

On Disturbed Methodologies

A Re-cap Almost in Verbatim of Spontaneous Interventions

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Abstract

The need to constantly review, (or more appropriately, disrupt) the canon, be it in art theory, in art history, in art education or in art practice in general, is imperative. As an art educator who is also an artist, for the author, criticism of art education and institutionalized methods appeals to the desire to theorize this criticism from an unconventional perspective. In doing so, he tends to agree with a certain “battle cry” often attributed to the art world’s enfant terrible, Banksy: “Art should comfort the disturbed and disturb the comfortable.” In the pursuit of means to disrupt art-related thinking and practice and therefore, to disturb the institutionalized methods of art education, this study attempts to identify strategies that can be termed “disturbed methodologies.” This research is based on experiences from the author’s pedagogical projects in general, yet attempting to focus specifically on “Point(s) of Ellipses” (How to do stuff with the stuff we have and stuff we don’t have)—a crash course in “Disturbing the Piece”, which was on offer at the Danish National School of Performing Arts (Den Danske Scenekunstskole, DDSKS) in Odense, Denmark.¹ This course was representative of the kind of events the author is constantly experimenting with at the intersection of art practice and art education in the mode of critique, assuming the critical intellectual equality of all persons involved. The aim is to frame the work of art as essentially a non-consensual object resulting from a critical attitude leading to discontinuity. This hybridized entity (the artwork), inhabits liminal spaces that are effervescent and characterized by mixes of irresolvable desires. In this domain, the piece becomes novel constellations of heterogeneous objects and situations that disrupt habitual tropes and patterns of perception. By observing his own art-practice experience of institutional critique, “disruption” is seen in a practical, engaged approach to criticism rather than in a theoretical, historical or otherwise hermetic attempt at epistemological consideration. This article attempts to make an almost verbatim re-cap of the presentation made by the author during a colloquium on the history and practice of art education in Berlin in June 2023. Of course, there is the surety that memory will fail, but it is the effort that really matters, isn’t it ... (?).

Keywords

disruption – disturbed methodologies – performative pedagogy – postcolonial theory – canon – art pedagogy – Ghanaian contemporary art

1 Introduction

I would like to begin with an epithet. In the spirit of disruption, it is taken from nowhere in particular; cannot be attributed to anyone in particular; but sounding quite convincing, as though it came from the mind of an ancient philosopher, I elect to use it, even if it remains seemingly random, for it is honestly a poignant, almost irrefutable truism. But we need to note too that epithets are usually only obliquely related to the point one is trying to make, aren't they? So, we may never return to it, even though, at the end of the day, the point would certainly have been made. And then I'll share an anecdote about how my planned idea for the presentation somehow went south toward an unplanned, yet beautifully generative, route ...

An epithet that is attributable to no one

... one of the most frustrating moments in the contemporary learning sphere, when it comes to ART, EDUCATION and PRACTICE, is to be at your wits end and not really know what exactly it is that you're doing; what exactly it is you're supposed to be doing or what it is exactly you even did in the past ... OMG!

As has been hinted already, this so-called epithet is attributed to no one in particular. The author however, would perhaps, like to take the credit for it[?] wink, wink ... then again, why would an epithet appear somewhere inside the text and not right before it? All these make up valid and fascinating positions for enquiry.

2 The Anecdote about the Unplanned Route

I recall having started my presentation in Berlin with a rather worn-out critique of orthodox classroom process. It is one that I usually make of the so-called lesson plan in a typical pedagogic situation. Flicking back my rather huge Shuka

or Maasai cloth scarf,² I took a step to the lectern, leaned in towards the microphone, and with a gradually developing smirk, breathed out: “The almighty lesson plan is only as good as the start of the actual lesson,” as though it was meant to be a whisper. It was heard all through the hall, and deliberately so.

This critique, I believe, is not totally novel. What I wish to propose with this initial critical evaluation of one of the fundamental moments in conventional teaching and learning, is its futility. The futility of the idea that one is ever capable of predicting the totality of the outcome of the lesson before it actually transpires, should really be common knowledge by now. There is no real denying the fact that the intended lesson plan would always remain an intent, a potentiality, a desire. Because at the start of the lesson—in real time, in real space, with all possible configurations of concessions, conditions, and contexts—the entire pedagogic situation is thrown into chaotic conflict! And then what do we do?

Isn't it curious that almost every film, narrative or story begins with a conflict? It is this similar situation I tend to take students through. To facilitate certain frustrations within them that ultimately yield unexpected treasures. Imagine for instance, that you have been invited to attend an art exhibition. Given standard art educational practices of the late 20th century, you would expect to be ushered into a presumptively neutral venue with autonomous art objects that would be encountered by your disembodied eye, for your rational contemplation. Doesn't this sound all too familiar? So now, imagine that this exhibition you are thrust into is one that is quite impossible, if not literally impassable. It presents work, (a disturbed piece), by the contemporary Ghanaian artist Bernard Akoi-Jackson, whose general oeuvre has been described in his bio as: [work that is] “drawn to the politics of such vestiges of colonialist encounter as overtly bureaucratic rituals that lead to procedural stalemate in society. His multi-disciplinary, audience-implicating installations and performative pseudo-rituals have featured in exhibitions across the world” (Eli and Edythe Broad Art Museum [MSU Broad], 2015).

The work's title is presented thus: *Untitled ... How to Usher the [an] African fully into [His]tory, like a sheep to the slaughter, as though s/h[e] (wasn't aware of) it all along and that his/her grin was not informed by a sly knowingness, but rather by a dumbfounded bewilderment and an eternal gratefulness to kin totally privileged by woes inflicted so long ago in antiquity, it is no use “mulling” over them in such contemporaneity, even though time continues to be cyclic ...* (MSU Broad, 2015). As complicated as the non-title goes, there's not much time to soak it all in before you are nudged on to navigate all the possible frustration so lavishly laid out before you (see Figure 12.1). And as if the ambiguities were not enough, you have a milling set of very busy-looking uniformed staff, who

also sporadically issue out verbal commands here and there. Distractions are rife! Visual, textual and sonic prompts are everywhere.

There is music playing at a decibel too loud and the heating has also been upped a notch, so that your entire orientation is put in slight disarray. And to be fair, there is also always room to exit it all, if you're not too settled in place. If you are able to survive the initial onslaught of complex and complicated instructions, you only graduate to another section of the process, where much more obscure hurdles must be surmounted, whilst also keeping some earlier instructions in mind, since you've been foretold, they will be needed later on in the process. Upon reaching the eventual end, if there is any such site we can designate as an end, you receive some kinds of rewards. You are presented, in Christian eucharistic style, with Ghanaian chocolate, brutally sawn through by an uncanny character, who also offers you Dutch Schnapps and a certificate. What oddities, right?



FIGURE 12.1 Bernard Akoi-Jackson, Video stills from the performance *Untitled ... How to Usher the [an] African fully into [His]tory, like a sheep to the slaughter, as though s/h[e] (wasn't aware of) it all along and that his/her grin was not informed by a sly knowingness, but rather by a dumbfounded bewilderment and an eternal gratefulness to kin totally privileged by woes inflicted so long ago in antiquity, it is no use "mulling" over them in such contemporaneity, even though time continues to be cyclic ... (2015)*. Performed at Lilith Performance Studio, Malmö, Sweden, in May 2015, the work staged a fictitious bureaucratic ritual where participants were hemmed into a system of absurd tasks, reflecting on postcolonial identities. Courtesy of Lilith Performance Studio and the artist

Well, as it pans out in the artistic output, so does it also in the pedagogic situations that I offer in a typical class/lecture room encounter. All these are done in the already hinted at position that there's a need to continually disrupt the canon, whether in art theory(-ies); in history(-ies), in art education/transfer of knowledge(-ies), or in the very practice/praxi (the doing and thinking through that goes along). This is because I'm in some sort of agreement with Banksy, who is said to have suggested that art should comfort the disturbed and disturb the comfortable. In this brushed up anarchic attitude, I also operate from a pedagogic angle inspired by the complex praxis of Kāṛī'kachā Seid'ou, Professor at the KNUST Fine Art Department, who in a 2012 interview proposes that he stopped making art as we know it so as to make artists. His claim is supported by living proof that his emancipatory approach to teaching art, of which I am a beneficiary, has had him dedicate much of his art teaching to challenging students to develop practices that are arguably independent of prevailing systems. It is from his lead that I coin the series of strategies I employ in my own output as *disturbed methodologies*. These strategies frame the work of art as essentially non-consensual, in that even though most of the time, the public is implicated in the work, they are not participating so as to realize a hegemonic idea. The work(s) is/are hybridized and inhabit(s) liminal spaces that are so effervescent that the emergent piece(-es) become(s) "novel constellations of heterogeneous objects and situations that disrupt habitual tropes of perception" (Akbank Sanat, 2018).

So, this is how the anecdote has played out. I intended, as with a 'lesson plan', to talk about one particular event, only to have embarked on this unplanned route, which has had me touch on quite a lot of stuff. My offering is in memory of Bisi Silva, founder of the Centre for Contemporary Art (CCA), Lagos, and the itinerant Asiko Art School Project, a roving, non-traditional art school program.

In a similar manner, imagine you signed up to study at an art school (where myself and a host of similar-minded colleagues offer our services as lecturers, instructors, facilitators, etc.). You expect to be taken through tried and tested techniques, or to be introduced to set ways of working and knowing what art is, only to be met with rather unexpected instructions, examples and models (or, maybe added to what you expect, these other baffling examples are added to your already long list of references). The examples you see have never really appeared in the canons that your initial training almost always referred to (Figure 12.2). Imagine that in your first week, you are asked to try dreaming, which involves the remembering of the recent past and re-construction of possible futures. The course outline, if there is any, suggest that the work is to be based on ideas of play, humor and criticality. You will Re-visit the recent past;

you will Re-view some of the activities that were done generally in your formative studies.

After dreaming, you will then begin Waking, which involves your Searching through the debris of recent and future times with a series of participatory activities, which will have you engage in an analysis of some of the observations that arise from your reviews. They will also have you Re-read of your course proposal and Re-cap on the ideas that were broached. Then you will Re-view the proposal collectively, so as to determine the feasibility of projected ideas. For research, you are invited to “bump” into people, sites, spaces and ideas. You’re encouraged to ethically eavesdrop on conversations in public transport or go out to town, visiting makers who may not necessarily refer to themselves as “artists.” They must simply inspire conversations and encounters that become worthwhile for you and the general society. These activities are intentionally non-extractive, and they go on and on whilst doing them, your studio, if there is any such space available, starts filling up with tangible and intangible stuff. In a likewise manner, your mind is also filling up and you are wondering what to do with all this stuff that is accumulating. After a couple of weeks, you’re almost breathless. Why does one have to go through all this?



FIGURE 12.2 Installation view of *Orderly Disorderly* (2017), the end-of-year exhibition of graduating BFA students from Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology (KNUST). Organized by blaxTARLINES KUMASI, the exhibition was held at the Museum of Science and Technology, Accra. Courtesy of blaxTARLINES Kumasi



FIGURE 12.3 Va-Bene Elikem Fiatsi, exhibition poster for *Orderly Disorderly*, 2017. The poster announces the end-of-year exhibition for graduating BFA students, organized by blaxTARLINES Kumasi at the Museum of Science and Technology, Accra. Courtesy of blaxTARLINES Kumasi

We are proposing this because both learners and the facilitators of learning are aware that we constantly engage on a fraught historical note. Most of the contexts within which I am facilitating art education are often encumbered by certain historical disruptions. Via a singular act of transgression for instance, the infamous Berlin Conference of 1884–1885 through the action of Euro-American colonialist cartographers, etched out such literal boundaries upon the African continent. This contravention left in its wake a great deal of turmoil, initiating the atomization of African peoples and a devastation of their (our) collective psyche. So, it has become imperative to jostle people out of their collective slumbers, through these kinds of disturbing engagements. When African colonies began attaining their independence in the late 1950s and throughout the 1960s (led brilliantly by Ghana, as the first country south of the Sahara, to have obtained independence in 1957), it was the hope of the people that their leaders would make good, the promises of African excellence and self-reliance via a collectivization of the “African experience” (Armah, 2010).

By encouraging learners to venture into the real world, often outside of the cosy studio context of only the university, many transformative encounters are ignited. These ideas are also espoused in my PhD dissertation titled:

“Disturbing the Piece* A Post-Conceptual Praxis in Context.” In the dissertation, I make the quote of a quote of Fanon via Armah thus:

The revolutionary, according to Fanon, inserts himself among his people, without noise. This formulation is pivotal, but because it is so casually understated, its myriad implications escape casual readers. Cabral adds that in the revolutionary process, the desire for visibility is a teething disease, and that massive crowds, gathered together to make insurrectionary yearnings before the oppressor, make no sense. Quiet, selective, effective, efficient initiatives do make sense. (Armah, 2010)

So, let’s imagine an art school in which not only faculty, but learners, technicians or facilitators operate as Fanonian revolutionaries. They all insert themselves deeply in their peculiar contexts, whilst being conscious of prevailing conditions and acting conscientiously, responsibly, and ultimately exuding a high sense of generosity. By being so politically alive to one’s surroundings, inspiration is *tapped* from all round, not in an extractionist attitude, but rather in one that recognizes the interconnectedness of all and sundry. And being thus aware, the types of texts that inform this expanded and heavily disturbed approach to knowledge engagement, point to an acknowledgement of art as politics, and not as merely a reflection of political positions.

Knowing this, learners are encouraged to embark on historical and theoretical investigations of notions of contemporaneity via critically looking at ideas of rupture, disruption and disturbance within the field of contemporary art (Osborne, 2013). In these types of encounters, we are able to discuss some of the crises that have bedeviled the field of art. We then proceed retroactively towards a reading of Peter Osborne’s assertion that contemporary art is “post-conceptual” (2013).

Being thus equipped, we also attempt to review notions of equality within aesthetics as politics as developed by Jacques Rancière in *Dissensus: On Politics and Aesthetics* (2010), as the necessary conditions for a truly political art. That which can claim to be emancipatory, thus democratic. A salient argument of Rancière’s is that contemporary art need necessarily operate in the ‘aesthetic regime’ to be adequately democratic. These ideas are further explored by the historian Grant H. Kester in *The One and the Many: Contemporary Collaborative Art in a Global Context* (2011), where, on the contrary, a so-called “third way” is approached when it comes to politics in art practice. For Kester, “consensus” is the keyword. What we critique in this is his reliance once again, on what Rancière calls the “ethical regime” in the “distribution of the sensible” (2010). For I continue to insist that the work cannot be consensual as Kester proposes.

In a similar position, Claire Bishop is also dissatisfied with the appeal to the consensual and critiques it scathingly (2012). In her argument, Bishop seeks to restore faith—though restoration is perhaps not a fair attribute to her project—in Rancière's insistence on antagonism and dissensus as the approach to emancipatory art. It is in this unrelenting resolve in engaging with the realities of antagonism that my notion of disturbed methodologies warms up to.

Due to the multifarious interests of my artistic and pedagogic projects, the practitioners from whom I receive gifts of inspiration are not only limited to the field of art but spill out further to the lived public sphere. Of course, there are certain staples of disruptive praxis that cannot be left out of our engagements. We therefore discuss the work of practitioners of pedagogy as transformative artistic practice like Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Irit Rogoff, a practitioner from theatre Agyeman Ossei, who transforms the words and thoughts of one who believes in the healing and awakening of the spirit of a slumbering people (Ayi Kwei Armah), into innovative theatrical experiments, and artists Andrea Fraser, Hito Steyerl, Thomas Hirschhorn, Francis Alÿs, Santiago Sierra, Superflex, Jonas Staal, Paul Chan, whose forms cause us to rethink our presumptions about art and Kaŕi'kaçhä Seid'ou, who gave up art making to make artists as art, as Seid'ou proclaimed in 2013, making reference to the beginnings of his artistic, pedagogical project in 2003.



FIGURE 12.4 *Bambolse and Kente-inspired mural*, executed with students at the Main Administration building of Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology (KNUST), Kumasi. Courtesy of the artist

In expanding the referential vocabularies and modes of making, I have hinted already that the forms and practices we engage do not carry the pretensions to art that we tend to witness in the so-called art world. With such fecund visual and conceptual cues, my colleagues and I are able to challenge students to either embark on their own projects, or as in the case shown in Figure 12.4, work on projects that occupy public spaces within the urban sphere.

Notes

- 1 From November 10 to December 8, 2018, I was invited by the DDSKS, to teach in the context of a project called TKU a set of activities that introduces students of Theatre, Music and Dance to innovative approaches to Artistic Research. I proposed the course: "Point(s) of Ellipses" (How to do stuff with the stuff we have and stuff we don't have). A crash course in "Disturbing the Piece" This experimental course presented several moments of challenge to the participants, who at the very end, became extremely delighted by the unexpected outcomes that eventually panned out. For the presentation in Berlin however, even though I had sought to share this particular project as a microcosm of my work, I decided eventually, to deviate slightly from presenting just this project in detail, rather, I offered general takes on my artistic and pedagogic approaches, via a series of anecdotal interventions.
- 2 The Shuka or so-called Maasai cloth, also known as the "African Blanket," is not necessarily indigenous to the Maasai people of East Africa, even though they are the ones known to wear it predominantly. Before colonization, the Maasai would have worn mainly leather clothes. The Shuka then, is said to have become more popular with the Maasai from the 1960s. One of the possible origins of Shuka cloth stems from Scottish missionaries during the early colonization of Africa. It goes to give therefore, that the cloth may have well been produce somewhere in Manchester and sold in East Africa, as another means of capitalist exploitation of culture.

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