

“*Dis No Be Art*”¹: Reflections on Popular Media Art Exhibitions, Value and Class in
Contemporary Urban Accra, Ghana²

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Abstract

Accra, Ghana’s capital, now boasts of significant numbers of art galleries and other art viewing spaces. These specific infrastructures showcase diverse works of established Ghanaian artists including Larry Otoo and Kofi Agosor and emerging artists such as Bright Ackwerh, Serge Clottey, Amoako Boafo, Kwesi Botchway, Otis Quaicoe, and Yaw Owusu. In these spaces, there is a near absence of popular visual media works. Within this inspection, and my active resolve to extend my teaching of popular media beyond the classroom, I have drawn on my collections on Ghanaian popular media artifacts to curate ‘corrective exhibitions’ in Accra. In this paper, I discuss the inspiration behind my collection practice around popular media artifacts. I also detail some of the critical motivations underpinning my exhibitions around hand-painted movie posters, barbershop and beauty salon signages, political cartoons, and a wooden sculpture.

Keywords

Ghanaian popular culture, creativity, multiple intelligences, popular media, barbershop/beauty signs

Author bio

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Introduction

The literature on popular arts in Ghana points to a significant research output on the subject (for example see: Cole 1997; Collins 2018; Donkor 2016; Gilbert 2000, 2006; Meyer 2015; Ross 2004, 2014; Shipley 2013). Yet, my profound interest in attending exhibitions in Accra since 2012 reveals a near absence of popular cultural art forms³ at these locations. Although I have not interviewed gallery owners regarding their motives on this matter, one can surmise, at least, a key reason. That is, most galleries in Accra (as elsewhere) are simultaneously commercial and elite locations, where collectors and art enthusiasts meet to sample or purchase ‘serious’ works. Thus galleries, unless solidly committed to highlighting these works, do not, as a rule, showcase these visual art forms, which include barbershop signages, obituary posters, paintings of memes featuring Ghanaian personalities, Mami Wata paintings, and paintings of famous African musicians. An exception to the above is my curation of Gallery 1957’s exhibition (April 12 – June 7, 2018) titled *Almost True*. The event featured the works of visual satirists Michael Soi (Kenya) and Bright Ackwerh (Ghana). Another notable exception is Nubuke Foundation’s exhibition, *Suɔmɔ Hi Fe Shika* (March 6 - April 17, 2021), which showcased Ghanaian hand-painted movie posters, barbershops, and beauty salon signs from my collections. Through my initial observations of this bias against exhibiting popular media artifacts in galleries in Accra, I activated my resolve to extend my teaching beyond the classroom by organizing non-commercial exhibitions sourced from my collections. Here, the goal was to sensitize audiences to such popular artifacts’ cultural, intellectual, and pedagogical value. This short piece details the key motivations that propelled my different exhibitions from my collections and a loaned work from Edem Yeboah, a respected wood sculptor (Figure 1).

Curatorial Approach & Motivations

Before delving into the discussion, let me first briefly deal with my overall curatorial approach and, second, two critical points about what propels my passion for collecting popular media artifacts. With very few exceptions that I am aware of, where the motive for exhibitions is non-commercial, the standard modes of exhibiting other visual arts in Ghana are profit-motivated. My curatorial approach is different as it is not profit-oriented and instead geared towards educating varying publics in Ghana. Regarding what fuels my collection practice, the first reason relates to my research and teaching around popular culture in Ghana. Here, I find that as a scholar in this area, it is imperative for my students and all others, including my (academic) colleagues, to visually and physically engage with these artifacts firsthand, either within the university environment or in various exhibition spaces. Granted that some of these materials, such as vehicle inscriptions, death announcement posters, and shop signages, are easily visible in the public domain, I find it essential to have a central location where visual samples of these works can be stored and accessed. Within this mindset, I have complimented my physical collections with a public digital archive via my Instagram page: @ghanaian_popular_culture. Here I curate and archive photographs that I have personally taken and those that I source from other locations and duly credit. Another important motivation for my collection practice is to preserve these artifacts, as Ghana currently does not have a museum or a gallery dedicated to these items. In doing so, an end goal is indirectly to help stimulate a positive sensitivity towards these formats as vital national resources worth preserving within academia and the wider public.

When I began scouting for locations to showcase some of my collections, it was apparent that gallery owners were enthusiastic about supporting me to stage exhibitions but could not do so because the works in my archives were not for sale. For example, in 2013, when I first approached Artist Alliance, through its famous founder, Professor Ablade Glover, he was interested in lending me his gallery space to exhibit my collection on the

unique Ghanaian hand-painted movie posters (Figure 2). Professor Glover was enthusiastic because his gallery would have been the first in Ghana to have hosted such an event on the posters. All previous exhibitions on the poster have been held either in Europe or the United States⁴. However, as a commercial gallery, with no endowed funds to sponsor non-commercial shows (such as mine), it was logical that I could not hold my event there.

Thus, it was a great relief that in 2014 and 2015, Alliance Française (Accra), a not-for-profit organization, agreed to sponsor my exhibitions. The sponsorship included a free gallery space as well as hosting audiences during the opening and closing nights. In my first exhibition at Alliance Française, Accra (20th March -23rd April 2014), I showcased the near-defunct practice of the art of the hand-painted movie posters that were very prevalent from the late 1970s to the early 2000s (Elsas 2016; Wolfe 2001). Local movie theatre owners used these posters, produced on recycled flour sacks, to advertise Hollywood, Bollywood, and Hong Kong movies to Ghanaian audiences. In organizing this event, one goal was to allow audiences to experience the very glocal nature of the posters in their orientation and practice. The glocal format of this art form, just like Hiplife music (Oduro-Frimpong 2009, 2021), lies in how the artists involved in this practice, utilizing the recycled flour bags, employed their creative, imaginative skills and talent to create a distinctly local Ghanaian visual art form. Another goal of the exhibition (which also strongly motivated my 2021 exhibition around the posters at the Nubuke Foundation) was to forcefully repudiate a lingering negative projection of the posters as a type of ‘deviant art’ that, ostensibly, is outside the zones of so-called recognized canon works of art. Recent examples of such positioning of the posters occur as ‘gaudy’ (Brown 2016), ‘incredibly bizarre’ (Johnson 2017), ‘over the top’ (Matteson 2019), ‘dazzlingly morbid [or] disturbing’ (Ro 2019), ‘beautifully offputting’ or describing the posters as possessing ‘childlike innocence’ (Mike 2020). Whether meant to exoticize the posters to boost sales in galleries in the United States and Europe, such epithets tap into longstanding racialized thinking that disaffirms “the social reality, creativity, and intellectual acuity” (Nzegwu 2019, 367) of the producers of this art form.

A different stimulus for organizing exhibitions on other popular artforms, such as barbershop and beauty parlor signages, occurred at Alliance Française, Accra (3rd August-2nd September 2015) and titled “Married but Available” was to create a positive aesthetic consciousness about these works. Such a goal aimed to situate the posters as not inferior to other artworks and, as a result, should be considered equally important pieces of art of value (Figure 3). Although perhaps in non-Ghanaian contexts, such awareness might not be warranted, I believe such understanding is crucial in Ghana. The key rationale is that this mindset can nurture a healthy respect for popular visual artists involved in such projects and begin to engender Ghanaians to collect (and possibly preserve) these works for posterity. It is from this position that I continue to exhibit on barbershop and beauty salon signs.

A third significant incentive for exhibiting popular artworks was to reinforce the vision that these works are of substantial intellectual value through the exhibition statements and discussions I hold at such events. Here, I highlight how, for example, political cartoons and other satirical visual works like those produced by Bright Ackwerh, through their dynamic feature of humorous critique, allow political researchers to grasp a more holistic picture of politics on the ground. As well, political cartoons, as an informal discourse, act as a sensing device that detects and allow us to apprehend “certain ground realities associated with a country’s current (social)-political dispositions” (Oduro-Frimpong 2018: 155). I also signal how these works are key treasured sources for archiving aspects of Ghana’s history and can analyze and help critically understand Ghanaian postcolonial culture. Finally, I highlight the scholarly relevance of such popular artifacts by noting their pedagogical value through their use in the classroom to clarify, challenge, and ground theoretical concepts, thereby contributing to efforts, for example, to de-Westernize or decolonize contemporary

university classroom (Mbembe 2015). Overall, in holding these popular media art exhibitions, I am motivated by the urge to get audiences to begin to take these media formats and their creators seriously. Here the goal is to nurture audiences' dispositions to these artists as intelligent and authentic creatives whose outputs are equally original. Mainly in conversations with academic colleagues and students, who attend my exhibitions at Ashesi University, we discuss how these popular artforms ground relatively recent and nuanced discussions of what counts as 'creativity' (Ingold and Hallam 2007; Svasek 2016) and what is 'authentic'/inauthentic (van de Port and Meyer 2018).

Edem Yeboah's wooden sculpture features a quotidian scene one encounters in many urban centers in Ghana where female hawkers converge to either relax or wait for work (Figure 1). In this installation featuring Yeboah's work titled *Kayaye* at Ashesi University (November 5-10, 2019), my goal was to initiate discussions around the entangled Akan philosophical notion and cultural practice of "*nyansa nni baakofo tirimu*" ("wisdom does not reside in a person's head"). In other words, I wanted audiences to visually experience and discuss the idea of different abilities, or in Gardner's (2011) terms, varying bits of intelligence. This dynamic perspective of the mind acknowledges "many different and discrete facets of cognition, acknowledging that people have different cognitive strengths and contrastive cognitive styles" (Gardner 2006, 5). In this pursuit, my exhibition statement omitted Yeboah's background information. This gap fostered discussions around where Yeboah schooled and trained. It was in revealing Yeboah's non-formal training which generated fascinating conversations about his unique talent. In all, I have outlined some fundamental inclinations that structure my exhibitions around Ghanaian popular visual media.

Conclusion

In Ghana's history, well-respected hotel spaces were the key locales to experience and source essential artworks in previous eras. However, within the Fourth Republic, especially in the last decade, one witnesses a blossoming of art galleries and other viewing spaces, especially in Accra. However, popular media works are not as visible within such spaces compared to other visual formats such as abstract paintings, digital art, photography, and installation art. Given the above, my curatorial practice has aimed to correct what I consider a blind spot. Beyond this goal, my exhibition practice projects such artifacts worthy of respect for their cultural significance and, therefore, preservation. Furthermore, my exhibitions have highlighted popular media artists as equally creative geniuses, and their works possess intellectual and pedagogical significance.

In terms of my future exhibition goals, I aim to extend and intensify my practice by exhibiting in high schools and tertiary institutions in Ghana. Here, the objective is to introduce students to these formats as sources of intellectual discussions and knowledge. With regards to changes that I hope to witness within museums/galleries in Accra and other parts of Ghana, several ideas come to mind. One is for such museums/galleries to consciously seek out private collectors and convince them to showcase their works. Another idea is for museums/galleries in Ghana to offer their space for those collectors who are genuinely interested in showcasing their works for noncommercial gains.

Image captions

Figure 1. Edem Yeboah's wooden sculpture 'Kayaye.' Photo: Joseph Oduro-Frimpong, 2019.

Figure 2. Leonardo Arts' *Blood and Bone* (2009) poster painting. Photo: ©Nubuke Foundation and Joseph Oduro-Frimpong, 2021.

Figure 3. Heavy J's "*Say No To Brazillian Hair: . . .*" Photo: Joseph Oduro-Frimpong, 2019.

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Notes

1. This popular Ghanaian Pidgin English expression indexes what some people consider a non-belonging status of non-normative art pieces and/or how they cannot/should not be showcased in galleries and museums.
2. My understanding of Ghanaian popular cultural art forms is in sync with scholars as Barber (1997, 2018) Ligaga (2020), Newell and Okome (2014) and Ogola (2017)
3. My gratitude to members of the Andrew Mellon Foundation funded project "Entanglement, Mobility and Improvisation: Culture and the Arts in Contemporary Urbanism and Its Hinterlands" who helped me to think through facets of this piece.
4. For such exhibitions in Europe, see: Brunei Gallery's "African Gaze: Hollywood, Bollywood and Nollywood Film Posters from Ghana. Accessed 30th November, 2021. <https://www.soas.ac.uk/gallery/african-gaze/ChinaHeights/> (2019) "Hand-Painted Movies from Ghana". Accessed October 30, 2021. <https://chinaheights.com/exhibitions-/2019-deadly-prey> ; And in the United States, see MASS MoCA's (2013) "Outrageous Supercharge: Hand-Painted Exhibition from Ghana". Accessed October 30, 2021. <https://massmoca.org/event/outrageous-supercharge-hand-painted-movie-posters-ghana/>; PosterHouse's (2020) "Baptized by Beefcake: The Golden Age of Hand-Painted Movie Posters from Ghana". Accessed October 30, 2021. <https://posterhouse.org/exhibition/ghana/>