

**Blazing Century 1:  
Creative Interventions on the Margins  
of Two Worlds - Studio-Based Art and  
Connective Social Practice**

**Wilfred Ukpong  
September 2022**

**Submitted in partial fulfilment of Doctor of Philosophy**

**School of Art, Faculty of Technology, Design, and Environment  
DEGREE AWARDED BY OXFORD BROOKES UNIVERSITY**

**ABSTRACT:**

My research explores and formulates creative interventions on the margins of two worlds: studio-based art and connective social practice. This thesis proceeded as a reflective commentary on this inquiry while engaging five experimental art projects, mainly carried out in Nigeria and South Africa. I have employed the dynamic model of practice-as-research as a conceptual framework that allows the evolving art-research process to draw on a range of theoretical/practical methodologies.

While most of my experimental projects are formulated on post-conceptual contemporary art practice, I have remained fixated on the theoretical and practical application of frameworks from social sculpture (Joseph BEUYS and Shelley SACKS), Relational Aesthetics (Nicolas BOURRIAUD), Connective Aesthetics (Suzi GABLIK), and environmentally sustainable and political-ecological (Bruno LATOUR). I have approached my experimental projects with critical praxis, allowing me to overlap existing theoretical frameworks with my artistic practice to produce new outcomes and knowledge.

In a working context like Nigeria and South Africa, art practice from the perspective of Fine Art or art-for-art's sake is geared toward producing "commodified objects". These forms are charged with visual aesthetic components. They depend highly on the existing socio-economic conditions and lack profound socio-ethical causes. My central question is: is it possible to develop alternative artistic models as forms of creative interventions between a traditional individual studio-based art practice and extended connective social practice?

As practice-based research, my work is exploratory and embedded in creative and experimental processes formulated to contribute new forms of knowledge to the field of art. My research's critical locus evolves from a mediating point of interaction and critique between these two worlds. This allows me to create asymmetric relations between their margins and prompt new "relational encounters" that reproduce a series of "mediated objects." In this investigation, I consider the concept of "mediated objects" as embodied agencies that hold visual-aesthetic and socio-ethical components. They address the critique outlined in studio-based art and social practice using converging interdisciplinary, cross-cultural, and context-specific methodologies and approaches.

My goal in this research is to propose and encourage alternative models of artistic practice – characterised by structurally positioning the five experimental projects through performance action, sound/music, photography/film, and creative vision workshop as firm propositions. These inspired propositions have complex aesthetics and socio-political, cultural, and ecological components. They serve as a more potent alternative art practice in Nigeria, South Africa, and other countries on the African continent, where contemporary socially-engaged art practice is underdeveloped and, in some areas, sparingly practiced in recent years.

**ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS:**

Firstly, I would like to express my sincere gratitude to my supervisor Professor Ray Lee for the continuous motivation, exceptional guidance, support and understanding of my practice and research context. I could not have imagined having a better supervisor in this research journey.

Secondly, I would like to thank my initial supervisors, Dr Paul Whitty, Dr Janice Howard and Professor Chris Dorsett, for their seminal guidance, advice and insightful comments. Their support encouraged me to widen my research and practice. Also, and in particular, I am grateful to Professor Shelley Sacks for this research opportunity and for enlightening me at first glance on research methodology/practice in Social Sculpture and Social Practice. Her support has been hugely crucial in this research trajectory.

Thirdly, I would like to express my profound appreciation to Dr Mark Sealy, Dr Theaster Gates, Hugo Tromp and my brothers, Victor Ekpuk, Anthony Ndikanwu, Dan Peter-Anam, Otobong Amos, Emeka Okereke, Iniobong Esuene, Olivier Frendo, and Ukpong James, for their continuous support, kindness and generosity during this research and related art projects.

Lastly, I would like to thank my family, most especially Chantal Brige-Ukpong, Yannis Ukpong, Yvan Ukpong, Yale Ukpong, and Yohann Ukpong for their inspiration, love, support and patience during my absence from home. I also thank my family members, Edem Ukpong, Blessing Ukpong, Wanda Ukpong, Emediong Gabriel, Grace Ndikanwu, Emmanuel Ukpong, Emem Ukpong and Ukpong Ukpong, for their encouragement, kindness, and prayers throughout this research and my life in general.

**TABLE OF CONTENTS:**

List of illustrations	Page 5
Introduction	Page 7
Chapter One	Page 10
Chapter Two	Page 21
Chapter Three	Page 30
Chapter Four	Page 45
Chapter Five	Page 52
Conclusion	Page 58
Contribution-Impacts	Page 61
Future Direction	Page 62
Bibliography	Page 65
Appendix	Page 68

## **LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS:**

<b>Figure 1:</b>	Ukpong, BC1: Drill, Ibeno, Niger Delta, Nigeria, 2010	Page 10
<b>Figure 2:</b>	Niger Delta Militant in Southern Nigeria, Agence France-Presse, 2016	Page 12
<b>Figure 3:</b>	Wilfred Ukpong, BC1: Drill, Oil and Gas facility, Niger Delta, Nigeria, 2010	Page 14
<b>Figure 4:</b>	Oil and Gas Terminal, Niger Delta, 2010	Page 16
<b>Figure 5:</b>	Wilfred Ukpong, BC1: Drill, Niger Delta, 2010	Page 18
<b>Figure 6:</b>	Wilfred Ukpong, BC1: Drill, 2010	Page 18
<b>Figure 7:</b>	Ombeline de la Gournerie, Production Assistant for BC1: Drill, Niger Delta, 2010	Page 20
<b>Figure 8:</b>	Wilfred Ukpong, BC1: Composing A Cause, Niger Delta, 2013	Page 22
<b>Figure 9:</b>	Wilfred Ukpong, BC1: Composing A Cause, Niger Delta, 2013	Page 22
<b>Figure 10:</b>	Wilfred Ukpong, Sound/Music Recording Equipment for BC1: Composing a Cause, Nigeria, 2012	Page 24
<b>Figure 11:</b>	Wilfred Ukpong, Sound/Music Recording Session for BC1: Composing a Cause, Nigeria, 2012	Page 26
<b>Figure 12:</b>	Ray Lee, <i>circles of ether</i> , Sound Installation, Kinetica Museum, Oxford Brookes University, 2007	Page 27
<b>Figure 13:</b>	Shelley Sacks, Exchange Values, Sculpture & Sound Installation, 2007	Page 28
<b>Figure 14:</b>	Jacques Derrida, Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, University of California, 1993	Page 31
<b>Figure 15:</b>	Wilfred Ukpong, FUTURE-WORLD-EXV, film still, 2019	Page 34
<b>Figure 16:</b>	Wilfred Ukpong, Sculpture/Prop Workshop for FUTURE-WORLD-EXV, Niger Delta 2016	Page 36
<b>Figure 17:</b>	Medicine Bowl Ceramic, Nigeria	Page 37
<b>Figure 18:</b>	Nsibidi/Abakwa Signs Nigeria/Cuba	Page 38
<b>Figure 19:</b>	Wilfred Ukpong, FUTURE-WORLD-EXV, and film still, 2019	Page 37
<b>Figure 20:</b>	W Ukpong, discarded floater for crude oil offloading between oilrigs/vessel, Niger Delta, 2015	Page 38
<b>Figure 22:</b>	W Ukpong, Repurposing polystyrene from a discarded giant floater to art, Niger Delta, 2015	Page 39
<b>Figure 23:</b>	W Ukpong, Repurposing polystyrene from a discarded giant floater to art, Niger Delta, 2015	Page 39

<b>Figure 21:</b>	Wilfred Ukpong salvaging polystyrene, fiberglass and steel from a giant floater, Niger Delta, 2015	Page 38
<b>Figure 24:</b>	Wilfred Ukpong, a prop workshop participant, FUTURE-WORLD-EXV, Niger Delta, 2016	Page 40
<b>Figure 25:</b>	Wilfred Ukpong, a costume workshop participant, FUTURE-WORLD-EXV, Niger Delta, 2016	Page 40
<b>Figure 26:</b>	Wilfred Ukpong, Blazing Century 1 installation, Quintessence Art Gallery Lagos, Nigeria, 2018	Page 41
<b>Figure 27:</b>	Wilfred Ukpong, FUTURE-WORLD-EXV/BC1: NIGER-DELTA/FUTURE-COSMOS, 2016	Page 42
<b>Figure 28:</b>	Wilfred Ukpong, behind the scene of FUTURE-WORLD-EXV, 2016	Page 43
<b>Figure 29:</b>	Wilfred Ukpong, behind the scene of FUTURE-WORLD-EXV, 2016	Page 43
<b>Figure 30:</b>	Wilfred Ukpong, at the formal film award presentation Transcorp Hilton, Abuja 2018	Page 44
<b>Figure 31:</b>	Wilfred Ukpong, film costume design inspired by Hans Eworth painting of Mary Tudor, 2015	Page 46
<b>Figure 32:</b>	Wilfred Ukpong, BC1: THE RETURN OF THE OBJECT, with Marvelous Dominion & Theaster Gates at a performance intervention during the 56 <sup>th</sup> International Exhibition Venice Biennale, 2015	Page 48
<b>Figure 33:</b>	Wilfred Ukpong, BC1: THE RETURN OF THE OBJECT, performance art intervention at the Zeitz MOCAA opening in Cape Town, South Africa, 2017	Page 50
<b>Figure 34:</b>	Wilfred Ukpong, BC1: YOUTH OF NIGERIA AS ARTISTS OF THE FUTURE, Nigeria, 2017	Page 53
<b>Figure 35:</b>	Wilfred Ukpong, BC1: YOUTH OF NIGERIA AS ARTISTS OF THE FUTURE, Nigeria, 2017	Page 55
<b>Figure 36:</b>	Wilfred Ukpong, BC1: YOUTH OF NIGERIA AS ARTISTS OF THE FUTURE, Nigeria, 2017	Page 55
<b>Figure 37:</b>	Wilfred Ukpong, BC1: YOUTH OF NIGERIA AS ARTISTS OF THE FUTURE, Nigeria, 2017	Page 56
<b>Figure 38:</b>	Wilfred Ukpong BC1: EARTH SOUNDS (Performance-based Film), Janus Encounter, Nigeria, 2021	Page 58
<b>Figure 39:</b>	Wilfred Ukpong BC1: EARTH SOUNDS (Performance-based Film), Janus Encounter, Nigeria, 2021	Page 58
<b>Figure 40:</b>	Wilfred Ukpong Future-bond, drawing during BC1: YOUTH OF NIGERIA AS ARTISTS OF THE FUTURE Nigeria, 2017	Page 59
<b>Figure 41:</b>	Wilfred Ukpong, Frontal design rendition (Corel Draw) of VOF Foundation by Wilfred Ukpong, 2022	Page 65
<b>Figure 42:</b>	Wilfred Ukpong, VOF Foundation frontal view of the building construction, Eket, Nigeria, 2022	Page 66
<b>Figure 43:</b>	Wilfred Ukpong, VOF Foundation, angle view of the multipurpose hall, Eket, Nigeria, 2022	Page 66
<b>Figure 44:</b>	Wilfred Ukpong, The VOF, recycling oil material waste into solar housings, Eket, Nigeria, 2021	Page 67
<b>Figure 45:</b>	Wilfred Ukpong, The VOF, recycling oil material waste into solar housings, Eket, Nigeria, 2021	Page 67

## **INTRODUCTION:**

Over the past 50 years, artistic practice in Nigeria (my country of birth) – where this practice-based research is mainly situated, along with South Africa – has focused mainly on studio-based activities within the Fine Art perspective. The conception of art here is often conceived as an activity removed from social life and guided by artistic autonomy and formal aesthetic principles that govern its production, perception, and distribution.

While art communicates an intended meaning from the perspective of “art for art’s sake”, it is also sometimes used as a medium of social commentary, thus a facile apparatus for social and political change. Predominant contemporary art forms have been highly dependent upon existing socio-economic conditions. Contemporary Art objects in Nigeria and other African countries are often fetishized as “commodity objects” within existing conservative capitalist structures. Nevertheless, such forms lack elements of deep social inclusion, which were prevalent in traditional art forms in Africa or currently rooted in social practice, a contemporary art medium primarily explored in the western hemisphere. Social Practice focuses on social engagement through collaboration, participation, and community interventions within existing systems of production that facilitate social exchange and transformation. When an artist’s obligation and identity are continuously redefined and tested by increasing social conditions and challenges in today’s society, is it possible to develop an alternative artistic model between traditional individual studio-based art and extended connective social practice?

This research seeks to offer five experimental case studies conceived as “blazing trails for a century of artists to follow”. They provide platforms for critique, re-imagination, and re-conceptualisation of an alternative contemporary form of artistic practice through a series of creative interventions on the margins of two worlds; studio-based art and connective social practice with focuses on participation and object making.

These evolving examples create asymmetrical relationships between my initial rejection of “commodity objects” and my later engagement with what I conceive as “mediating objects”, which culminates as forms of interventions between studio-based art and connective social practice. For me, these evolving mediating objects through conversational processes exemplified in the five experimental projects are “creative interventions” that address the critique outlined in these two distinctive worlds. These examples offer a framework to formulate a series of converging interdisciplinary, cross-cultural, and context-specific methodologies/approaches in their development.

## **PROJECTS:**

**BC1- DRILL** was conceived as a community-based art project involving interlinked creative workshop initiatives, site installations, and experimental participatory performance actions. The project involved the active participation of 100 local youths, mostly ex-militants, ex-cultists, and fishers, in two crucial marginalised oil-producing locations and fishing settlements – Ibeno and Bonny – in the Niger Delta. BC1: Drill was developed in partnership with the Prince Claus Fund for culture and development in Amsterdam. The project aimed to generate community dialogue, resolution and truth through actions and objects that seek to redefine critical spaces for reimagining alternative forms of artistic practice that promote transformation, collaboration, and inclusion. On the one hand, it does this by mediating between two worlds: studio-based work and social practice and facilitating immediacy of social exchange between marginalised local community youths and privileged oil and gas workers. On the other hand, by trying to retain the processual visual aesthetic structure and sensorial effects of the work evolution.

**BC1: COMPOSING A CAUSE** was a meditative socially-engaged sonic experiment that involved sound-making workshops and studio-based sessions. The process combined a series of field and studio recording activities by setting up community encounters with individuals, local traditional musicians, academically trained musicians/artists, and a young European musician to create speculative narrative soundscapes and scores that reflected on participants and communal experiences. The project aimed to develop an abstraction of narrative soundscapes and scores firmly based on participants' socio-cultural experiences and test the process of sound and music making as a catalytic space to "provoke social relations" and promote a cause for change in the Niger Delta. It did this by proposing alternative ways of using sound and making to interact between the environment, humans, and non-human objects across different spatial spaces and temporalities.

**BC1: NIGER-DELTA/FUTURE-COSMOS & FUTURE-WORLD-EXV** was an interlinked art-photographic and art-film project conceived and developed alongside four creative workshops with young people from the marginalised oil-producing communities in the Niger Delta. These projects aimed to experiment with art-photographic and art-film making processes/products both as studio-based work and social practice that responds – in forms of participatory art and visual activism – to challenging socio-political and environmental issues of the region. The two interlinked projects are characterised by a "mediating third term" through a process that ensures the capacity to communicate on two levels – to participants and spectators – with disturbing and pleasurable experiences. Within the context of image production, this mediating third term allows the viewer/reader to see the image as a catalytic and embodiment of agency.

**BC1: THE RETURN OF THE OBJECT** was conceived as a series of disruptive performance interventions that explored and tested the role of objects as a mediated social agency in international art venues. This project was developed through a series of public interventions initially tested and scoped during the 56<sup>th</sup> International Venice Biennale, before the 2017 FNB Joburg Art Fair, and at the Zeitz MOCAA opening in Cape Town. This experiment aimed to develop a critique of 'commodified' and 'non-social' art objects through a developing interest in "mediating objects" that ranged from inter-subjective encounters with performance artists/actors to engaged props used during these events. Here objects exist beyond the realms of commodification assigned to contemporary art objects. Within the context of "mediating objects", an active viewer or audience is forced to focus on the object's capacity and potential to exercise agency. This very act of presentation or engagement underscores the characteristic that exemplifies the practical means of creating and sustaining human relations.

**BC1: YOUTH OF NIGERIA AS ARTISTS OF THE FUTURE (2017)** was a two-part *social-art workshop* process that explored creative ways to enable young people (artists, creative and cultural practitioners) in Nigeria to become aware of their social-artistic capacities. The project aimed to promote creative visions and activities that shape environmental interventions and social artworks that could become forms of social and creative enterprise. The seminal impetuses for the conception of this project were based on a background interest in extending conceptual frameworks in the social sculpture practice developed by German conceptual artist, scholar, social critic, and activist Joseph Beuys. Furthermore, to extend the strands of connective aesthetics, a concept conceived by American artist and art critic Suzi Gablik. It does this by facilitating a paradigm shift in working perspective among youth participants to become social agents. The explored working models prompt participants to new ways of working while boosting their capacities for imaginative thought and creativity towards sustainable and humane forms of development in their future practice.

This experiment has shown that 'art' – in the sense of the term used in contemporary social sculpture – can emphasise creative actions that support active engagement in shaping one's life and society.

### **QUESTIONS:**

In this practice-based research, I emphasize the role of creative processes developed as a set of investigations through five experimental works. These developed projects play a vital role in the new understanding of the critical practice that arises with complexities and rigor to sustain and investigate the possible relationships between studio-based art and connective social practice. In this sense, practice, and research together operate in such a way as to generate new forms of knowledge that can eventually be shared, scrutinized, and validated. I have approached each of my experimental projects with a critical application of my praxis – which overlaps theoretical frameworks with my practice using each of the projects as a catalyst to explore processes and inquiries that relate to my research questions:

- 1) Can artistic practice be experimentally engaging and, at the same time, responsive to socio-political and environmental issues in a context where conventional social work apparatus often employed by NGOs and governmental bodies seem impractical?
- 2) What forms of collaborative and inclusive engagement can facilitate immediacy of social exchange while trying to retain the processual aesthetic structure of the ongoing work evolution?
- 3) Can a lens-based practice facilitate valuable tools for social transformation and interventions? If so, how can such tools and strategies be developed and sustained in direct response to the socio-political realities of the working context?
- 4) If such interventions evoke audience empathy in the art world, how can such forms function with viewers and participants unfamiliar with contemporary art-film and art-photography?
- 5) Can the role of art objects be tested as social agents and can it act as a means to inhabit artist intentions, and can such objects redefine and review spaces of their encounters while literally entering the audience through visceral and emphatic ways?

At the end of this commentary, I have included an appendix section using simple narrative terms to reflect on the core contextual background and influences that helped carve out an extended trajectory in my artistic career. This supplementary information gives an account of the key impulses and encounters that paved the way for my current artistic sensibilities, aesthetic preference and research interest.

## **CHAPTER 1- BC1: DRILL (2009 – 2010)**

**BC1: DRILL** was conceived as a community-based art project involving interlinked creative workshop initiatives, site installations, and experimental participatory performance actions. The project involved the active participation of 100 local youths, mostly ex-militants, ex-cultists, and fishers, in two crucial marginalised oil-producing locations and fishing settlements – Ibeno and Bonny – in the Niger Delta. BC1: Drill was developed in partnership with the Prince Claus Fund for culture and development in Amsterdam.

In the context of the Niger Delta, it is essential to give detailed definitions of the designated focus groups. Militancy here refers to a group of armed rebels – operating from a primary rural base – who often pose under the pretext of radical activism yet engage in insurgent violence and guerrilla warfare. In the context of the Niger Delta, they are known to fight against authorities (Nigerian military and police force) and often practise piracy and kidnappings aimed at multinational oil and gas expatriates. Here, cultists are a group of brotherhood whose activities are shrouded in secrecy – including drug abuse, ritual killings, sexual assaults, gambling, pipeline canalisation, and intimidation. And finally, fishers live mainly in the coastal communities in the Niger Delta and practise fishing as a profession. BC1: Drill, on the one hand, came from a research interest to test and explore trans-disciplinary and cross-cultural methods from social sculpture and connective aesthetics and, on the other hand, to develop a body of work that can effectively and creatively respond to topical issues among community conflicts, youth restiveness, violence and unemployment in the Niger Delta. Joseph Beuys' concept of social sculpture provided a framework. I was primarily exploring his practice's transformative role in building human capital and shaping a democratic and sustainable future.



**Figure 1** Wilfred Ukpong, BC1: Drill, Ibeno, Niger Delta, Nigeria, 2010

The oil-rich Niger Delta has been at the centre of environmental justice campaigns in the UK, with concerns over major spills and flares at the hands of oil and gas industry giants. I thought of an artistic project that could combine skills development with research and creative invention. Also, coming from a fine art studio-based interdisciplinary background, I was particularly interested in developing projects in photography, film, sculpture, installation, performance, and music. I was interested in how these projects could be situated within a socio-political and environmental context; thus, how to incorporate a studio-based artistic practice with connective social engagement that tackles pertinent social issues with community participation and intervention. This project straddled the realms of visual aesthetic volition and a sense of ethical-social responsibility. **The primary focuses of BC1: Drill** (a 12-month project from September 2009 – September 2010) was to develop a series of creative vision workshops – with the participants – and segments of participatory performance actions in the two communities. At this early stage of my research, I was interested in exploring processes and inquiries related to my primary research questions. My questions were, can artistic practice be engaging and, at the same time, responsive to socio-political and environmental issues? And can such activity be transformative in a context where conventional social work – often employed by NGOs and governmental bodies – seems impractical?

Over the years, many government agencies in the Niger Delta and related NGOs, such as Amnesty International, have been involved in various empowerment and capacity-building projects. Yet their efforts are often ineffective and unsustainable due to the poor infrastructure, corruption, mismanagement of funds, and lack of sustainable developmental structures in the region. In the lecture, *Youth Restiveness, Militancy and the Intractable Problems of the Niger Delta*, Austin Emaduku explained:

*Corruption and mismanagement of received funds have also been a huge factor. Equally rampant and most disturbing is the halfhearted implementation and criminal circumvention of laudable programs for self-enrichment. Efforts and emphasis have always been focused on nebulous human capital development programs, mostly because it is a soft area where funds can be siphoned without any noticeable and measurable impact. Human capital development is laudable and direly needed in the region, but concentrating on human capital development without first providing the basic infrastructure to facilitate and sustain economic activities is like putting the cart before the horse (Emaduku, 2016).*

Most NGOs and governmental agencies offer artisanal training to youths in welding, carpentry, fashion, hairdressing, and baking. They complement the training with subsequent starter packs and seed funding to establish a small-scale enterprise. yet without ensuring that basic infrastructure needs like electricity, good roads, and water amenities are implemented for a lucrative business environment to thrive.

Austin Emaduku further explained that *“most youths trained have had to sell off their starter packs and gave up their shops and returned to the streets or creeks to begin their criminal activities... the simple reason, in most cases being that these businesses rely on electricity and water within a year, cost of buying fuel and diesel have practically wiped out whatever earnings they made”* (Emaduku, 2016). However, in an environment where even established businesses are folding or merging due to a lack of basic infrastructure, it is most likely that youths trained and supported in these empowered initiatives would eventually terminate business operations and succumb to such a strident socio-economic environment. Reading Emaduka’s lecture led me to rethink ways of capacity building and youth empowerment processes through artistic and creative approaches. I was thinking of how these processes can be inclusive, collaborative, encompassing, and mentally transformative.



**Figure 2** Niger Delta Militants in Southern Nigeria, Agence France-Presse (2016)

While designing my working processes, I was posed with the question of what forms of collective and inclusive engagement can facilitate immediacy of social exchange while retaining the processual aesthetic structure of the ongoing work evolution? I thought whether the focus groups – ex-militants, ex-cultists, and fishers – could be invited into oil and gas producing and engineering facilities to perform among oil workers. Can such symbolic enactment and engagement create space to promote new emancipatory social relations or dialogue processes that generate capacities for inclusion, collaboration, and social transformation? Before traveling to Nigeria, my initial interest was to dedicate a substantial amount of time to literature reviews on the Niger Delta. Moreover, in parallel, investigating a series of conceptual frameworks – drawn from the fields of interventionist post-conceptual art practices, critical aesthetics, dialectic materialism, and, most significantly, the concept of Social Sculpture (Joseph Beuys and Shelley Sacks).

At this time, I was exploring practical and theoretical frameworks that can support work development in the Niger Delta. As part of my Ph.D. investigation, I also examined an extensive compendium of critical essays linked with forming and evaluating socially-engaged art practice from the 1960s to the present. These essays are among *Education for Socially Engaged Art* (Helguera, 2011) by Pablo Helguera, *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship* (Bishop, 2012) by Claire Bishop, *Conversation Pieces: Community and Conversation in Modern Art* (Kester, 2004), by Grant H. Kester, *Relational Aesthetics* (Bourriaud, 1998) Nicolas Bourriaud, *The One and the Many: Contemporary Collaborative Art in a Global Context* (Kester, 2011) by Grant H. Kester, and *Social Works: Performing Art, Supporting Publics* (Jackson, 2011) by Shannon Jackson. Attending related seminars and lectures organised by the Social Sculpture Research Unit helped me gain insights into contemporary methodologies in social sculpture. It provided a practical understanding of the social practice.

Arriving in Nigeria in December 2009, connecting a youth empowerment worker with whom I have been in touch and previously worked with in various local NGOs was essential and valuable. Our first visits to Ibeno and Bonny communities (located 100km apart) were to establish a relationship with stakeholders and youth leaders. Mr. Dan Peter-Annam took an extensive role as a collaborator, personal assistant, and facilitator/mediator in developing the project in the two communities. BC1: Drill was introduced to them as an artistic and research project that will help promote community dialogue and youth empowerment through creative workshops and performance actions. The first two months in the Niger Delta were spent recruiting 50 participants from each community. The selection process was based on recruiting 20 proclaimed ex-militants, 20 ex-cultists, and 10 fishermen who had affiliations with local militants. The selection was also focused on those who exhibited artistic and cultural interest and activist roles in their community. Essentially, a significant part of the recruiting process was to ask each participant about their direct role or interest in promoting, impeding, or intervening in certain socio-political, economic, and environmental matters and towards a perceived more remarkable change in their communities.

On the 9<sup>th</sup>, 16<sup>th</sup>, 23<sup>rd</sup>, and 30<sup>th</sup> of January 2010, participants in the two communities met at respective town halls and were given particular orientation on the project through visual illustrations among a slide presentation. With contributions from the invited local NGO officers trained in youth empowerment, cultural officers, and environmentalists, these workshops were structured as informal and conversational, where participants were allowed to discuss personal and group concerns. This approach offered interesting suggestions and information that served as significant components and references during the next phase of the prop and costume-making workshops. I thought this was helpful and comprehensible for a group who had no prior understanding of contemporary performance art, activist art, or cultural reference in art.

After spending two months in the Niger Delta, I returned to Oxford, and the next four months were spent designing the next phase of the workshops and subsequent performance. At some point during my visit to Nigeria, I felt that my knowledge of the context was far from extensive. I thought substantial time was needed to understand the social dynamics of the context from which I have become alienated since relocating to Europe over the past 10 years. At this point, I was interested in exploring literature surveys on the social conflict in the Niger Delta. I was articulating and transposing some of the approaches in *Social Sculpture* into the context of the Niger Delta. Notable books were *Conflict and Instability in the Niger Delta: The Warri Case* (Imobighe, 2004) by Thomas Imobighe, and *Fresh Dimensions on the Niger Delta Crisis of Nigeria* (Ojakorotu, 2009) by Dr. Victor Ojakorotu. These two edited volumes covered militarism, resource management, development, conflict resolution, youth restiveness, and instability.

At this point, I read Shelley Sacks in her "Perspective and Reflections" on *Social Sculpture*. She noted:

*The criteria of contemporary art making and aesthetics overlook that an 'expanded conception of art frames social sculpture' and that this frame is concerned with shaping our lives and humane and ecologically viable society. If, on the other hand, the criteria of traditional forms of activism or change processes are used, significant aspects of Beuys' 'expanded conception of art' also risk being lost (Sacks, n.d.).*

Considering the above quote, personal reflections, and participant observations, I grasped that the idea of an "expanded conception of art" from a social sculpture perspective and within the participants' cultural ethos seems incomprehensive and non-viable. For most participants in the workshop, traditional or contemporary art exist in forms of drawing, painting, or sculpture, primarily produced and appreciated for their beauty, emotional or spiritual purpose. Moreover, activism for them would exist within socio-political landscapes and unrelated to the realms of artistic practice.



**Figure 3** Wilfred Ukpong, BC1: Drill, Oil and Gas facility, Niger Delta, Nigeria, 2010

Introducing new forms of artistic practice to non-art participants during the workshop was daunting. My question here was *'if forms of performative actions in social sculpture or socially engaged art practice were able to evoke an empathic response in western art audiences, how would the audience in the Niger Delta perceive such forms of engagement and presentations?'* Furthermore, how can such a non-traditional art form that seemingly resembles a protest and aims to disrupt social behaviour patterns and cultural experience within the public and private spaces be perceived as art when audience and participant members are unfamiliar with contemporary social practice?

A subsequent trip to Nigeria was made in May 2010 to begin the next phase of the workshop with local fashion designers, artists, and previous participants who had expressed interest in creating performance props and costumes. On the one hand, I was fixated on performative actions in socially engaged art practice in the west. On the other hand, I was exploring the converging roles of local cultural aesthetics, artistic traditions, vernacular activism, and indigenous performative art. I thought that these converging frameworks and traditions from the west and the local context could help activate social dialogue, transformation, and reforms as creative imperative strategies in the active engagement of participants.

In order to formulate specific working strategies that mediate the field of contemporary social sculpture and performance art within the context of the Niger Delta, I started reflecting on Jack Richardson's essay, *Interventionist Art Education: Contingent Communities, Social Dialogue, and Public Collaboration*.

Richardson explained:

*Recent nontraditional forms of public art have been described as an interventionist, referring to art that establishes its purpose and form through the social exchanges and altered behaviors that arise due to its disruption of quotidian patterns of social experience in public spaces (Richardson, 2010)*

Richardson further illuminated that:

*The form of the work is revealed through the contingent communities, spontaneous social dialogues, and unexpected social collaborations due to its disruption of habitual public experience (Richardson, 2010).*

Considering Jack Richardson's essay as an entry point in developing this interventionist performance art project thus provides both a theoretical and artistic framework for rethinking the function of art-making in the social realm within the broader Niger Delta context and concerning traditional public art enactment seen during festive cultural rites. Suppose these two worlds of artistic practice are presented simultaneously as parallel forms of art-making during the workshop. Can such a dual method re-evaluate and reconsider the potential that art-making might evocate as a means of social engagement and as forms of the dialogue process and knowledge production in the public environment be habited by the participants who are not artists or art students? Moreover, can this type of engagement help respond to my research questions?

At the end of the four-month workshop, I realised that the project BC1: Drill had organically developed as a mediating process in the margins of two worlds which tended to incorporate an extensive whole with formulating frameworks between traditional and contemporary forms, processes, and products, animate and inanimate, natural and supernatural, self and other, aesthetics and politics, and authentic and inauthentic to re-conceptualise diversity of artistic forms tending to dismiss conventional classifications. The next phase of the workshop – meeting every Saturday and Sunday for six months – focused on developing performance props, costumes, and ephemeral performative actions in various oil and gas production sites and engineering facilities.

At this point, every process and product developed tended to challenge and overcome the perceived boundaries of 'art making' and 'activism' while exhibiting explicit contradictions and competing stakes of experimental art-making that culminated as alternative forms of contemporary art practice for local participants. During the process, I stressed to participants that the workshop and performance actions were experimental with no absolute outcomes. Nevertheless, it was essential for the evolving process and product to be characterised by inherent tension and complexities akin to the socio-political and cultural landscapes of the Niger Delta.

Saying this, I believe it is helpful to give some background to the socio-political, environmental conditions, and of course, the cultural landscape of the Niger Delta. According to Wikipedia:

*The Niger Delta is the delta of the Niger River sitting directly on the Gulf of Guinea on the Atlantic Ocean in Nigeria. It is typically considered to be located within nine coastal southern States. The Niger Delta is a very densely populated region called the Oil Rivers because it was once a major palm oil producer. The area was the British Oil Rivers Protectorate from 1885 until 1893 when it was expanded and became the Niger Coast Protectorate. The delta is a petroleum-rich region and has been the center of international concern over pollution that has resulted principally from major oil spills of multinational corporations of the petroleum industry (Wikipedia Contributors, 2019).*

In his Environmental Protection Law, Ikhide Ehighelua noted that:

*The current conflict in the Niger Delta first arose in the early 1990s over tensions between foreign oil corporations and a number of the Niger Delta's minority ethnic groups who feel they are being exploited, particularly the Ogoni and the Ijaw. Ethnic and political unrest continued throughout the 1990s despite the return to democracy (Ehighelua, 2007).*

From 2004 to 2010, violence and community conflicts affected the oil industry with piracy, kidnappings, and pipeline vandalization. Over the years, the Niger Delta has been thrust into the global limelight due to resource extraction, environmental pollution, and conflict. However, the region's rich ecological biodiversity and cultural heritage engaged by various indigenous artists and creative sectors have been greatly overlooked.



**Figure 4** Oil and Gas Terminal, Niger Delta, 2010

The holistic and conversational approaches are essential to critics and novelists, among them Ben Okri, Ken Saro-Wiwa, Isidore Okpewho, J.P. Clark, and academically trained artists such as Uche Oke and Bruce Onobrakpeya, and have been my reference point of departure. These prominent authors and artists focused their visual art or literature on evolving dialogue between the margin of regional cosmological and cultural paradigms. These works focused on topical discussions on minority discourse, environmental degradation, climate change, multinational corporations' greed, dictatorship, and people's struggle to control their resources. Here, I will stress that the complexities in the works of the mentioned artists and authors were quite pivotal in developing BC1: Drill. In conceptualising this project, I drew from the local activist forms while looking at artistic responses from literature, visual arts, and performances, such as local masquerades and dance traditions during festivals.

The costume and performance prop-making workshops were developed in an engineering fabrication yard and onshore oil drilling base in May and June 2010. I was interested in experimenting – with participants, artists, and designers – on the role of creative dialogue between the cosmological and industrial landscapes of the Niger Delta. I also employed symbolic forms of activism in the region with particular reference to The Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND), which at that time was the largest militant group in the Niger Delta region. It was a robust and disruptive approach that these workshops were initiated within related oil industrial locations

In the workshop, we highlighted and referenced the dramatic features of Abang, an indigenous performance and cultural dance among the Efik-Ibibio tribe of the Niger Delta. I was particularly interested in appropriating symbols, dance gestures, and the hoop skirt costume, which inhabits communication elements and makes multiple references to Victorian costume, traditional repository, and oil storage facility also called Abang in the Efik-Ibibio language. Fifty hoop skirts used by the Bonny participants were made in red, while 50 created for the Ibeno community were made in black. We also created one hundred emblazoned black flags for the performance as a direct reference to the flags used by the MEND group. The black and red symbolisms directly referenced the two significant colours used by The Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta. In MEND colour symbolism, black stands for crude oil, while the red colour represents spilled blood from oil pollution and conflicts in the region. MEND, at this time, had directed efforts toward knocking down oil production and claimed to expose the exploitation and oppression of the people of the Niger Delta and the devastation of the natural environment.

Creating references through cultural and activist elements in the costumes and props was a strategy to animate tension between the two worlds and encapsulate the land's cultural spirit with its complexities of co-existence between the host communities, the Federal Government of Nigeria, and their partnership with oil and gas corporations. Furthermore, notions of complexities, tensions, conflicts, and the internal drive for critical dialogue and resolution became apparent in the creative making. These efforts of creative interventions between two worlds propelled me to think seriously about the inherent contradictions, mediations, and movements as forms of critique in the visual making in the costume and prop-making activities. At this time, I thought of the art and practice of "Dialectic", which refers to the method of argument or exposition that systematically weighs contradictory facts or ideas to resolve their real or apparent contradictions. As complex as these may sound to local participants, I believe that reiterating the need for a dialectics process as a methodology on the margins could help conceive the design structure of the workshop materials and subsequent performance. Also, it was essential to encourage participants to understand that contradictions and complexities in this project are essential tools for developing dialogue and social change.



**Figure 5** Wilfred Ukpong, BC1: Drill, Niger Delta, 2010



**Figure 6** Wilfred Ukpong, BC1: Drill, 2010

For a week into the next phase of the performance, I took a break to revisit and explore forms and concepts of dialectics and, most specifically, Hegelian Dialectic, in order to conceive ways in which the evolving structure of mediations during the performance in locations among the oil storage facility, engineering fabrication yard, and oil exploration and production base in the engaged communities.

According to the Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy definition (Stanford.edu, 2016), “Hegel's dialectics” refers to the particular dialectical method of argument employed by the 19<sup>th</sup> century German philosopher, G.W.F. Hegel, which, like other “dialectical” methods, relies on a contradictory process between opposing sides. It is a term used to describe a philosophical argument method involving some contradictory process between opposing sides. The contradiction between a proposition (thesis) and its antithesis is resolved at a higher level of truth (synthesis). I had conceived that inviting local participants who are ex-militants, ex-cultists, and fishermen into oil and gas industrial facilities to perform in the presence of oil and gas workers could be a profound symbolic enactment. Thus, such a symbolic encounter could create space to promote new emancipatory social relations or dialogue processes that can generate capacities for inclusion, collaboration, and social transformation.

The oil and gas workers were indeed apprehensive about commuting a unit for this event, and a growing tension prompted them to request security presence during the performance. These performative actions were ephemeral and improvisational. Abang and Ekpe traditional dance and gestural patterns were employed as integral parts of this performance. These dance patterns soothe therapeutic tendencies through their dramatic forms of communication. Abang and Ekpe traditional dances within the Efik-Ibibio cultural expression can be viewed as a form of communication. The performance actions took place on the 10<sup>th</sup> and 24<sup>th</sup> of July, the 14<sup>th</sup> and 28<sup>th</sup> of August, and the 11<sup>th</sup> and 25<sup>th</sup> of September 2010. I was joined in the Niger Delta by my production assistant, Ombeline de la Gournerie (a French artist and filmmaker who has worked with me as a studio assistant in France for over two years). Participants appeared spectacular and took charge of the industrial facilities. They enacted a distinctive form of artistic performance and dance expression that told their stories, vented their frustrations and showcased cultural richness.

Through a series of interviews and feedback, it was observed that the events offered alternative and new ways in which alternative spaces and actions can generate capacity for community dialogues and change preconceptions. From the perspective of both parties, the events offered opportunities for different kinds of social relations and exchange activated by such engaged private spaces where both participant and audience are encouraged to become active agents of change. Much notable, positioning my artistic and research within the critical margins of two worlds with their inherent contradictions, I am drawn to *Jacques Rancière's* definition of “good art”. In *The Emancipated Spectator* (Rancière, 2011), Rancière argued that “good art must negotiate the tension that pushes art towards 'life' and separates aesthetic sensoriality from other forms of sensible experience”. In his view, the audience is aesthetically and politically passive in most modern artistic encounters. Good art, in this sense, should seek to transform the spectator into an active agent and the spectacle into a communal performance that seeks to activate change and dialogue.

In years of reflections on this project, I realised that BC1: Drill, in its development, tended to speak twice: from its readability and unreadable visceral sense. Here, I was drawn to Claire Bishop's *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship* where she re-examined *Jacques Rancière's* definition of good art as “*art that avoids the pitfalls of a didactic critical position in favor of rupture and ambiguity*” and that such: *suitable political art would ensure, at the same time, the production of a double effect: the readability of a political signification and a sensible or perceptual shock caused, conversely, by the uncanny, by that which resists signification* (Bishop, 2012).

From this standpoint, BC1: Drill inhabits tendencies and characteristics of artistic and political forms with symbolic objects of negotiations between opposite worlds. That is the sensible and perceptual worlds of both local community and oil industrial worlds, thus mediating and culminating with its uncanniness that seeks to activate social exchange and change. The workshop and performance seek to address the contradictory pull between the artistic autonomy of studio practice and the collective engagement of social practice. Participants and audiences are introduced to new forms of creative engagement that mediate between traditional African and contemporary western art forms that inhabit socio-political focus.

In retrospect, BC1: Drill is a revolutionary process of visualisation of community dialogue and truth through actions and objects that seek to redefine critical spaces for reimagining alternative forms of artistic practice that promote transformation, collaborative and inclusive engagement. On the one hand, it does this by mediating between two worlds: studio-based work and social practice and facilitating immediacy of social exchange between marginalised local community youths and privileged oil and gas workers. On the other hand, by trying to retain the processual visual aesthetic structure and sensorial effects of the evolution of the work. Herein is the crux of this first experimental research-led artistic project.



**Figure 7** Ombeline de la Gournerie, Production Assistant for BC1: Drill, Niger Delta, 2010

**Link - BC1: Drill:** <https://orientationtrip2010.files.wordpress.com/2010/02/prince-claus-fund-in-turkey-nigeria-and-mali.pdf>

## **CHAPTER 2 - BC1: COMPOSING A CAUSE (2012 -2014)**

**BC1: COMPOSING A CAUSE** was a meditative socially-engaged sonic experiment that involved sound-making workshops and studio-based sessions. The process combined a series of field and studio recordings by setting up community encounters with individuals, local traditional musicians, academically trained musicians/artists, and a young European musician to create speculative narrative soundscapes and scores that reflect on participants and communal experiences. The project aimed to develop an abstraction of narrative soundscapes and scores firmly based on participants' socio-cultural experiences and tested the process of sound and music making as a catalytic space to "provoke social relations" and promote a cause for change in the Niger Delta.

In this project, I was interested in developing a sound/music project as a testing ground to test new methods while responding to a set of original research questions. These questions were: what forms of collaborative engagement can facilitate immediacy of social exchange while retaining the processual aesthetic structure of the ongoing work evolution? Can a collaborative artistic studio-based work be experimentally engaging and at the same time responsive to socio-political issues in a context where conventional social work apparatus seems impractical?

On the one hand, the impetus that led to the development of this second experimental project was my fascination with sound, music, and chants while developing BC1: Drill, and thus these were major communicative components in the performance project. During the ephemeral performative actions enacted in locations among oil and gas and engineering facilities, local participants used vernacular songs and chants to communicate their intentions and social concerns through audience feedback during my previous events. I observed that the songs and chants were able to captivate the audience through intense emotive and visceral experiences, and I was interested in exploring further the embodying dynamics in these kinds of aural forms. On the other hand, I was interested in exploring further the artistic process that activates a "shared presence" among individuals, art objects, and their environment using sound.

In *Relational Aesthetics* Bourriaud explained that art is a

'shared presence' between images, objects, and people, which in turn allows us to understand artistic practices as experimental laboratories where anyone can participate, where sound and objects can be engaged to start up shared and transformative encounters (Bourriaud, 1998).

My encounter with music and sound-making can be traced back to my mid-teens in Nigeria. Coming from a family background of avid music listeners and the presence of a keyboard synthesizer, drum machine, and other sound-making devices at home was creatively stimulating. Over the years before relocating to Europe, I was engaged in church choir activities and music compositions ranging from gospel, rhythm, and blues, and hip hop sound production. Though I have a keen interest in traditional Nigerian music, I was equally fascinated with film scores from Stanley Myers, Hans Zimmer, and John Barry while watching western films. In the late 1990s, my friendship with Yale doctoral researcher David Doris (now an associate professor of African art and visual culture at the University of Michigan, in the Department of the History of Art, the Department of Afro-American and African Studies, and the Stamps School of Art & Design) would extend my interest to Fluxus experimental music and sound making.



**Figure 8** Wilfred Ukpong, BC1: Composing A Cause, Niger Delta, 2013



**Figure 9** Wilfred Ukpong, BC1: Composing A Cause, Niger Delta, 2013

Doris spent a research year in Nigeria studying Yoruba art and music. His interest in my broad artist background prompted him to encourage me to explore the interactive engagement of visual art and sound/music. The sensuous immediacy of such encounters in the works of George Brecht, John Cage, Joseph Beuys, and Yoko Ono, which Doris introduced to me, was compelling.

The interdisciplinary and cross-cultural background of visual artists, musicians, composers, designers, and poets who engaged in experimental art performances that emphasised the artistic process as a shared activity over the finished product was compelling. These processes, which generated new sonic art forms and social encounters, were inspiring during my early days in Oxford Brookes while attending a music event organised by the Sonic Art Research Unit. I began conceptualising the idea of creating an alternative art sound-making project with community storytellers, local musicians, and a European composer in an experimental process. In my reading of Fluxus, I became interested in the works of Joseph Beuys *FILZ TV 1970* and Yoko Ono's *"Ni-chome Noise Symphony" 2011*, that prompted embodied spaces where their art and sound could activate spaces for both political engagement and aesthetic experience.

During my second year at Oxford Brookes, my close acquaintance with a fellow doctoral student, in the Sonic Art Research Unit, Mike Blow (now professor of Interdisciplinary Arts and Music at the International College of Liberal Arts Yamanashi Gakuin University, Japan), would reactivate my interest in the interaction of sound and visual art through objects and installations in both public and private spaces. My frequent visits to activities at the Sonic Art Research Unit in Oxford Brookes were also instrumental in the project's conception, with methodologies of sound collection borrowed into this process. At this point, reflecting on the socio-environmental situation in the Niger Delta, I was prompted to explore the concept of *"Sonic Ecologies"*, in which soundscape compositions could become agencies in both social and ecological crises. According to Marcel Cobussen in his inaugural lecture given on November 28, 2016, at Leiden University, the term *"'sonic' is defined as almost any vibration that humans, as well as animals, can perceive, to the physical as well as mental effects of sounds, to what can be heard and listened to, but also to what remains inaudible and unheard"* (Cobussen, 2016)

In this note shell, the concept of sonic ecology, which I was interested in investigating through these experiments, deals with aural interactions between living and non-living organisms and their environment. He noted that sonic could encompass musical and non-musical sounds, noise, silence, ultra- or infrasound, spoken language, and aural communication systems. In addition, Cobussen defined the term *"ecology to refer to the analysis and study of interactions organisms (here, specifically humans) have with each other as well as with abiotic components of their environment"* (Cobussen, 2016).

Before returning to Nigeria in early March 2012, I had made inquiries about the possibilities of collaborating with local traditional and professional musicians with extensive knowledge in traditional oral storytelling and combining musical instruments and sounds from natural objects. In late 2011, I met budding young Dutch music composer Hugo Tromp in a tutorial workshop on Logic-Pro. I began an exciting conversation on the possibility of collaborating on a project in the Niger Delta. Tromp was artistically raw, talented, and keen on learning new sound and music production forms. I had travelled to his base in Groningen (Northern Netherlands) to establish a relationship and discuss the possibility of him joining me for a project in the Niger Delta.

In March 2011, Hugo and I travelled to Nigeria to conceptualise and develop this experimental sound and music project with the working title BC1: Composing a Cause. While conceptualising this project, it became apparent that my part in this experiment, in general, would be of a facilitator with sub-roles culminating in-between the margins of musicologist/musician and sound artist/social practitioner.

During the conceptualisation of BC1: Composing a Cause, I thought it would be helpful to structure and design the process into four phases: environmental recording,; human recording; live music recording; and digital studio composition. The environmental recording session involved Hugo and me visiting and collecting distinctive sound files in some oil and gas/industrial engineering and natural environments in the Niger Delta.

The second phase, human recording, involved visiting marginalised and most affected rural oil-producing and fishing communities where personal experiences and historical accounts were recorded. The device used in these sessions was a Zoom H4n portable handheld recorder and USB audio interface that features an interchangeable microphone system. During this period, I was reflecting more on the sonic ecology and considering it from the perspective of arts, social, and natural sciences with topics such as noise pollution, interpretation of oral history, and manipulation of sound elements. First and foremost, my roles and Hugo's were of musicologists functioning as social historians, social witnesses, and recorders of events. These roles are relational experiences.



**Figure 10** Wilfred Ukpong, Sound/Music Recording Equipment for BC1: Composing a Cause, Eket, Nigeria, 2012

The third session involved four days of live recording sessions (developed in a rented community town hall in Eket between July 14<sup>th</sup> and 28<sup>th</sup>, August 11<sup>th</sup> and 25<sup>th</sup>, 2012) with eight traditional musicians and a percussionist. This session aimed to develop a responsive composition of musical sounds inspired by listening to the environmental and human recordings in these two oil-producing communities, Ibeno and Esit-Eket. In this phase, we were interested in reflecting on the collected audio files from the first and second phases as elements that could activate participant musicians' senses into both active and transformational musical actions. However, listening to the previous recordings propelled engaged musicians to reflect on their individual socio-cultural experiences, communal histories, and oral and musical traditions. The sound files acted as embodied sensory stimulations for new sonic possibilities and social experiences concerning this very experimental space of encounter, the town hall as a place of convergence and dialogue. In this third phase, I encouraged the participant musicians to focus more on their compositions' communicative elements, which tended to embrace forms of exchange and dialogue as central to the ongoing work evolution.

In *Sonic Experience: A Guide to Everyday Sounds*, Jean-François Augoyard and Henri Torgue described sonic ecology as *"the interaction between the physical sound environments, the sound milieu of a socio-cultural community, and the 'internal soundscape' of every individual"* (Augoyard & Torgue, 1995). I am interested in seeing if such interaction could be envisaged as a form of relational aesthetics to *"provoking social relations"*. However, a closer look at Bourriaud's work and his concept of *"relational art"* allow for a deeper appreciation of the perspective I adopted for BC1: Composing a Cause as an experimental process of encounters, provoking social relations, transformations, and transmutations using sound making through human and non-human interactions. At this point, I was persuaded that BC1: Composing a Cause could become a social and aesthetic experience where the sound-making process becomes a relational and collaborative device among the musicians/artists.

If Bourriaud defines relational art as a *"group of artistic practices that takes as a theoretical and practical starting point all human relations in their social context, rather than in a private and autonomous space"* (Bourriaud, 1998) then assembling these groups of artists/musicians in community town halls (non-artistic studio spaces) could be seen as a strategic construction of correspondence. Furthermore, such correlation culminates on the margins, where the artistic framework of sound-making activity is the production of inter-subjective relations and the making of democratic forms of social exchange.

In these encounters where participants were asked to freely yet collaboratively and spontaneously respond to elements from sound files collected from previous community recordings, there was something conversational, dialogic, or even ethical as interventionist solidarity in their creative convergence within their town halls. Moreover, such forms of inter-subjectivity and aural interrelations generated from shared activities could be perceived as essential characteristics of relational aesthetics. While listening to the evolving compositions, which combine elements from the oral account, environmental sound, chants, and traditional percussions, the engaged musicians noticed that this process of performative interaction through sound and music making seemed to challenge their conventional traditional and contemporary sound and music process. The response was confirmed through feedback at the end of the session.

Suppose this project's aim was based on the concept of exchange and aesthetic experience. In that case, we are instantly prompted to reimagine this alternative work-in-progress as a sociological and artistic product – this process unifies the relationship between participants and their environment. During the session, I realised that not only did the composition evoke a sense of memory through interludes of personal historical accounts and collected environmental sounds, but it existed as a propositional composition material that suggested alternative ways of better living through chants of spoken words.

In the next phase of the project, which I had designed as a studio base, I established an operational base in Groningen (Northern Netherlands) to continue the collaboration with composer Hugo Tromp in his hometown. For over 18 months between 2013 and 2014, Hugo and I would periodically revisit the project to experiment and explore how these recordings from the project's first, second, and third phases could be combined to create more dialogical yet textured and complex soundscapes and film scores.



**Figure 11** Wilfred Ukpog, Sound/Music Recording Session for BC1: Composing a Cause, Eket, Nigeria, 2012

The subsequent experimental short film project FUTURE-WORLD-EXV – was inspired by soundscapes and scores that served as a muse for designing the film. I was also looking at possibilities where the evolving soundscapes and scores compositions, combined with still images and installation, could evoke compelling emphatic, emotional, and visceral responses. I was also interested to see how such compositions could catalyse future conversation and facilitate social and environmental change in the Niger Delta. Hugo and I were interested in the studio used by contemporary western composers whose works were profoundly emotive and seemingly compelling sonic narratives that evoked a visual sense of space, time, and memory. Hugo, in particular was interested, and was influenced by Max Richter, a German-born British composer and pianist whose post-minimalistic works intersect contemporary classical and alternative popular music. Hugo was also drawn to the stylistic sensibilities of American-based Garman film score composer and record producer Hans Zimmer. Their award-winning works combine electronic music sound with traditional orchestra arrangements. On the other hand, I was exploring the works of award-winning British film composer Steven Price. His notable works in films such as Gravity and Fury combined organic elements, voices, and processed orchestral sounds to tell emotional stories that are space and character-driven. American composer Jonathan Bepler, who has collaborated with various artists and choreographers and is known for his post-minimalistic experimental music and sound composition, was also influential. At this point, I was fascinated by the idea of presenting sound elements through installations within the public realm that will activate spaces for conviviality, interconnections, social exchange, and imagination.

Returning to Oxford, I was introduced to the works of two of my professors (Shelley Sacks and Ray Lee). Their works became the reference point of departure in developing this project's final phase. I was fascinated by Lee's most notable "*circles of ether*", consisting of spinning, whirling, and pendulous sound installations and performances exploring the invisible forces of inter-subjectivity. Also, his immersive sound installations and monumental outdoor work, for example, "*Chorus and Ring Out*", displayed a unique synthesis of art forms in public arenas, thus creating spaces for exchange and imagination beyond ordinary encounters.



**Figure 12** Ray Lee, *circles of ether*, Sound Installation, Kinetica Museum, Oxford Brookes University, 2007

Sack's work *"Exchange Values"* was not sound-based, but was a trans-disciplinary social sculpture project where she created installations consisting of 20 stitched 'sheets of the skin' from 20 randomly selected boxes of Windward Island bananas and with farmers. Yet, I was particularly interested in the sound elements through voice recordings that accompanied each sheet of skin which became a communicative element in that installation. Professor Sack's installation aimed to create an engaging space for interconnections between producers and consumers regarding our complex global economy and the role of 'artists' in re-envisioning our world. An excerpt in the installation synopsis reads:

*Through the integration of the aesthetic and the political, an imaginative space is created in which we can engage with the re-shaping and transforming of our lives and our society, and explore ways to develop a more participatory and sustainable society. This expanded workspace, where we work with the invisible materials available to us, where the personal and social imagination moves and weaves, is a creative space accessible to all (Sacks, 2016).*



**Figure 13** Shelley Sacks, *Exchange Values*, Sculpture & Sound Installation, 2007

Critically looking at the work of these two artists at that point inspired me to envision a series of soundscapes and scores compositions that combines aesthetics, socio-political and environmental causes to create a space for participatory and evocative dialogue with an emphasis on developing an imaginative or speculative vision. With the help of visual illustrations (drawings and photographs) taken during our fieldwork in the Niger Delta, Hugo and I experimented with some melodic and thematic ideas. We reflected on themes of loss, decay, and dislocation on collected sound materials and the social conditions of the Niger Delta. The library of sound and audio files collected in the first and second phases contained organic and voice elements to reflect personal and communal imaginaries. In order to develop an immersive and embodied sound work that could inspire a moving picture narrative, we took a visceral and conversational approach, incorporating orchestral elements with string compositions. We also incorporated samples of the local musician compositions, voices, and environmental sounds to create more emotional and thematic melodies that will set a listener on an emotional journey.

From a cross-cultural and trans-disciplinary perspective, this project aimed to create challenging reflections and imaginative exchanges through sonic materials collected and developed through the four phases of this project. I drew methodologies of studio-based sound art and social practice as an alternative art practice in Nigeria. In doing so, a set of alternative working methods and converging frameworks from various socially engaged art practices were engaged and tested. Combining all the sonic elements into a series of compositions, the project BC1: Composing a Cause was able to highlight the critical concept of a sonic community – one in which sound functions emphatically to create a unifying relationship with living and non-living beings and their environment. In this framework, sound making is seen as a transformative and shared activity. While I have not yet tested the sound compositions in an open public space in the form of an installation, in this experiment I succeeded in employing sound and music-making as social and collaborative tools to reflect on memory, community history, and culture. It also examined and broadened the social roles of music/sound as catalysts to create a collective and speculative vision of the Niger Delta.

In the subsequent experimental short film project, FUTURE-WORLD-EXV, this diary of soundscape and score became the base and muse for creating a visual narrative in the film. The soundscapes and scores explore the aural and visual landscapes of the Niger delta while examining the sonic texture and transmutations of humans, history, culture, and the environment through sound compositions. Each soundscape and score speaks to the characters' shifting emotional states, environments, and engaged objects, thus evoking a meditative sonic-visual experience.

Within this experimental framework, BC1: Composing a Cause should be heard as a proposal for alternative ways of interaction between the environment, humans, and non-human objects situated across different spatial spaces and temporalities. This alternative sound work is essentially a proposal to listen and react creatively to our sonic milieu and suggest new forms of cultural exchange and artistic practice that could help us re-evaluate and speculate a transformative social environment. On Wed 14 July 2021, 6 - 8pm (BST), Autograph-ABP London invited me to present "Composing A Cause: A Meditative Sonic Visual Experience" I was joined live in conversation with musicians and sound artists Professor Ray Lee and Hugo Tromp to discuss sound design and the process of producing speculative soundscapes. In the framework of our conversation, the audience was invited to build a visual and sonic relationship with the Niger Delta through my speculative soundscapes and performance-based film, EARTH SOUNDS.

**Links - Composing A Cause:** <https://autograph.org.uk/events/composing-a-cause>, <https://vimeo.com/641594886>

### **CHAPTER 3 – BC1-NIGER-DELTA/FUTURE-COSMOS & FUTURE-WORLD-EXV (2015 – 2019)**

*I strongly believe that the future of Art lies in the transversal encouragement of innovative ideas and creative imaginations from the realms of interdisciplinary, cross-cultural and connective aesthetic practices that seek to be transformative and responsive to our socio-cultural demands, economic deficits, and environmental emergencies of our precarious time.....herein lies the crux of our Blazing Century, for these are days of many artistic commitments for change – Wilfred Ukpong (excerpt from LENS CRATCH: FINE ART PHOTOGRAPHY JOURNAL MAY 2022)*

**BC1-NIGER-DELTA/FUTURE-COSMOS & FUTURE-WORLD-EXV** was an interlinked art-photographic and art-film project conceived and developed alongside four creative workshops with young people from the marginalised oil-producing communities in the Niger Delta. These projects aimed to experiment with art-photographic and art-film making processes/products both as a studio-based work and social practice that responds – in forms of participatory art and visual activism – to challenging socio-political and environmental issues of the region.

The formative ground for conceptualising these projects came from the potential revealed by the two previous environmental scoping projects, BC1: DRILL AND BC1: COMPOSING A CAUSE, which took an interdisciplinary approach with a social focus. I aimed to take art photography and art film from what it is or is perceived to be within the Nigerian contemporary art context to what they can eventually become within a broader interdisciplinary and cross-cultural context. Beyond the realms of art-photography and art-film, I was interested in incorporating various approaches ranging from paintings, costume designs, sculptures, installations, performances, and community engagement. Each of these projects employed a broad range of processes and contents in lens-based projects that demonstrate extraordinary and alternative visions with a social focus.

Over the years, my background and interest in a broad range of visual arts and culture foregrounded my preoccupation with a multi-dimensional space my work/practice tends to embody while enhancing *Joseph Beuys'* "expanded conceptions of art". In these projects, the interrelationships between sculptures, architecture, photography, moving images, and sound are apparent. I was drawn to developing a workspace that combines and develops discrete yet interrelated artistic forms during performance actions and filming. Some objects and props used in these performances or the film's *mise-en-scène* are relics of those events displayed as visual assemblages or installations. For me, the interrelationship between the secondary materials and the actual events or between secondary events and original materials in creating these projects becomes complementary. Hence, the events' moving images and photographic documentation envelope discrete parts of their making into an encompassing structure.

On the one hand, BC1-NIGER-DELTA/FUTURE-COSMOS & FUTURE-WORLD-EXV seeks to attest to a critical social undertaking for transformation and change through their participatory art components. On the other hand, they provoke a radical interdisciplinary and cross-cultural exercise that tends to respond to my research questions such as: Can a lens-based practice facilitate valuable tools for social transformation and interventions? If so, how can such tools and strategies be developed and sustained in direct response to the socio-political realities of the Niger Delta context? Secondly, if such interventions evoke audience empathy in the art world, how can such forms function with viewers and participants unfamiliar with contemporary art-film and art-photography?

Finally, what forms of visual engagement can facilitate the immediacy of social exchange while retaining the processual aesthetic structure of the work's ongoing evolution? While pre-conceiving this long-term photographic and film project in Oxford during the spring of 2015, I thought it was essential to divide the project into two segments. The two parts were the Studio-based Design session and Community Creative Workshop session consisting of four sub-parts: Drama & Performance Workshop, Costume & Design Workshop, Prop & Sculpture Workshop, and Filmmaking & Photographic Workshop. I was interested in creating platforms that activated a critical interface between my creative studio work and community engagement, cultivating opportunities for developing creative art processes/works, building resources, social relations, empowerment, and imagination. In Studio-based Design, I was influenced by various books and writings, art, visual culture, and philosophy in the first segment. Firstly, in the plenary address at the conference 'Whither Marxism?' hosted by the University of California, Riverside, in 1993, Jacques Derrida, in his "*Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning*", is extensively quoted in the image below (Derrida, 1993).

*"If we now prepare ourselves to speak about ghost, about inheritance and generation, which is to say about certain others who are not present, not presently living, not here among us or within us or outside of us, then it is in the name of justice. In the name of justice where it is not yet, not yet there, where it is no longer, in the sense that it is no longer present. It is necessary to speak of the ghost, indeed to the ghost and with it, from the moment that no ethics, no politics, whether revolutionary or not, seems possible and thinkable and just that does not recognize in its principle the respect for those others who are no longer or not yet there, presently living, whether they are already dead or not yet born. No justice seems possible or thinkable without the principle of some responsibility, beyond all living present, within that which disjoins the living present, before the ghosts of those who are not yet born or who are already dead, be they victims of wars, political or other kinds of violence, nationalist, racist, colonialist, sexist, or other kinds of exterminations, victims of the oppression of capitalist imperialism or any of the forms of totalitarianism. Without this non-contemporaneity with itself of the living present, without this responsibility and this respect for justice concerning those who are not there of those who are no longer or who are not yet present and living, what sense would there be to ask the question "Where?". "Where tomorrow?" "Whither?" This question arrives, (if it arrives,) it questions with regard to what will come in the future-to-come. Turned toward the future, going toward it, it also comes from it, it proceeds from the future. It must therefore exceed any presence as presence to itself this question, which is perhaps no longer a question and which we are calling here justice, must carry beyond present life, life as my life or our life. In general. For it will be the same thing for the "my life" or "our life" tomorrow, that is, for the life of others, as it was yesterday for other others; beyond therefore the living present in general. The spirit and the specter are not the same thing, but as for what they have in common, one does not know what it is, what it is presently. It is something that one does not know, precisely, and one does not know if precisely it is, if it exists, if it responds to a name (and corresponds to an essence. One does not know: not out of ignorance, but because this non-object, this non-present present, this being-there of an absent or departed one no longer belongs to knowledge. One does not know if it is living or if it is dead. Here is – or rather there is, over there, an unnameable or almost unnameable thing: something, between something and someone, anyone or anything, something "this thing", but this thing and not any other, this thing that looks at us, that concerns us, comes to defy semantics as much as ontology. This Thing that is still invisible, that is nothing visible. This Thing that meanwhile looks at us and sees us not see it even when it is there"*

**Figure 14** Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt*, University of California, Riverside, 1993

The above excerpt, delivered in wit and abstraction as it appears, highlights Derrida's recourse to quasi-transcendental structure and metaphysics of presence in his criticism of Marx's complicity. He touches on concepts of ghost hauntology and spectrality. Themes of respect and justice for the dead, living and the unborn highlighted in Derrida's text indelibly influenced visual content and explored subjects in these two projects. I had visualised the marginalised region as an otherworldly dead-end inhabiting the ghostly and oppressed Other who needed emancipation. Derrida's work offered a great depth of imagination for me to speculate on the real, imagined, and imaginary conditions of co-existence and help in conceptualising the visually structured and complex non-linear narrative of the Niger Delta that cuts across different spaces, temporalities, and universes. I was interested in developing a bold visual narrative that speaks to personal and collective memories with reference to historical and contemporary archives while addressing some of the region's most profound ecological and socio-political issues.

In his critique of industrialised culture and proposition to return to agrarian communal life via the disintegration of civilisation, Derrick Jensen, *Endgame, Vol. 1: The Problem of Civilization* (Jensen, 2006) was also influential. Here I was interested in rethinking the basic concept of civilisation, capitalism, and ecology politics concerning ethics, values, responsibility, and the meaning of co-existence.

Exploring these critical volumes offered provocative and emancipatory premises for conceptualising these projects. The content, visual imagery, and processes developed became forms of propositions and responses to my questions and social conditions. The most captivating in the mentioned essays were two long quotes highlighted below. Though unrealistic as his proposition had seemed, it yet formed a premise that prompted me to rethink the relationship between the notions of "dreams" versus "nightmare" and "hope" versus "hopelessness" as essential elements of tension and complexity in building the visual images that developed in these two projects. In this volume, Jensen also quoted on the image below.

In a textual attempt to respond to the above quote, both Jensen and my response seen on the image below appeared as introductory textual images in the art-film *FUTURE-WORLD-EXV*. My response has also been featured on an image gallery presentation of my work in Autograph-ABP London (<https://autograph.org.uk/online-image-galleries/afrofuturism-mysticism-and-climate-justice>) Thirdly, Robert Farris Thompson's book *Flash of the Spirit: African and Afro-American Art and Philosophy* (Thompson, 1984) also influenced my seminal decision to become an artist.

His work offered cross-cultural, interdisciplinary approaches to my understanding of African and Afro-American Art, Philosophy, and ancient African civilizations. His books informed and helped as I explored, reflected, and reiterated concepts of aesthetic, social, and metaphysical traditions among music, sculpture, textiles, architecture, religion, and idiographic writing systems – from ancient traditions to the New World – which are subjects referenced in this work. In conceptualising this project, Thompson's work allowed me to conceive alternative visual imagery that will prompt a viewer/reader the opportunity to navigate conceptually and spiritually into new realms of visual encounter. Fourthly these two essays – *Flame Wars: The Discourse of Cyberculture* (Dery, 1994) by Mark Dery and *Afrofuturism, science fiction, and the history of the future* (Yaszek, 2010) by Lisa Yaszek – reactivated my interest in speculative future. They reignited my early interest in major Hollywood science fiction films I grew up watching.

Returning to Robert Farris Thompson's book, *Flash of the Spirit*, I was made to understand that ancient African cosmological traditions practised stellar arts through their understanding of the sun, moon, stars, and the phenomena of lightning and rainbows to foresee the future. Furthermore, thus, science fiction and speculative futures are not exclusively western traditions but are global phenomena.

Reading these volumes prompted me to decentralise the one-sided western hegemony of technologically influenced future visions while dismissing dominant imperialistic narrative discourses. They inspired to disrupt colonial archives and Eurocentric colonial gazes of the Other. I was persuaded in these projects to conceive socio-climatic imaginaries as forms of survival and resilience in the struggle for influence over how our region's future environmental landscape is envisioned and proposed. In doing this, I combined ideas of mythic and speculative dimensions of the Niger Delta by boldly revisiting and exploring the aesthetic concept of Afrofuturism – the cultural movement that conjures otherworldly visions out of every day of Black/African experience – and beyond.



**Figure 15** Wilfred Ukpogon, *FUTURE-WORLD-EXV*, film still, 2019

To explore how people of colour negotiate life in a technology-intensive world, Mark Dery, in his book *Flame Wars: The Discourse of Cyberculture*, defines Afrofuturism as a:

*Speculative fiction that treats African-American themes and addresses African-American concerns in the context of 20th-century technoculture -- and more generally, African-American signification that appropriates images of technology and a prosthetically enhanced future (Dery , 1994).*

From a universal perspective, I thought engaging imaginaries within the African perspective was imperative if science fiction could play a significant role in de-familiarising our past and present and offering us alternative social, economic, and political futures. They contributed to spatialising and politicising topical regional discourses from the Niger Delta perspective. In this experimental project, I was interested in how speculative narrative imageries through art-photography and digital film can be engaged subsequently as forms of visual activism. As an artistic response, I thought this project should react to the context of the Niger Delta with its increasingly pessimistic expectations of the future due to pressing environmental and ecological challenges and social deficits. I became preoccupied with exploring ways the region's art, culture, and technological progress can boldly reimagine perspectives on environmental crises, social injustice, race, gender, identity, and the body in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

After a year of working primarily alone in my studio space in Oxford to conceptualise this project, in early 2016 I travelled to the Niger Delta to develop the second segment of the project. My aim in this segment was to develop two series of photographic and film works while also creating spaces for skills acquisition and empowerment in a context where capacity building and employment in the art and creative sector are less apparent. My point of departure was to attest to the premise that within the contemporary field of social practice there is a sub-set of processes of image making that calls for participatory and collaborative engagement.

In the context of Nigeria, skills acquisition and empowerment projects are facilitated by NGOs and do not sit in the long tradition of art practice. In this segment, the focus group – with people aged between 18 to 28 – involved aspiring artists, actors, models, designers, photographers, filmmakers, and technicians. They were primarily secondary school graduates, art students, activists, and early career artists and creatives in the region interested in working within the social realm. Selection criteria were also focused on participants keen on developing and expanding their skills while seizing the project as a crucial tool to tell their own stories, dream and offer hope in a place of hopelessness. Here, I would like to mention my interest in the applied anthropological concept of the 'political economy of hope,' which describes how personal and collective hope is associated with the political and economic structure of a problematic context. It asserts as a critical and imperative tool of resilience, resistance, and survival in the face of uncertainties and devastating social experiences.

During the Drama and Performance Workshop developed within three months in 2016 (24 Days), participants were encouraged during the workshop to propose a set of alternative narratives that illuminated their enduring plights, complaints, and aspirations for a better future. With the support of two professional actors, I introduced and experimented with 20 participants on various rudimentary acting techniques and improvised methods among tension relief and concentration, emotional/sense memory and cultural memory, building characters from archetypes, and improvisation through character embodiments. While introducing the participants to the aesthetic concept of Afrofuturism as an essential component of this project, the conceptual framework offered a blueprint to guide and equip participants with central themes of resilience and survival. Through embodiment and the internalisation of characters, they were asked to challenge existing oppressive structures while giving them a space to reimagine better futures with ample possibilities for a just existence that embraces cultural evolution, technological advancement, and a sustainable ecosystem.

The Costume and Design Workshop was designed for individual youths, primarily women passionate about costume design, fashion, and filmmaking. My goal was to work with two local fashion designers and sewists to give participants first-hand and intensive training, tools, resources, and the mindset required to work in the local fashion and film industry. Through three months in 2016 (24 days), 15 participants were briefly introduced to the history of fashion and textile design traditions in Europe and Africa. Through reference on mood boards and books, participants learned how to draw, design, and conceive a character's personality through costume design, drawing primarily from art, history, and science-fictional resources.

Developing in the period parallel with the Costume and Design Workshop was the Prop and Sculpture Workshop, conceived for individuals who aspired to be sculptors and craftsmen. My goal here in this session was to collaborate with a trained sculptor and object maker to train and guide 15 participants through a brief history of sculpture and object-making traditions and techniques from European and African perspectives. While creating a series of film and photographic props and sculptures, I was interested in using the workshop to highlight the importance of Afrofuturism and the idea of repurposing/recycling oil and gas waste into functional objects.



**Figure 16** Wilfred Ukpong, Sculpture/Prop Workshop for FUTURE-WORLD-EXV, Niger Delta 2016

While some props and sculptures were drawn from ancient Nsibidi and Uli pictograms and ideograms from southeastern Nigeria, the design workshop employed local symbolism. I was interested in experimenting with how objects inspired by local symbols can materialise science-fictional ideas to provoke and support speculative thought around an environmentally sustainable future. Finally, the Filmmaking and Photographic Workshop was initiated when the story, actors, costumes, and props were ready. About 10 budding photographers and filmmakers were engaged in the workshop for 24 days in mid-2016. The workshop allowed participants to explore processes of art-photography and experimental filmmaking. It highlighted subjects among new forms of storytelling techniques and narrative structures that resonate globally with human experiences and conditions. During the workshop, I took participants already practicing lens-based work and social practice through the historical background.

In this workshop, the photographic and filmmaking process/product became an instrumental tool that did not serve primarily as a visual reflection on the Niger Delta but also as a response to pertinent issues of these marginalised engaged oil-producing communities through these new forms of empowerment.



Figure 17 Medicine Bowl Ceramic, Nigeria

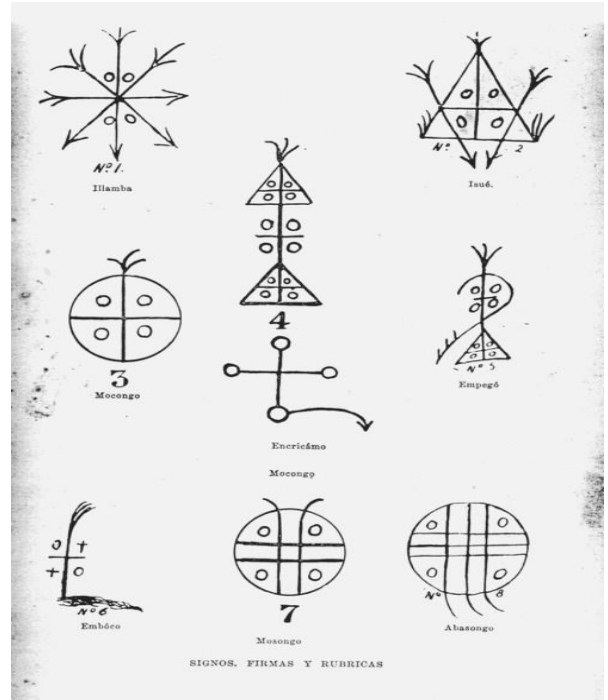


Figure 18 Nsibidi/Abakwa Signs Nigeria/Cuba



Figure 19 Wilfred Ukpong, FUTURE-WORLD-EXV, film still, 2019



**Figure 20** W Ukpong, discarded giant floater for crude oil offloading between oilrigs/vessel, Niger Delta, 2015



**Figure 21** Wilfred Ukpong salvaging polystyrene, fiberglass and steel from a giant floater, Niger Delta, 2015



Figure 22 Wilfred Ukpong, Repurposing polystyrene from a discarded giant floater to art, Niger Delta, 2015

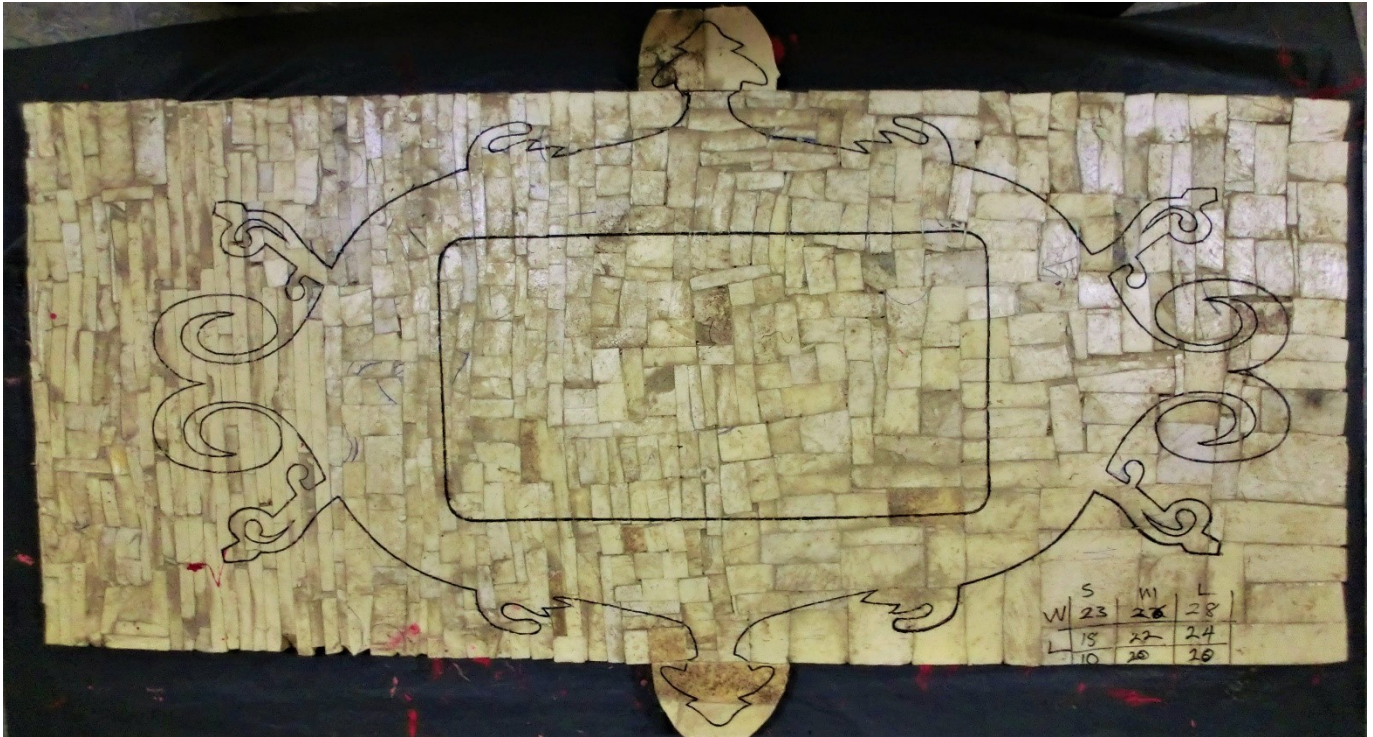


Figure 23 Wilfred Ukpong, Repurposing polystyrene from a discarded giant floater to art, Niger Delta, 2015



**Figure 24** Wilfred Ukpong, a prop workshop participant, FUTURE-WORLD-EXV, Niger Delta, 2016



**Figure 25** Wilfred Ukpong, a costume workshop participant, FUTURE-WORLD-EXV, Niger Delta, 2016

In the attempt to assert a critique of conventional filmmaking and video art form in Nigeria, the film *FUTURE-WORLD-EXV* examines a possible relationship with mediums such as painting, sculpture, performance, and specifically photography to present exciting interdisciplinary and cross-cultural encounters. I was also interested in using the film project to draw on the intricate relationships between the margins of film theory and filmmaking, aesthetic design and social relevance, and current technological innovation – of digital filmmaking – and political critique within the context of the Niger Delta.

The film is centred on an oilman who becomes torn between pursuing his industrial duties and horrifying visions of the escalating environmental crisis. He finds himself in a colony of black and red skin humanoids that are living in an environmentally devastated water environment. The film seeks to challenge the historical narrative and reframe colonial gazes. Over 16 minutes, a poetic and fragmented dreamscape narrative unfolds, tied together with text, original musical scores, speculative soundscapes, and interlays of archival footage without dialogue. Through the art of performance and visual storytelling, I aimed to use the film as a platform that creates opportunities to envision a just, viable, sustainable, and inclusive future, pulsing with imagination, agency, and transformation concepts. Here the film becomes an important tool to critique the present, imagine and dream of alternate possibilities of future scenarios.



**Figure 26** Wilfred Ukpong, *Blazing Century 1* installation, Quintessence Art Gallery Lagos, Nigeria, 2018

The series of art-photographic images, some captured as film stills and some as staged photography under the working title BC1-NIGER-DELTA/FUTURE-COSMOS, was also developed as poetic meditations on the current social and environmental crisis in the Niger Delta. The images function and fluster within personal and collective memory and provide a basis for substantive post-colonial imaginary and alternative socio-environmental and ecological visions that yearn for a change in the impoverished yet oil-rich region. The images mediate complex structures between the participants and viewers/readers and help to encouraged and build a self-determined future.

The engaged subjects are not frozen in a historical time but appear as dynamic and collective “agents of change” transgressed across different spaces, temporaries, and universes. Employing this photographic series as a catalyst to activate change through its compelling images is in line to support the use of the lens-based practice to facilitate valuable tools for social transformation and interventions. Clair Bishop, in her essay, *Participation, and Spectacle: Where Are We Now? During the Creative Time summit*, explained that:

*In using people as a medium, participatory art has always had a double ontological status: it is both an event in the world and at one removed from it. As such, it can communicate on two levels—to participants and spectators—the paradoxes that are repressed in everyday discourse and elicit perverse, disturbing, and pleasurable experiences that enlarge our capacity to imagine the world and our relations anew. But to reach the second level requires a mediating third term—an object, image, story, film, even a spectacle—that permits this experience to have a purchase on the public imaginary (Bishop, 2011).*



**Figure 27** Wilfred Ukpong, *FUTURE-WORLD-EXV/BC1:NIGER-DELTA/FUTURE-COSMOS*, 2016



Figure 28 Wilfred Ukpong, behind the scene of FUTURE-WORLD-EXV, 2016



Figure 29 Wilfred Ukpong, behind the scene of FUTURE-WORLD-EXV, 2016

Link - Film Trailer for FUTURE-WORLD-EXV: <https://vimeo.com/641869847>

In my immediate observation, I would emphasise Bishop’s statement here that FUTURE-WORLD-EXV and BC1-NIGER-DELTA/FUTURE-COSMOS embody a double ontological status. One is a work that responds to participants’ lives through empowerment activities in the creative workshop. The other is a work that uses abstraction to represent imagined lives and possibilities of future co-existence. Here, I would further reiterate my previous statement highlighting images that tend to mediate with complex structures between the participant makers (actors/subjects) and viewers as “agents of change”.

My conclusion to these two interlinked projects is that they characterised a “mediating third term” through a mediating process that endures the capacity to communicate on two levels – to participants and spectators – with disturbing and pleasurable experiences. This mediating third term allows us to enlarge our capacity to reimagine an alternative world with capacities for progressive interrelations and interaction. In these projects, I have drawn on the idea that spectacle is akin to African aesthetic sensibilities and visually impacted through the use of compelling seductive and visceral charged elements. The spectacle here is achieved by engaging captivating cultural archetypes, visual metaphors, and fantasies to present serious issues grounded in the heavyweight socio-political demographics of the Niger Delta. I have observed that viewers/readers are drawn to the compelling aesthetic and transformative structures in work more than simply looking at it as a radical activist or protest work, and so the works can unfold as alternative forms of art making that culminate in-between the margins of two worlds.

The exhibition context for these projects becomes a critical space for visual activism that explores the interactive margins of visual culture and activist practice. In conclusion, I would elucidate that FUTURE-WORLD-EXV and BC1-NIGER-DELTA/FUTURE-COSMOS are embedded with studio-based work and social practice relational matters and possess subjectivity and the ability to straddle between the physical and metaphysical realms of thoughts and actions. Between what we perceive and analyse visually and something that cannot be perceived through the objective study of material reality yet endures dynamic or invisible forces that prompt us to imagine the world and our relations anew. Still, in their development as “agents of change”, they activate both aesthetic and visceral responses, which I have measured through empirical analysis from viewers/readers’ feedback. In creating these mediating projects, my role goes beyond an artist-researcher to a facilitator with the capacity to develop alternative artistic forms that mediate the margins of two worlds and are based on and inspired by complex social, cultural, ecological, and political relations.

#### **Links - Reviews on BC1: NIGER-DELTA/FUTURE-COSMOS and FUTURE-WORLD-EXV**

[https://www.bbk.ac.uk/events/remote\\_event\\_view?id=19131](https://www.bbk.ac.uk/events/remote_event_view?id=19131) <https://eu-admin.eventscloud.com/website/2065/video-art-and-africa/>  
<https://www.theguardian.com/culture/gallery/2020/mar/27/artists-of-africa-and-the-diaspora-in-pictures>  
<https://www.thisdaylive.com/index.php/2020/02/09/sharing-tales-of-oil-blood-and-hope/>  
<https://www.sunnewsonline.com/wilfred-ukpong-interrogates-travails-of-niger-delta/>  
<https://guardian.ng/art/visual-arts/changing-niger-delta-narrative-through-arts/>  
<https://thenationonlineng.net/french-nigerian-artist-questions-niger-deltas-future/>  
<https://arteasy.com.ng/sharing-tales-of-oil-blood-andhope/> <https://www.vogue.com/article/wilfred-ukpong>  
<https://guardian.ng/tag/wilfred-ukpong/>

#### **Links – Reviews on Film Award: FUTURE-WORLD-EXV Film Award**

<https://guardian.ng/art/with-future-world-niger-deltas-challenges-receive-global-attention/>  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J7N6FXGu6Q4>



**Figure 30:** Wilfred Ukpong, at the formal film award presentation Transcorp Hilton, Abuja 2018.

#### **CHAPTER 4 - BC1: THE RETURN OF THE OBJECT (2015 – 2017)**

**BC1: THE RETURN OF THE OBJECT** was conceived as a series of disruptive performance interventions that explored and tested the role of objects as a mediated social agency in international art venues. This project was developed through a series of public interventions initially tested and scoped during the 56<sup>th</sup> International Venice Biennale, before the 2017 FNB Joburg Art Fair, and at the Zeitz MOCAA opening in Cape Town. This experiment aimed to develop a critique of ‘commodified’ and ‘non-social’ art objects through a developing interest in “*mediating objects*” that ranged from inter-subjective encounters with performance artists/actors to engaged props used during these events.

Presented at The Mesh and FNB Art fair in Johannesburg from the 8<sup>th</sup> – 10<sup>th</sup> September 2017, and during the grand opening of the Zeitz Museum of Contemporary Art Africa in Cape Town between 22<sup>nd</sup> and 23<sup>rd</sup> September, BC1: THE RETURN OF THE OBJECT consisted of four performing artists/actors enacting characters – of an oilman, mother with a dying baby and two armed security escorts – initially represented in my short film FUTURE-WORLD-EXV. The idea of relocating these bold characters in costumes and props, which referred to art history, colonialism, industrial culture, and science fiction, was to create a disrupted environment where the performing artists/actors invite the audiences to engage in unconventional modes of dialogue. These conversations culminated through the use of their bodies and performance props engaged here at totems which tend to embody symbolic representative of forms of power and authority and mediate within the socio-environmental, economic, historical, and cultural realms.

In this experiment to test the role of art objects as social agents, my approach was informed by converging methodologies from object-oriented philosophy, new materialism, actor network theory, and an African sensibility toward ritual objects. My approach – considering the dynamic urban artistic environments defined by the capitalist structure that promotes “commodified objects” – was to engage the performance intervention as instrumental action. In this project, I was interested in testing the nature of objects and things to influence the audience’s thoughts and perceptions.

My critique here is not to request for a dismissal of the importance of the art object in these vibrant urban art venues but to see how these interventions can revive the role of objects as instrumental agencies. How can these objects’ interventions and symbolic ritual actions generate inter-subjective encounters with the body and space?

During these performances, the audiences/viewers were invited to dialogue with the characters, have tactile encounters with the performance props, and partake in the rituals of alternative narrative making through the use of objects and their multiple referencing. Encountering these performed objects with their multiple references to art and colonial histories, industrial culture, and science fiction to create a technologically advanced and speculative vision of Africa becomes an instrumental social and political action within the artistic realms. The art audience and bystanders are prompted to ask themselves who/what the bodyguards are protecting, where the sorrowfully black futuristic queen with a dying baby in her arms was hailing from, and the significance of the hooded coverall man with a mechanical apparatus. By engaging performance subjects and objects as totems with embodied forms, inhabiting complex intentionalities with multiple points of reference, this performance sought to mediate social agency through engaged objects within the urban art environment.

In the performance, the costumes and props were designed with complex intentionalities and purposes that sought to draw compelling attention to the audience, even using colour as stimuli. For instance, the image of the black lady carrying a dying baby has a double point of reference; on the one hand, to art history – specifically to the portrait of Mary Tudor (circa 1553). The reference painting of Mary Tudor was made by Hans Eworth, an exiled Flemish painter who was active in England in the mid-16<sup>th</sup> century and made a career in Tudor London by painting allegorical images as well as gentry and noble portraits. On the other hand, the reference image of Mary Tudor repositioned here within the Black/African context provokes a shift in perception. This reference image within the new context seeks to subvert and re-appropriate iconic European paintings within the context of black representation as engaged among Black British artists, most notably Sonia Boyce, Keith Piper, and Yinka Shonibare. Also, it is worth noting that Hans Eworth's painting of Mary Tudor has a melancholic presence and within this context shows a sympathetic image of the wealthy and noble Africans in their seemingly gloomy ecological atmosphere in their struggle to survive. An excerpt from Fitzwilliam Museum Cambridge on Mary Tudor's portrait by Hans Eworth reads:

*The elegance of Mary's outfit contrasts strangely with the dinginess of her surroundings. A window dimly illuminates the drab, grey background at the left, providing just enough light to cast Mary's large, unhappy shadow on the wall behind her. Shadows had been used in portraiture before, notably in the work of Hans Holbein, but they rarely evoke such a gloomy atmosphere (Fitzwilliam Museum Cambridge, n.d.).*

In reflecting on this excerpt, my reference to Hans Eworth's portrait evokes a strange contrast between the elegance of the performing subject within a wealthy urban African setting where her sombre disposition here becomes a critique within her environment.



**Figure 31** Wilfred Ukpog, film costume design inspired by Hans Eworth painting of Mary Tudor, 2009

My choice of referencing the portrait of Mary Tudor with a black subject here was to subvert the role of representation and challenge viewers' preconceptions of the subject as a way to critique western art's historical norms and colonial gaze. Here, the black skin subject is repositioned and elevated through opulent historical costumes into locations often inhabited by western subjects in the history of art. This approach relates to the idea of the oppositional gaze often employed by black artists.

Beyond the apparent reuse of this art historical image, this representation shows an appropriated form of Victorian costumes, which are still prevalent in Southern Nigeria and other parts of the continent as patterns of post-colonial cultures. In contrast, her red and black costume points to the colour symbolism used in my previous art-photographic and film project, which referred to a militant colour symbolism (specifically Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta). Black and red means oil and blood, and the added universal symbol of yellow means hope or sun. Also noted here is that this interplay with art historical traditions, colonial history, and colour symbolism in the Niger Delta context here becomes apparent.

Another vital component of the performance that was visually striking and terrifying was the stalked presence of two armed security escorts accompanying the black lady with her dying child, as well as the hooded coverall man with a mechanical apparatus. For me, the conception of these performing subjects with their costumes and props within an Afrofuturistic lens was a direct reference to science fiction, the state of insecurity in our contemporary existence, and perhaps the increasing security value on the high commodified art objects.

In her essay *Afrofuturism and the Technologies of Survival* was published in *African Art VOL. 50, NO. 4 WINTER 2017*, Elizabeth C. Hamilton elucidated that *"situating the Afonaut in contemporary art and Afrofuturism is very much about finding safe spaces for black life. It is about exploring, protecting, and preparing the body for hostile environments"* (Hamilton, 2017)

Hamilton, in her essay, talks about the often obscured and endangered lives of black space in the future, which she says is the result of the over-determination of the past due to the baggage of colonialism and apartheid, slavery, Jim Crow, and legacies of displacement and oppression. For me, situating and engaging elements of Afrofuturism in this work allows for a broad critique not only of Western culture and techno-culture but of art culture that perpetuates commodified objects. Within this working framework, objects represent and embody phenomenology and intentionality.

While conceptualising this project, it is noteworthy that I was broadly influenced by *The Enchantment of Technology and the Technology of Enchantment* (Gell, 1992), and *Art and Agency* (Gell, 1998), by Alfred Gell. He draws on *"ways of acting in idolatry, fetishism, and witchcraft with contemporary Western art to illustrate the commonalities in how objects mediate and act on social relations."* I am also fascinated by Gell's elucidation of the *"technology of enchantment"* and the *"anthropology of art"*. In closely reading his work, I became interested in various forms of visual effects of what he conceives as the 'technical virtuosity' of the artist. For him, this becomes a sort of *"stylistic virtuosity"* which can draw potentiality and culminates what he called the *"living presence response"*, thus a solid reaction to works of art as if they were living beings, a repository for forces, or a vessel for people's acting agency. In being invited to engage with the art objects, a viewer/audience enters into a personal relationship that triggers desire, dreams, hope, or dread.



**Figure 32** Wilfred Ukpong, BC1: THE RETURN OF THE OBJECT, with Marvelous Dominion & Theaster Gates at a performance intervention during the 56<sup>th</sup> International Exhibition Venice Biennale, 2015

My intention here is to ascribe symbolic archetypes to objects as stimuli to evoke a sense of collective unconsciousness among participant viewers during the performance. The role of intentionality becomes effectively utilised when an audience member is invited to touch and perform with the objects. Here my interest was to see how these performance subjects and props in their encounters could embody complex intentionalities while tending to mediate social agency. According to *Jacob P. (Aug 31, 2010) in the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, intentionality is defined as *“the power of minds to be about something: to represent or to stand for things, properties and states of affairs. Intentionality is primarily ascribed to the quality of mental states, which consists of being directed towards an object or state of affairs.”*

In exploring the psychology of patterns and perceptions in art and personhood, one is reminded of a broader philosophical ontology of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, known as the phenomenology of perception. Merleau-Ponty expounded his thesis on “the primacy of perception” to dismiss the notion of sensation during an encounter with an object and expounded a different conception of consciousness, which favours the inter-subjective, dialectical and intentional concept of consciousness through applied stimuli. Merleau-Ponty quoted “it is necessary to consider the organism as a whole to discover what will follow from a given set of stimuli” (Merleau-Ponty, 2013). I am also reminded of Cézanne’s interview where he said, “The landscape thinks itself in me....and I am its consciousness”. (bibliographic reference). Can the sets of objects engaged in the performance be a means to inhabit my intentionalities and those of my participant subjects, and could it be a way to redefine and review the spaces of their encounters? And can the encounter image enter us in visceral and emphatic ways?

Here, the seemingly otherworldly and out-of-place actors, props, costumes, and performative gestures constitute the *‘mediating objects’*. They are prompted to relate or collide with the everyday urban art environment. A new set of perceptions is developed due to the visible contrast and dynamic of cultural negotiation and the signifiers they embody within this new space. Using these performative gestures and employed objects to communicate and relate with the existing audience, the artworks and environment here create an opportunity to provoke new and alternative social relations and discussions.

BC1: THE RETURN OF THE OBJECT sought to explore how unfamiliar objects, beyond their original context, can provide privileged sites for active spectatorship and participatory encounters, while serving as an intrinsic medium in shaping our perception and developing new socio-cultural and political categories within a contemporary art environment. In dealing with these difficult-to-read objects, removed from their original and specific context, this work also shows that for objects to be well received and understood, a considerable amount of re-contextualisation and re-negotiation is critical to their understanding of a new context.

Aligning this experiment to Graham Harman’s idiosyncratic take on spectatorship in his Object Oriented Ontology (Harman 2011, 2015, 2016) formed my emphasis and template for conceiving a work. This performance involves the visceral and sensorial experience of looking deeply at objects beyond their formal aesthetic visual account of colours, composition, or socio-political references. Spectators and viewers are encouraged to think metaphorically while reading the objects from both conceptual and spiritual realms of visual encounters. In an interview, when pushed on what happens when an attentive spectator encounters an art object, Harman’s response was to articulate a radical interpretation of mimesis (Harman 2015, p. 105). In Harman’s philosophy, the encounter is marked by the viewer trying to imitate the art object somehow; the artwork/viewer meeting results in the spectator becoming enmeshed alongside the artwork in a ‘third object’.

Suppose the concept of “mediating objects” are aesthetically laden art forms that embody a range of socio-political, environmental, cultural, and economic dynamics and invites human relation and social encounters in their making. In that case, Harman’s ‘third object’ can be conceived as a category of the “mediating objects”.

From aesthetic philosophy in traditional art to contemporary visual art in African art has been image and object orientated. Traditional African art looks at objects as a physical agency connecting the deities and a community in space and time which inherently embraces inter-subjectivity and active spectatorship. Contemporary art takes a formal approach where art objects are more or less conceived as commodified pieces. In this experiment, a propelling obligation for a radical return to the power of object as an embodied and relational form that mediates social agency becomes imperative. In an endeavour to develop a critique on the world of studio-based work and social practice, I have been preoccupied with resolving a double discontent. That one forces me to problematise a world where art is fetishized as a commodity object. The other propels me to question the viability of ephemeral and social actions that lack visual aesthetic elements. In other words, this performance intervention prompted a fundamental shift to consider compelling visual aesthetic laden work mediating social agency in private and public spaces. From a wide range of feedback and conversations after the performance, it was apparent that my engaged objects during the performance interventions were charged with an intrinsic visual and metaphysical element. These objects sought to sustain culminating relationships between material and immaterial processes, human and non-human interactions, relational and non-relational aesthetics, artistic autonomy, and social responsibility in a world of infinite interactions and exchange.



**Figure 33** Wilfred Ukpogong, BC1: THE RETURN OF THE OBJECT, performance art intervention at the Zeitz MOCAA opening in Cape Town, South Africa, 2017

Lastly, I would like to end this chapter with two reflections, one on Bruno Latour's central concept of actor network theory, which explores the role that objects play in their redefinition of the social realm. Furthermore, the other on the role of art objects as 'embodied forms' was explained in a long conversation with artist friend and scholar Emeka Okereke.

I am reflecting on Latour's concept of ANT, which emphasises the imperative of art objects in the social place and the significance of things in a social site. His method embraces objects as participant actors in co-creating, co-sustaining, and co-extending social relations and exchange, and thus an endeavour to shift the conviction of society being the sole establishment of human interactions. In his book *Reassembling the Social* (Latour, 2005), Latour wrote that "face-to-face interaction is not a plausible departure point to trace social connections....because they are being constantly interfered with by other agencies." However, in his counter-intuitive, he wrote that "things do not exist without being full of people, and the study of humans must also entail the study of objects." Bruno Latour's actor network theory can lead to an awareness of the compelling power of art objects to draw audience invitations to conceptualise, meditate, strengthen, substantiate, and represent mundane things or ideas concerning the social space. This very role where objects assume to interact and substitute for and/or become parts or extensions of human bodies or thought is a significant area of interest in this experiment. The engaged objects become a backdrop for human activity and agency for social relations.

During a long conversation I had with Emeka Okereke on "the return of the object", Emeka exemplified and drew on the meaning of the telephone – in his Igbo language of Eastern Nigeria – which is colloquially called "Ekwe Nti", which loosely translates to "(slit) drum for the ear". He quoted:

*Here, a telephone is not a communication device but an object that engages in a sonic-sensorial relationship with a body part. In other words, if we were to say that the telephone is a conduit through which the body absorbs messages by way of sonic vibrations, we would not be far from fact. However, what is emphasised is a reading that does not alienate the object from an embodied experience. While an object is inanimate, it is almost always totemic and mediates within the dynamics of their spaces of encounters.*

This object-body oneness permeates the belief systems of African peoples in various degrees and connotations.

In conclusion, art objects become conduits and embodiments of social relations when placed or engaged as constitutive elements. They exist beyond the realms of commodification assigned to contemporary art objects. Within the context of "mediating objects", an active viewer or audience is forced to focus on the object's capacity and potential to exercise agency. This very act of presentation or engagement underscores the characteristic that exemplifies the practical means of creating and sustaining human relations and invitations.

**Link - Review on BC1: The Return of The Object:** <https://guardian.ng/art/from-niger-delta-ukpong-hits-south-africa-with-blazing-century/>

## **CHAPTER 5 – BC1: YOUTH OF NIGERIA AS ARTISTS OF THE FUTURE (2017)**

**BC1: YOUTH OF NIGERIA AS ARTISTS OF THE FUTURE** was a two-part *social-art workshop* process that explored creative ways to enable young people (artists, creative and cultural practitioners) in Nigeria to become aware of their social-artistic capacities. The project aimed to promote creative visions and activities that shape environmental interventions and social artworks that could become forms of social enterprise.

The seminal impetuses for the conception of this project were based on a background interest in extending conceptual frameworks in the social sculpture practice developed by German conceptual artist, scholar, social critic, and activist Joseph Beuys, and also to extend the strands of connective aesthetics, a concept conceived by American artist and art critic Suzi Gablik.

Beuys, in a statement during his *Public Dialogue* which consisted of a series of lectures and performance interventions at the New School for Social Research in New York, quoted:

*Here, my idea is to declare that art is the only possibility for evolution, the only possibility to change the situation in the world. But then you have to enlarge the idea of art to include the whole creation. And if you do that, it follows logically that every living being is an artist – an artist in the sense that he can develop his own capacity. And therefore, it's necessary at first that society cares about the educational system, that equality of opportunity for self-realization is guaranteed (Beuys 1974).*

In *Joseph Beuys and Social Sculpture*, Cara M. Jordan, in an essay at *The Graduate Center, City University of New York*, explained that Beuys' social sculpture method fostered creativity and

*aimed at transforming society through interdisciplinary dialogue — as an alternative to the chaotic political, economic, and social life of postwar West Germany. He sought to heal society through art with holistic and spiritual intentions, centered on the belief that art can include the entire process of living and, therefore, can be created by a wide range of people beyond artists (Jordan, 2017).*

The centrality of Beuys' concept of social sculpture conflates around the development of an extended form of post-studio-based practice that has come to be labelled as socially engaged public art and most recently as "social practice".

In developing this project, I was particularly fascinated by Beuys' extensive yet complex body of work, which can be categorised into four domains: traditional art (painting, drawing, sculpture, and installations), performance, academic teaching, and socio-political activities. The breadth of Beuys' oeuvre on various issues and his extensive practice was influential in that it reflected on my interdisciplinary and cross-cultural background where art becomes an essential tool for social transformation and community change.

BC1: YOUTH OF NIGERIA AS ARTISTS OF THE FUTURE was developed in Blazing Century Studios in January 2017 with 12 youth participants (18-29 years). The first part of the project involved five one-day sessions (9am-5pm) from the 23<sup>rd</sup> to 27<sup>th</sup> of January 2017, while the second part took place over two days (9am-5pm), on the 11<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> of February 2017 following Part 1. During these sessions, creative processes enabled youth participants to engage creatively with participating cultural managers. Through past experimental projects since enrolment, I have been scoping ways to explore questions, including how to develop cross-sector creative strategies that enable young people to become environmentally conscious and, most importantly, 'agents' of social change.

The above phrase, central to contemporary social sculpture, was primarily emphasised in my past scoping explorations, even though those projects did not focus on artists and creative practitioners but on non-art practitioners in rural and urban communities. In order to develop a model project highlighting the value of cross-sectoral exchange via creative strategies, this project narrowed the field somewhat from earlier intergenerational projects, overlooked urban and rural divides, and worked with artists and non-artists. Although this final project was cross-sector and intergenerational in terms of the whole process, the singular focus of the project was the youth who are artists and other types of creative practitioners who have a certain amount of language and skill in some form of artistic practice. Working with this more specific focus, it explored ways of inspiring and enabling new understandings and forms of social-environmental artistic practice that can also have a social enterprise focus.

During the conceptualisation of this project, I was fixated on an unpublished statement made during early supervision with Shelley Sacks. She noted that:

*The contemporary field of socially engaged art practice explores trans-disciplinary creativity and vision with a social focus....yet, the field of contemporary social sculpture does this but with a strong focus on the need and potential for human beings to recognize an expanded form of social art that includes shaping new social forms and structures as artworks and sees the real 'capital' of society, as the artist Joseph Beuys did, as the 'social capital' of an expanded understanding of art (Sacks, 2016).*



**Figure 34** Wilfred Ukpong, BC1: YOUTH OF NIGERIA AS ARTISTS OF THE FUTURE, Nigeria, 2017

Through its five-day course, this project tried to emphasise the above statement. It encouraged participants to explore trans-disciplinary creativity, vision, and inherent potentiality to realise extended forms of artistic practice with a social focus. These ways included processes of imagining possibilities, first on one's own and then with people from different sectors, like cultural managers, creative and social entrepreneurs, and an environmentalist. This imagining process – alone and then together – helped form the basis of the cross-sector dialogue needed to envision and shape these new social and environmental artistic forms and related social enterprises.

The first phase of the sessions was based on exploring a range of creative processes using a graphic road map and slide/video projection to explain methods used in previous experimental projects. Here, the 12 youth participants were encouraged to deepen and expand their understanding of their social potential and possibilities as agents of change and also become more conscious of their personal potential to contribute to the shaping of a more humane and ecologically viable society. While exploring past experiments in Nigeria and South Africa shown through a projector, participants were motivated by these working examples. The participants were encouraged to envision their application within their respective practices and in response to the social needs of their community.

At the end of the five-day workshop, three major proposed projects were voted on and selected for group participation. Four individuals were assigned to a project developed during the final phase with a cultural manager, creative officer, and environmentalist. The group 'visions' were further developed into meaningful proposals for social-environmental and artistic enterprises which could benefit the environment as well as the socio-economic lives of the people. Working as a facilitator in the project, I encouraged the participants to become more aware and appreciative of how others can contribute to this agency. They were also motivated to become more aware of the capacities and contributions that professionals from different sectors and disciplinary backgrounds through collaborative efforts can promote an expanded form of social art practice.

To support the above endeavour, I presented the devised concept of "Janus head methodology", which I conceived as a model that straddles two worlds: individual studio-based art and social practice. This model offered a shift away from the identity myth of the hard-edged, autonomous individualist studio-based artist or creative which are primary practices in Nigeria.

The engaged youth participants were individual conscious artists with independently self-motivated visions. Thus, engaging in a deeply connected relationship with their society or community fabric is not how the modernist vision of fine-art practice has conceptualised aesthetic freedom or individual selfhood. Nigeria's capitalist structure of the art world is generally driven by the ethos of competition and focuses on the commodification of objects. Most artistic products are bound to individualistic modes of thought and action and are directed toward the making of art objects.

While conceptualising the "Janus head methodology", which featured as a sculpture/prop in FUTURE-WORLD-EXV, I was particularly referencing the Janus mask used as a symbol of duality between two worlds in a traditional masquerade activity in southeastern Nigeria. I thought of the sculpture/prop as a conduit of connectivity that tends to blur the margins between two worlds. During the early days of my research, I had a brief encounter with a local traditional mask carver in the region who briefed me on the symbolic significance of a Janus mask. I was informed that Janus' head sits as a mediator of binary worlds that could mediate the margins of 'animate' and 'inanimate', 'natural' and 'supernatural', 'self' and 'other' and thus proliferate in the multiplicity of thoughts and actions.



**Figure 35** Wilfred Ukpong, BC1: YOUTH OF NIGERIA AS ARTISTS OF THE FUTURE, Nigeria, 2017



**Figure 36** Wilfred Ukpong, BC1: YOUTH OF NIGERIA AS ARTISTS OF THE FUTURE, Nigeria, 2017



**Figure 37** Wilfred Ukpong, BC1: YOUTH OF NIGERIA AS ARTISTS OF THE FUTURE, Nigeria, 2017

Engaging the artistic version of Janus' head here in this workshop was a way to draw the participants' attention to aesthetic sensibility of traditional art and how such a philosophical model can help extend the concept of contemporary art within the social context. The symbolic significance of Janus' head prompted me in this workshop session to introduce participants to the concept of Connective Aesthetics, which Suzi Gablik conceived as a proposal developed upon a methodical critique of the existing polarity between independent aesthetic practice and ethical practice. Gablik's attempt was geared toward attaining shared understanding and double convolution of self and the other, in other words, an effort to blur the constructed margins between an artist and the society in modern times.

In her book *The Reenchantment of Art* Gablik asserted that:

*modern aesthetics is inherently isolationist, aiming at disengagement and purity.... She vents that the advancement of individualism as opposed to collectivism in modern times diminished has profoundly diminished the desire for communal spirituality, traditional rituals, and most social relation within the community fabric. She maintains that 'Since the Enlightenment, our view of what is real has been organised around the hegemony of a technological and materialist worldview...we no longer has any sense of having a soul (Gablik, 1992).*

In her essay on *Connective Aesthetics*, at the Smithsonian Institution, Gablik proposed a new, less mono-centric mythology of the artist that affirms our radical relatedness in response to the needs of our time. She said:

*at this point, we need to cultivate the connective, relational self as thoroughly as we have cultivated, in the many years of abstract thinking, the mind geared to the principle of individual selfhood....What is needed today is an aesthetics of 'interaction and connection' (Gablik, 1992) .*

Within the framework of connective aesthetics, She further asserted that:

*Art that is grounded in the realization of our interconnectedness and inter-subjectivity-the intertwining of self and others-has a quality of relatedness that cannot be fully realised through monologue: it can only come into its own in dialogue, as an open conversation (Gablik, 1992).*

However, reflecting on Beuys' and Gablik's work concerning the "*Janus head methodology*" in the workshop inspired participants to learn new converging methods and start seeing their professional artistic endeavours both as a function of commodity object-making and also as a creation of social forms. In this way, their artistic endeavours can create social enterprises which could address public lives and the urgent needs of their community.

For workshop participants, this meant a complementary shift in working perspectives that enabled possibilities where their individual vision and voice could interact and connect with multiple visions and voices to address pertinent issues of the marginalised, oppressed, and less privileged. In envisioning this working frame, they were motivated to make the conscious and imperative shift from self-assertion to self-integration into a broader community, thus becoming an "agent of change". At the end of the workshop, I realised that I had created a creative vision space that supports participation and collaboration where concepts of social sculpture and connective aesthetics are explored, re-evaluated, and extended in relation to the engaged "*Janus head methodology*".



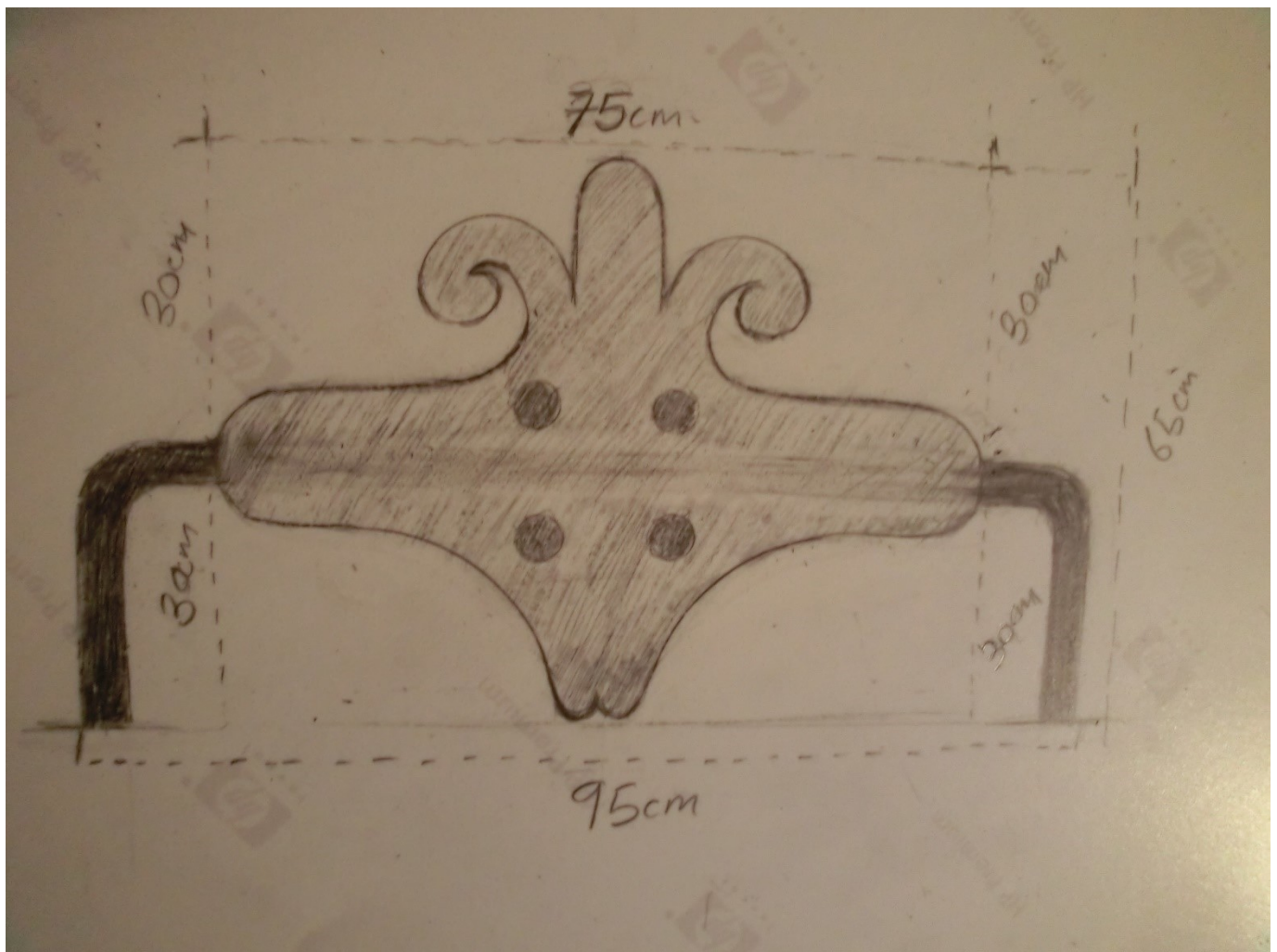
**Figure 38** Wilfred Ukpong, BC1: EARTH SOUNDS (Performance-based Film), Janus Encounter, Nigeria, 2021



**Figure 39** Wilfred Ukpong, BC1: EARTH SOUNDS (Performance-based Film), Janus Encounter, Nigeria, 2021

This convergence of conceptions and methodologies enhanced participants' sense of practice that connects individual studio space and social engagement that could invite participation, collaboration, and community interventions.

My conclusion on BC1: YOUTH OF NIGERIA AS ARTISTS OF THE FUTURE is that I have designed and engaged a set of alternative methods and strategies that can facilitate a paradigm shift in working perspectives among youth participants to become social agents. The explored working models exposed participants to new ways of working and contributed to boosting their capacities for imaginative thought and creativity towards sustainable and humane forms of development in their future practice. This experiment has shown that 'art' – in the sense of the term used in contemporary social sculpture – can emphasise creative actions that support active engagement in shaping one's life and society. Art within the context can also play a meaningful role in realising that the engaged 'youth' are all potential "agents of change" for the future.



**Figure 40** Wilfred Ukpong, Future-bond 1, drawing during BC1: YOUTH OF NIGERIA AS ARTISTS OF THE FUTURE, Nigeria, 2017

## **CONCLUSION:**

Throughout my research, I have used the dynamic model of practice-as-research, which is a conceptual framework that allows a research process to draw on a range of methods entirely framed as artistic practice and leads to arts-related knowledge output. Practice-based art research is an original exploration undertaken to gain new knowledge, and in this framework, I have utilized my practice/praxis and existing theoretical frameworks to develop new results and strands of these practice/praxis and theories. While the significance and context of my substantiation are described in this reflective commentary, a full understanding can only be obtained with direct reference to the creative outcomes through my five experimented projects.

However, an art research is defined as practice-based if it involves a creative artefact or artwork as the basis of the contribution to knowledge. Here a creative artefact could be an object or activities observed through empirical observation that is not naturally present but occurs due to the preparative or investigative procedure. In this research, my assertion of an original work is demonstrated through creative results in performance, sound/music, photography/film, sculpture/props, and workshops, which have contributed to new forms of knowledge.

Engaging the practice-as-research approach allows me to see the five experimental artistic research projects as creative activities consisting of contents and processes that can contribute to new creative outcomes. It also answers questions to generate innovative knowledge that is variants with – and complementary to – other academic research styles and methods in social science and humanities fields.

During my research, I have viewed my position as one that overlaps an artist-researcher and creative practitioner. From the lens of a creative practitioner, I have focused on creative behaviours, impacts, and outcomes through partnerships, collaborations, and public or private interventions within communities, mainly in the Niger Delta. As an artist-researcher, on the one hand, I have been concerned with creating experimental activities where critical observations, notes, and drawings were developed on the ongoing work production in relation to my thought processes. These activities subsequently opened up spaces for discussion and critique on each of the engaged projects within the site of engagements. I have identified the locus of my research to be an interaction and critique between the studio-based and social practice spaces. This approach allows me to create spatial relations between the margins of these two worlds as points of encounters that proliferates a range of visual and theoretical outcomes.

My approach to critical reflexivity in this research is extensive and developed through the process of giving attention to the embodied self and embodied others in creating the work. By employing the critical reflexive model, I have focused on the evolving dynamic interactions between my artistic mastery, gathered theoretical frameworks, critical reflections, and experiential feedback, which has helped produce a knowledge outcome. This approach helps me see my research as a constructed and mediated “object of observation” that considers the underlying social dynamics and their effects on the research subjects. Here, I would like to emphasise a few definitions of “critical reflexivity” and how their nuances help me understand and apply the concept within an artistic framework. In *Critical Reflection: A Review Of Contemporary Literature And Understandings* (White, Fook & Gardner, 2006), the authors asserted that reflexivity “however, goes further than reflectivity in the sense that it is both an approach to research and a way in which one can learn from practice – an educational tool that aids in critical knowledge production”.

While reflexivity can give rise to new knowledge and understanding, it can be limited in many ways. During my research, I have constantly allowed my reflective sensibilities to interact with embodied transactions, exchange values, beliefs, ethics, thoughts, and actions, and engage participants in the five mentioned projects.

In *Reflexivity in the Practice of Social Action: From Self-To Inter-Relational Reflexivity*, Gilbert, A. and Y. Sliep wrote that “a reflexive practitioner is more able to move beyond their own philosophical positioning and becomes open to multiple standpoints” (Gilbert & Sliep, 2009).

From the beginning of this research programme, I have approached my experimental projects with a critical application of my praxis – which overlaps theoretical frameworks with my practice – using each project as a catalyst to explore processes and inquiries related to my initial research questions.

While trying to find practical ways to answer the above questions, I had drawn and engaged a list of significant theoretical frameworks that I have explored, re-evaluated, extended, and tested in both singular and joined approaches. The concepts used ranged from Joseph Beuys and Shelley Sacks on “Social Sculpture” to Nicolas Bourriaud on “Relational Aesthetics”, (Bourriaud, 1998) Mark Dery on “Afrofuturism” and “Speculative Future”, (Dery, 1994), Alfred Gell on “Art and Agency” (Gell, 1998), Jacques Rancière on “Spectatorship” (Rancière, 2011), and Suzi Gablik on “Connective Aesthetics” (Gablik, 1992).

I have used these concepts to develop applicable methodologies that align with each project’s artistic discipline and context. Not knowing what would become of the outcome at the inception of each project, these concepts, combined with artistic discipline and mastery, provided a seminal backdrop to formulate new methodologies and processes of engagement, production, and presentation. All these combinations and working strategies helped me find an appropriate language to articulate my thought process in the evolving experiments and sites of encounter.

The original aim of this research was to propose new catalytic artistic forms – to encourage and prompt alternative models of artistic practice that serve as a more potent alternative art practice in Nigeria and Africa by geo-cultural extension. Each of these five experimental projects acted as testing grounds to examine old methods that gave birth to new ideas and insights that helped inspire methodologies and a framework for a subsequent project, irrespective of discipline, focus group, and context.

While working in the context where art either means individual creativity or relates to traditional forms of group activity, these experimental projects aimed to disrupt conventional notions of art practice. They did this by creating space for possibilities to develop a new contemporary form of artistic practice in the margins of two worlds – individualistic studio-based practice and connective social practice. This research showed participants alternative ways and processes to combine studio-based work and social practice while inviting social/public or community-based engagement through participation, collaboration, and active spectatorship.

It culminated as an alternative model of “relational encounters”, or “mediated activities”, which, in this case, straddled individual and collective realms of creative experience that activate spaces for both formal aesthetic and social engagement. Thus the aim of blurring the margins of aesthetics and ethics was achieved while opening up arenas for dialogues, inter-subjectivity, and relational and transformative experiences.

At the onset of this research, I felt discontent with the participants and audiences unfamiliar with this kind of working process. The ambiguity of evolving forms could not be categorised as art or social work in the context. However, the experiential impacts and insightful dynamics in response to a range of socio-political, cultural, and environmental needs and challenges encouraged me to see these activities as potential propositions for consideration.

These experimental projects elucidated various working strategies and ways that promote interdisciplinary, cross-cultural, and context-specific practice that can be linked to social and community engagement. Notably, during this research was a radical shift in practices and perspectives among participant members who learned that working within the fields of performance, sound/music, photographic, and film projects can exist both as a studio-based work and social practice.

A firm understanding of their responsibility as “agents of change” working within a multidimensional and connected aesthetic field of relational encounter encouraged participants toward works seeking transformation and the promotion of individual social enterprise, as some participants were supported with skills and resources for small business start-ups. Most notable was the last project, BC1: YOUTH OF NIGERIA AS ARTISTS OF THE FUTURE, where the conventional notions of an artist as an autonomous studio-based artist or creative with independently self-motivated visual aesthetic visions radically overlapped with the idea of a connective social practitioner. Their roles became one who engaged in private studio space and within the public and community space and designated as one who invites participation, collaborations, and community interventions. They were guided by unique individual visions and collective voices that culminate as democratic forms of social exchange.

A critical reflection and insight gained during this research and the experimental projects was the development of “mediated objects”, which can be living and non-living forms of artistic encounters that embody complex intentionality and promotes the notion of objects as a mediated social agency. My research showed that performance action, sculpture, sound, photography, film, and installation can embody a set of intentionality and the representation of “things” and can be designed to influence the viewers’ thoughts, perceptions, and actions. For me, the concept of “mediated objects” is not only a critique of ‘commodified’ and ‘non-social’ art objects or a dismissal of their importance in the art world but seen within the context of this research as a complementary alternative.

In Africa, connective social practice or socially engaged art practice is underdeveloped. And essentially, the concept of “mediated objects” is not only a critique of ‘commodified’ and ‘non-social’ art objects nor a dismissal of their importance in the art world, herein proposed as a complementary alternative. Within this contextual perspective of “art for art’s sake,” my five experimental projects have helped to develop new working strategies and processes that encourage alternative ways of re-thinking and re-imagining methods of connecting, relating, sharing, engaging, and embodying through art and creativity.

This set of working parameters has also given rise to new thoughts, actions, and forms of knowledge production among participants. They are inspired artistic propositions embedded and intertwined with complex individual/group and visual aesthetic/ethical components. The outcomes prompt the younger generation of artists and creative practitioners to develop the ability to respond to both aesthetics and socio-ethical responsibility.

Rather than solely focusing on creating works often fetishized as “commodity objects” within the existing conservative capitalist system, they are encouraged to thus engage in broader cultural, ecological, and political activities in shaping and building a viable present and future. My creative interventions on the margins of a studio-based practice and social practice offer new knowledge and insights in how to trade between the two margins. It articulates a new artistic vocabulary that can serve as a more potent alternative art practice in Nigeria and Africa by geo-cultural extension.

### **CONTRIBUTIONS AND IMPACTS:**

These working processes and methods open up spaces for reflections and envisioning new ways of making and being in a context where art is an exclusive professional activity aimed toward the making of commodified visual or sonic forms. They will encourage artists and creative professionals to be flexible, improvisational, and responsive while showing how making processes/products can respond to environmental, spatial, and societal needs. In other words, I can boldly assert that my “creative intervention” intentions have become “transactional intentions” or “mediating intentions” toward a “transformative intension” for emerging artists, creative practitioners, social entrepreneurs, community youths, and stakeholders at large. This research outcome will benefit all or some of these constituencies in conceiving art as “mediated objects”, “embodied forms”, or “transformational activities” that can become catalytic in responding to a broad range of social, cultural, economic, and environmental challenges. My experiments show that the art-making processes/products can be a “relational encounter” and “embodied activity” and can lead to transformation and change. It presents a model that redefines the role of an artist as an “agent of social change”.

Lastly, I would like to end this chapter with a more significant impact from FUTURE-WORLD-EXV, the third experimental project. When an early version of the court-metrague was presented to the Nigerian Senate in 2017, the award-winning film urged the then Senate President, Bukola Saraki, to assure Nigerians that the Petroleum Industry Bill (PIB) would be passed. However, the bill was eventually passed on 16<sup>th</sup> August 2021. The film’s highlights and dialogue were inspiring and had a more significant impact on the presiding senate president and his eight National Assembly members. Here is a link to that publication – <https://guardian.ng/art/with-future-world-niger-deltas-challenges-receive-global-attention/>

In addition, Yusuf Tuggar, Nigerian Ambassador to the Federal Republic of Germany, on 24<sup>th</sup> May 2018 in his statement after the film won a prize at the International Tourisms Borse Berlin’s Golden City-Gate Film Festival award in Germany, said: *This crossroad of theory and practice exists in other disciplines: When the fictive or fictional--movies/films/literature/art – such as Future World intersect with the fictive or real-life governmental and corporate decision-making processes/policies-and-laws, there is an opportunity to proffer innovative, pragmatic solutions to real-life problems. To this, Wilfred Ukpong’s Future World is succinct and inspirational in that it taps into what can be referred to as the Intertextuality of the three stories: Slave Trade, Palm Oil Trade, and Crude Oil Trade. Future World addresses all these stories in one. But it is not just the stories Future World addresses, it is how it addresses them. Utilizing industrial oil-and-gas waste to project a positive Afro-futuristic feel-good effect is a significant departure from most of the negative stereotypical African horror stories of poverty, famine, and underdevelopment. The German-born artist Joseph Beuys that he takes inspiration from was right in believing art can exercise a healing effect on both artist and audience. It is truly a Gesamt kunst werk – a total, comprehensive work of art and that universal human creativity has the effect of bringing us all together* (Tuggar, 2008).

### ***FUTURE DIRECTION:***

Firstly, I plan to embark on a visiting scholar or postdoctoral research position to develop additional research, training, or teaching. This programme will add more knowledge in the subject and develop my skills to pursue a career in academia and research within the field of art. These positions will allow me to disseminate the knowledge gained during my research and contribute to the art field through lecturing and book publication. The outcome of this research will be further experimented with and developed in different social and cultural contexts on the African continent and other places in Europe and North America.

I have been musing on ideas to write on the following topics: contemporary social sculpture; Afrofuturism now; working in-between the margins of two worlds - studio-based art and social practice; lens-based work as social practice; mediating objects - contemporary African art and agency; radical futures and waste ecologies. These initiatives and further research development will emphasize on the intersection of “art” and “practice” within the socio-environmental realm. It will create a conflating between making instrumentalised objects and an on-going process that activates opportunities for social change.

Secondly, I have founded and designed an on-going construction of a non-profit creative art and cultural centre in the Niger Delta called The VOF Foundation (The Vessel of the Future). The foundation is an artistic-architectural project with its own identity as an art form and institution. Developed as an artist-led, community-based institution that promotes interdisciplinary art, cultural development, and socio-environmental change in the Niger Delta of Southern Nigeria, V.O.F Foundation as my future direction and post-doctoral project, where knowledge gained in my research will be extensively utilized. The space will enable me to extend my research and collaborate with other agents/actors to produce innovative and emancipatory projects that challenge colonial structures and the universality of capitalist artistic and cultural norms. I expect this to be achieved by demonstrating the role of socially-engaged art and cultural productions as revolutionary tools to re-imagine viable futures while configuring a collective social and critical consciousness in times of crisis and uncertainty.

The three-story (*2000 meters square*) industrial-architectural inspired structure will feature international artistic and curatorial residency spaces, a research library, an architectural and experimental design lab, an audio-visual production studio, a creative academy, a café, a multipurpose hall, a contemporary art gallery, and a digital archive museum dedicated to the art, environment, culture, and history of the Niger Delta region in connections to the West. In conceptualizing the V.O.F Foundation architectural design, I have drawn references from the floating oil production system, power turbines, and ship structures in the oil-rich Niger Delta - my place of birth - to create a seemingly futuristic vessel. Beyond style and visual aesthetics, and as a bold symbolic statement on waste and material ecologies, I have used local materials like bamboo, sharp and plaster sand in the building process and have also repurposed and recycled materials waste (discarded Giant Hose for FPSO Tandem Crude Oil Offloading Service) to create an eclectic geometric functional roof design (for solar storage inverters) complementing the building's stark-minimalist color palette.

Here, used materials inhabit ethical and socio-political as well as environmental implications. Materials and the resources economies and local craftsmanship engaged in the building process are tools to deconstruct the industrial infrastructure and re-imagine a future generative space beyond the Western industrial paradigm while questioning systems of unregulated capitalism and environmental pollution in the Niger Delta. The building design also aims to challenge conventional typologies and sustains the ability to unfold both industrially and artistically as a dynamic, eco-friendly, multifaceted creative space.

The V.O.F Foundation will create an enabling environment and amplify a sustainable ecosystem for emerging artists, art historians, curators, designers, filmmakers, musicians, dancers, architects, photographers, and environmentalists through seasonal collaborative projects that strengthen creative energy in a space envisioned as a critical repository for sustainable development and collective knowledge production. The foundation's mission is to mobilize a network of multiple agents/actors – both local and international – in a nexus that drive creative entrepreneurship through projects that promote the intersection between artistic development, cultural dialogue, social justice, human rights, youth, and women empowerment, environmental and ecological consciousness, and by extension, agriculture sustainability through scientific experiments in the foundation's external mini farmyard.

I see this infrastructural project as an ethical-social imperative and critical emergency response to problematic social conditions in the Niger Delta. The impoverished oil-rich region has been historically distressed by decades of political corruption, poor governance, inadequate infrastructures, community disputes, youth restiveness, unemployment, and more than 50 years of environmental degradation. The centre will help broaden the horizons for local youths to gain self-reliance and creative skills for future employment opportunities and creative development in the thriving cultural sector.

The VOF Foundation will create a platform for foreign institutional partnerships to promote capacity building, women empowerment, creative development, cross-cultural dialogue, and environmental change. The space will allow me to continue my research with young artists and creatives. My focus will reside on the margins, where symbolic and poetic gestures meet with generative social change. I will curate creative workshops and exhibitions that place emphasises on the role of “mediating objects” as conduits for addressing issues central to the community. Such initiatives will open opportunities for conversations and reflections on these pressing community concerns. Furthermore, I hope to broaden the concepts of social sculpture, relational athletics and connective social practice. These extensions will evolve through object making while creating conditions that materialise potential ideas.



**Figure 41** Wilfred Ukpong, Frontal design rendition (Corel Draw) of VOF Foundation by Wilfred Ukpong, 2022



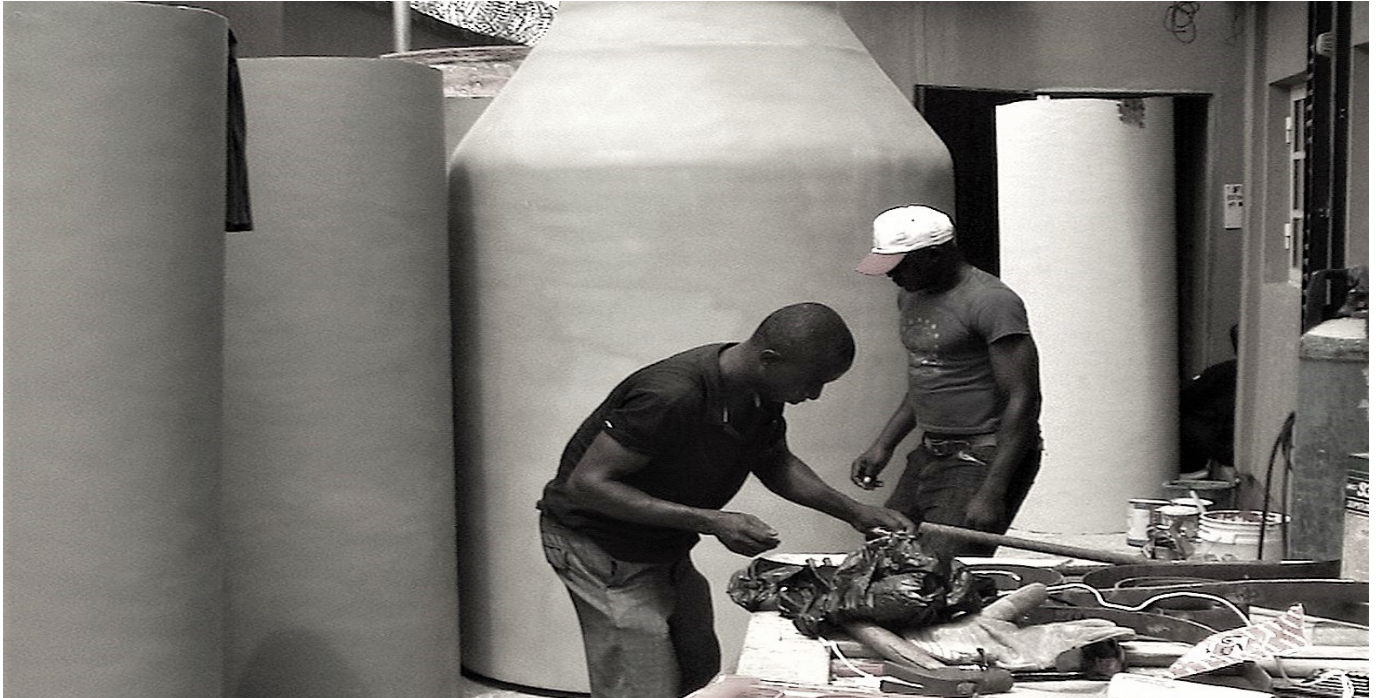
**Figure 42** Wilfred Ukpong, VOF Foundation frontal view of the building construction, Eket, Nigeria, 2022



**Figure 43** Wilfred Ukpong, VOF Foundation, angle view of the multipurpose hall, Eket, Nigeria, 2022



**Figure 44** Wilfred Ukpong, The VOF, recycling oil material waste into solar housings, Eket, Nigeria, 2021



**Figure 45** Wilfred Ukpong, The VOF, recycling oil material waste into solar housings, Eket, Nigeria, 2021

## **BIBLIOGRAPHY:**

- Augoyard, J.F. and Tongue, H (2005) *In Sonic Experience: A Guide to Everyday Sounds*: McGill-Queen's University Press.
- Bishop, C (2012) *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship*: Verso books.
- Bishop, C (2011) *Participation, and Spectacle: Where Are We Now?* lecture at the Creative Time summit.
- Bourriaud, N (1998) *Relational Aesthetics*: Les Presse Du Reel.
- Beuys, J (1994) *Public Dialogue, lectures and performance*: New School for Social Research in New York.
- Chukueggu C.C (1998) *Contemporary Nigerian Art and its Classifications*: Published by Delsu Consult Pub House in association with Virochy International Press.
- Cobussen, M (2016) *Sonic Ecology*: lecture at Leiden University.
- Dery, M (1994) *Flame Wars: The Discourse of Cyber culture*: Duke University Press.
- Derrida, J (1993) *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning*, lecture at University of California, Riverside.
- Emaduku, A (2016) *Youth Restiveness, Militancy and the Intractable Problems of the Niger Delta*.
- Ehiguelua, I (2007) *Environmental Protection Law*: New Pages Law Publishing Co. Effurun/Warri.
- Fitzwilliam Museum Cambridge (n.d.) *Mary Tudor's portrait by Hans Eworth*, University of Cambridge.
- White, S, Fook, J & Gardner, F (2006) *Critical reflection: a review of contemporary literature and understandings*. in S White, J Fook & F Gardner (eds), *Critical reflection in health and social care*. Open University Press, Maidenhead, pp. 3-20.
- Gell, A (1992) *The Enchantment of Technology and the Technology of Enchantment*: Clarendon Press.
- Gell, A (1998) *Art and Agency*: Oxford University Press.
- Gablik, S (1992) *The Reenchantment of Art*: Thames & Hudson.
- Gablik, S (1992) *Connective Aesthetics, essay at the Smithsonian Institution*, Washington DC: University of Chicago press.
- Gilbert, A. and Sliep, Y (2009) *Reflexivity in the Practice of Social Action: From Self-To Inter-Relational Reflexivity*: Sage publication.
- Helguera, P (2011) *Education for Socially Engaged Art*: Jorge Pinto Books Inc.
- Hamilton, E.C. (2017) *Afrofuturism and the Technologies of Survival: African Art* VOL. 50, NO. 4.
- Harman, G (2015) *Object Oriented Ontology*: PlasiCity Press.

- Imobighe, T (2004), *Conflict and Instability in the Niger Delta: The Warri Case*: Spectrum Books.
- Jacob, P. (2010) *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, the definition of Intentionality*, Online Publication.
- Jensen, D. (2006) *Endgame, Vol. 1: The Problem of Civilization*: Seven Stories Press.
- Jordan, C.M. (2017) *Joseph Beuys and Social Sculpture*: PhD dissertation submitted to The Graduate Center, City University of New York.
- Jackson, S. (2011) *Social Works: Performing Art, Supporting Publics*: Routledge.
- Kester, G.H (2004) *Conversation Pieces: Community and Conversation in Modern Art*: University of California Press.
- Kester, G.H (2011) *The One and the Many: Contemporary Collaborative Art in a Global Context*: Duke University Press.
- Latour, B. (2007) *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory* (Clarendon Lectures in Management Studies) 1st Edition: Oxford University Press.
- Merleau-Ponty, M. (2013) *The phenomenology of perception*: Routledge.
- Onobrakpeya, B. (2016) Quote from the Guardian Newspaper Arts Section.
- Ojakorotu, V. (2009) *Fresh Dimensions on the Niger Delta Crisis of Nigeria*: JAPSS, Inc.
- Okereke, E. (2022) *The return of the object, DIARY OF A BORDER-BEING*: online publication.
- Rancière, J. (2011) *The Emancipated Spectator*: Verso books.
- Richardson, J. (2010), *Interventionist Art Education: Contingent Communities, Social Dialogue, and Public Collaboration: A Journal of Issues and Research*.
- Sacks, S. (n.d.) *Perspective and Reflections on Social Sculptor*, online publication: SSRU Oxford.
- Sacks, S. (2007) *Exchange Values, Eleven Years On*: Essay on Installation Exhibition
- Sacks, S. (2016) *The contemporary field of socially engaged art practice* (unpublished SSRU Oxford)
- Smith, Hazel & Dean, R. T (2009) *Practice-led Research, Research-led Practice in the Creative Arts*: Edinburgh University Press
- Stanford.edu. (2016) *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. [online] Available at: <https://plato.stanford.edu/>.
- Thompson, R.F. (1984) *Flash of the Spirit: African and Afro-American Art and Philosophy*: Vintage

Tuggar, Y. (2018) Wilfred Ukpong's Future-World, award presentation Nigerian Embassy in Federal Republic of Germany

Ukpong, W. (1999) Emblems of Prowess, Exhibition Catalog: Quintessence Art gallery Lagos, Nigeria.

Ukpong, W. (2022) LENS CRATCH: FINE ART PHOTOGRAPHY JOURNAL: online publication.

Wikipedia Contributors (2019). Niger Delta. [online] Wikipedia. Available at:  
[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Niger\\_Delta](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Niger_Delta).

Yaszek, L. (2010) *Afrofuturism, science fiction, and the history of the future*: online publication

## **APPENDIX:**

I was born in the early 1970s in Southern Nigeria in a time characterised as the post-colonial/post-civil war era. I grew up in Eket, a major oil exploration and producing town in Southern Nigeria. My parents were science-oriented, my father a manager at the time at ExxonMobil, and my mother a practicing medical anaesthetist working in a general hospital.

Growing up in the 1980s, I was a big fan of the American and European art and cultural movements, which were essential exports to Nigeria. These movements significantly impacted and influenced the local arts and music scene. Visual graffiti, a necessary part of hip-hop culture, was a fascinating and foremost impulsion for me at that time. My father, who was interested in photography and video as leisure pursuits, encouraged his children to watch western films and learn music in his free time. At home, the presence of a keyboard, a synthesizer, and analogue photographic and video cameras were creatively stimulating. At the same time, my mother was an avid lover of fashion and design and would spend her free time sewing clothes for her family and friends.

Additionally, my cousin Victor Ekpuk, now a renowned Nigerian-American visual artist based in Washington DC, also played a significant role in my budding career. Ekpuk, then an art student at Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife, was interested in African literature, poetry, and music.

He would proudly display his impressive mastery of modern drawing and painting during holidays with us while also listening to American Jazz and West African world music. In such a broad cultural and creative environment, there was always an air of exciting materials and resources for me. Thus, offering a fresh impetus for artistic development throughout my formative years. I was interested in music, art, fashion, design, filmmaking, and the use of poetry and storytelling. However, my parents were a robust subscription and direction in my secondary education. I was persuaded to attend a science school, even though I had exhibited a deep artistic inclination that spans various art forms. My father was strongly bent on his three sons following his lucrative footsteps in the oil and gas industry. He wanted me and my brothers to study engineering. Ultimately his aspiration for his children partly came to fruition as two of my brothers studied chemical engineering and went on to work for ExxonMobil and Shell corporations. I was a pure science student and was eventually admitted to the university to study electrical/electronic engineering. Yet during this same period, a series of strange encounters completely changed the course of my career.

In the early 1990s, I travelled to Lagos to see Victor Ekpuk in his studio. During my stay with Ekpuk, I came across an art history book *Flash of the Spirit*, by Yale professor Robert Farris Thompson. This landmark book on African and Black Atlantic aesthetics and philosophy became a significant inspiration and best-read companion. It propelled me to desert my engineering studies and tread the highly spirited frenzied artistic path. My parents and Ekpuk were furious at my decision. Yet Ekpuk later advised me to consider a programme in fine arts at his Alma mater in Ile-Ife. While making admission inquiries at the Fine Art department, I came across Bolaji Campbell, a senior lecturer and a friend to Ekpuk.

Campbell – now a professor of African & African diaspora art at the history of art and visual culture department at the Rhode Island School of design – was fascinated by my seemingly deep interest in art scholarship. Yet, he wasn't motivated by my decision to study fine art in Nigeria.

Campbell encouraged me to read art and art history books while suggesting that I could explore the possibility of studying art in Europe or North America. I suppose part of Campbell's concern was that he was increasingly becoming wary of the Nigerian educational system, which was in decline. He feared that the rare artistic vibrancy he discerned in me might be in jeopardy in the Nigerian art schools. And perhaps, he thought I needed a more liberal, creative, and academic environment to grow. Unfortunately, my parents had dismissed the idea of studying art abroad.

However, reading art and art history books and visiting art and cultural institutions helped broaden my interest and exposure to contemporary art practice over the years. During an invitation to an art lecture at the United States Information Service (USIS) in Lagos, I was introduced to David Doris, an American Ph.D. student from Yale. Doris was Robert Farris Thompson's student and sort of protégé conducting a one-year research programme in Nigeria. Just before his trip to Nigeria, he had read my essay on Ukara emblematic ritual costume worn by Leopard secret men society in South-Eastern Nigeria. He thought my writing – which he found in the artist bibliographic section at the National Museum of African Art in Smithsonian Institution Washington DC – was insightful and brilliant. Coincidentally David Doris and I were both heading to the university city of Ile-Ife the next day. We became the closest of friends, and he saw the artistic forté in me. He encouraged me to develop a unique style through experimenting with influence in traditional African and contemporary art, as well as the Fluxus, which Doris was a proponent of the art movement. Through Doris' subscription, I would spend a significant amount of time experimenting with various artistic materials and concepts to develop a portfolio of work for gallery presentations.

At this time, I was also fixated on modern art practice in Nigerian art schools, notably the Ife and Nsukka art schools. These new forms of contemporary art practice developed in Nigeria just after independence culminated from the idea of synthesis by combining traditional Nigerian art with modern European art forms. These emerging forms were conceived by founding Nigerian modern artists who studied in Europe. I was captivated by their cross-fertilisation approach which influenced my early artistic practice. At this point of reflection, it is vital to give a concise historical background survey of the context of artistic practice in Nigeria from the Fine Art perspective and how this influenced my budding career. As a point of entry, I would like to reference an interview on The Guardian Nigerian journal with one of the leading and founding master artist, Dr. Bruce Onobrakpeya MFR, whose works played a vital role in the development of modern Nigerian art. In this interview, Onobrakpeya quoted, *“Nigerian art is dynamic because it is the product of cross-fertilization and influences from home and outside. This inherent hybrid quality means that it can never be stagnant.”*

Most noted founding Nigerian artists such as Chief Aina Onabolu, Ben Enwuonwu, and Akinola Lasekan had acquired their higher art education in Europe. Chief Aina Onabolu had excellent professional training at the St John's Wood School in London and Academic Julien in Paris, France. And Ben Enwuonwu had his training at Goldsmith College London, Ruskin College Oxford, and Slade School of Fine Arts, London. While Akinola Lasekan, another pioneer modern Nigerian artist, enrolled at the Hammersmith School of Building, Arts and Crafts.

Other Nigerian elites who obtained their higher education abroad before independence had mounted relentless pressure and agitation on the colonial masters on the imperative to establish higher institutions in the country.

The above artists had returned to Nigeria when the strong presence of the pro-independence agitators prompted the colonial governments to establish institutions of higher learning in the country. In his essay on *Contemporary Nigerian Art and its Classifications* (1998), Chukueggu C.C noted that during the 1957/58 academic years, the Fine Art Department in Nigeria was affiliated with two prominent British-based Art Institutions, namely the Slade School of Art and the Goldsmith School of Art.

The two art schools were part of the University of London that established the fine art unit in the Nigerian art higher educational system. Over the years, Nigerian art schools would evolve between the margins of traditional Nigerian art and modern European art. This synthesis or cross-fertilisation foregrounded the conceptual backdrop for developing what is known today as Modern Nigerian art.

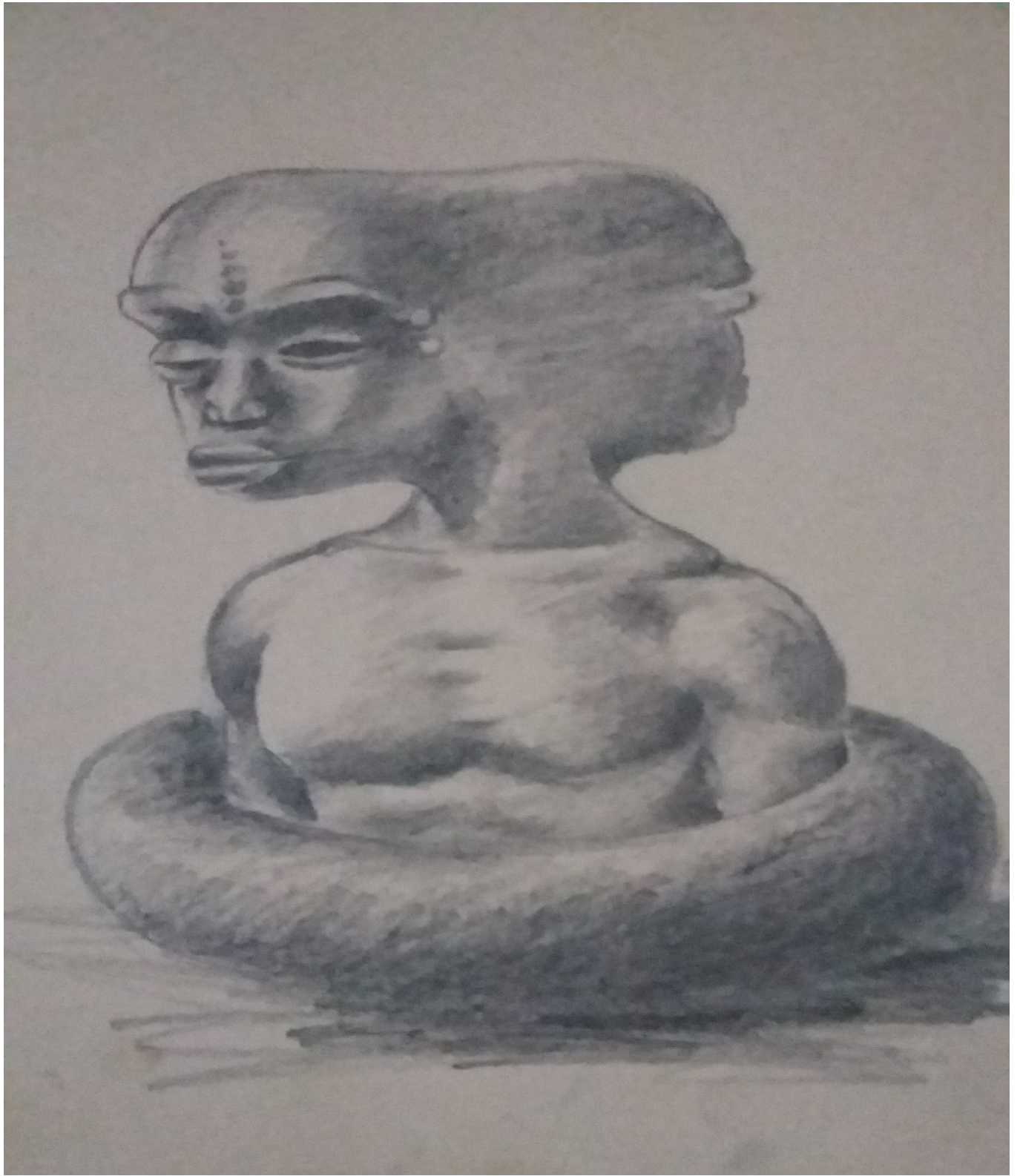
This conceptual background became a seminal influence for me in developing unique artistic and aesthetic sensibilities. I drew from Nsukka and Ife art schools, African art and Black aesthetic philosophy, and contemporary art from a Eurocentric perspective. In my synthesis approach, I was interested in merging old and new forms hence a continuation of Nigerian and Black aesthetics traditions in modern artistic sensibility. I was captivated by the individual genius in the visual art expression of a founding Nsukka artist Uche Okeke which anchors on his philosophy of natural synthesis. Subsequently, during my years in southwestern Nigeria, I was captivated by the artistic concept of Onaism. This art movement started at the Obafemi Awolowo University Ile-Ife in the late 1980s. Looking at Uche Okeke's work, alongside a range of Nsukka masters, I was entrenched in expanding the traditional Uli and Nsibidi pictographic art traditions in southeastern Nigeria. Between 1996 and 1998, I spent significant time exploring and experimenting with various artistic concepts and developed work for gallery presentations. In mid-1999, Quintessence, a top-tier Lagos gallery, accepted my dossier and hosted my debut solo exhibition, "*Emblems of Prowess*", on the Lagos art scene. The much critical acclaim and the successful show consisted of a series of sculptural paintings.

The featured works were inspired by traditional Nsibidi and Uli symbols yet presented in contemporary forms and statements. From that point on, roughly 22 years ago, I felt the validity of being called an artist. And after having a brief yet successful career as an artist in Nigeria, I relocated to the United Kingdom. I had a few solo exhibitions and an artist residency in London. During my early days in Europe, the urge to enrol in an art school became increasingly apparent while visiting art schools and museums. Eventually, I was admitted to Ecole Supérieure d'Arts Lorient, France. I was introduced to both modern and contemporary art scholarship during my studies. During my MFA programme, I was interested in exploring performance, installation, video, and sound art. I was captivated by the works/practice of Marina Abramovic, Chris Burden, John Cage, Matthew Barney, and most importantly, Joseph Beuys. I thought that Beuys' activist role and concept of social sculpture were quite engaging and relevant to our challenging times. They allowed me to see the potentiality of art in building human capital and shaping a democratic, sustainable and viable future. In parallel, I was also drawn to Rick Lowe, Adrian Piper, Vanessa Beecroft, Ai Weiwei, and Theaster Gates. Their works also exhibited profound socio-political and environmental activist components that I was interested at that time when echoes of community conflicts and environmental devastation from my homeland (Niger-Delta) were profoundly unsettling and troubling.

The escalating tensions between multinational oil and gas corporations and marginalised minority ethnic groups were troubling. The people of the Niger Delta had expressed discontent over their land and resource exploitation since crude oil was discovered in the oil-rich region in 1950. This circumstance fuelled socio-political unrest that led to violence among ethnic militia groups, Nigerian police, and the military forces. The unfortunate event that stirred my interest in socio-political and environmental issues was the execution of Nigerian playwright and activist Ken Saro-Wiwa and nine Ogoni chiefs by the Nigerian military regime. Saro-Wiwa was quite an influential Nigerian writer, television producer, and environmental activist. His inspirational works focused on political dimensions such as environmental and social injustices.

He was a member of the Ogoni people, an ethnic minority in Nigeria whose homeland, Ogoniland, was earmarked for crude oil extraction since the 1950s. And like other oil extracting locations, the Niger Delta has suffered extreme environmental pollution and damage from decades of indiscriminate petroleum waste dumping and gas flaring.

I returned to the Niger Delta to initiate a project that would respond to the problematic conditions of the context. At this point, I was interested in furthering my scholarship by embarking on a practice-based research project in a unit committed to the field of Social Sculpture due to my increasing interest in Joseph Beuys' concept of Social Sculpture. I became preoccupied with conceptualising a project that could mediate between social practice and contemporary art frameworks toward a social transformation process. In September 2009, I enrolled in a Ph.D. programme in the Social Sculpture Research Unit here at Oxford Brookes University. Interestingly, I was awarded a special grant from the Prince Claus Fund in Amsterdam just after my enrolment. My project *Blazing Century 1: Drill (BC1: Drill)* was initiated as a series of creative workshops, disruptive interlinked site installations, and ephemeral performance actions in important oil-producing and fishing locations. *Blazing Century 1* became my major long-term art-research project that foregrounded an experimental chiasmus, a creative intervention in the margins of two worlds: studio-based work and social practice. I aimed to develop an art-research project that was as an innovative intervention that embodies a double ontological status. My project became empirical research to respond to a set of questions and artistic activities to respond to the social conditions of the engaged context.





BC1-ND-FC: The Advent of the Visionaries – A Screen to Behold, 2017

Wilfred Ukpog (our bonded companion), we strongly persuade you to be "One" and at the same time be the "Other" and inhabit the margins that build on two distinct worlds. Be courageous and safeguard when the worlds seem conflicting, and rejoice when the worlds seem efficiently collaborative, productive, and manifesting into "something." That bears a double ontological semblance to an old classical artwork called "Janus" or to a new socially engaged artwork, which you called Blazing Century 1. Let this evolving creative intervention be wholly and tended towards an engaging intentional purpose, though precarious and sometimes atypical, like an offspring of two distinct worlds. Believe and be committed, for this mediated "something" will evolve in your favour and for the benefit of the "other" and will direct your current paths to the future.

A message from the Visionaries on "Blazon Century 1: Creative Interventions on the Margins of Two Worlds"

**DEDICATION:**

*This research project is dedicated to the loving memories of my father, Chief (Mr.) Sonny Ukpog (the oilman who led me to walk a separate path), and to Chief (Mrs.) Aino Oni-Okpaku (the gallerist and mother who found me and encouraged me to walk a completely different and distinct path. The research outcome is a footprint of those separate paths converging.*