatres of Africa's masquerading systems.

Taking cue from Benjamin (1936, 2008) and, by extension, the canonical Minimalists (Judd, 1965) and the Pop artists, the artist invented a semi-mass production technique for his reproductive sculptures. It is an adaptation of industrial embossment and stamping techniques in which several copies or identical units of masks are produced through the engagement of assistants, the use of industrial materials as well as applying industrial techniques of fabrication and manufacture. The processes involve, first, the artisanal part of modelling the facemask as a twin "model and mould" in fibreglass-enforced resin. The "model and mould" would correspond respectively in heterosexual language, to the twin male-female "embossment dies". There is also the industrial part of forming the masks by degrees of pressure from a press-source which presses the "high relief" model into the "intaglio" mould with a sheet metal laid in-between them. The plasticity of the sheet metal laid like hymen over the intaglio mould, responds differently to the different degrees of "action and reaction" pressure between the model and the mould. Sometimes, there is violent pressure which ruptures the facemask. Besides its homology with embossment, this method also brings to mind a unique "serial repoussé" technique in which a design is beaten into sheet metal by hammering; this time, with the process turned upside down, the hammer is the whole mould (female) and the design is the model (male). In as much as the sculptor wanted to produce serial repetitions or units, his objective was also to create unique objects in each case that can combine in various permutations to form a substantial installation. The artist's first-hand description of the production process reveals some technical and anecdotal details not captured in the foregoing outline:

In order to produce a model and mould which could be tough and resilient because several copies would be made from them, I decided to use polyester resin and fibreglass because I have worked with these materials for about two decades. Firstly, I used photographs of facial masks that were embedded with various histories through displacement, museumification and dissemination as reference materials and based on this a model of each mask was made in clay and left to be bone dry. This was followed by building a rectangular clay wall around the mask leaving a space of about two centimetres between the mask and wall. This wall could take any shape depending on the nature of the mask. The purpose of the wall was to serve as a receptacle for the gypsum that would be poured on the model to take its form. A few handfuls of Portland cement were added to this mixture to obtain a thick but pourable mixture. The separating agent (grease) was applied on the surface of the mask to allow easy separation of the mould from the mask model after casting. Three millilitres (a few drops) of the hardener (Methyl Ethyl Ketone Peroxide/MEKP) was added to half a litre of pre-accelerated polyester resin and stirred very well for a consistent mixture. A thin layer of the mixture was applied to the whole surface of the model with a brush. Strips of fibreglass were dipped in the preparation (gypsum) and applied all over the mask's surface. This process was done repeatedly till the whole mask got covered and the clay wall was filled with the gypsum till a fairly flat level was attained. The fibreglass and resin composite was used for the mould to increase its structural strength since several copies of the mask were going to be made from the same mould. This took about 30 minutes to set and another three hours to cure and cool completely. With the help of small wedges and a pair of pliers, the mould was successfully separated from the mask and the mould surfaces washed and dried in the open air. The process was repeated for moulds of subsequent masks.

Informed by the communal nature of most African masking traditions, at every stage of the production process communality was an important ingredient as I directed and guided my studio assistants throughout the various processes, working as friends and as a team. This stage required the use of an industrial Simple Press equipment for the production of copies of the masks. Since I had taken the pictures of some aluminium plates we started producing samples. Originally, the Simple Press equipment which I adapted for my work was made for compressing books during binding. It usually consists of two vertical bars and a stout screw linked to two thick metal/wooden planks within which the book is placed for compression. By revolving a horizontal barbell connected to the screw, pressure is exerted on the book, making it compact in the process. In the first instance, we placed the mould on the base of the Simple Press equipment and placed the positive side of the aluminium plate on it. We placed the (mask) model on it and exerted some pressure on the model with our hands to get the model align and fit into the mould. At this stage we transferred the process to the Simple Press equipment where further pressure was to be exerted on the plate to complete the process.

The model was placed almost the exact position directly above the mould in order for it to align with the mould when it is lowered or when maximum pressure is exerted on the model to fit properly into the mould. To finish this production process, a revolving (barbell propeller) lever on the Simple Press equipment was turned in a clockwise motion until the model and plate underneath had sunk and fit perfectly and tightly into the mould. The pressure exerted on the plate by turning the lever clockwise forced the plate to gradually take the form of the mask. By revolving the ball propeller in an anticlockwise manner, the pressure was released and the mould ejected. The embossed plate (mask) was removed. Another copy of the mask was produced in the same manner from a similar plate.

In the third instance however, the reverse side of the plate was used for the production of a similar copy. I realized that despite the malleable nature of the plates and the impressive results, the forms could be varied if further experiments were conducted. I cut through the sides of the plates to make them more malleable during the stamping/embossment or final stage of the fabrication process. This informed the second series of experiments. However, in the production of several copies of the various masks, both the Simple Press and the stamping techniques were used.



Figure. 1: Studio assistants exerting pressure on a plate using the Simple Press equipment.



A

B



Figure 2: (Images A – D) Production processes and masks produced through stamping of the feet on the model and mould with the sheet inlayed.



Figure 3: A group of children interacting with installed masks in the exhibition Silence between the Lines... Anagrams of Emancipated Futures (2015). Courtesy: Robin Riskin



**Figure. 4: A close up shot of the masks at night during the exhibition *Silence between the Lines* (2015).
Courtesy: Kwaku Boafo Kissiedu**

6. The artist's Site-Specific Installations: Masking beyond the African Masquerade:

In interrogating canonical European and Luddite media which have become hegemonic in Ghanaian art production, formats and display, the artist repurposed decommissioned industrial materials, adapted both artisanal and mechanical techniques for his serial reproductions of masks. Due to the variation of pressure exerted on the printing plates, each of the cases illustrated in Figure 2 (whether by turning the propeller of the simple press or stamping of the feet on the model) every mask produced from the same model was spontaneous, though identical, each was strikingly different. The text and images on each plate reinforced the docu-fictional/realistic aspects of the work while the rapture on each mask indirectly alludesto the impact and effects of colonialism and modernity on each individual; in the end, a series of identical units were produced from each mask type. The artist goes beyond the iconographic translation of masks and masquerades and adopts nominalistap appropriation and bricoleur strategies of production showcased as site-specific projects and installations. Thus, he dissolves or brings into tension different artistic genres and formsand initiates an expanded sculpture practice (Krauss, 1979). The collective production, display and community involvement in all the processes undermine semblances of aura, issues of artistic talent and demystifies narcissistic authorship and media autonomy predominant in modern Ghanaian art experience.

The standard understanding of masquerade is anthropocentric; a masquerade implies a community of human wearers and performers. By the titular “beyond the Masquerade”, we mean the artist’s facial masks themselves are presented as actors on equal footing with human actors in the exhibition environment. Bruno Latour’s sense of actants interacting in a contingent social map or network comes to mind here. Everything in the installation space is an actor and mediator. The installation could be best described in Latourian terms as the name of a movement, a displacement, a transformation, a translation, an enrolment... an association between entities which are in no way recognizable as being social...except during the brief moment when they are shuffled together” (Latour, 2007, pp.64, 65).

For Latour, and for the artist's work, "every actor is a medium of translation". Like Ezeulu's elusive mask, it is "able to link the most far-flung objects and equally capable of failing in this effort" (Harman, 2009, p. 102). In each exhibition moment the constellation creates a cartography which transforms literal objects in the space, such as parts of buildings, furniture and public spaces into quasi-masqueraders. These objects and spaces take the place of wearers and performers in a typical masquerade. The installation creates different registers of docu-fiction, much like sculptural comic strips, through this new theatre of masks which pretend to be masquerades. As a documentary, they are archives or geologies of symbolic, social and technical histories of Ghana and their geopolitical networks in the 21st century. While the mask leitmotif could connote perversion, simulation, dissimulation, the hidden or deception, its printing plate medium is also an archive or a register of facts, histories and events of Ghanaian life. In these cases, people's lives are actually embedded in them; for instance, printing plates which have been used for printing funeral posters allude to histories of specific persons, family kinship, economic class configuration of their relations, and design styles offered in Ghana at the time. On the other hand the roofing sheet medium could allude to life in the slums and related poor communities created as a result of dislocation due to urbanization and gentrification.

7. Conclusions and Recommendations

Masking traditions were and still are integrated into community life in several parts of Africa. It is the essence of their cross-genre and collective cultural production that this text alludes to in terms of simulation, and reproduction in the artist's serial facemask project. Most probably, today's artist needs an expanded view of art media and their conditions of production and dissemination in order to transform contemporary experience. We have argued that an appropriate motif which has the capacity to embody or reflect the complex workings of today's theatre of aesthetic infrastructure is the mask. That the artist employed its connotations as the organising trope, motif and principle for his work is needless to say. Here, respectively, he considered the mask motif as, among others, a sign or image of technical reproducibility, an object which occupies a unique space among other objects and people, and a distinctive function or gesture of dislocation or subversion of conventions.

The project also embodies multiple techniques from the archival past which survive as a constellation of dormant fossils in the present but bearing signs which already anticipate future transformations. Further research into other masking practices on the continent, the appraisal and adaptation of their collectivist means of cultural production and spitting, their improvisations of diverse media and contexts, seems expedient. The outcomes of the artist's present project seem to point in this direction. They suggest pathways of artistic investigation and production that could transform aspects of Ghana's contemporary art essentially unmoored by a liberal-humanist and capitalist ideology which privileges the autonomous and medium-specific object of an unassisted artist. The hegemony of traditional medium-specificity and the unassisted artist-genius in art production deprives or censors art from its potential transformation by machines, by emergent media or by a collective of producers. Caught in conformist this milieu, it seems insightful to keep reflecting on Ezeulu's advice to his son and on Benjamin's caution to keep reconfiguring one's thoughts in anticipation of the contingencies of our time in which "forms are being melted down, a process in which many of the contrasts in terms of which we have been accustomed to think may lose their relevance". And for this, art is no exception.

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Endnotes

Our use of the term “theatre” is used to mark participatory and embodied experience in both art production and spectatorship. On the side of spectatorship it is closely related to the embodied experience of site-specific work and also to Michael Fried’s description of theatricality in *Art and Objecthood* (1967). Miwon Kwon describes the theatricality associated with site-specificity as “in a sensory immediacy of spatial extension and temporal duration (what Michael Fried derisively characterized as theatricality), rather than instantaneously perceived in a visual epiphany by a disembodied eye” (2002, p. 11). Achebe captures this embodied experience of presence and duration succinctly in Ezeulu’s admonition; “If you want to see it well, you do not stand in one place”.

Mining the Museum was a resampling of the Maryland Historical Society Collection (1992).

This first-hand account is an edited version adapted from the artist’s PhD thesis *Masking beyond the Masquerade: On Reproduction and Simulation of African Mask Forms* (April, 2017).