

# THE KUMASI-ACCRA AXIS AND CONTEMPORARY ART IN GHANA

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*Photo:*  
*Elisabeth Sutherland, Ghanaian performance artist*

In August 2015 we spent two weeks conducting research on contemporary art in Ghana with support from a Faculty Enhancement Opportunity Grant through the UF Office of the Provost (Rebecca Nagy); Harn Museum of Art resources (Susan Cooksey); and the Center for African Studies as well as the Criser Endowment at the Harn Museum of Art (Alissa Jordan). Our goal was to understand the roles of long-established and new art institutions as well as digital networks in the recent emergence of a group of internationally connected contemporary artists. This expanding art scene is fueled by artists educated at the Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology (KNUST) in Kumasi, many of whom subsequently live and work in Ghana's major urban center of Accra. By interviewing faculty, arts administrators, artists, collectors, and dealers in both cities we gained insight into the emergence and development of the contemporary Ghanaian art scene in virtual and physical spaces. We were able to study a community of artists as they are defining themselves and their work via new forms of networking, collaboration and free exchange of ideas through "talk parties," alternative radio, social media, street art festivals,

pop-up exhibitions, and other channels.

Until recent years, despite the international reputations of a handful of artists—among them Ablade Glover, Atta Kwami and Kwame Akoto—Ghana was not known for a vibrant contemporary art scene. Rather, scholarly and popular attention was focused on the historic traditions of Ghanaian art, including textiles such as kente and adinkra cloth, metal casting, gold work, wood carving and ceramics. Only in the last decade or so has scholarly attention broadened to include research and publication on the expanding contemporary art scene. The creative energy and innovative approaches of contemporary Ghanaian artists have been fueled by a radical rethinking of the undergraduate and MFA programs of the art department at KNUST. Inspired by the theory, practice and teaching of Professor, several other faculty members have worked with him to develop a curriculum based on social engagement and intervention in a range of environments in Kumasi and Accra that they describe, with a nod to French philosopher Michel Foucault, as "archaeology of the city."

The quality of the work produced by KNUST students in a range of media and forms of practice, including performance and installation, has increasingly attracted the attention of scholars, curators, collectors and dealers in Africa, Europe and America. We spent several days in Kumasi interviewing Dean Edwin Bodjawah and faculty members, Kwaku Boafo Kissiedu, George Ampratwum and Dorothy Amenuke as well as some of their outstanding advanced undergraduate and MFA students. In Accra, we made repeated visits to the Museum of Science and Technology to examine the exhibition

"Cornfields in Accra," which occupied the entire three-story structure. The exhibition showed new work by KNUST art faculty, students and alumni working in installation and performance art, video, photography, sculpture, painting and experimental media.

During our week in Accra, we also met with the directors of several non-profit arts organizations that support and promote the work of contemporary Ghanaian artists, including ANO, the Nubuke Foundation and the Foundation for Contemporary Art. We also made several visits to two leading commercial galleries, Artists Alliance Gallery and Gallery 1957, where we selected four works of art for the Harn Museum of Art collection: a pen and ink drawing by 1985 KNUST graduate Kate Badoe, a painting by recent KNUST graduate Jeremiah Quarshie, and two photographs printed on fabric by Ghanaian-German artist Zohra Opoku. Along with other acquisitions currently in progress, these works will be shown at the Harn in an upcoming exhibition of contemporary Ghanaian art.

Finally, we spent a day at Accra's street art festival known as Chale Wote, now in its sixth year. Along with thousands of locals and visitors to the city we took in art installations, performance art, dance and music as well as stilt walkers, acrobats, street food and stalls selling goods of all kinds. Chale Wote exemplifies the commitment of the Ghanaian art community to engage local audiences in the experience of contemporary art while also drawing the attention of the wider art world to the exciting developments taking place in Accra, Kumasi and beyond as Ghanaian artists take their rightful place on the international stage.

Rebecca M. Nagy is director of the Samuel P. Harn Museum of Art. Susan E. Cooksey is curator of Africa art at the Harn Museum of Art. Alissa Jordan is a PhD candidate in anthropology at the University of Florida.