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Materializing the Image, Imaging the Material: African Facemasks in Second Life

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ABSTRACT

In his expanded sculpture practice, the artist Edwin Bodjawah interfaces accumulative practice, collaborative production and mechanical manufacture. The ensuing sculptural forms are serial facemasks which exist as both multiples and standalone objects. Guided by the axiom 'the medium is the message and the message is the medium', the artist images aspects of modern and past life of West Africa with the readymade materials he collects for his work, respectively, decommissioned litho-printing plates and derelict roofing sheets. The readymade images he appropriates (African facemasks) materialize African systems of cultural production which anticipate the expanded field of contemporary art, its democratization of media and its prospects for collective production of art. Masks also connote for the artist, the interdependency of artistic activity, objects and daily life, and the interstitial spaces within modern life in which artists enact their creative visions. The paper argues that the interface between repurposed material and appropriated image presents a congenial site through which the literal African experience in capitalist, colonial and post-colonial systems can be resurrected, re-presented and re-engaged.

Keywords: African, Facemasks, Image, Medium, Serial.

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1. Introduction

The European early Modernist and formalist appropriation of ethnographic African masks is a familiar motif in the international history of 20th century visual arts. Today, this historical phenomenon, commonly associated with the Cubists, the Fauves, the Surrealists and the Expressionists, is critiqued for its blind spot of colonial-primitivist legacy. What is usually left unsaid in this post-colonial critique is that the corpus of works, produced within the European formalist dialogue with classical African art, often overlooked the advances in media plurality and cross-genre cultural practices that had characterized the African referents and their specific contexts of production, function and dissemination. The European formal modernists had maintained or preserved the conventional boundaries of the beaux-arts canon

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that had unconditionally defined the set of media artists ought to use, segregated specific media, and kept each in its own place. Moreover, this canon had given special privilege to the standalone and rectangular painting format or to the single narrative sculptural object fashioned in a singular medium. In this vein, art was boxed into alienated representations and, occasionally, romantic adventures which also forestalled the direct manipulation of material realities by artists. Meanwhile, these material realities, represented but not directly manipulated by the artist, had archived the everyday realities and actual living conditions of humanity. Among other things, this was a significant hurdle the early 20th century European avant-garde, such as the Constructivists and the Dadaists, sought to surmount.

The opportunity to challenge the hegemony of beaux-arts medium specificity in art history was missed furthermore in early modern African art and in African American art of the Harlem renaissance. Despite their formidable critique of themes and subject matter, both of these Africa-referencing art traditions made iconographic changes to the Euro-Western beaux-arts painting and sculpture formats but left their respective media boundaries and their established limits intact.

In the standard genealogy of media plurality in international contemporary art, too, there is a critical vacuum. Dadaists, Constructivists, Minimalists, Pop Artists, and lately, the Brazilian Neo-Concretists, get a pride of place as the neo-avant-garde who bridged the gap between art and life, high art and low art, and opened international art to the phenomenon of media proliferation. Pop art is especially eulogized for its profanation of high art with the appropriation of signs from consumer culture, and serial and identical reproduction of the erstwhile standalone art object.

Minimalism is credited for the 'expanded field' (Krauss, 1979) of art production through the proliferation of 'specific' objects inhabiting our everyday space. However, the 'pre-industrial' variety of work from Africa and the rest of the world which foreshadowed and even anticipated the transparent or porous boundaries of contemporary art is missing from the story. Among the former are African masking systems whose artefacts and events are at once cross-genre and multi-media.

For the sculptor Edwin Bodjawah whose serial facemask project is the subject under review here, this lacuna is the starting point for his reflections on media and formats of dissemination. Bodjawah uses decommissioned materials from Ghana's urban life, such as disused lithographic printing plates and derelict roofing sheets, to produce serial facemasks. His distinctive approach to artistic medium is inspired by the social relations, production techniques and protocols embedded in African masking systems, by the specific characteristics of the artefacts themselves, and by the repurposed materials which archive and image modern African life. These repurposed materials and serial production techniques he invents become the medium through which African past retains a 'second life' in modern life.

For Bodjawah, these features of African masking systems and mask forms can inspire contemporary art practices seeking to radically challenge the surviving hegemony of medium specificity in his specific location of practice in Ghana. Among the features of African masking traditions that find direct expression in Bodjawah's practice are the following: identical reproductions of facemasks are legitimate, they are cross-genre and multi-media in principle - that is, disciplinary boundaries are porous, everyday materials could have a "second life" as transfigured art media through bricolage and readymade nomination, materials and techniques employed interface tradition with improvisation, their production and dissemination processes are communal and thus integrated with everyday social life (Fig. 1).

The decommissioned materials Bodjawah repurposes and the reproductive and collaborative techniques he devices have metaphoric relationship with his facemask leitmotif. The etymology of masking and the functions of masks across history present it as a suitable metaphor of media proliferation and interpenetration.



Figure 1: Dan Mask (Northern Liberia, Western Cote d'Ivoire)
Material: Wood, cowrie shells, vegetable fibres, red and white paint.
http://edmondosaficanart.blogspot.com/2012/01/dan-mask_1759.html

Furthermore, the decommissioned industrial materials he repurposes are archives of modern African life and its constitutive economic and social relations in global history. In the first phase of the project, he appropriated facemask images and production systems of the following ethnic groups; Senufo, Baule, Marka, Baluba, Kpelie, Kifwebe and Gelede (Bodjawah, 2016)⁴. In this paper, the authors focus on his Senufo composite installation. The paper argues that Bodjawah's reflections on media heteronomy are informed by the mask motif as a sign and a metaphor of reproduction and simulation, reflecting both traditional and modern connotations of masking. Masks also connote for the artist, the interdependency of artistic activity, objects and daily life, and the interstitial spaces within modern life in which artists enact their creative visions. Through his signature materials, decommissioned lithographic printing plates and used roofing sheets, Bodjawah explores the mediascape of materials in global capitalist flow (Appadurai, 1990) as well as their potential significance as expanded media (Benjamin, 2008). The authors of this paper examine the sculptor's materials and mediums that are, by default, outside the canon of modern African art but which also embody rich layers of histories of everyday African urban life. The paper investigates these ordinary mediums that abound in most post-colonial West African cities and their slums. These materials were brought to Africa through trade and travel, but most importantly, through colonization and capitalist modernity. Filled with insightful metaphors, these ordinary mediums have had considerable impact on communal life. Before their physical manipulation, their layered histories, the veiled mappings of their trajectory, and their symbolic value through exchange and use, present them as masked objects which lend themselves to reuse and repurposing. As iconic symbols of past life on the continent, the appropriated mask imagery, too, connotes the vagaries of African identity and embodies western capitalist interests in the developing world. In the end semi-artisanal experiments are conducted with these mediums to produce serial facemasks which exist as both multiples and standalone objects. In the research leading to this paper, the authors conducted several interviews with the artist and his teams of collaborators, made several studio visits and reviewed exhibitions that showcased his work between 2015 and 2018. Furthermore, the team made critical studies of content in the artist's journals and working diaries, and made historical and comparative studies of West Africa's visual and material culture which bore resonance in his expanded sculpture practice.

Theoretically, Bodjawah takes a Productivist route in which the focus is on how to transform techniques and media of art production and dissemination than on manipulating the image, iconography or form alone. This sets him apart from African modernists such as Ecole de Dakar and the Zaria Rebels who challenged the beaux-arts canon with new iconographic content but kept the latter's medium-specific formats and genres intact. He is inspired by Walter Benjamin who makes a distinction between the *informing artist* indulgent in reportage and the *productivist artist* who intervenes in and transforms the existing media, techniques, relations and means of production (Benjamin, 2008).

2. The mask as object in space and gesture of dislocation, profanation, threshold or subversion

As an object, the mask can play the roles of "substitution", "replacement", "camouflage", "cloak", "veil", "visor", "shield", "artificiality", "façade", screen, shield, semblance, veneer, visage, colouring, gloss and so forth. The space occupied by the mask is, technically speaking, a paradoxical space neither inside nor outside what it covers or its surroundings. Like Derrida's *hymen* it exists as a boundary between what it covers and what it does not cover. It is an anchoring point, a point of separation. Yet it touches and intervenes in both inside and outside spaces simultaneously. As an architectural metaphor, it is a point of opening and a point of closure, a doorway. It guards or mediates the gap between the private and the public. Wearers of masks do not see their own masking but they each become a spectator who sees the masking or unmasking of others. To catch a glimpse of their own masking, the wearers of masks may have to stand before "mirrors" which reflect their own spectacle. The masquerader becomes a stain in his or her own theatre.

⁴ This phase of the project culminated in a PhD thesis *Masking beyond the Masquerade: on Simulation and Reproduction of African Mask Forms* (2017) and several exhibitions which have been valuable resources for this paper. Among the exhibitions are *Silence between the Lines* (2015, Kumasi), *The Gown must go to Town* (2015, Accra), *Cornfields in Accra* (2016, Accra), *Orderly Disorderly* (2017, Accra), *Silence speaks* (2017, Cape Coast), *Spectacles, Speculations* (2018, Kumasi).

As a gesture or function, the masking motif embodies the interdependency of artistic activity, objects and daily life. It is a theatrical complex which may invoke or connote acts of “parody”, “the carnivalesque”, “affectation”, “concealment”, “anonymity”, “disguise”, “trickery (*Eshu-elegba*)”, “transformation”, “deformation”, “pretence”, “window-dressing”, “the occult”, and so forth. It is interesting here first to refer to etymology; the words 'mask', 'masquerade', 'mascara' without doubt came into the languages of Europe from the Arabic *maskharah* related to the verb *sakhira* which means "to laugh, scoff, jeer, sneer, ridicule, mock, deride, make fun" (Picton, 1990, pp. 181-186). And it is interesting how these connotations coincide with some tradition-based West African masquerades such as the *Ebira* which, besides its official functions, provides entertainment through performance styles that exaggerate ordinary behaviour through parody or mockery (Picton, 1990). But reverse-parody can have catastrophic consequences as the masquerade could also stand for the juridical and patriarchal order maintained by the spirits and ancestors. For example, much has been said and made of the motif of masks in Africa and elsewhere as embodied spirits and ancestral beings when activated in performance. In this sense the mask is more than mere facade. It is transformative to such an extent that some masquerade performers in action speak a formal language different from that of the everyday. In Chinua Achebe's *Things fall Apart*, Enoch the zealot's unmasking of an *Egwugwu* of *Umuofia* was understood as the killing of the spirit of an ancestor, an act of provocation which led to the destruction of a church building. If this narrative has any structural equivalence in contemporary society then it is the tragic event of Charlie Hebdo. It is easy to see how the *theatre* of masking is ubiquitous in Contemporary society in terms of being a sign, an object and a function or gesture of repetition, denaturing and invention. The dominant logic of masking in late 20th century cultural production was the carnivalesque. Mikhail Bakhtin, the notable theorist of the carnivalesque and the dialogic, posited it as the peculiar logic of the 'inside out' (à l'envers), of the 'turnabout,' of a continual shifting from top to bottom, from front to rear, of numerous parodies and travesties, humiliations, profanations, comic crownings and uncrownings (Bakhtin, 1984. p. 11).

In the theatre of the carnival there is a temporary suspension of official power, a breakdown of the distinction between high and low, the subversion of signs of identitarian “authenticity” and the overturning of social conventions. Participants in the Rio, Notting Hill and Mardi carnivals will admit that this is a common experience. It is in this sense that artists and feminists of postmodern and postcolonial persuasion, alluding to the indeterminacies of identity, gender and sexuality appropriated the carnivalesque trope in their work as a political motif of power subversion. In most of these examples there is increased focus on the body as a subject and vehicle; the body in performance in real time, or staged for film, video, or the photographic tableau. In this genealogy we find Fani Kayode's photographic tableaux *Eboorisa* (1987), *Dan Mask* and *Golden phallus* (1989), and Yinka Shonibare's digital video *Un Ballo in Maschera (A Masked Ball, 2004)* in which the artist appropriates a historical narrative of the assassination of King Gustav III of Sweden at a masked ball as a metaphor for power and its imminent deconstruction. As a motif of parodic subversion the mask motif also occurs in the institutional critique of the Guerrilla Girls who sport gorilla masks and jam the misogynist spaces of contemporary art exhibitions. The “desecration” of the Russian Orthodox Church by the Pussy Riot is another case in point. Lagbaja, the Lagos-based Africano musician, also extends the meaning of masking into anonymity. His interpretation of masking is intelligently political. The mask stands for “nobody in particular”; rather, it depicts the anonymity of the so-called "common man", the voiceless in the society or the facelessness of the exploited masses of Africa and elsewhere.

3. **Beyond the African masquerade: The facial mask, the bricoleur and the engineer⁵ in a new theatre of simulations**

⁵ Claude Lévi-Strauss (1966) makes a distinction between the bricoleur's mytho-poetic thought and the engineer's “conceptual” thought. The bricoleur is unimpeded by lack of specific tools or materials for a particular task. He repurposes or improvises with things in his immediate locality. However, he remains within the limits of what the immediate system can provide. The engineer, on the other hand, is impeded by lack of specific tools for specific tasks but is always trying to make his way out of and go beyond the constraints imposed by a particular state of civilization while the “bricoleur” by inclination or necessity always remains within them. (Lévi-Strauss, 1966). The strategy in this project is located in a space halfway between these poles. The hybrid position affirms Derrida's (2001) notion that “the odds are that the engineer is a myth produced by the bricoleur”.

However, most of the masquerade-referencing practices and politics of the African postmodernists are silent on the logic of the mask as a technical metaphor. In this paper the authors observe in Bodjawah's practice a shift from the Bakhtinian carnivalesque focus of the postmodernist African artists who appropriate the black body in the masquerade as a trope of political emancipation. On the other hand, Bodjawah takes a productivist route focusing on the technical infrastructure of mask production. As such, for the technical processes and the social relations of production and dissemination, he sampled and manipulated the pool of connotations and logics associated with masking, especially, those that have some bearing on the spectrum of contemporary experience in the Ghanaian locality.

This work extends the symbolic logic of the mask motif into the actual mechanics, processes and social organization of technical reproducibility in modern sculpture. 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. Since the starting point of Bodjawah's facemask project is not the original African mask, with the benefit of hindsight, this paper attempts not only to reflect on, but also to complicate the nostalgic outlook of the Harlem Renaissance or *Ecole de Dakar* artists. Evidently, Bodjawah's falling on reproductions, simulations and models in the tourist market as reference points for the artwork alerts him 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 hints of Minimalist and Pop aesthetic of serial reproduction, Bodjawah's project repurposes reproductions of masks found in internet databases, museum catalogues, and in the tourist market. He considers the provenance of the referenced facemasks and their images as meaningful to the work. Bodjawah 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.

4. Medium is the message, message is the medium:

On its part, the disused lithographic plate employed in Bodjawah's work embodies layers of media histories of serial image making. It combines lithography, photography and digitization. Reflecting McLuhan's thesis on media (McLuhan & McLuhan, 1992) and Appadurai's notion of mediascapes (1990), one can deduce that photography made 19th century stone lithography obsolete but today through plate-lithographic printing processes the two media are brought together. This coincidence of past and present prepared the way for the hyper-productive mediation of printed graphics by digitization which we experience in today's print culture. In this reading, the used aluminium litho-plates Bodjawah appropriates for his work is a collision or archive of different technological eras and geographies. In Bodjawah's work, he gives new life to obsolete, reversed or discarded media through a collage of technological inventions and extensions. Taking cue from Benjamin (1936, 2008) and, by extension, Judd (1964), Bodjawah invented a semi-mass production technique for the reproductive sculptures. It is an adaptation of industrial embossment and stamping techniques in which several copies or quasi-identical units of masks are produced through the engagement of assistants, the use of decommissioned 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. Respectively, the "model and mould" would correspond, in heterosexist language, to the twin male-female "embossment dies". This artisanal stage of the process resonates in autonomous sculpture practice where the outcome is a standalone artefact made in a homogeneous or uniform medium. Yet as model and mould, the outcome is the matrix of reproduction, of denaturing the aura of the standalone art object. In casting of the models and moulds, Cobalt Napthenate (CoC₂₂H₁₄O₄) often called accelerator/promoter was mixed with polyester resin in the ratio of 1:100 to step up or quicken the setting and curing process of the resin. It is an oxidation dryer which comes in the form of a violet liquid. The hardener, which is Methyl Ethyl Ketone Peroxide (C₈H₁₈O₆) also known as MEKP, an organic peroxide, was added in the ratio of 1:200, stirred very well before pouring onto the clay models

to obtain the moulds and models. 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 artist wanted to produce serial repetitions or units, the objective was also to create autonomous and unique objects in each case that can be combined in various permutations to form substantial collective installations in various spaces.

5. Second Life: From used lithographic printing plates and corrugated roofing sheets to serial facemasks

Bodjawah repurposed two basic materials which had had previous lives in other technical processes and social functions before transforming them into facemasks. The used aluminium printing plates (positive lithographic plates) were acquired from medium scale print houses such as the University Press (UPK) and small scale press houses, such as Gazben Printing Limited, in Asafo, a residential community in Kumasi well known for the development of small printing presses and other enterprises.

In similar vein, Bodjawah’s team made trips to various suburbs of Kumasi (Asafo, Kwadaso and Ayigya-Zongo) in search for the other material- corrugated roofing sheets. They exchanged newer corrugated sheets for old, rusty and weak ones (made from wrought iron and mild steel with tin or zinc) for the work. Moreover, they collected discarded ones within the communities too. In a few cases too, they negotiated with labourers at some construction sites for the old corrugated (roofing) sheets that had been ripped off buildings. Popularly called ‘zingli’ (zinc-wall) in local Ghanaian parlance, the word resonates with El Anatsui’s “Chief in Zingliwu” literally meaning – “A chief dressed in corrugated sheets”.

Bodjawah also negotiated for vandalized roofing sheets after demolition of structures by agents of the new gentrification phenomenon emerging in many communities in Kumasi. Some new buildings were being put up by investors who had bulldozed their way through porous public systems and establishments. They put up such buildings, neither mindful of the waterways they obstruct nor of the economic precariat of the low lying communities whose homes get flooded consequently. Other smaller property owners may also be caught in the demolition exercises and thus suffer losses as well. Whatever the case may be, the life savings of these different groups partially lie in the rubbles and sheets.

Exchange through contact in various forms became part of Bodjawah’s work through negotiating for lithographic plates which came from different but relatively small print houses some of which had just two employees to the University Press which is also relatively small compared to many others. Introduced to the continent indirectly through colonization, printing began to overshadow oral traditions etc., just as urbanization and industrialization dealt a big blow to subsistence and communal societies (Mudimbe, 1988, pp. 15, 16). With time, some communities’ livelihood depended on the press through writing, illustrations, machinists and technicians, production and distribution of prints. The positive side of the used lithographic plates therefore represent several layers of histories and transformations among the masses and their respective communities and the society in general; disrupting traditional systems of communication and of life in the process (Meillasoux, 1975, p.115 cited in Mudimbe, 1988, p. 17).

6. Lithographic printing of positive imaging and modern encounters

Lithographic printing itself has a very long history connected to the histories of printing and record keeping in ancient Mesopotamia, China, Egypt and the Johannes Gutenberg revolution of the moveable type, 1438 and the 18th century introduction of the multi-coloured prints from engraved plates (Welch, Killeen and Davidson, 2010, p.3). Alois Senefelder invented lithography which was a quicker way of printing than engraving and embossment and changed the art of printing completely to this age (Senefelder, 1998). In the lithographic printing process, the positive area of an aluminium plate or any suitable flat surface containing texts and graphics is first covered with hydrophobic chemical (initially, animal fat, wax, linseed oil etc.). Through the introduction of water and ink on the surface, the ink

adheres to the positive image while the water cleans the negative parts of the plate. Linked directly with mechanical photography, the images are made on a positive plate and printed on positive sheets. The image is transferred onto a plate in reverse and inked on a positive plate or support. This is unlike chemical photography in which the image is developed from a negative image through chemical processes and serial reproductions made from this negative film.

Bodjawah's repurposing of the used lithographic plates can be made analogous to the Beninois artist Hazoumé's appropriation of used jerry cans for his work. Like the latter, Bodjawah's used lithographic plates also represent the subjects and victims of capitalist modernity and colonization; by analogy, they are used over and over again till they are worn out or discarded. Thus, these used plates are documents of the actual lives of the subjects of Ghanaian modern and colonial history. If, according to Mudimbe (1988, p. 16-18), colonization dominated the physical space and assimilated the very fabric of traditional life into western ideologies and reforming the minds of locals, then it is only appropriate for the artist to use materials and techniques that the system has created to bring attention to this reality (Benjamin, 1936; 2008). The subsistence, agrarian and communal communities and households began to crumple devastatingly giving way to a more industrial and modern society affecting every sphere of activity including the livelihood of the masses. This initiated a new way of life for which most were not prepared (Mudimbe, 1988, pp. 16-36).

Each used plate comes with a unique documentation of events, narratives and histories found in the text and images. Each plate therefore re-presents or documents part of the larger community which constructed it. This is also in relation to the environment, and in response to the transformations that contact with western modernity brought through colonization and other social and economic encounters. Also, each used aluminium plate is unique in terms of layout, subject matter, text and colour. Bodjawah makes diligent study of these qualities of each used plate before selecting it for the facemask project.

7. Corrugated iron, corrugated history and archive of colonial and postcolonial relations

The history of corrugated iron is a very fascinating one. Firstly, by the late 1820s Palmer, an engineer, in his quest to devise a system that could support itself structurally invented and transformed sheets of wrought iron into series of ridges and furrows (Thompson 2014, p. 3097). A couple of years after this invention, Richard Walker's firm patented its version and started manufacturing corrugated iron for building purposes. The early manufacturing process comprised the stamping of the sheets with a heavy press to create an undulating ridge and furrow, a process akin to the technique Bodjawah employs in his facemask reproductions. Later developments by Sorel in Paris (1837) led to the dipping of iron into molten zinc. This process was exported to the industrial hub of Birmingham, and adopted by John Porter in the early 1840's. One John Spencer developed the technique of passing the sheets through rollers which created the corrugated forms. In 1846 Edward Moorewood and George Rogers developed a more advanced machine and technique for pressing the sheets into corrugated forms (Thompson, 2014, pp. 3098, 3099).

David Miles who reviewed *Mornement and Halloway (2007)* discusses the extent to which corrugated sheets had become a world phenomenon by 1900. He talks about an elegant edifice built by the British Army in 1894, having driven Gold Coast natives from their homes on the Krobo Mountains in Ghana and boasts shamelessly about the British legacy left in ruins. Thompson (2014, pp. 3105-3107) also talks about the social and cultural significance of the corrugated iron buildings that cover the landscape of rural Scotland and opines that the British used a system of measurement to determine the thickness of metal, a system known as the *Birmingham Wire Gauge (BWG)*. They deliberately used thicker corrugated sheets measuring 16.5-22 BWG for construction at home in Britain while thinner ones of thicknesses between 24-26 BWG were exported to the colonies. It is therefore not surprising that some of the corrugated buildings in the colonies are in ruins while those in the Metropole are in relatively good conditions and probably seen as heritage sites.

Long trails of rusty tin shack houses, like canopies over estates in big cities, small towns and villages form part of the architecture in several cities across Africa. These do not only serve as dwelling and trading places, the tin shacks were also workshops of various artisans and everyday people- welders, auto mechanics, carpenters, electricians, plumbers, drivers etc. The old and used corrugated roofing sheets, embody the histories and life of the proletariat within emerging cities and slums and have

become part of the images and allegories of African modernity. John Pepper Clark's poem, 'Ibadan', captures what anachronically appears like a drone image of a typical post-colonial African city roofed in corrugated zinc, responding to tropical elements;

Ibadan,
Running splash of rust
and gold – flung and scattered
among seven hills like broken
China in the sun.

These sheets intervened in the architecture of the continent by way disrupting the various home-grown architectural systems that the societies had evolved. Again, the grand scheme of introducing structural changes abruptly from the colonial powers and integrating them in African societies meant that practically, the local communities had to adapt to these changes at the expense of their home-grown solutions (Mudimbe, 1988, p. 17). With the benefit of hindsight, Bodjawah attempts to revisit these home-grown systems and give them second lives.

8. The Senufo encounter

The generality of processes involved in Bodjawah's production of the serial mask forms have been discussed in the foregoing. However, the facemask project under review references masks of the Poro society in particular. The Poro society is found among the Senufo. The Senufo can be found in Liberia, Cote d'Ivoire, Guinea and Sierra Leone (Willett 1985, pp. 26, 192). Traditionally, they were generally farmers. They also had a variety of artistic styles and like many other agrarian societies in Africa, they had schools and societies for the transfer of knowledge and tradition. These societies went underground during the colonization period when missionaries constantly tried to convert indigenes to Christianity (Nooter, 1993, p. 55).

According to Forster (1993, p. 30) the initiates (Colobele) are secluded in groves for three months to begin to adapt to the language and terminologies of adulthood. They spend another seven years to develop intellectual, cultural foundations and skills to survive in a seemingly simple environment but complex in terms of social and political structures, philosophy and culture. There were both male and female Poro societies. Women played very significant roles in their activities, especially, due to the belief that the Senufo society is a matrilineal one (Vogel, 1981, p. 38; Glaze, 1993 p. 119). As a result, there were several women's associations, among them, Fodonon and Sandongo just as there were for the men's Poro.

Accordingly, Forster (1993, pp. 30, 32-35) emphasizes the role of the divination societies and some of the women belonged to these groups; taking boys and girls through pre-initiation and initiation rites as and when they came of age and was required by their customs and practices including friendly hoeing competitions. While some women belong to the Sandongo society whose role was to pacify hostile spirits who threaten human life, and although the ceremonies were performed by men, others in the Fodonon taught language and carved figures used in dancing ceremonies to honour the dead (Glaze, 1981). These agrarian, carving, masking, educational and conscious communal activities were intertwined and did not only bring order and unification to the communities, they helped stabilize the state as well (Glaze, 1981).

Glaze (1993, pp. 121, 122) further points out that to the Senufo ancestresses were more important than their male counterparts and even in their representation, the female figure sculptures were rendered better in terms of aesthetics than their male counterparts. These could also be inferred from the pair of Senufo figure sculptures which were carried by men and women respectively on their heads during certain ceremonies (cf. Vogel, 1981, pp. 41, 42).

The importance of the female in society in the education and transmission of histories among boys and girls and society in general and the sensitivity to gender issues particularly those of women informed this choice of mask. There are various types of face and helmet masks which were used by the Poro societies. Carved in wood with fibre extensions in some cases, some typical Poro face masks were symmetrical with protruding foreheads and a vertical ridge on them; they sometimes had horns too (Vogel, 1981, pp. 40-42). Also, on the forehead they sometimes had a vertical ridge which stood at almost

at 90 degrees to the thin eyes. In some cases, their eyes were almost closed and they had average to large size noses. They also had thick lips which were sometimes left open – this was the type Bodjawah adapted for this project, while being attentive to their communal means of production and the gender sensitive social organisation involved in their making, their display and their use. Indeed, there were other types of Poro masks with prominent geometric forms; eyes hollowed in triangular grooves, mouths hollowed out in circular shapes and long projections emphasizing the bony structure of the skull (Wingert, 1954 p. 69).. And in context, the fact that female ancestresses were more important meant that not all social arrangements were patriarchal after all. The role of women in both Fodonon and Sandongo Poro societies suggest that issues of gender were very sensitive among the Senufo; with males and females complementing each other in the various communities who lived side by side; yet had distinct styles. In the end, and according to Willett (1985) it is through these performances and art forms that past traditions and customs were transmitted and reinterpreted seasonally, annually or cyclically. Bodjawah's strategy of giving 'second life' to used materials, communal social arrangements and images of past African life is an adaptation of the features of African masking systems.



Figure 2: Figure 2: Serial copies of Poro Masks 'manufactured by Edwin Bodjawah and a team of collaborators.

Medium: Used lithographic plates, 2014. Image, courtesy Edwin Bodjawah.

Medium: Used lithographic plates, 2014. Image, courtesy Edwin Bodjawah.



Figure 3: Installation of Poro (Senufo) masks in Silence between the Lines exhibition (2015).

Medium: Used lithographic plates and corrugated roofing sheets. Image, courtesy Ibrahim Mahama.



Figure 4: Installation of Poro (Senufo) masks in Cornfields in Accra. Medium: Used lithographic plates and corrugated roofing sheets, 2016. Image, courtesy Ibrahim Mahama.

9. Conclusion

This century also opens up possibilities for a more heteronomous mediascape of art making considering new developments in image making technologies and the increased potential to resurrect and re-engage the past in contemporary life. The sculptor Bodjawah's work creates new production and exhibition contexts for the display and experience of art. Overall, his serial facemask project throws into question the expediency of the hegemony of media autonomy so persistent in modern art practice in Ghana. Bodjawah involves his immediate community in the production and exhibition processes of the facemasks. This collective production practice does not only allude symbolically to the communality of African masking systems, it also brings art closer to the modern public by promoting an understanding of contemporary art as intimately woven into the everyday. This gesture carries the incentive to bridge the gap between high and low in art production and reception. As has often been the case in pre-colonial Africa, art has everything to do with social reality and therefore deeply connected to the masses in terms

of everyday happenings and the communities' very survival and well-being (Willett, 1985). Thus, every humble space that connects is not only significant, it is also critical.

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