

## A Right to Determine Value: Ibrahim Mahama in conversation with Thomas Aquilina Transcript

0:10 Mala Yamey

Hello everyone, and welcome to UP Projects' latest *Constellations* ◦ *Assembly* event, *A Right to Determine Value: Ibrahim Mahama in conversation with Thomas Aquilina*. Thank you so much for joining us this afternoon. My name is Mala Yamey, and I'm the curator at UP Projects, if you require a visual description. I am a 30-year-old mixed race woman with medium length brown hair and glasses. For those of you who may not know UP Projects, we are a leading public art commissioning organisation specialising in social practice, meaning that all of our work involves engaging communities through the process of creating public art projects. UP Projects online *Constellations* ◦ *Assemblies* are designed to share learning and knowledge relating to pressing issues facing the public art sector today, and in this, our latest series titled, *Pushing for Spatial Justice*, we are exploring the role that art and artists can play in advocating for more inclusive cities. The series takes inspiration from Thomas Aquilina's research into spatial justice, in particular his 2025 essay, "Who's right, what's right and where's that right?" Through these events focusing on varying rights to public space, we will be highlighting the importance of community voices in determining whose rights and what's rights, what rights are centred. For today's event, we're thrilled to be joined today by two brilliant speakers, Ibrahim Mohama and Thomas Aquilina, who will explore the artist's role in building cultural infrastructure in the absence of formal public space, enabling communities and young people to shape fertile environments for creativity, education and civic engagement. I'm just going to briefly introduce Ibrahim and Thomas. So Ibrahim Mohama lives and works between Accra and Tamale. His practice is characterised by the transformation of everyday materials, such as jute sacks, wood remnants, paper documents and found objects, which he uses to address histories of labour, migration, and global trade. He's interested in how crisis and failure become inscribed within these materials, turning them into archival documents that can be reimagined towards social transformation. Textiles and architecture occupy a central role in his work, carrying the markers of time, place and use, and bearing the possibility of renewed features. Thomas Aquilina is an architect and academic dedicated to building communities of radical thought and progressive practice. He's an associate professor and co-director of spatial justice at the Bartlett School of Architecture, UCL, and a senior associate at We Made That his work spans different forms of practice to include advocacy, design, pedagogy, policy and research. I've given a little bit of an introduction to them both, but you

can find further information on each speaker's work and their bios in the link which Jack will have just put in the chat. Before I hand over to Ibrahim and Thomas. I'd like to quickly mention some of our virtual housekeeping. If you experience any technical issues, please use the chat button at the bottom of your screen to chat privately with our dedicated tech support. If you would like to ask the speakers any questions during the discussion, please do so via the chat. There will also be an opportunity for you to ask questions verbally at the end of the discussion. So at that point, please use the raise hand button, and Thomas will invite you to unmute your microphone. Until then, can we please ask that you keep your microphone's muted, but please do feel free to keep your cameras on, as it's lovely to see everyone in the room. To see our speakers consistently, we recommend that you either select the speaker view or select gallery view and click follow hosts video order. Closed captions are available by selecting the CC button at the bottom of the screen. And we also have two BSL interpreters with us today, Kirstie Archer and Victoria St Clair. So if you require BSL, please also pin them on your screen, as you heard at the beginning, we are recording the discussion today. I do hope you enjoy it. I know I'm really looking forward to it. So without further ado, I'm really delighted to hand over to Ibrahim for his presentation. Thank you Ibrahim and Thomas.

#### **4:26 Ibrahim Mahama**

Thank you very much for the very lovely introduction. I thought Thomas was going to speak just a bit before I do, but we can go straight into it. Yeah. No. It's really lovely to be able to share, let me share the screen at first. Okay, thank you. Yeah, so we - we're starting the conversation with this idea of like the collective rights. And when I talk about collective rights, also looking at the idea of like, collective freedom, collective justice, the idea of distribution, the idea of redistribution, and the idea of like reimagining the world through certain historical material residues, or reimagining the world through maybe histories of failures, but trying to find the potentialities that exist within those within those conditions, and how we can escape that and create new and alternate realities. So the first image on the screen is basically my attempt to try to understand the work that I'm doing back in Ghana, in the north, with the building of these institutions and studios. Because as an artist, I come from a varied background in Kumasi, from an intellectual background this radical pedagogy - art teachers from a different generation, inspiring younger artists to think differently about art, about the role that it can play, about the form that art can take, and also how the question of justice is somehow embedded within how an artist even begins to produce art in the first place. So the question of restitution by even land acquisition, it's quite interesting. So I start, I bought a piece of land in 2014 to build a studio, and that money came from the residue of the art

world, the capital residue of the art world. So an artist making a painting and then investing the money into buying land. But it's also interesting to think that a lot of these portions of land are either originally demarcated for schools, for farms, for maybe a factory or something, but eventually they're like, cut into pieces and then sold to private developers and all that. So the idea was how to acquire all these lands back into one space which could be made into a public space. So building an art school versus building like a public collection versus the artists, understanding that the ecology around like these areas, like bats, the birds, the goats, all of these are parts of the systems that we build, not just for human beings. And also, like somehow transplanting memory through material forms. So my interest also came in the form of the railway collecting like the old lines that were built by the British in the early 20th Century. So typically go into forest areas with like groups working with them, collecting like material residues, the wood, the metal. Like, of course, you're buying these things, but I'm really interested in this act of dedication, like, just going to collect things that normally would be severed and wiped away. And for me, I think it's, it adds up to this kind of cultural genocide, in a way. And I think that as artists, we also need to step in in order to be able to somehow retrieve the memory that comes through these objects. Yeah, so and how to transplant them? So now, if you're building an old railway line in an artist studio, it's like land arts, but it's not really for an aesthetical reason. It's also there because of a deeply historical, political reason, you know? So it's some there is something that it does differently in terms of how it brings our minds back to, like, the collective memory and all that. So these are typically images of like, working with young men in the forest. And I'm really interested in what these materials also what they've witnessed in their life. So imagine the train running on these lines with the wood leaving residues on top of them - the forest, the crickets, the animals in the forest, and then also how they interact with these things. So I'm really interested in the point, the concept of memory on a much larger scale. So I would transport all these objects to the studio. So these are very far distances. So if you know Ghana, the western region to the north, you're looking at like more than 700 - 800 kilometres. So again, what does it mean to move these things again, back to the question of dedication across space and time? Because what you have to remember is that in the early 20th Century and late 19th Century, a lot of the labour that was used in building the railway was also it comes back to the question of indentured servants, also in labour. A lot of them were not paid. And there were people that were that the British took from across West Africa in order to build these lines. And a lot of these histories, which are mostly not talked about, are embedded within the wood. So what does it mean if you're collecting, let's say, all of the wood from the railway and you're going to build, let's say a pavilion with it. The pavilion certainly shifts away from, let's say the gaze that maybe a white cube space might bring along. So I'm really interested in

the intellectual discourse that is embedded within the residue of these materials. So then it means that we can also focus on like labour, in terms of the ghosts that are embedded within it, historically, but also in terms of like the labour of ghost itself. Because then, when we reflect on history, it also re-channels our thinking about how we can rethink about our place in the world and how we interact with one another, how it allows us to somehow cultivate a new sense of empathy, to really deal with the situation within the world. So even the idea of building a studio and labour that goes into it, it also comes back down to the question of the redistribution. Because if when be when we're building and then now it comes to when the space is open, you've seen that in many western institutions, then it becomes very narrowed down in terms of the bodies that occupy these museums and others, even the type of work, and I like to focus on Nkrumah's Food Distribution corporation that was built in the late 50s and early 60s, which was connected to the highly electric dam projects. And then also, like our relationship with the eastern block, the non-alliance movement and all that. But Nkrumah's idea of freedom was also born out of the market women who were contributing their capital - their labour - which actually led to increments freedom when he was put in jail after 1948 and then he became the front runner, later becoming the Prime Minister and President. So when I am not just thinking about distribution, I want us to go back to the question of redistribution. So what does it mean to buy back an old public building which is dilapidated, which is going to be scrapped and thrown away, or an old bridge or an old train or an old plane, and then bring it back into the world? Because now you're bringing it, you're giving it a new life. And this new life comes with a different - it comes with the old soul, but it also comes with collective rights for us to excavate new souls and new purposes out of it. So the question of emancipation, equality, fraternity, all the things that were talked about in relation to like the French Revolution, like the things that were not properly even thought about in terms of distribution. Like, how do we think about some of these things? Of course, again, the distribution, we can think about the material form. So you have the rail lines, the original image of like the men building it, versus us buying these lines which have been dismantled, which is going to be broken into pieces and re-melted, sold as commodities, but then we buy it and we decommmodify it, and then we focus on the memory. So the idea of the decommmodification of history and somehow focusing on the collective memory and shared memory, so we can all extract something from it. It's very important. And of course, there are certain moments in history, like the civil rights movement or even the murder, the assassination of Patrice Lumumba in 1961. Of course, the independence of Ghana, which again as the Black Star back down to Marcus Garvey's Black Star and all that. What does it mean, like the question of freedom and liberation? What does it mean beyond? Because we are escaping the human condition. So we also have buildings,

like the silos that were built by Nkrumah. Again, back to the food distribution which were abandoned. So again, as artists or as cultural practitioners, what is our role? What is our role, even as architects or whatever, what is our role in this? Is our role to design new spaces, or is our role to excavate old spaces with old potentials, which can also inspire future, future forms of thoughts and reorganisation? So working with members of the community in order to be able to do these excavations, for me, it's very important. Again, back to the collective. And I, when I did the Barbican, that was also very central, the question of the collective. So again, when we're - when you're normally have to sew, like the smock garments in the north of Ghana, you only have to sew it in a for one person or two people. But the idea that we were using the building as the Barbican, together with the architecture, the brutalist architecture, the history that it comes with the sites that it comes the building is on, and using that as an inspiration to prepare this material, but on such a scale that we had to, like, hire 1000 women and men to sew this material, so making it larger than life. But then also thinking that when you're doing this, depending on the space, like, you're hiring a football stadium, and the football stadium will normally, will be like, there are like 50,000 people chanting, and then now we're bringing all these spectators onto the pitch to somehow engage with producing and sewing a material on a very molecular level, because it looks industrial, but everything is done by hand. And I'm really interested in what it means for us to be able to work on such a scale, the idea of escaping, going through this kind of industrial process, and going back to the question of the hand and what it means. So for me, if you asked me what the Barbican work was, it wasn't just the idea of the work on the Barbican. It was also more on the constitution of the labour going into like the production of the work. And the work at Ibraaz also carries the same feeling. So because the chairs are original or historical chairs that were made by the British in the colonial period, and I've gone round villages collecting these chairs. Or sometimes even in Tamale, people come to the studio and say, "oh, my grandfather had these chairs and he's dead. We don't want them anymore." So then we collect these chairs, and then we work with the carpenters in the space, even in the parliament in Tamale, the original one that we built as part of the architecture, we use it as a space of repair. So to repair this. And then take that concept and take it to London, to a space like Ibraaz, and rebuild it within that context, which allows for deliberations and talking about difficult things like Gaza and all the other things that we experience in our modern world. So what does it again mean in terms of the discuss that it comes with, or even if we're looking at it in relation to like the objects, like planes, because now we're talking about the question of distribution and imagination. So nothing is - no stone is left unturned. Everything can be looked at. So we can look at the planes, the trains from different areas, in terms of the memories they come with, and how we can convert them into social spaces, and

what does it mean? Again, transporting these trains, dismantling and then even as they travel across space and time, they witness new form, like they witness time and history in a different way. It's not just about us, but it's also about the objects itself and the journeys that they make, and how that also is transcribed in a way, like when you have to, like when you're operating drones, myself, my assistant, Sackitey and others, and how we are sharing this in the process of the making, and also how these spaces become playgrounds, so the kids playing in the airplanes, demystifying the places, becoming like restaurants, places for eating, sharing food, versus like teaching, coding. What does it mean for these spaces to become voids? Again, like people in the society, like tuk-tuk drivers, others, bringing kids from their communities to see contemporary art for the first time? What does it mean for us to bring courage into the work, into the world through the work that we do, and how does that translate into courage in other people; excavating courage in other people, the kids who would risk their lives to sit in this tuk-tuk, I always joke that not even in India will they pack this number of children in a tuk-tuk. Yeah, but it takes a lot of courage to make that leap, just to for culture or the people that we work with, like our caretakers Zakaria, labour into building of infrastructure. How does that labour also transcribe into other forms of labour, like taking kids through the work of, let's say an artist like Olafur Eliasson, or any other work of art. How does it what does it mean to combine physical labour with how things are transmitted? And yeah, again, the transmission is also about the production. So when I did this work with the Kunsthalle Vienna, it was also about how taking these dismantle trains from, like the last 20/40 years in the structural adjustment history, and then bringing it to Vienna by, again, in the production of these and assembly of these. How is it like - because it's like an art normally, the artist studio almost seems like a place where the artist needs the solitude, quietness in order to reflect. But I like the idea that we can reflect collectively as we're producing and even as we're building, as we're distributing, redistributing, taking, collecting objects from the society, preserving those objects. What do all these things mean, either bottles or terracotta pots or whatever. Even as we're building the foundations of the spaces, how do children become part of the foundation they're witnessing? The question of the witnessing, collective witnessing. Because in 30 years, these children will have children, and will be the relationship and the memory of what they're witnessing now to what this space becomes later, and how does it also instil a new sense of purpose in them in relation to how they think about this land or this place that they're growing up in. So one of the last things I will show like the question of the building. So instantaneously, whilst even thinking about the building of the studio, you're also thinking about the collection like the objects that we make, like from the Global South, major arts collection, works, installations, which mostly ends up in the West. So the question again now is that if we're producing these artworks and they

can only be shown in the West, there's also a problem with the question of the justice, because inscribed in the materials that allows the artist to produce the work of art is already inscribed the question of the collective labour. So when an artist produces a work, they also have to come to terms and understand that the inspiration and the conditions that allow for that also is a media. It's a way that allows them to build or inscribe spaces that allows for these objects to become part of the vernacular or the language of the landscape that they find themselves. So either the work, you can look at the work in London, that could be a reality, or anywhere else in the western context, or the work also a part of the work in the local context, that is also like a thing. And I think that's where the question of justice. We really have to rethink about what it means, the idea of the collective rights, and then also what it how it re-inscribes the question of freedom and justice. Yeah. Again, like the non the capital corpses. Again, also like what does, how does a work of art also function in all these different contexts, objects, the kids, their relationship, their bodies to these. These objects are coming from the Second World War I, collecting them from Greece, expanding on them as artworks. They travel to Australia, to the Biennial and other places. But again, in those places, the objects are just objects. Whereas here the kids come to like the excited. They touch the birds flying. They sit on it; they lay their nest. The kids, they sleep on it. They lift each other. So it's also a different relationship to the history of like these objects and what they can do as art. Or even, again, back to the question of the redistribution, like the kids coming to witness the idea of the building of an institution. Because it's not like the museum is built or the institution is built, and now we open it. No, we are interested in how we collectively witness what we are building, and what it means within this timeline that we find ourselves in. The space, the precarity of it, the water, the pouring of the concrete, the kids learning in the same space, the *Parliament of Ghosts* whilst we are building the floor at the same time, things that normally you would not really see in the way architecture operates, or the women we when we have this program where we send busses to, like, different communities. We recently had two bus donations. So we're expanding our programs, but what we do is that we would normally take busses to communities and bring the women and children mostly, and then some of the men, but it's the excitement that they come with because idea of, like, engaging culture from a different from this point of view. You know the idea that the women are so proud when they come, they bring their kids, they put them on the plane engine, they take a photo of them, they put it behind the seat. The idea of, like, reconstituting what the idea of, let's say, a childhood memory also could be from a parent's point of view, or even from a children's point of view, or from the community collective community point of view is also quite interesting in the way that it shapes things, or the people in the communities, their relationship with these

objects coming around, selling fruits and things, and then how they sit on the installation, they place the fruits on the installation. So there is - you're trying to create a system which somehow limits the boundaries that somehow governs the way a traditional art world or institution would operate, and the dialogs that happen and the transactions that happen. So not just that, but also looking at birds, chickens, goats, the goats come in. They - every night when you come there, like 100 goats that are sleeping in front of the in the compound of the studio, there are ducks and the chickens even come and hatch eggs in some of the installations, because that's where they feel safe. The eggs will be safe, you know. Yeah. So it's also quite interesting in terms of how, like, the ecosystem is somehow taking over the birds, the bats are living inside the walls. We have, like, more than 50,000 bats that live inside the walls of the institution. Yeah. And finally, this is the Kaṛī'kachā Art School. So the idea of like us talking about the question of the Parliament, the question of the ghost, the question of labour, the question of the collective rights, how do we reconstitute or build an art school that somehow brings all of these things together in terms of dealing with freedom from a very different collective point of view that allows for, let's say, pedagogy, to operate in very different forms. Yes, so it's a thought, of course, as my practice is developing and growing, there are a lot of questions I'm asking myself, and I hope that we can, we can pick it up from here. Thank you. Thomas, over to you.

## 23:21 Thomas Aquilina

Wow, beautiful. Thank you. Thank you, Ibrahim, that's spectacular. Your work is so purposeful and so courageous at the same time. And what an incredible body of work in the last decade as well. So just, so inspirational. Thank you. I might just offer a little reflection on this idea that I formed around collective rights and a way to understand spatial justice. And I think you, you sort of spoke to that, particularly through this idea of collective memory, but this idea of sort of how we might hold rights, or what they look like and where they manifest is, I suppose, a way to ask questions, often the most difficult ones, that makes possible ways for us to understand spatial justice, and that is, I suppose, an idea of how we seek new and expanded vocabularies, often between the kind of institutional frameworks that we inherit, and really about maybe community knowledge. And I think you in the work, particularly where we see the intersection of the community is maybe where the work finds itself most alive, almost. And so that's to say, I suppose, when I was reflecting on the work in the last decade, I always get the sense that you are driven, or you're governed by questions and ideas. And I wonder maybe, what questions are you currently asking now in relation to these questions of rights, and maybe,

what questions are you asking 10 years ago, at the point where you were finishing that PhD in Kumasi?

**25:16 Ibrahim Mahama**

Yeah, I guess the original questions which I started, which with which was the collect, the question of the collective rights embedded within these materials still stayed. But I realised that as you go along, there are other the question refines itself in different way, in different nuances, and you come to realise that it's much more, it's simple, but also complicated at the same time? Yeah. So for instance, when I started the work, before I - well the original, the truth of it is that when I started building *Red Clay*, it was not on this grand vision. The idea was there's I spoke to a professor, a friend of mine. His mentor, one of the like, our mentors at the art school in Kumasi province, Kɔrɛ'kɔchɛ. And then I remember I'd been talking to him about building a studio. And then when I started, when I earned my first proper living as an artist selling this work to the Saatchi Gallery, I said, "okay, I have this money, and I want to do something with it. What do I do? But I want to build a studio." And then Kɔrɛ'kɔchɛ said, "oh, have you thought about building it in the north?" And I said, "I'm not really sure. You know, I haven't really thought about it". And he said, "Yeah, why you should think about it?" Because the North is difficult, and also, historically, it's not a place that you would think about building like, let's say, an art studio on this grand mission. But it will do something. It will go a long way to inspire children in the community. They might not necessarily become artists, but it will really change the way they look at the world. And that was just a seed. And I - we started. We bought the land, started expanding, and of course, we have an artistic director at all the institutions we run, Salom, and he was a classmate of mine from the undergrad period, and we had been talking about some of these ideas. And he Yeah, we started working together. So he stepped in to somehow reshape the way we're looking at the question of the redistribution through workshops and all these other things. So the more and more we make these decisions, of like, for instance, doing things that are particularly in relation to like redistribution, like taking what we have the collection, like the workshops, like inviting people from like their universities to do like photonics workshops, or like doing robotics workshops, or doing things. Then it could sometimes it takes us back to like the molecular things again, like going back to the railway collecting like wood that is in a state of decay, or going to the archives and collecting materials that are being discarded, which you thought that 10 years ago when you started making this work and proposing that would have somehow changed that. But you realise that there is a certain constant; you're constantly renewing hope, finding renewed hope in the questions, the question that you asked, and then you're expanding the

parameters of that question. So certainly for me, I still remain at the question of what it means to redistribute given the particular sets of conditions that we are in, particularly in this moment in time with all the wars and all the crisis that is happening around the world. The question is that, how do we come back to this fundamental question of what it means to live in this world, and how does it mean to coexist and all that?

## **28:31 Thomas Aquilina**

Thank you. Maybe picking up on this idea of the making of your institution and the making of your independent school in Tamale. It feels to me, it's very rooted in its place. It's very much about the ecology of this part of Northern Ghana. And just to say, having travelled on by bus from Accra to Kumasi last year, I - the distance is something that I know, both in time and space, or at least experienced, and I wonder really how that how you're trying to explore that rootedness, particularly as you as when you were showing your slides, I noted Abu Dhabi, Accra, Tamale, Stockholm, Amsterdam, always inscribed in the top corner. So there's a sort of - so in a sense, you have this incredible global circulation. And I wonder how that is in relation and in conversation with your rootedness in Tamale?

## **29:45 Ibrahim Mahama**

Yeah, it's interesting, because art and culture, it doesn't really have a specific centre. It is everywhere. There are different people in different parts of the world who developed cultures over years and. Sometimes, maybe those cultures and traditions have been interrupted. And sometimes, as practitioners, maybe you're coming from a certain region, and you become successful as an artist or whatever, and then as an intellectual, business person, whatever, and you think, oh, maybe going back to that place might not help, because the rhythm in that place might not really be good for you. Maybe you find yourself you are like a city person, or let me be in the city, because it's easy when people travel into town, it's easy for them to access me without going through the difficulty of going through a road that they might not even like, going from money to take a plane. You have to use those terrible roads, you know, if you have to go to go to Tamale and then you don't have money to board a plane, you have to go on those roads, those very bad roads. But again, I realised that there are those conditions are part of those places. Like me, as you said, I travel all around the world all the time. I was in Saudi yesterday, and I'm here today. Of course, you can take that for granted. And I always like to imagine that there are people who are there are people who are bound to the specific geographical context within certain parts of the world, and a lot of them might

never leave those places. But for us as practitioners, we get to leave and come back whenever we want to. And I like the idea that it reminds me of how what I can bring to this place, of course, being born in a place like that, it means that the cultural sensitivities and everything you already borrow and learn from that. But for me, I'm also thinking about how it reshapes your intellect and how you can what you can bring back. Because not always a matter of or which city am I going to go to, New York or London, and what. How can that shape me as a person? But my question is that, how can my work and my intellect also help shape a new discourse, a new generation, a new attitude, and things like that? And already, it's these places like Tamale, for instance, and the areas where we were, it's quiet. And when you live in a rural - when you're in a rural setting and you have to work, there is a certain peace of mind that you have, generally that you might not have. So that's why sometimes you see that even in the plane, I it's quite disturbing, though, but I find a lot of peace of mind when I'm flying. So I always make my notes when I'm in a plane, and I write, oh, I'm between London and Abu Dhabi. You make a note, then I have time to think, because that's the place that one you know, mostly don't have Wi Fi...

### **32:22 Thomas Aquilina**

...Ah, so these are these annotations. That's why it's always between places.

### **32:28 Ibrahim Mahama**

It's always my notes. Mostly are always made in between places, because I barely sleep on the plane, and that is where I mostly do all my so if I'm thinking about something and I don't have the time to write it because maybe have a busy schedule running around. I'm always looking forward to flying to the next place, and then in that period, if it's an hour or two, I make all my notes and my drawings within that period. Of course, it has its deficiencies and everything, but certainly this is what the kind of some of the strategies that I've used recently.

### **33:00 Thomas Aquilina**

Thank you. Thank you. Thinking about moving between places and what we carry with us. Your work across all scales seems to always carry with it contestation, residue of history, of contested histories, a kind of condensing of history, almost. And I wonder what it means to make that work at a particular scale, and at the scale of architecture in particular? I appreciate as well that it also, at times, is even larger at the infrastructural scale. And I suppose, yeah, I wonder what it means to

make work at that scale, but also, how do you also hold - how do you also hold those contested ideas across different projects? Does that make sense?

### 33:56 Ibrahim Mahama

Yeah, no, it makes a lot of sense. Scale - the question of scale is very interesting, because most often, when I started working the idea, I mean, when we're in art school, professors would encourage us. They had this course where a couple of professors, Castro, like Kissiedu so one of the professor from the University in Kårî'kachä, and then Edwin, like the lecturers, they came together, put together all the different courses, which historically, when you went to study in the university, you had to study carving, you had to study drawing, you had to study this. But at some point realise that, no, it was just art. If you go to an art school, fine art school, to study painting, except in very traditional schools, where people go to study techniques in painting. But rather, if you're going to study art, then just let the artists - you can they can do all the courses. But then when it comes to like how you grade them, or how they produce art, it shouldn't be based on the fact that they can make a carving or a drawing or a sculpture. So the idea of combining all of that gave the artists a bit more freedom to think about even how they could use space. So for instance, if I as a student, I discovered, I realised that I want to do an exhibition in an old factory, the kind of how I respond to the form, based on the space, will be different from if I want to do a work in the market space, if I want to do a work, let's say, in a kiosk or whatever. So these things played a very important role. So some of the early materials I collected, like the jute bags and others. I was really interested in how they responded to the market, how we were sewing it's working with the like the market women to sew these materials and how they would envelope, for instance, the commodities in the market. But I also, when I started doing the research around the railway and encountering these like really enormous spaces, I realised that it was actually quite interesting that, for instance, in the early 20th Century, when these spaces were being built like they were meant, of course, for the trains and other things. So like in terms of scale, in terms of the objects and what it did, and thinking about, let's say, artists who were practicing. So within that period, like how even art was taught in art school, it was also quite limiting in terms of how you would make art. You would never think about taking a train and making a sculpture out of it. But of course, maybe in the US and other places, you had people like Smithson and others who were like doing these fantastic land arts projects and all that. So I thought that it was quite interesting to use this practice, this practice as an archaeological tool, to somehow re-excavate time in terms of, like, wider practices. So, for instance, look like the work of Elena Che. If you go to Colombia, looking at work of Doris Salcedo and others in America, people like

Smithson were very important. Of course, Richard Serra, in terms of, like, looking at the skill and materiality. Of course, Arte Povera, you have like Alighiero Boetti. You have Alberto Brewery. So like so many Christo and Jean Claude. So all these different artists producing from different parts of the world, different parts of the continent and all that. Of course, in South America, you also have, like, all the amazing textile artists and all that. So thinking again, that if you're a practicing artist now in art school or as a young artist. Now, when you're producing your work, how do you think about how you produce in relation to the world, in relation to the art market, in relation to museums and all that? So most often, when I'm making work in the studio, I'm not necessarily making it because it's going to a museum. I'm producing a work because I'm engaging with a certain historical memory. And I don't care what scale or size it comes in; it might come in a form of a small archive. It might also come in the form of a train. So I like that when we are done with it, and then a museum comes along says, "we want to commission you to do something." I'm like, "oh, yes, I did this work, which is 300 meters", like, oh, let me say, "okay, let's see how we can work around it." So now there is a sense of negotiating, whereas maybe before they say, "oh, we want you to do a painting or a sculpture and we want you to put it here." But I like the idea that how we develop our relationship to scale also gives us a lot more freedom with regards to how we build. And lastly, I will talk shortly about, like, even the buildings that I collect, like even thinking about like the silos, like restoring them. Or recently, I bought this old colonial building the city, which we have to restore this year. And also, like some of the factories, like the glass factory, the rubber factory, like the tomato factory, so like collecting these buildings and residues, old colonial buildings. And now I'm thinking, okay, how do we build a new institution that is, like on the scale of, let's say, all these collective, collected fragments of different architectural points? So if you're going to build, like an entire space of, let's say, 2000 meters, a building, how do you build that? And how do you build another building on top of it to contain it? And what's that building, it's a building, but it becomes an object. So I like how it also somehow goes a long way to expand the kind of imagination that can come with how we think about art and the dedication to culture, you know. And it's that sense of audacity that I think that is quite interesting, that artists, especially coming from Africa in the Global South, how we renegotiate our relationship with, let's say these kinds of cultural sensitivities with cultural production.

### 39:07 Thomas Aquilina

Let's think about this idea of negotiation. You know, you negotiating back with an institution or with a gallery. I like this idea very much that your work is now that you feel emboldened to be in negotiation. I think when I, when I visited the *Parliament*

*of Ghosts* here at Ibraaz in London, where I am, one way to think about it is a kind of reverse restitution, that that what was exhibited in in the centre of the city is work, and the labour of the work from Northern Ghana, and it makes us rethink where we are the it makes us sort of, I suppose, understand the kind of global circuits that we're in. I wonder if you can talk to this idea of reverse restitution?

**40:00 Ibrahim Mahama**

Yeah, the question of the labour, I think if we think about it a bit more deeply, then we realise that even the objects that are in Ibraaz, they were built by the British system in the colonial period. So of course, maybe the material would have come from the rain forest in the south of Ghana and the western region or elsewhere or could have come from England or elsewhere. But in terms of, like the techniques and then, like the industrial process, it was all something; it was English. But thinking about our point of insertion comes from a point of care and repair. What does it mean for us to somehow go back, because some of this furniture, they'll be broken into pieces if not. And so does firewood in the market, because people might think that, oh, it's out of fashion, or we want new, bigger stuffing chairs, which is like you can lie on every part of it. It looks almost like; I always call them the coffin chairs. They look like you can be buried inside of it, and no one would find you ever again. But I like the idea that we generally would take an interest in these objects in terms of the sophistication of like, the production process that went into it, and the people that were associated with it, people that had it, that were using it. They were in homes of like people. And today in Ghana, when you want most of these chairs, you have to go to the villages. That is where these things are. So for me, this is very important in terms of what it means and how we can save it. And that's how come even the work at Ibraaz, we can also look at it in relation to the work in Kochi, in the current Kochi Biennial. And for those chairs, we collected them in Kochi. We collected jute bags in Kochi and everything. And I think for it was quite interesting to think about how, of course, if we're bringing all these materials, like the chairs to Ibraaz, the question of the restitution is important, reverse restitution. But we can also think about the train that went all the way to Vienna, and when the train was produced in the late 80s, during the structural adjustment program, with money that was coming to the Global South, which a lot of that money was also going back to Europe in the form of buying trains that were using mines and other things, whilst maybe certain tensions for certain wars, civil wars and other things were developing at the same time, they would have never imagined that this train would one day make a journey back to Europe in a form of an artwork. And with the beauty about art is that art manages to transform even the dead and then give it back a new life. It's like a Lazarus condition, what art does so you look at the same

objects and realise that, okay, the original train was worth, let's say, 100,000 but now, even at the point where it contributed to a system of exploitation which really didn't benefit people in that place, it - an artist might take that same object and convert it into a form, and then that form creates a new set of value within the art market, within the world, and that goes a long way also to create a new condition. And so for me, I think that is always that is where it's tricky. If we talk about the restitution, we cannot talk about it just by itself, without talking about its link to capital, then the redistribution of capital. And I think the question of the redistribution of capital also comes back to the way we think about cultural production and cultural appropriation and all the other things that are associated with it, and how we can somehow renegotiate with it.

**43:31 Thomas Aquilina**

In hearing you just now, you're making me think about how you're making work, but also critiquing cultural worlds at the same time simultaneously. Your own production and practice of art is at the same time helping us challenge the institutions in which we occupy. It's really - it's really beautiful. I want to - at the Bartlett, I work very closely with a colleague and Paul Masipa, and we think about this idea of triangulations. And part of that is to think about multiple locations simultaneously. So in conversation, I'm thinking about Kingston in Jamaica, and Paul is thinking about Johannesburg in South Africa, and we sort of triangulate with London. So in this idea of maybe folding / unfolding places. What sites are you currently triangulating?

**44:33 Ibrahim Mahama**

Well, different places as I travel around the world? I somehow sometimes they're Yes, there are certain histories or sites that you see that somehow draws you, and there are ones that also maybe you would like to keep for later. But certainly back at home, I've been looking at a lot of different, multiple sites. You know, recently, when I went to Singapore, I was also thinking a lot about it in relation to the history of Ghana. And of course, I did this. I was the artistic director for the Ljubljana Graphic Arts Biennial. And we also, for a long time thinking about our relationship to like the former Yugoslavian territories like Slovenia, Bosnia and these places, Serbia. Certainly also like England, of course, is always very prominent in terms of how we're thinking about like this, the UK, in relation to like Africa and all that. Currently, there's a project that I'm doing with the Cartier, which we are somehow bringing these historical remnants like we're working with this glass factory projects an idea, and idea is to find ways in which we can somehow retrace maybe

certain historical labour forms and other things. Yeah. But generally, in Ghana, I'm just mostly focusing on like sites. I'm like, traveling around, discovering new spaces and trying to see ways in which we can expand on the on the projects that we're doing, the sensibilities that come with it. There is a building in the - there's an old colonial building from the in the mountains, which is more than 150 years old, and we're currently discussing with the - it's a school. We're currently discussing with the school on how to convert that building into like a cultural institution. And it's historically situated in a place where the British built this railway line. So it's one of the central parts of the railway line. And it was a cola plantation region. So it had a lot of connection to, like Kano. So there are a lot of Nigerians who came there to, like trade and do business and all that so. And literally, the name of that area was called, like the money town, or something like that, because of, like, the trade that cola and the amount of money that came with, you know, so again, I'm also thinking about a lot of these, what that these sites, and sometimes the site is also not just the place also, but it's also just a thing. Like archives, I recently collected, like, almost the entire history of the railway archive in Ghana...

#### **47:03 Thomas Aquilina**

...which was all the drawings that, right? All the drawings as well.

#### **47:07 Ibrahim Mahama**

Yes, all the drawings, you know. And there were things that were being destroyed. Some of them were being sold for us, for firewood, or even sold, like the public toilets as toilet paper and all that. Yeah. So again, working with like people recovering these objects. So sometimes you have to work with like people, like almost as if you're doing some kind of investigative journalism and recovering the question of the sites embodied - embodied within these material forms, like paper and like wood or like a piece of metal, or like a letter or something like that. So I'm really thinking about ways in which we can somehow recover all these different sites, and then how we can think of them as an extension of this of a certain historical skin, and then through maybe artistic practice and aestheticization and all that, we can recompose them. Some of it might come in a form of a new textile work, in a form of a new drawing, but some of it also comes in forms of archive or in forms of like recomposing architecture. Why can't we use, let's say, the drawings as a skin in order to be able to build, let's say the architecture, if an artist has to put a painting on a wall, which is the entire wall, is hand drawn, drawings that were used in the period for cola exploitation. What does it mean? So I'm really thinking about how we can somehow defragment and also re rethink about the question of, like,

the complexity of thoughts in materials, both the innocence and also like what are implicated in it.

**48:35 Thomas Aquilina**

Thank you. I know we're going to invite questions from the floor. But whilst, whilst people gather their ideas and their questions, I suppose, I was recently in South London, and I was at Frank Bowling's studio and gallery, and what was quite amazing was that the studio is split across a mews, and so that the means the work is made in one studio, and then the work is then moved over the road in the other studio. So when the work gets brought back with these stretched canvases, it's a named. And this sort of idea, I suppose, of naming, I think, is quite important as an academic, it's thinking about vocabulary. And words is so central, and I think it's very apparent in in the titles of your work. I remember when I was working as an architect, I worked briefly on the Ghana Pavilion that was at Venice, and I remember the name of your work, *A Straight Line Through the Carcass of History 1649*, and I wonder how you go about the naming of your work, and how the work can hold these contradictions, and how it can also point to the kind of politics and regimes and histories that you're trying to evoke?

**50:07 Ibrahim Mahama**

yeah, that work in the Ghana Pavilion, the material that I used in it, I was also making references to, like, some of the colonial sand castles that have been built in Ghana, and it was part of a research I was doing much earlier, like in the collection of the archives and all that. And of course, along the coast of Ghana, you have a lot of the women who are engaged in fish smoking. So they do it over long periods. And the objects they use for the fish smoking, they are really beautiful. They have good smell, like they have the residues of the fish on it. And when I look at it, I'm not just looking at it in relation to the form. I'm also thinking about it in relation to like ecological crisis, in relation to like over-fishing in the sea and so many other things. And also thinking about it in relation to like the histories of like exploited bodies, like the transatlantic slave trade and all that. So the idea in Venice was literally just to build a wall with these fish nets, fish nets together with, like, some memories of archives embodied within it and all that. So one of the first tests that I did of this work, before we - it was photographed for the catalogue, was getting permission to install the work in the Ussher Fort Prison in Accra, the old prison. So, like, there was a part of the building that is dilapidated, that is falling apart, and the idea was just to install the work in it in such a way that it somehow created a divide within the old colonial forts. But prior to that, I had done a work in Malta in 2018

there was an exhibition called *The Island is What the Sea Surrounds*, just created by one of my old friends, Marian. And we built a similar part of this work, but it was such a massive work that when you came in this space, you did not - because the building was falling apart. And when Malta became part of the Schengen Territory, they were new codes that came with so some of these buildings had to be abandoned. They couldn't use it as a fish market anymore, and the building was falling apart. They had a crate. So I went and I didn't take I didn't take anything from Ghana or elsewhere. We reconstituted everything that was in the building, the residues, to make the work. And then I also got some timber from Italy, because, of course, in Malta, there is no wood, so we had to get it and rebuild. But it was done in such a way that when you came in, you just saw this line of like timber holding the ceiling. And it looked almost as if the timber was there to hold the building from falling apart. So mostly the journalists were walking around like I was talking, and they were like, where is the work exactly? And it was also quite interesting, because they know Malta was where they shot the first season of Game of Thrones? So you have a lot of artisans there. So I worked with them in order to be able to part of the work that I wanted them to look old, we would make it and all that. So it looked so original, like it was something that was just naturally there. But there was a line in the floor of the building, which was, you know, when they got the fishes. Normally, the architecture is designed in such a way that the floor slants in a way that all the guts goes into this gutter and it washes out into the ocean. So that's where the title of the work came from, the straight line through the carcass of history. And then I later on used it and applied it to some of the other works that I did. Yes, yeah, so.

### **53:24 Thomas Aquilina**

Wonderful. Okay, great, maybe, maybe, if anyone wants to ask a question from the floor, in the meantime, I maybe you'll just can, I can also read out the questions. There's a question here from Mpho: can you please expand on your framework for radical pedagogy and how you find a balance between the demands of the art market and your logistics of distribution?

### **53:57 Ibrahim Mahama**

Maybe I'll start from the arts market. The arts market is full of contradictions, certainly, and art itself is full of contradictions. But I one of the decisions I had to make earlier on was somehow to rely on some of these contradictions in order to build these systems. Yeah. So for instance, if you're coming from Africa, you normally would not have access to grants and all kinds of things. Of course, there are people who like, stay within that world and they apply for grants. For grants and

other things. But I wanted to just dwell solely on the logic of what art has been doing. So if artists have been producing art for a longest period, and then at the same time, we're complaining, oh, we don't have spaces. We don't have this I'm like, okay, why can't we use the capital residue from the participation within the art world and art market in order to create these alternate realities? And that is where the question of the redistribution. I like the question of distribution, but I like to think of the "re-" because the redistribution means that you are taking an object or a material that was part of the collective memory, consciousness, people contributed a labour to shaping it. It's either a piece of wood or a textile that people have worn, like in a sense of the Barbican or a jute bag that has been used that now, as an artist, you're inspired by, let's say, the aesthetics, the form. And then you cannot be inspired by the aesthetics of form without thinking about where it came from, the conditions that inspired that. And then when you produce the work of art, of course, it comes with it, but you're like, okay, will you wait it goes into the into the art market, and then it transcribes into something else. And when the capital comes, like, okay, fine. Why can't we use it to buy back this historic building that the city is thinking about destroying? And then when you buy it back, it now becomes a public space that is inscribed in history forever. Whereas, maybe in the state apparatus, there might not be policy or a courage from someone who is like the top position to say that this is a very important space. We don't need to touch it because of the history that it because of our collective history. And I think the whole point of it is the whole point of the redistribution. It centres down on the question of responsibility and courage, finding courage to take responsibility where traditional politics and the world will not take responsibility for that. Yeah. So that's where the radical pedagogy is, and that's what when we think about people like Kaṛî'kaçhâ from the art school, that is where it's inscribed from. How do artists somehow rethink about their responsibility within the world that they find themselves in, just from an aesthetical point of view, but from a deeply material point of view, which is attached to a set of, let's say, ideological values.

## 56:46 Thomas Aquilina

This, this idea of collecting. We've spoken a little bit about this, but this idea of collecting simultaneously excavating, is very much a way of trying to think about public space, and so your process of collection is actually a way to reinscribe publicness in so many ways. It's, yeah, please, yeah.

## 57:11 Ibrahim Mahama

No, it's interesting, because sometimes there's some of the things the work that we do in the studio, and people come around and like, oh my God, I didn't realise that this, this history, even existed. Or even when we were children in school, there were things that we had to learn, like when I started working with the jute bags, I swear I literally just bought the bags and I started sewing. I started sewing. And this is because, when we were children in school, we had a course which was called life skills. And you like, every once or twice a week, the teacher would come with - you had to bring things from the house. It could be a cloth or whatever. You had to buy sewing needles, and then they taught you how to sew. But, and we learned, there were so many other things that we had to do in a catering we had to learn how to learn how to make food, how to think about ingredients. We had a farm in our school. And today, like, I'm looking at like, a lot of schools in Ghana, and the kids practically don't even know where if you ask them, which count, like, where is Mozambique, they can't even tell you where Burkina Faso, which is just across the border, you know? So certainly not - it's not just a nostalgic feeling or so, but you also realise that the world has somehow there's been other forms of decline in terms of education and all of course, in my parent's generation, it was also different in terms of maybe things they had to study, and maybe they had to learn art history and learn certain things, and maybe some of those things were cut out. But more and more, as you're studying the different trends of how history has been composed, in terms of education - formal education - you realise that it also shapes different generations in terms of how they respond to the world that they find themselves in. And for me, I think that just by the gift of, let's say, being growing up with, let's say in the 90s and all that, the idea of learning how to sew, because when I travel, I always have a needle in my bag. If my shirt breaks, I sew it myself. So like they are sewing the bags from the beginning. And that's where the Saatchi became important. Because that work that was sold to the Saatchi, I produced the entire work myself. At the time, I did not have any money to employ anyone.

## 59:18 Thomas Aquilina

This is back in 2014 with, this? This is the new artform of Africa and Latin America at the same time. I think that...

## 59:26 Ibrahim Mahama

...yeah, but this is like 2011 to 2012/15, this is the period where I was working. So even at some point I had this scoliosis, my spine was beginning to shift. I had problem at this time because I was always in the studio, either in Kumasi or in Accra

home sewing. And then when I got to a point where I realised that there was something I was learning about it intellectually, and I went to gas works for the residency, when I came back through reflections with Alessio and the team, and like meeting people in London, Zoe, even at the time, Chris Deck, and the director of white cube at the time, Elvira. I see all these people in London, it really shaped how I was thinking about, yeah, because then now you're in London, like, it's one of the big centres of the art world. You're seeing how, like, you're seeing the fair, 154 is opening for the first time in 2014 I'm there. I'm seeing it. So, like, you're seeing all of these things, and then you're coming back again to the question of the making. You're like, okay, I see that their painting is still dominant. This is happening there. You're thinking about the quality of work, that how display formatting. You're thinking also about where you're coming from in terms of radical pedagogy, redistribution. You're asking yourself, okay, how do I go back again, back to the drawing board, into the basics, and then ask these questions, renewed questions, rather than be swayed and carried away and thinking that, Oh yes, I see in the market these kinds of works are doing well, so maybe if I redirect my channel, no, it was about going back to the fundamentals. And for me, that is always the point. That's why I make a lot of notes. The question is always how to stay grounded in the fundamental beliefs and about fundamental forms. So if I wouldn't go back to Ghana and say, we're going to stop rebuilding these architectural forms, which are very precarious and they almost draw the life out of you, let's go back to it, and let's do it. The precarity is necessary. The precarity is necessary. It teaches us something that sometimes excess - no matter how much excess capital that you have, you'll never be able to get.

**1:01:24 Thomas Aquilina**

I'm hoping we have a few, a few more minutes before, before they before UP Projects...

**1:01:29 Mala Yamey**

...You've got about nine minutes until the end of questions.

**1:01:33 Thomas Aquilina**

Oh nine minutes, okay, fantastic. Okay, that's great. In that case, there's a question that was asked in the chat that I might just slightly reframe in part, because I suppose Ibrahim you spoke very bodily about sewing 12 years ago and one thing that is important to my own practice is walking. And so maybe the question I'd ask

is, who do you want to walk with? And this is both bodily and conceptually. And the question that was asked, I suppose, in the chat, is: who in this contemporary time are you inspired by? So who would you want to - who at the moment would you want to work walk with, and maybe where?

**1:02:19 Ibrahim Mahama**

Everywhere there is a very important collective in Congo. It's called the CATPC, the artists, the plantation workers league. And they are just group of artists who came together to buy land, you know, back because of the monocrop culture from Unilever. And there are a lot of the land in parts of the regions are like, destroyed, of course. You also know, like the conflicts in Congo due to, like, the excess of minerals in the place and all that. So these guys simply just started when they make artworks out of maybe chocolates and other materials, palm - they use the capital residue to buy land, and then they are doing cultivation like they're like, building schools, like they have a space called White Cube and all that. So like, of course, I met them through a Dutch artist called Renzo Martins, and I kept in touch with them. And yes, they're currently also part of the project that we're doing in the Cartier. And there are certainly people who have, and they've somehow they understand what it means, like the responsibilities that an artist has to take in terms of like the society that they find themselves in, or within the world, the discourse of the world itself. Of course, one of the first artists that I really admired in terms of their social practice was Theaster Gates. And I met Theaster Gates, much like 10 years ago. 11 years ago, actually, in Venice. We showed both - showed at the Okwui Biennial, All the World's Futures, and we kept in touch. And then I visited his studio and even his class a few times in Chicago. And certainly he's, I really like his way of approach and his way of thinking. And just this act of like, taking charge of responsibility and seeing that, oh, I've seen that. There is this building that's falling apart. Let's see what we can do about it, and how do we organise the community around it, and all that. Of course, every work, even including what we do, it always has its glitches, here and there. But certainly, I think the most important thing is always about the potential that artists brings to artistic practice. Yes, and of course, like even in Africa, you'd have different individuals, like in Ghana, they have like, we have Omar Ba for the artist who has been building, like the dark atelier and other spaces. You have Kwesi Botchway who has this wonderful studio. You have the Compound House Gallery, one of my colleagues, Nuna, who's been like working with younger artists trying to read distributes like the way their works are being thought or seen. You have the Black Star Alliance Collective, which is like made up of professors, students and other comrades alike who are like, where, that's where the radical pedagogy comes from. Of course, if you go to Senegal, you

also have like, people like the RAW Material. My Koyo, so rest in peace. But she was such a force to reckon with, and she was really amazing in terms of how she thought about what it means. And I always liked the name RAW Material, and how, like, even in our work, we're dealing with, back to the question of the raw material, but as a conceptual thing, in terms of Maria and, like, the entire group Fatima, and what they what they've been doing in in Senegal with, like, the academy and all the other things. And of course, there are comrades like Bonaventure and others who live in Europe, like the director of the Hackaway, but in terms of what they do, using the institution as a point in order to be able to bring people connect, people from the continent and other places, in terms of the programming and all that. So there are a lot of different individuals. Of course, in South America, they're like, there is Doris Salcedo and others. Of course, when you go to East Africa, there is Michael Armitage with inkai and the programming, like somehow renewing faith and the knowledge back in, like the older practices and all that, and also working with younger artists and all that. Yeah, so certainly, there's, there's a wide range, and I'm just as much excited about the idea that even we could be inspired by, let's say the methods of, let's say the Black Mountain College. And the Black Mountain College closed in 1957 the same year Ghana, we regained independence. So again, how do we learn from even, let's say, arts practices or teachings from that period, something that produced someone like Rauschenberg, which would later inspire me as an artist in terms of how I think about material, compositions and things like that. So it's why it's very, very wide range. And I'm currently looking at like artists and practitioners also from like India, like and also within the Asian region. So it's something that I'm taking time to also to discover and learn from myself.

## **1:07:02 Thomas Aquilina**

Thank you. That's a really generous spectrum of artists to think with and walk with. And there's another question here from Sepake. And the question reads: would you consider your practice in tamale as a way of spatialising pedagogy?

## **1:07:22 Ibrahim Mahama**

Yes, I think so. I We don't in the way we it operates. We don't really even talk about pedagogy, but I think that it naturally does that in a way that people take responsibility for it, in a way that people would come to us, giving us objects, donating things to us to help us to expand the reach of the work that we're doing, or the objects that we bring there the contemporary arts forms like the buildings that I'm reconstituting, like even thinking about like agriculture, planting trees, and the historical trees, which are like in which are going extinct, or like in crisis, in

terms of like the infestations and all that, and how that also somehow inscribes a new way of attitude, and let's say young people within those within these places. Not just in Ghana, but of course, or in Tamale. But the idea is that the hope is always, when you're making art, it will transcend the boundaries of it, the boundaries of the space or the place that it finds itself. And yeah, thank you very much, Sepake is one of our very important comrades. Yes, I'm sure she's smiling all the way wherever she's sitting, yeah? But yeah...

**1:08:44 Thomas Aquilina**

...I'm sure she's all the way from Blackheath. [Laughter]

**1:08:49 Ibrahim Mahama**

Yeah. So, yeah. So special pedagogy. I like the way she frames it. I've never thought about it in that way specialising the pedagogy. Okay, interesting. Yeah, I'll keep that. I will. I will quote her somewhere.

**1:08:59 Thomas Aquilina**

We've got a couple of more questions here. This one is about, this comes from Yasmin Khan, thinking about safe how thinking about safeguarding artists involved in the diversity of the public realm, what support and what policies would you like to see strengthened in the cultural sector?

**1:09:29 Ibrahim Mahama**

Yeah, I think artists generally are cultural practitioners. We always need support. I think sometimes one of the things that we take for granted is how powerful what we do is, you know, and even when the lack of support is there, you find that a lot of folks who are still like doing struggling to pull up events or do things here and or even keep up their practice, which goes a long way to inspire the way maybe future practices might emerge and all that. And anytime there is like a right-wing government, or any of these bad politics, the first department or area it affects is like the cultural sector. Yeah. So certainly in Ghana, one of the things that we've been fighting for are strong policies that protect, for instance, certain like cultural practices, and how that all allows artists to think that they are not just working for a living, but they are working towards contributing something meaningful to the society in the world that we find ourselves in. Of course, you make a living out of your work, but you think that the work that we produce in the world is part of the

living legacy of the world itself, in terms of how we can develop and develop and again, cultivate and incubate these cultural sensitivities and also empathies that can allow us to be able to have much better dealings with the world and our neighbours, whether they are plants or animals or like the floor or like material residues and all that. Yeah. So certainly, I think that there needs to be policy. I don't think we can have a global policy on this, but it will be. It's a case to case basis and places, but certainly, when we are artists or cultural practitioners, we always have to hope that we do such a good work enough in order to be able to infest the place that we're in in such a way that it might lead towards a generation that would - their response to culture would be beyond the point of the question of commodification. And I think even in the West, sometimes, when you look at like maybe London and elsewhere, there are so many cuts and things that are happening, and you always realise that it comes back down to money. It's always about profit making. Oh, we have to cut money from here because maybe it's not really yielding things, but culture is not about yielding anything like that. You know, of course, that's what we're talking about. The contradictions to begin with. There are parts of it when it comes to the markets and all that. Am I creating certain capitals and other things, but in terms of what culture itself and what are we as practitioners are supposed to produce? It's supposed to do something much beyond capital or any other thing, and we know it, but it's realisation it's different, you know. So I think that we have to look at it in different sectors from different parts of the world and see what works for which region and how collective it can contribute towards assets and collective growth.

## **1:12:19 Thomas Aquilina**

You really honed this idea of collective rights through so many different ways of thinking about collective memory, collective labour, collective histories. And I think this point you make around residue is so present in all the work to me that I'm going to take this away today, this idea of residue, but also of redistribution. I also really appreciate the way you said Ghana regained independence. You know, there's this always this careful re-articulation of what we've inherited. I think we're going to have to close the conversation. I just wanted to ask you, though, do you have any questions? Did you want to ask a question?

## **1:13:08 Ibrahim Mahama**

Yeah, if I start, I won't finish. Yes, I'm not a man of a few words. So no, I'm very grateful, because for me, it's also I'm constantly trying to reflect on why the why? Why do we do - why are we doing all of this? So these kinds of conversations where

we speak with colleagues and then comrades alike, it really somehow instils a different like a new, renewed sense of hope and interest in what we are doing. So I'm really grateful to be here. And thank you very much, Mala and everyone for organising this, and for you, Thomas, for finding the time, and also to all of our people, Sepake, and I never know how to pronounce your name, Mpho, yeah, from afar, yeah. But yeah for all our colleagues, for, like, really, like, always, constantly doing all of us are doing our bits in our own corners, every in every part of the world. And I think it's not a question, per se, but it's rather a comment that we have to be reminded why we do what we do constantly, and why it is important. Because if a lot of people don't question when money is being spent on war, but they question when money is being spent on culture. So when anytime people question why we dedicate time and resource to build in a better world? I'm like, so you rather spend money into destroying the world, but yeah, so whatever we do, it is important, and it goes a long way. So I think we have to do it and do it more.

#### 1:14:44 Thomas Aquilina

Thank you. Thank you. Let's pause there.

#### 1:14:48 Mala Yamey

Thank you so much. Ibrahim and Thomas. I really have enjoyed getting to know you through the process of working on this talk, but also this has just been such an enriching presentation and discussion. I really love this notion, Ibrahim, that you brought in of excavating courage in other people and other species. So like both the idea of, I mean, I'm sure you're right. I don't think you have as many children piling into rickshaws in India but could be wrong. And the idea of chickens laying eggs within the safety of a cultural space, and this constant questioning of redistribution and this word "re" and the offer for future generations how childhood memory might be reconstituted through collective witnessing. This feels really, really urgent and deeply representative of your generous engagement with communities. So really thank you so much for your openness, with your responses and sharing your knowledge with us today. Thank you also to everyone in the room for participating and for your great questions. Thank you to Kirstie Archer and Victoria St Clair, our amazing BSL interpreters, I've forgotten how to speak. Our next *Assembly* event will take place in May, which will focus on the rights of children and young people in shaping public space. And full details of this event will be coming soon. So please do sign up to our *Constellations* ° *Assemblies* newsletter to keep up to date, you should see a link in the chat. I'd also like to encourage you to join the *Constellations* ° *Exchange*, which is a group on LinkedIn that enables the *Constellations* community

to connect and share thoughts and resources. It's great to see so many people joining already. And if you would like to share any reflections on today's event or further reading and resources, please do join the group, and we look forward to seeing you there. The link also should be in the chat. And finally, your feedback is really, really important to us to help us make sure our assemblies are responsive to your needs and requests. I think we will have just added the - lot of links going in there, a short survey link in the chat, which we will be really grateful if you could take a couple of minutes to complete. And finally, again, I've said a lot of thank you's, but thank you so much for joining us today. Another huge thank you to our wonderful speakers, Thomas and Ibrahim and the fantastic team at UP Projects. I look forward to seeing you all at the next *Assembly*, and have a lovely afternoon. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you.