

## Ibrahim Mahama's Immersive Taxidermies at Play — An Epitaph from a Living-Dead

karĩ'kachä seid'ou<sup>1</sup>

### Abstract

Ibrahim Mahama's corpus of massive installations in city spaces constitutes a single node in a complex ecology of politically-committed and socially-engaged projects. An expanded social practice of this breadth and depth cannot but oscillate between the dualities of spectacle and participation, if not beyond. Yet this detail has been missed by most art world commentators who focus on the visual spectacle which Mahama's installations seem to offer at first glance. Such reductionist interpretations tend to rob the artist's work of the nuanced life and social forms embodied in his practice. This three-part paper, with each fragment introduced or concluded by reminiscent African proverbs, meditates on Mahama's complex dramaturgy and affirmative social formatting. It is an insider's critical perspective written in an epigrammatic and allusive literary style. Its structure reflects the patchwork and archival methods Mahama adopts for his jute sack installations. The paper argues that Mahama's projects are epitaphs to precarious labour and disposable life. Thus, they are meditations on the imminent death of populations disposable within the hegemonic Neo-Liberal capitalist framework. Yet these epitaphs or "immersive taxidermies" are also Mahama's means of testing his emancipatory vision for reverse gentrification of encroached commons. As a corollary, Mahama invents a parallel exchange economy channelled 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.

**Keywords:** Taxidermies, jute sack, labour, precarity, epitaph, living-dead, Neo-liberal 2.0, Commons

I was impressed too by the vast wall-hanging of Ibrahim Mahama (Ghana), a gloomy, oppressive, Arte Povera decoration of old coal sacks sewn together, worn, torn and filthy. But again I missed the political and social argument and saw instead pathetic beauty, a beauty that could so readily be adapted to the stage. It could be a backdrop to Wagner's Ring or any example of Italian verismo (Sewell, 2014).

Without the benefit of hindsight on Ibrahim Mahama's public projects, his massive and immersive installations, his politically-committed practice, and his socially-engaged projects in Ghana, controversial and conservative critic Brian Sewell<sup>1</sup> does not simply miss "the political and social argument"; he misses an important point about form, too. Confronted with the jute-sack installation inside one of the Saatchi rooms for the "Pangaea" group exhibition (Figure 1), he stops cold at what is obstinately present to the eye. He reduces the import of Mahama's work to an autonomous spectacle to behold, to a mute, optical and wholly manifest surface to be contemplated; simply, what can be seen at a glance. He turns a blind eye to the more nuanced conditions of Mahama's expanded practice: his "frameless framing" of lived situations and his ironic recoding of time; his maddening repetition of gesture, motif and material; his transitory archives of surplus, excess and residue; his "collaborative critique"<sup>2</sup> and social formatting of the Commons, and his witty alchemy.

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Figure 1. Ibrahim Mahama. *Pangaea: New Art from Africa and Latin America*. Saatchi Gallery, London. 2014. Photo courtesy Ibrahim Mahama.

One comes across a similar slip in judgement in Danish artist Av Kristoffer Ørum's "A Didactic Spectacle" (Ørum, 2016)<sup>3</sup>, a critique of Mahama's "Nyhavn's Kpalang" project (Figure 2) at the harbour 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. To Sewell, it is Arte Povera and its haunting "raw material" aesthetic which come to mind. Just two years after the Saatchi show, an exhibition would explore parallels between Mahama's jute sack installations and Alberto Burri's "sacchi" corpus<sup>4</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 20<sup>th</sup>-century painting and sculpture, he hardly takes shelter behind Post-War cemeteries of artistic brand names, while not being oblivious of or averse to it<sup>5</sup>.

One could plausibly stand this historicist logic on its head if one considers Borges's famed maxim that "every writer [artist] creates his own precursors" through "work [that] modifies our conception of the past, as it will modify the future" (Borges, 1960, p. 192). In this sense, Tàpies, Burri, AbEx, Arte Povera and kin might be seen to have "plagiarised" by anticipation from the future, that is, pointing towards the ethos of contemporary art specific to Mahama's vision (cf. Bayard, 2005; Bayard 2009; Žizek, 2015). This reading affirms, more than the closure of historicist readings, an openness of the past towards the future. And this future, always-already, has retroversive effect on how the past would be evaluated. Meanwhile, the somewhat sympathetic and acerbic readings of Sewell and Ørum, respectively, converge on another point; the one imagines Mahama's work as a decorative backdrop for a Wagnerian stage<sup>6</sup> while the other typifies it as forming "a decorative backdrop for the hordes of tourists that flock to Nyhavn".

Clearly, more is at stake here. Read in a new light, the beauty or significance of Mahama's work could not simply be situated in its fringe propensity to "be adapted to a stage" or to become a "backdrop" to an opera or any established genre.



Figure 2. Ibrahim Mahama. "Nyhavn's Kpalang [Nyhavn's Skin], 2012-2016". Charlottenborg Palace, Copenhagen. Photo courtesy Ibrahim Mahama.

Rather, it is the "stage" itself (Figure 4a-4d); a sordid but solemn and unscripted "opera", a "verismo" embracing the crisis, emptiness, and hopelessness of our present age of austerity and universalized indebtedness<sup>7</sup> as the site, medium and subject through which to think the ruinous world anew (Žizek, 2017, Lazzarato, 2007/2012).

There is no photograph, film, or section of Mahama's work which is not already a tableau of some sort. Even the somewhat spectacular constant of his constellations, the sea of threadbare industrial-grade jute sacks,<sup>8</sup> already constitutes a stage, a stage of departed actors. Here, these walkthrough/see-through firewalls of coarse plain-weave patchworks, bearing traces of their previous use and repair by successive owners, and of precarious labour<sup>9</sup>—their detritus of braided twigs and disused plastics; their excess of aluminium tags, stamped inscriptions<sup>10</sup> and hand-rendered signatures<sup>11</sup> (Figure 3)—are presented as forensic witnesses of the exploitative mechanisms of global and local economic processes. The artist's working and thought process also involves inscribing the audience into the production process itself, in his words, "patching different spaces together", and "re-establishing dialogues that were suspended or [had gone] into crisis". He takes residues from the failed past and unrealized futures to be present in the processes and outcomes of his work.<sup>12</sup>



Figure 3. Ibrahim Mahama. "Labour of Many" (detail). Plain weave jute, aluminium tags, hand-stitched patchwork, stamped and hand-rendered inscriptions. Photo by Dave Southwood.

Why not attempt to complicate Sewell's reading a bit, in such a way that Wagner's "Ring" and its cognates are always-already inscribed in Mahama's *mise en abyme*? Why not flip over Ørum's reading; in which sense, the hordes of tourists, more likely than not, taking selfies, become actors on Mahama's "Brechtian" stage<sup>13</sup> *en plein air* (Figure 3, 4a-4d)? Would we not then have to invoke here the good old Lacanian mantra that the picture being in my eye also means "I am in the picture too"<sup>14</sup>, already framed by it" (Lacan, 1973, p. 89; cf. Lacan, 1979, p. 63; Dolar, 2015, p. 129)? It seems to me that this is what Mahama's public interventions evoke—the deactivation, rather than synthesis, of the formal tensions between spectacle and participation, in other words, making detachment and empathy, or distraction and contemplation, coincide with remainder. By this near coincidence of living conditions and autonomous artistic form, Mahama transforms actualities into possibilities. He attempts to render the capitalist conditions of actual life, work, and factual labour inoperative<sup>15</sup>, and in the process hopes to liberate their inherent political potential. When pressed further, inoperativity tears through the fabric of practical reality and opens up spaces for the "impossible that happens" (Zupančič, 2000). In this way, to appropriate Agamben, the artist maps out emancipatory routes from "bare life" to "forms-of-life"<sup>16</sup>.

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*S3 wo tanfo sua w'asa a na w'akyea ne pa* (Ghanaian proverb: Asante Twi). A foe imitates your dance with a deliberate contortion in the hip.



Figure 4a, 4b, 4c. Ibrahim Mahama. “Occupation and Occupation”. Walkthrough installation, Adum-Kejetia Railway Footbridge Project. Kumasi, 2014. From “Occupation Series”. Figure 4d. Ibrahim Mahama. “Material Effects”, Eli and Edythe Broad Art Museum in East Lansing, 2015. Mahama’s installation offers a complex form of dramaturgy; it is the stage in itself, more than an auxiliary backdrop. Photos courtesy Ibrahim Mahama.

“Only the curses of the departed are to be feared” (Iyaloja, “Mother of the market” in Wole Soyinka’s “Death and the King’s Horseman”)

*Se ɔtwe aankɔ ayie korua a, ne nboma kɔ* (Ghanaian Proverb: Asante Twi): Even if the antelope absents himself from a funeral, his skin gets there all the same.

## II

An allegorical image comes to mind when the decommissioned jute sacks—the shed skins (Figure 5a, 5b)<sup>17</sup> of global agro-commodity trade, denied their visas to cross the Atlantic after transporting cocoa beans<sup>18</sup> and other cash crops to the harbours, overworked by local grain merchants until they are unfit to store or transport food any longer, over-exploited by local charcoal traders to the point of their failure, emptied at this point of their second death and exchanged for Mahama’s newer sacks on offer, sewn and patched together into a giant tapestry—encase over-scaled city structures as their new skins. It is the image of giant and immersive taxidermies<sup>19</sup> in urban space, a return of the repressed—an intrusion of the city by the living dead, by the breaths of ancestors in the whispers of the swaying jute sacks<sup>20</sup>.



Figure 5a. “Maria (Maria Fuseini Awabu). Figure 5b. Ibrahim Mahama “Azara”. Mahama draws parallels between the skins of “porters of goods” (tattooed skins of Ghana’s women porters) and “vessels of goods” (the “moulted” and signed jute sacks) in this series of photographs<sup>21</sup>. Photos courtesy Ibrahim Mahama.

In a sense, taxidermies are memento mori. They are post-apocalyptic dioramas or vanitas still life objects installed in real-time and in literal space. Taxidermies are archives and residual representations that both mourn and affirm lives already lived through their exposure to the threat of death, by their subjection to mortification; hence, they are like gravestones marking the absence of populations emptied of life<sup>22</sup>. They are metonyms of actual lives already lived; lives potentially emptied of political substance. They are doppelgangers of “bare life” deposited by the global capitalist apparatus. Among other things, 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>23</sup> (cf. Malabou, 2012), phantoms or ghosts reading their own epitaphs.

Mahama’s architectural taxidermies in jute sack are monuments of “moulted” skins, of absent bodies<sup>24</sup>, of “death on display”. They are like giant *écorchés* (Figure 6)<sup>25</sup> who got back their lacerated skins but who return our gaze as monstrous spectacles – as ciphers of the unhomely<sup>26</sup>. Through a seeming “new lamp for old lamp” transaction, Mahama contributes to the “moulting” process by exchanging newer sacks—bought fresh from post-harbour sack dealers—for worn out and mended charcoal-bearing sacks<sup>27</sup> 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 or rejection. 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. This scheme echoes a vicious cycle endemic to capital itself, like a system paying the plaintiff with her own money (Zupancic, 2018). It is important to Mahama that the “moulted 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 re-routing the capitalist conditions of commodity exchange and value production<sup>28</sup>, he seems to extricate himself from an enduring image, the stereotype of African artists of residual and accumulative practices as nothing more than bricoleurs.



Figure 6. *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. Courtesy US National Library of Medicine, Creative commons under Public Domain Mark 1.0.

Typically, taxidermies are taut and opaque to the armature and stuffing material inside; but Mahama's structural and immersive taxidermies only seem opaque from a distance; on a more intimate encounter, they seem rather gauzy and sinewy, sutured, punctured, obliging viewers to see through them from either side. Thus, they only pretend to conceal what is inside them. As they dance in synch with the rustle of breezes and soft winds, they also partially reveal their skeletons, barricades, and passageways inside from time to time. From the outside, they seem to dissolve or to morph the obstinate structure beneath. When the hand-stitched skins get soaked in rain, the parched palette of bleached umbers, wash-out and fading charcoal greys, ochres, siennas, and rust, give way to aggressively mournful and shadowy tonalities; vertical pleats multiply along the horizontals of the gridded sutures<sup>29</sup>, there is increase in convexity as structures underneath appear to swell forth. And more silently swollen, more mournful and monstrous they seem if it is twilight or dawn.

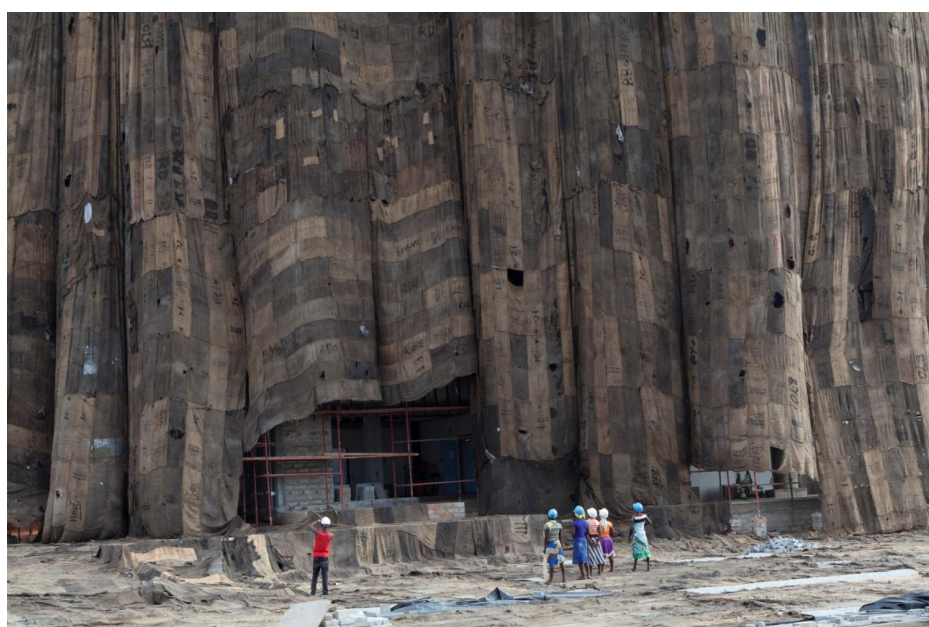


Figure 7a & 7b. Ibrahim Mahama. “Civil Aviation” Project, Airport, Accra, 2014, an iteration of the “Occupation Series”. Photos courtesy Ibrahim Mahama.

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, 1995/1998). 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 neo-liberalization of capital and its unbridled globalization of markets, the zenith of the late 20<sup>th</sup>-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 which administers economic and labour 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>30</sup> are structurally coded into the “dynamic of accumulation and expansion”, that is, into the very nature and heart of capitalism (cf. Jameson, 2011, p. 149; Lazzarato, 2007/2012). 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 Neo-Liberal 2.0 Capitalist form, history seems to have been made; for the first-time capitalism echoes the form of precarious subjectivity itself<sup>31</sup>. While Aaron Schuster sees in this short circuit between precarity and capitalism the end of an epoch, Žižek sees in the contemporary

precarious subject the exception and surplus of capitalist universality<sup>32</sup>, the embodiment of universal freedom and capitalist inoperativity through the new uses they are inclined to put their bodies to (Schuster 2016; Zizek, 2017). In Zizek's estimation,

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 (2017).

To be sure, there is no star in Mahama's dramaturgy even if his sanctimony around Ghana's women migrant porters 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" (Figure 13a). The Squatted Prosfyka project<sup>33</sup> in Athens for documenta 14 creates an expanded image of populations potentially subject to global economic precarity (Figure 8a, 8b). Here the levelling and de-psychologising of social classes, races, and gender in the activity of hemming jute sacks together at the 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 27th May, 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 reorientation to the relations of production (Mahama & Ndikung, 2017).

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.

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*Baype an taybe an tanta mueb, tay sur yif baype ee runnie or berab* (Temne Proverb, Sierra Leone): When a leopard is doing its chase, the prey does not stop to ask if it is a male or female leopard.

*Dodoɔ funu mmɔn* (Ghanaian Proverb: Asante Twi): Corpses of the multitude do not smell.

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Figure 8a. and 8b. Ibrahim Mahama. “Check Point Prosfygika. 1934–2034. 2016–2017 (2017)”. Performance with ready-made labour and ready-made site of production at Syntagma Square, Athens. documenta 14, 2017. Photos courtesy Ibrahim Mahama.

*Wode sebɔ nboma sua adwinni a, na w'avie* (Ghanaian Proverb: Asante Twi): The apprentice who re-heads drums with leopard skin has already mastered his trade.

*Ananse a ɔmpɛ anwene bi anwene na ɔnwene kwan tempɔn mu* (Ghanaian Proverb: Asante Twi): The spider who does not really want to indulge in the craft of weaving, weaves her web in the busy pathway.

### III

At the 2015 Venice Biennale, Mahama's giant taxidermies came to the attention of a worldwide audience. With the “Out of Bounds” project<sup>34</sup>, the last iteration of the “Occupation Series”, the young Ghanaian artist had lent skin to skinless medieval masonry; the giant écorchés of the Arsenale had got their flayed skins back. 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>35</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” (Figure 4a, 4b & 4c; Figure 7a & 7b; Figure 11a, 11b, 11c, 11d & 11e), prior to the Venetian epic event curated by Okwui Enwezor and his team.

After “Out of Bounds” contemporary imaging, screen and cartographic technologies such as drone and google map navigation would become key in the prospecting, mapping, and documentation of sites and projects, and in his supplementary 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 and abyme* projects in which the artist uses jute sack taken from all major public installations till date. Examples are the “National Theater Project” (Figure 9a, 9b), the “Great Hall Project” (Figure 9c, 9d) in the Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology (KNUST), Kumasi and “Check Point Sekondi Loco, 1901–2030. 2016–2017” Torwache, Kassel, and the Porta Venezia gateway installation in Milan (2019) (Figure 10).



Figure 9a, 9b. Ibrahim Mahama. Mallam Dadoo 1992-2016. National Theater Project, Accra, 2016.

Figure 9c, 9d. KNUST Great Hall Project, 2018. Commissioned by Vice-Chancellor Kwesi Obiri-Danso for the KNUST 52<sup>nd</sup> Congregation Ceremony. Photos courtesy Ibrahim Mahama.



Figure 10. “A friend”. Giant taxidermies at the Porta Venetia Gateway, Milan, 2019. Photos courtesy Ibrahim Mahama



Figure 11a, 11b. Mallam Ata Charcoal Market Project. [“Moulted skins” of the global agro-commodity and regional charcoal trade]. Photos courtesy Ibrahim Mahama. Accra, 2012.



Figure 11c. KNUST Museum Project, 2013. Figure 11d, 11e. Adum Central Market Railway Footbridge Project. From “Occupation Series”, Kumasi, 2013. Photos courtesy Ibrahim Mahama.

The “Occupation Series” and subsequent projects, conceal a social practice of commoning<sup>36</sup> under the veil of spectacular installations. The re-purposed jute sacks, metonyms of absent bodies, and their dissipated labour, frame real-time living conditions in the city space<sup>37</sup>. A complex dramaturgy ensues. The interventions challenge the various means by which exclusive property rights, centralized state regulation, and neo-liberal economic forces encroach on the city’s collective commons and transform them into private property and gentrified public spaces and goods. In this somewhat blue-collar phase of the young artist’s practice, he organised modest labour forces towards transforming Ghana’s privatized commons<sup>38</sup> or state-administered public spaces and infrastructure into transitory and open-source art production and exhibition sites. The “readymade labour” of the city’s surplus populations came into creative dialogue with the city’s “readymade-armature” (Figure 12a, 12b). Besides doubling as framework for installations and exhibition sites, the “readymade-armatures” also function as sites of production for new work (Figure 13a, 13b), 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.



Figure 12a. Ibrahim Mahama. “No Parking, No Stopping, No Loading”. Abandoned Affordable Housing Project, Asokore Mampong. “Exchange Exchanger” 2016. Figure 12b. Abandoned Nkrumah-Era Silo Structure, Ho. Photos courtesy Ibrahim Mahama.



Figure 13a. Core group of young women head porters and North-to-South economic migrants whom Mahama regards as collaborators on his projects. “Beposo Bridge Project (1936-2016)”. Figure 13b. Readymade labour-readymade sites of production, KNUST Catholic Church. Photos courtesy Ibrahim Mahama.

The mournful jute sack tapestries, sewn by the hands of the “readymade labourers”, mediated between these darkening and paling shadows of urban commons<sup>39</sup>. And the giant taxidermies were born. As if responding ambiguously to Tania Bruguera’s call to return Duchamp’s urinal from the art museum to the washroom, these location-specific interventions continued to function as sites for improvised living. However, they did not dispense with their aesthetic form as alienated spectacles or with their alchemical form as contingent commodities in the international art market.

Also 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 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) (Figure 14a, 14b, 14c & 14d) and the Red Clay Studio Complex (15a, 15b, 15c, 15d, 15e) in Tamale in northern Ghana. Through them, Mahama has exercised full private property rights by negotiating with state agents, corporate bodies, private owners, and traditional custodians of land as a paradoxical means by which to re-common or reverse-gentrify public spaces, goods and social services facing threats of private encroachment and gentrification. In most cases, the post-colonial State under Neo-Liberal pressure has construed public infrastructure, goods, and services as cash cows, failing which they get divested or abandoned to decay.



Figure 14a. Ibrahim Mahama. Savannah Center for Contemporary Art (SCCA-Tamale) is a project space, exhibition and research hub, cultural repository, publishing house, and artists' residency dedicated to retrospective exhibitions on 20<sup>th</sup> century Ghanaian and African modernism in art, design and, technology. Figure 14 b, 14c, 14d. Inaugural Exhibition at SCCA Tamale (2019): "Galle Winston Kofi Dawson<sup>40</sup>: In Pursuit of something 'Beautiful', perhaps..." Curator: Bernard Akoi-Jackson. Photos courtesy Ibrahim Mahama and SCCA-Tamale.



Figure 15a, 15b, 15c, 15d, 15e. Ibrahim Mahama. “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 centre for renewable energy. [Project under construction]. Photos courtesy Ibrahim Mahama.

Thus, abandoned silos, industrial and estate projects, especially, of the Nkrumah era have also become sites, muses and means for a new series of redemptive infrastructure projects.

Meanwhile, in 2015, when the derelict jute sack tapestries, metonyms of the “left behind”, made their ironic entry into Venice as triumphant icons of alienated labour 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 labour conditions peculiar to the Arsenale of antiquity, the largest pre-industrial “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>41</sup>. But more significantly, it was impossible to miss the walkthrough, between and within the nearly animate installation because it had flanked the entry-exit corridor which 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”; and neither on Enwezor, the curator, who bade all to reflect on the “current disquiet that pervades our time”<sup>42</sup>.

Sharing something with Francis Alÿs’ *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. And for this “chorus of idle footsteps”<sup>43</sup>, detours are out of bounds.

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*Dua a eβen na etwie* (Ghanaian Proverb: Asante Twi): Closer tree branches rub against each other while their trunks still stand apart.



Figure 16a, 16b. Ibrahim Mahama. “Out of Bounds”. Walkthrough installation allusive to the propitiatory walk in “Dante’s Inferno”. Venice Biennale, 2015. Last iteration of “Occupation Series”. Photo courtesy Ibrahim Mahama

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## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Brian Sewell (1931–2015) is the British critic who dismissed artists from Euro-Western antipodes as deserving nothing more "than a footnote in the history of modern art in the 20th century".

See Hassan and Olu (2001) for Sewell's racist goof.

<sup>2</sup>Theaster Gates has used the term "critique through collaboration" to describe his social practice.

<sup>3</sup>See also a counter-critique of *A Didactic Spectacle* by the curators of the exhibition *An Age of Our Own Making* which featured *Nyhavn's Kpalang* in Ndikung et al (2016).

<sup>4</sup> Refer to Ibrahim Mahama's exhibition "Food Distribution Corporation", K21 Kunstsammlung, Dusseldorf, Germany. "Food Distribution Corporation" was an immersive and site-within-site work which 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 Ibrahim Mahama's reflections on Alberto Burri's oeuvre in the video "#32: Alberto Burri im zeitgenöss. Kontext: Ibrahim Mahama" [# 32: Alberto Burri in Contemporary. Context: Ibrahim Mahama]. Published May, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cgdTG9wmt-w>. The video was made to accompany "Food Distribution Corporation".

<sup>5</sup> Ibrahim 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 non-proprietary means of making and distributing art. Besides a solid treatment in post-war 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, Piere 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. Currently, Ibrahim Mahama is pursuing a practice-based PhD with blaxTARLINES.

<sup>6</sup> Sewell's reading of Mahama's installation as a themed backdrop for stage is somewhat realized [without Mahama's input] in Qudus Onikeku's choreographic project "We almost forgot", staged in the Lagos Live Festival. However, that is a far cry from Mahama's vision. Here, the "grimy" Mahamaesque curtain attracts a reviewer's attention thus:

The backdrop of the stage is one of old sacks of the sort used in the import of grains from sunny climes, across it in a dearth of order, unstructured scrawls in blue paint as those that can be observed on the tunnel walls and side streets of low income metropolitan cities, establishing a gritty expectation for the tone of this evening's presentation.

See Peter (2016), "A review of Qudus Onikeku's "We almost forgot"".

<sup>7</sup> For Zizek's psychoanalytical reading (2017), "the age of austerity" and its symptom of "universal indebtedness" is the latest phase of capitalism. This phase is signalled in the global north "by events like September 11 and the 2007–2008 financial crisis", the EU debt crisis, and in the global south by the rise of non-Western new powers such as China. In this phase, precariousness is "a universal feature of "human nature".

<sup>8</sup>The importation of Ghana's jute sacks from Asia, a recurrent line in several texts on Mahama's installations, is partly due to the collapse of the Kumasi Jute Factory. Established in 1962 by the Nkrumah Republican regime, the factory stopped operation in 1991 when under Neo-Liberal economic pressure, the state closed some factories and put some on divestiture. The close-down of the jute factory displaced over 2000 workers and put an end to



hessian farming in Ghana. Attempts to revamp and revive the factory are ongoing. Interestingly, the Jute Factory premises have yet to become a site for Mahama's installations.

<sup>9</sup>Ibrahim Mahama forms labour collectives with Ghana's precarious workers based in Accra for his projects. Prominent among them are young women migrants, predominantly from Northern Ghana, who temporarily work in the more affluent South as head porters. There is also a workforce of men he employs as project assistants, scouts, merchants, drivers, scaffolders, installers and labourers on project basis. Mahama regards a core group of the women head porters and fewer male contributors as collaborators on his projects. His relation with the collaborators is beyond casual. With them he has worked on a series of projects and, through them, injected social programmes into his practice.

<sup>10</sup>Industrially stamped inscriptions are about origin, destination and evidence of standardization. Respectively, the typical inscriptions are "Ghana Cocoa Board", "Produce of Ghana", "Vegetable Oil Treatment (VOT) and standard marks stenciled or screen printed in indelible black ink on the cocoa-carrying bags.

<sup>11</sup> The hand-rendered marks on the sacks also echo tattoos on the skins of migrant workers. Mahama's early photographs explored this homology. The culture of hand-marking containers and vessels of food commodity is also common among tomato merchants in Ghana, principally women, who mark their wooden tomato boxes with their initials and abstract designs in black and polychrome. Among households in working class "compound houses" in cities, women get their names and initials marked on aluminum pots, bowls and pans.

<sup>12</sup> Starting from "Exchange Exchanger: 1957-2057", Mahama hints at this juggling with time in his counter-factual dating which appears in the titling of his works.

<sup>13</sup> Ibrahim Mahama's stage is Brechtian in the sense that he defamiliarizes the familiar.

<sup>14</sup> In the French original, "*Les quatre concepts fondamentaux de la psychanalyse*" ed. J.-A. Miller (Paris: Seuil 1973), p. 89, Jacques Lacan writes: "*Le tableau, certes, est dans mon oeil. Mais moi, je suis dans le tableau.*"

Mladen Dolar translates this as: "The picture, certainly, is in my eye. But I am in the picture". See Mladen Dolar, "Anamorphosis", (2015, p. 129). Certainly, Alan Sheridan is in error when he translates this as "The picture, certainly, is in my eye. But I am not in the picture." See "The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis" (New York: Norton 1979), p. 63. Also see Mladen Dolar's comment on Sheridan's error in "Anamorphosis", (2015, p. 129).

<sup>15</sup> "Inoperativity" is means without ends. See Agamben (2015, p. 94). Inoperativity can be made analogous to what Ranciere refers to as "an original effect", i.e. the political effect of aesthetic experience. It is "an original disjunction" or "the suspension of any direct relationship between cause and effect". It is "first is an effect of des-identification". Its community is "a community of des-identified persons". See Jacques Ranciere, (2009, pp. 72-73).

Agamben suggests that "In inoperativity, the classless society is already present in capitalist society, just as, according to Benjamin, shards of messianic time are present in history in possibly infamous and risible forms". "[I]noperativity is a poem of poetry, a painting of painting, a praxis of praxis. Rendering inoperative the works of language, the arts, politics, and economy, it shows what a human body can do, opens it to a new possible use", (Agamben, 2015, p. 94).

<sup>16</sup> If "bare life" or "homo sacer" is human life separated from or deprived of its political substance, or of its form, "forms-of-life" is inoperative life. It is factual life transformed to potentials or possibilities. It is the deconstructed life, life inseparable from its form; "a life in which it is never possible to isolate and keep distinct something like a bare life". See (Agamben, 2015, p. 207).

<sup>17</sup>At the point of their failure as vessels, the jute sacks are surplus, like the shed or moulted skins of reptiles and other animals.

In Dagbani, the language which Ibrahim Mahama and other Dagombas of Ghana speak, "kpalang", the word for "sack" is polysemic. It is also used to refer to "skin", "body" and "vessel". In a 2016 interview with Lotte Løvholm, Mahama he refers to the signatures appearing on the jute sacks as repeating the marks that appear on skins of Ghana's human precariat:

"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".

<sup>18</sup> Ghana is the second largest cocoa exporter in the world.

<sup>19</sup> The Greek roots of "taxidermy", "taxis" and "derma" translate as "to move" the "skin" or "arrangement of skin".

<sup>20</sup>See Birago Diop's poem "Breaths" translated from the French original "Le Souffle des Ancêtres" in "*Leurres et Lueurs*", (Paris: Edition Présence Africaine, 1960).

<sup>21</sup> Ibrahim Mahama pays homage to migrant porters and project collaborators in this series of photographs.

<sup>22</sup> 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". Tony Myers, *Slavoj Žižek* (London: Routledge, 2003, p. 83).

See also Jacques Lacan, *Écrits: A Selection* (trans. Alan Sheridan), (London: Routledge, 1977/2005, p. 126); Mladen Dolar, 'Cogito as the Subject of the Unconscious', in Renata Salecl and Slavoj Žižek (red.): *Cogito and the Unconscious, SIC 2*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998, p. 11–40).

<sup>23</sup>Malabou's "new wounded", the post-traumatic subject, embodies the image of the living dead. According to Joan Copjec, 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".

<sup>24</sup>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. Anthony Vidler's Eurocentric typology projects the human body into architecture and urban planning in these forms:

- i. The perfect Vitruvian body (Classical/Renaissance).
- ii. Abstracted bodily sensations corresponding to healthy states of mind (Modern).
- iii. The enchanted or animated body – the morphed, disfigured or dismembered body (Postmodern animism). See Vidler (1990, pp. 3-10).

In all these stages, it is the notion of a "body present" that is projected. However, Mahama writes the "absent body", the "departed body" or the "the body disposed by the late capitalist apparatus back onto the built environment.

<sup>25</sup>*Écorchés* are bodies without skin. The French word literally means "flayed". *Écorchés* were popular with Renaissance era artists like Leonardo da Vinci and physician Andreas Vesalius who dissected cadavers and made anatomical illustrations of figures flayed of their skin. Andreas Vesalius is famous for his seven volume *De humani corporis fabrica*, a 1543 book of *écorchés* in allegorical poses in landscapes.

<sup>26</sup>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).

<sup>27</sup>After carrying charcoal, the sacks end their tenure to carry food grain in a similar way in which surplus populations such as precarious workers are rendered unemployed or unemployable for specific tasks but paradoxically become the bearers of new forms of labour.

<sup>28</sup>It is easy to see the artist extending this alchemical logic into other markets [art and non-art]. For example, developing sophisticated schemes with the blue-chip art market, issuing bonds to financial institutions as a means, medium and subject of his interventionist projects, etc. are some of the possible means of re-routing market logic. An artist co-traveller who employs such alchemical modes in socially-engaged projects is Theaster Gates.

<sup>29</sup>The rigid, pristine, mute, complete and immutable modernist grid appears softened, punctured, stained, hyperbolic, expressive and under construction in Mahama's jute sack installations as well as his 'rigid' object installations. However, the modernist grid, no matter the size, scale or number of units is, as Krauss (1979, p. 60) notes, a fragment "arbitrarily cropped from an infinitely larger fabric". Thus, Mahama's patchwork tapestry continues to explore this emblem of 20<sup>th</sup> century modernism in both its centrifugal (beyond frame) and centripetal manifestations.

<sup>30</sup>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 "precarariat" has displaced the traditional "proletariat" in the new capitalist economy (2012, p. xiv).

<sup>31</sup>That labour is fundamentally precarious took capitalism in its austerity phase to disclose. In this scenario, labour 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'". See Bauman (2005, p. 3). Also quoted in Bourriaud (2009).

<sup>32</sup>Jacques Ranciere 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 thus the struggle for emancipation, begins when the *demos* themselves act to affirm the universal premise that "we are all equal". See Harney and Moten's idea of undercommons (2013) is echoed here.

<sup>33</sup>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 Prosfygika tenement. While there, he was involved in mobilizing funds to restore tenement facilities, attended Anarchist meetings and participated in their struggles against co-ordinated attacks by cops, Neo-Nazis and members of the Golden Dawn. The Syntagma Square collaborative performance was an extension of the Squatted Prosfygika Project.

Ibrahim Mahama was also signatory to the respective letters written to Athens Mayor, Giorgos Kamini, and Greece 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.

<sup>34</sup>"Out of Bounds" was Mahama's first outdoor public installation in Europe. An artist book publishing project was launched with contributions from the blaxTARLINES publications team and edited by Osei Bonsu, a young curator. Refer to Bonsu (2015).

<sup>35</sup>To paint the gloomy picture of immersion in a dark boiling pitch, the punishment reserved for swindlers, Dante refers to the Arsenale in his *The Divine Comedy*. The great poet had visited the Venice Arsenale in early 1321 and had witnessed the legendary shipyard where “unsound vessels” were under repair. Today, a plaque in the Arsenale commemorates Dante’s visit with these lines excerpted 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 recaulks  
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).

<sup>36</sup> In the analysis of labour relations, important insight has been gained since Henri Lefebvre shifted focus from the factory environment (Marx) to life in the city. “Rights to the city” means fundamental rights to the reservoir of common wealth produced and owned by all. It is in this vein that Hardt and Negri (2009, p. 250) describe the urban environment as “a factory for the production of the common”. Mahama’s alchemical projects offer proposals for making common again, the public spheres that have been encroached, gentrified or left in ruins.

<sup>37</sup> In a 2016 interview, Mahama 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.

<sup>38</sup> According to David Harvey, Capital ruthlessly feeds upon and extracts rents “from the common life that others have produced”. *Rebel Cities*, p. 78.

<sup>39</sup> I appropriate this phrase from Birago Diop’s “Breaths”: “The dead are not gone forever/They are in the paling shadows/And in the darkening shadows...”. David Harvey also refers to public spaces, public goods and other urban commons as the “shadow-form” of urbanization. See David Harvey, *Rebel Cities*, p. 80. I extend Diop’s and Harvey’s “shadow” trope to encompass precarious human inhabitants of the city whose labour conditions are encoded into the city infrastructure and into Mahama’s projects.

<sup>40</sup> GWK Dawson is a Ghanaian modernist painter trained in Kumasi and the Slade in the 1960s.

<sup>41</sup> 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.

<sup>42</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-coloured valley of the “Inferno”, towards “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). 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”.

<sup>43</sup> I owe this expression to de Certeau (2011), p. 97).