

DOING MEMORY
Testimonies of Collective
Memory in Artistic Practice

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'A Short Century' is a lecture that traces the genesis of my artistic practice and poetics. The lecture has been held now at numerous international cultural institutions and aims to analyse some of my most defining works. In addition, the lecture specifically delves into my social commitment and collective activity at Red Clay studio in Tamale, Ghana, where, over the past few years, I have explored the social and economic issues affecting West Africa through socially embedded artistic practices. Ghana, which has only been independent for some sixty years, still bears the scars of its colonial past, the effects of which are evident in both the country's economic system and social structure. In this sense, historical memory and how new generations relate to it is pertinent. Themes such as mobility, 'weight', and the relationship between body and object are central to this discussion and are the registers through which I have reflected on how objects can carry traces of history, becoming testimonies of collective memory.

I often begin this lecture with a black-and-white photograph, taken in Ghana at the end of the nineteenth century, between 1893 and 1920, when the British Empire was building a national railway network, dubbed the Gold Coast Railways, now known as the Ghana Railway. The project, which began in the south of the country, immediately created new job opportunities and triggered a migration flow of labour from north to south. However, no extension was ever made to the north, and indeed, many people in Ghana have never seen

a train in person. I began to wonder what it would mean to take this historical form and bring it into a new geographical space, inserting it into a different context. What would the implications for collective memory be? How can everyday objects change when they are transformed and inserted into a different system of economic values and power, such as the art market?

The first objects I began to explore with this idea of mobility were contemporary goods, namely the raw jute sacks, which are originally produced in South East Asia, specifically in India and Bangladesh. These are usually imported beyond the border into West Africa by the Ghana Cocoa Board to transport cocoa. After their official use, the fabrics are sold to intermediaries who use them to transport goods of all kinds to markets, such as corn, charcoal, and other products. On the fabric, which gradually deteriorates and tears, various marks and inscriptions accumulate, testifying and telling the story of their incessant journey from one place to another. These marks accumulate and layer on top of each other, giving the fabric a new historical memory.

I developed an interest in this material during my trip to Burkina Faso. I stopped at the border for hours and encountered many long trucks carrying different goods across the border. I was fascinated by the idea that a material that has direct contact with people and represents society to a certain extent can take on different forms as it crosses borders. Indeed, this material symbolizes trade, labour, and capital. This is a political-economic issue and I see it as a significant material to work with. What interests me is seeing what happens to these sacks when they can no longer be used, when they reach the end of their life cycle, when society decrees that they are too obsolete and damaged to be used again and must be replaced. When objects reach this stage, they enter a new phase that could be defined as transcendental; they begin to develop almost 'spiritual' qualities. Objects acquire a new depth, offering new meanings. By recovering these jute sacks, I also transform their condition as objects, exploring what they can become. For my compositions, I use a wide range of materials, including jute sacks, archival documents, colonial and independence-era maps, sewing machines, shoeboxes, old railway tracks, and wooden doors. Then there are the carriages of locomotives and the fuselages of aeroplanes. These objects, in their structure and image, present symbols of both political and economic power. When I work around an object, I spend a lot of time analysing it conceptually, exploring it through photographs and drawings,

and imagining how to express and transform its potential and material. What interests me is the intersection between the abstract and the material that objects can create, going beyond my initial idea.

A fundamental aspect of my artistic research lies in the recovery and transportation of these objects from their place of origin to my studio. Sometimes, the objects I'm transporting are railway carriages or even entire aeroplanes, requiring the assistance of trucks and cranes,

as well as numerous collaborators. Some of these relocations—which I carefully monitor and document with photographs and videos throughout the process—can take anywhere from a few days to a week of travel. During this phase of work, it is interesting to observe not only the interaction between the objects and the places they pass through, but also the reactions of the local communities, many of whom have never seen, for example, an aeroplane. In particular, the younger generations are often encountering this technology for the first time. The journey, therefore, along with all its implications and logistical challenges, is a significant part of my practice, which is not limited to the mere final result, but embraces every stage of development and research, from collection to transportation, and up to the manipulation of objects and materials.

When these bodies arrive in the studio, they become alternative spaces to be occupied and experienced. The idea of reimagining the occupation

of space dates back to my university years when I dedicated myself to urban exploration of the area surrounding the city, where many buildings abandoned by the post-colonial community stand. Toward the end of colonialism and with the election of Ghana's first president, Kwame Nkrumah, in 1957, the government promoted numerous construction projects throughout the country. Under the influence of the Soviet Union, many imposing brutalist and modernist monuments were built.

This fervent development was driven by the government's desire to promote industrialization in Ghana, particularly in the north of the country, where the economy was predominantly agricultural, based on the cultivation of raw materials such as corn and tomatoes. To achieve these goals, the government implemented a construction plan for factories, workshops, and silos. However, despite these efforts, Nkrumah was unable to meet the community's expectations and was deposed. Soon, these places, scattered throughout the urban fabric of the country, began to be abandoned and forgotten, becoming empty shells—symbols of a collective failure of a project for rebirth, of unfulfilled hopes, and unfinished utopias. My interest in architecture is not limited to its physical structure but extends to the interaction between objects and spaces, the materials, and the ecosystems within it.

My focus on labour also influences how I approach my studio. I've built a large studio complex that functions like a museum, where people can experience the work in its context. My studio, like the other parts of my practice, is strongly influenced by my own idea of what a work should do. I have converted and 'activated' a large architectural complex that functions as a museum, a meeting and exchange place where local communities and anyone can experience work in its context, as well as participate in the creation of installations. I am particularly interested in involving the different generations, who can find within it a space to experiment, explore, and create. Often, school groups come to the studio, where they draw or play with the objects they find. They interact with the materials. The work is inherently political because of the way it references politics in the ongoing context of nation-building and highlighting this in my art is a way to honour the contribution of countless individuals, both past and present, who make work possible.