

ECLECTICISM IN CONTEMPORARY ART:

AN UTOPIA

By

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MASTER OF FINE ART

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Department of Painting and sculpture

Certification

I hereby declare that this submission is my own work towards the award of MFA and that, to the best of my knowledge, it neither contains any material previously published by another person nor material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree of the University, except where due acknowledgement has been made in the text.

KNUST

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Mr. K. B. Kissiedu

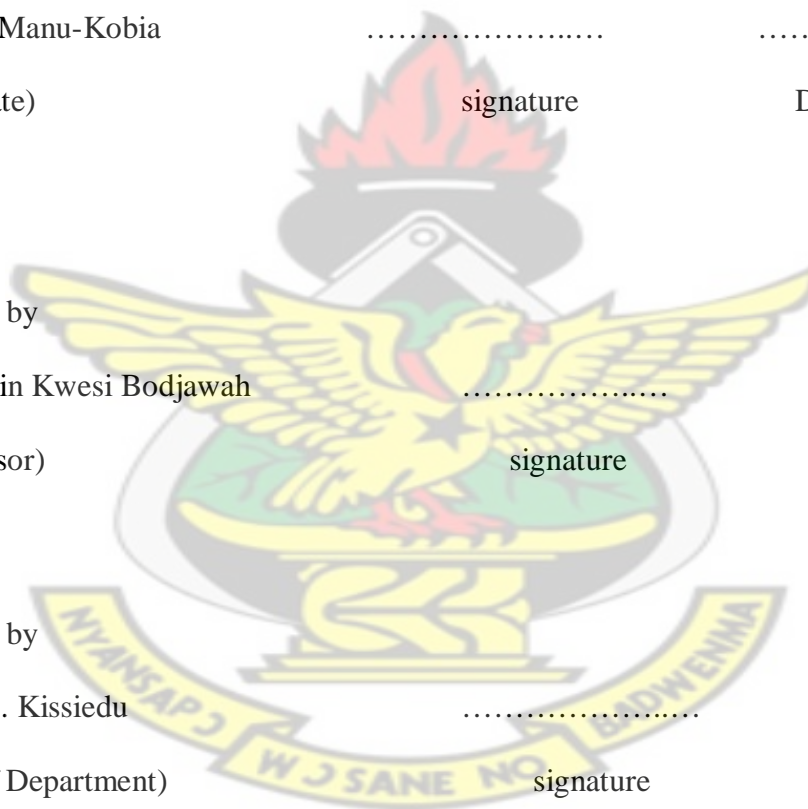
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Date



CHAPTER 1

PREAMBLE

Hinged on what he calls the “Kantian self-criticism”, Clement Greenberg (in his famous 1960 essay "Modernist Painting") advanced an influential argument which formed the impelling ideology of modernist Art. In this essay, Greenberg prescribes not only individuality and self-sufficiency of the various Arts, but also a positivist as well as a visual approach to practice and experience respectively.

Having been the predominant ideology for a tremendous production of works until recently, this theory (under close study) however unveils not only contradictions but also undesirable philosophical and aesthetic implications, for Greenberg seem not only to privilege rationality as the way to practice and experience but claims also that it guarantees objectivity. Again, the theory appears not only hegemonic in character, but it does espouse also a rather reduced and closed solution to the epistemological and the ontological enquiry.

But according to McEvilly, “...categories and criteria have no innate validity – only the validity that is projected upon them – and thus that their transgression can be an opening into freedom” (1999, p.67). Therefore in a quest for an ethic and egalitarian solution to the epistemological and the ontological question, the study saddles itself with the sacrilegious responsibility of questioning Greenberg’s formalism: a logic which seems to have fettered Ghanaian academic art.

Largely influenced by works of anti-modernist critics, the study elects a phenomenological approach of inquiry (though it appears to conform to the prerequisite structure of a positivist report).

Chapter one provides an overview of the central argument and aims. It also provides a list of the study's sources of motivation, line of approach and an overview of the project's sub divisions.

Chapter two launches the study's body of argument, introduces the modernist concept of formalism and discusses its challenges. It conducts also a semiotic analysis of the status quo and attempts to un-masque its political, aesthetic and philosophical implications.

Chapter three makes an overview (though hackneyed and brief yet representative) of some anti-modernist strategies and discusses not only how they have been employed to undercut the Greenbergian formalist theory, but also how they have contributed to the epistemological and the ontological enquiry.

Having negotiated a strategy and conceptual direction from the discussion in the previous chapter, the study (in Chapter four) attempts a narration of the musing. The chapter also discusses how the muse was pursued and its challenges in the context of KNUST Art.

The final chapter concludes not but attempts to highlight some few points on how the project has contributed to the chosen field of study and thus set rolling the discussion.





Figure 1. Marcel Duchamp. *Fountain*. (1917).

Source: <http://artintelligence.net/review/wp-content/uploads/2007/06/duchampfountaincol.jpg>.

CHAPTER 2

IN QUESTIONING THE STATUS QUO

Parodying normative ideas of art, Duchamp undercuts not only Greenberg's theory with *Fountain* (figure 1) but questions also whether there are in fact any "necessary and sufficient conditions for something to be art[?]" (Fisher, 1993, p.150). Duchamp by so doing circumvent not only conventional concepts of art, but advance also questions of ontological, epistemological, and institutional concerns. In addition, Duchamp also posits art as a *language* (a system of communication and signification, not simply decorative objects to be hanged and placed in spaces) and it is this Duchampian approach that the study elects: viewing language as the structural foundation of society and culture.

After all, what will the stake holders in art consider as beautiful, if indeed the subject of beauty were to be the only worthwhile concern of art? Isn't a Michelangelo's *David* beautiful? Then, why would it not fair well in a strict Islamic culture, say Afghanistan? Why will a Vanessa Beecroft show be repudiated in a conservative African or Islamic community? Is it not art? What about Serrano's *Piss Christ* and Serra's *Tilted Arc*? Perhaps in a bid to answer the above listed questions Krauss notes (as asserted in Eisenstein's film) that

[a]s a function of a given ideology, works of art project a particular picture of the world, or what it is like to be in the world; but "world" in this context is understood as being fundamentally different as viewed from different ideological vantages. And these vantages are themselves thoroughly structured or impregnated with systems of values, so that art is in this sense never morally neutral, but is involved, willfully or not, in upholding or maintaining those values, or – in certain extreme cases challenging or subverting them (Krauss, 1981, p.211).

Reflecting on Duchamp's *Fountain* which attests to the complexity of the epistemological, institutional and ontological question, it has been pointed out by Krauss that art is not neutral; it is loaded with hidden implications which are mostly not only subjective, but also economically and socio-politically motivated and thus charged. Characterized by marginalization and suppression, these ideologies and concepts are not only subtly coded in an oppositional system (thus leading to a binary pairing of rationality/irrationality, male/female, resurrection/death, wealth/poverty, good/evil, order/chaos, vertical/horizontal, white/black, heterosexual/homosexual etc) but they are also structured in an arbitrary vertical order. However, it must be pointed out that "the sacred is only another name for what one rejects as excremental" (Bois, 1997, p.51). It is for this reason why the study conducts an analysis of Greenberg's theory and attempts to un-masque its political, aesthetic and philosophical implications.

Considered rather as out-of-date in the context of a postmodern vocabulary, the concept of Modernism is understood to have been inspired by the 18th century Enlightenment (where faith in pre-modern beliefs were substituted with science and objectivity). Hoping to model a better world after the design of the cosmos, the historical movement of Modernism infected an array of disciplines including the Arts: where Immanuel Kant's *Critic of Judgment* (1790) was employed as a defining principle. Advocating for insulation of Art from Life, for as claimed by Fried: art's survival depends on its ability to defeat theatre (1967, p. 830); Greenberg championed a puritanical endeavor which argued for employment of "characteristic methods of a discipline to criticize the discipline itself, ...[as he said, not only] to entrench it more firmly in its area of competence ...[but] to eliminate from the specific effects of each art

any and every effect that might conceivably be borrowed from or by the medium of any other art” (1960).

Described as “Media Formalism” by Fisher (1993, p.264), this meant that Greenberg had without doubt located the answer to the ontological enquiry in the traditional medium exclusively, however, this approach laden’s the practice not only with conventions but it is also hegemonic in character (thus leading to the Modernist ethos of specialization and a notion of artistic genius). Also, questioning why art media is so central to Greenberg’s universal criterion for the essential in art, Fisher again points out that, not only does Greenberg’s criterion closes its eyes to other critical perspectives, but his argument “ is in danger of giving a circular definition of art” (1993, p.152). He notes also that, not only does drawing share the property of flatness with painting but also two dimensionality is a property which most sculptural surfaces share with painting (Fisher, 1993, p.266).

Privileging the optical over other senses, Greenberg attempts to project art as “a sublimatory activity that separates the perceiver from his or her body” (Bois, 1997, p.25-26), however faced with Meno’s paradox (as quoted by Merleau-Ponty, 2008, p.431), which questions among other things how the subject gets to know the object? The traditional Cartesian model crumbles brought vis a vis a more potent paradigm, for art encompasses pertinent socio-cultural and political issues which should not be simply masked under traditional issues of metaphysics, technical proficiency, mimesis, beauty and media purity. A quintessential instance of this, perhaps as a testimony of Greenberg’s theory’s inequitable-representativeness was the *Primitivism* show (in 1984) in the Museum of Modern Art; where tribal objects from Africa, Oceania etc were “wrenched ...out of context” (McEvilly, 1999, p.41) to validate the traditional Western-Bourgeois-

Christian concept of art, modernist “mysticism of progress and scientific method”

(McEvilly, 1999, p.66); a Hegelian evolution-like progress of history which was tailored imperatively towards a teleological goal.

Eliciting not only issues of cultural imperialism, the Western logocentric character of Greenberg’s gossamer ideology (in its blatant disregard for content and contextual issues) collapses, brought vis á vis other critical perspectives. It thus becomes apparent that these modernist myths are arbitrary social constructions (devised to validate a single reality), and for that reason should be undone since they remain cultural not natural.

In her essay, *Sculpture in the Expanded Field*, Krauss defined modernist sculpture as the counterpoint of the logic of the traditional monument. According to her:

The logic of sculpture ... is inseparable from the logic of the monument. By virtue of this logic a sculpture is a commemorative representation. It sits in a particular place and speaks in a symbolical tongue about the meaning or use of that place.... Because they thus function in relation to the logic of representation and marking, sculptures are normally figurative and vertical, their pedestals an important part of the structure since they mediate between actual site and representational sign (1979, P.33).

According to this concept of sculpture, Azii Akator’s statue of Okomfo Anokye in Kumasi (Figure 2.), is a traditional monument marking the site where the Traditional Priest of the Asante Kingdom is alleged to have conjured the *Golden stool* from the Heavens in the 17centry. The sculpture is figurative, vertical and its pedestal connects the representation with the particular site. As opposed to this logic of the monument, Krauss defines the logic of modernism as:



Figure 2. Azii Akator. *Okomfo Anokye*. Concrete.
Location: Bantama, Kumasi. Photograph by Manu-Kobia (2008).



Figure 3. Unknown artist. *Untitled*. Concrete.
Photograph by Manu-Kobia (2008).

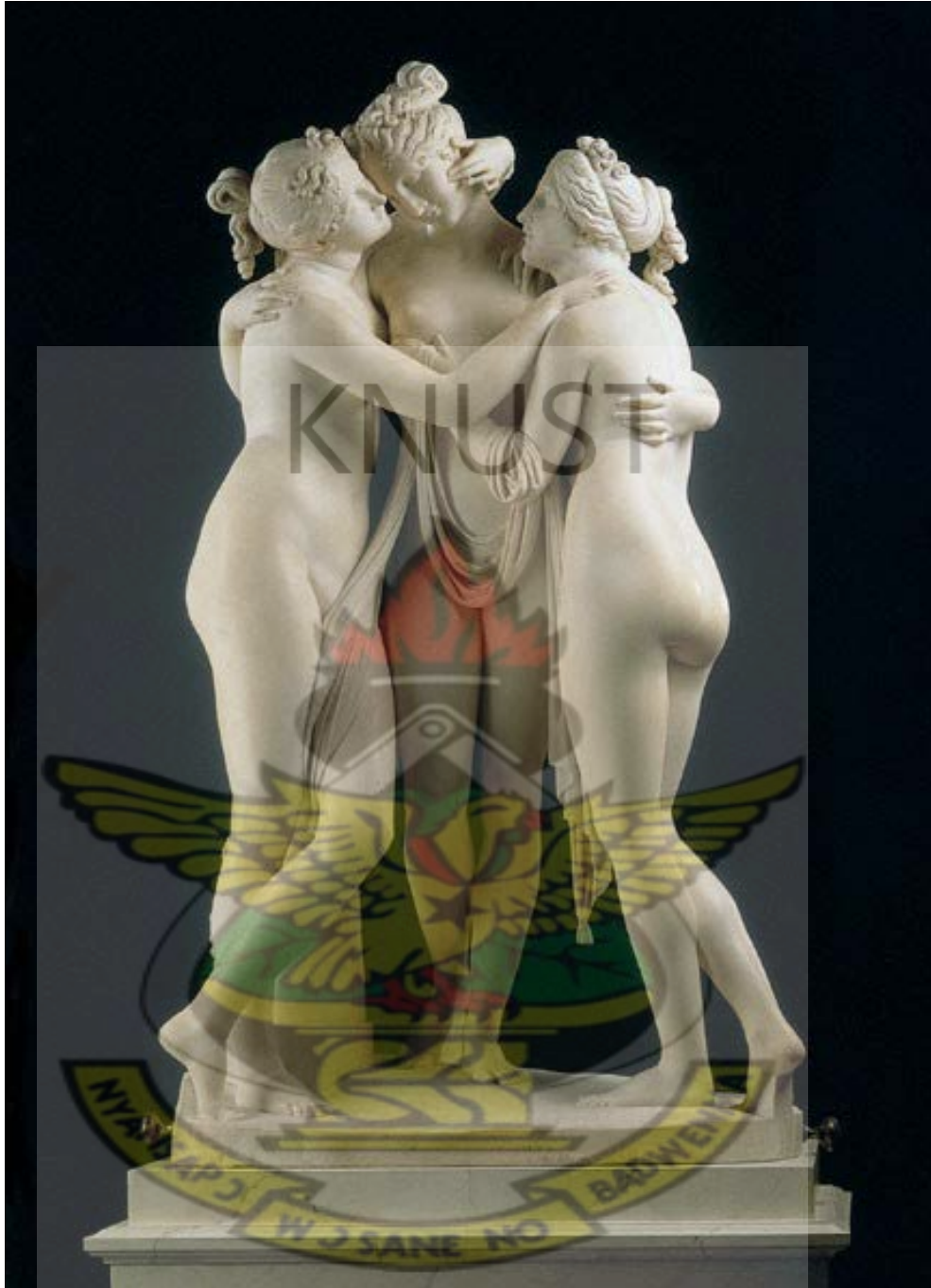


Figure 4. Antonio Canova. *The Three Graces*. (1813). Marble.
Source: <http://www.creativelydifferentblinds.com/VAImagesVASculpture/TheThreeGracesAntonioCanova2.aspx>.
Accessed: December 9, 2008.

its negative condition – a kind of sitelessness, or homelessness, an absolute loss of place. Which is to say one enters modernism, since it is the modernist period of sculptural production that operates in relation to this loss of site, producing the monument as abstraction, the monument as pure marker or base, functionally placeless and largely self referential. It is these two characteristics of modernist sculpture that declares its status, and therefore its meaning and function, as essentially nomadic. Through its fetishization of the base, the sculpture reaches downward to absorb the pedestal into itself and away from actual place; and through the representation of its own materials or the process of its construction, the sculpture depicts its own autonomy (1979, P.34).

According to the above definition, *untitled* (figure 3) falls under the category of Krauss's logic of modernist sculpture (though not quintessentially). Constructed in a fashion which Serra (as quoted by Friedman, 1995, p. 63) terms as "studio made and site adjusted", *untitled* has no pedestal (which would have otherwise anchored it to its site) and thus claims it's nomadic status. Again in being opposed to the logic of the monument, *untitled* (like Canova's *Three Graces*, figure 4) undeniably reveals itself "in an instant and ... [it is] addressed only to the eye of the viewer" (Bois, 1997, p.25) to deliver on the modernist promise of a single objective meaning.

Also being market conscious, obsessed with good form and conspicuously oblivious of contemporary contextual issues of cultural relativism, phenomenology, hermeneutics etc, *untitled* (in being a quintessential manifestation of the predominant churning ideology of KNUST Art) unveils its arbitrary and hegemonic western logocentric character and for that matter, should be contended and substituted with an egalitarian model; which is conscious of a more expanded form of socio-cultural issues. For as observed by Krauss,

even in a spatial art, space and time cannot be separated for purposes of analysis. Into any spatial organization there will be folded an implicit statement about the nature of temporal experience. The history of modern sculpture is incomplete without discussion of the temporal consequences of a particular arrangement of form.... Sculpture is a medium peculiarly located at the juncture between stillness and motion, time arrested and time passing. From this tension, which defines the very condition of sculpture, comes its enormous expressive power (Krauss 1981, p.4-5).





Figure 5. Constantain Bruncusi. *Endless Column*. Location: Tirgu jiu, Romania.
Size: 96ft 33/8in, Assessed: 30/1/2008.
Source:<http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=00076287%28198007%29122%3A928%3C470%3AB%27OTI%3E2.0.CO%3B2-V>.



Figure 6. Jackson Pollock. *Action painting*. Accessed: November 13, 2008.
Source: <http://www.artinthepicture.com/blog/wp-content/uploads/2007/08/action-painting.jpg>.



Figure 7. Alberto Giacometti. *Suspended ball*, Iron, plaster, wood and string.
Accessed on December 19, 2008. Source: <http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0007-6287%28200111%29143%3A1184%3C718%3AAGZANY%3E2.0.CO%3B2-2>.





Figure 8. Robert Smithson. *Spiral Jetty*. Salt Lake, Utah. 1970. Assessed: 19/12/2008. Source: [http://events.liveguide.com.au/568513_thumbnail_280_Spiral_Jetty_Robert Smithson. jpg](http://events.liveguide.com.au/568513_thumbnail_280_Spiral_Jetty_Robert_Smithson.jpg).



CHAPTER 3

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The Gestalt psychologists...understood the field of sight as fundamentally vertical, and thus freed from the pull of gravity. They described the visual subject's relation to its image-world as "frontoparallel" to it, a function of its standing erect, independent of the ground. This means that the image or gestalt is always experienced as a vertical and that its very coherence as a form...is based on this uprightness.... In this, the Gestalt psychologist were in accord with the Freudian account of a separation of perceptual fields into vertical and the horizontal, a division that in Freud's view occurred at the point when the human species became erect, thereby separating itself from an animality oriented toward the horizontal of the ground and the dominance (of hunting and mating) of the sense of smell. Standing up produces the importance of the vertical and the visual, of the field that is distanced from the immediate grasp of the perceiver. A function of this distanced viewing would be the sublimation of the carnal instincts and the possibility of a conception...of beauty (Krauss, 2007. p.359).

Contending this rationalist erect way of perceiving the world, for it is founded on a "repression" (Bois, 1997, p.26), Bruncusi rejects the pedestals metaphorical role as a segregator of the subject and the object and thus converts sculpture from its transcendental concerns into its viewer's material world. In an equal radical fashion which Krauss describes as an assaults on "all the sublimatory forces: uprightness, gestalt, form, beauty" (Krauss, 2007, p.359), Pollock broaches a discussion on a new object–beholder relationship by subjecting and orienting his drip paintings to both gravity and the horizontal axis.

Serving as an impetus for these transgressionary ideas is a wavering concept (formless) which incessantly blurs and serrates (jaggedly) the world of arbitrary claims as evinced in Giacometti's *Suspended Ball* (Figure 7). As Bois (1997, p.53) explains under the entry Base Materialism in the Catalogue *Formless: A User's Guide*, the concept of informe has the

job of de-class(ify)ing, which is to say, simultaneously lowering and liberating from all ontological prisons, from any "devoir etre" (role model). It is principally a matter of de-classing matter, of extracting it from the philosophical clutches of classical materialism, which is nothing but idealism in disguise....

Further undoing the modernist myths, the entropic logic (the second law of thermodynamics) is also invoked. "[P]redict[ing] the inevitable extinction of energy in any given system...[and] the inexorable and irreversible implosion of any kind of hierarchical order into a terminal sameness" (Bois 2007, p.505), entropy also questions rationalist arbitrary pretenses and thus asserts that if there is anything inherent in art, it is entropy. The "entropic universe [is to this end]... shorn of any other meaning than the irreversibility of time, [according to Bois]...and everything is equally devoid of signification" (2007, p.506). Entropy is therefore, an attack on form and meaning as evinced in Smithson's *Spiral Jetty* (Figure 8). Pointing out the liberating effects of entropy, Bois further asserts that

[e]verything, whatever its past, even before it has any past, is geared in the end toward the same equal state - which also means that there is no justifiable centre, no possible hierarchy. In short what might at first seem a dire prospect - the fact that man, though he often chooses to ignore it, has created for himself a universe without quality - can also be liberating, for a

world without a center (which is also a world where the self has no boundaries, no propriety) is a labyrinth open to infinite exploration (2007, p.506).

Having opened up a borderless world which espouses not only unfettered experiments but engenders also a transgressive space which aims at an egalitarian stance, the covert endeavor of leveraging cultural spaces for selfish economic ends are put to question as exemplified in Akoi-Jackson's *Untilled* (kokoo) and Eliason's *Weather Project* (Figure 9 and 10) which evinces among other things that "matter is heterogeneous; it is what cannot be tamed by any concept" (Bataille as quoted by Bois, 1997, p.71).

The museum (having now been purged of the Cartesian myth) becomes an open arena for plural ideas, in acknowledgement of the fact established by Bishop (P.48) that "perception is...not the function of a detached gaze upon the world from a centred consciousness...." As observed by Schuld, the Cartesian myth becomes possible only if one begins to entertain the type of thinking which "separate[s] input (the observable qualities of an object) from output (response); [in consequence, making] "[w]hat happens in between the two...unconsidered" (Schuld, 2007, p.5). But (as observed by Schuld) this appears "apt if your model is a behaviorist one, which charges that input and output... constitute the measurable (and therefore appropriately material and scientific) content of human experience" (Schuld, 2007, p.5). However, the naked fact is that [m]eaning (immeasurable and atemporal), is not so much set aside... [by such a warp model, but] *set apart* (Schuld, 2007, p.4-5).

Therefore in acknowledgement of the fact that (among other things) some subjective experiences (secondary qualities) are lost in our quest to construct meaning rationally, the Cartesian model fails to run the gauntlet and as a consequence needs to be substituted

with a superior model. Emphasizing a multisensory, kinesthetic experience (in time and literal space) since meaning is contingent, Merleau-Ponty (2008, p.241) avows that

All knowledge takes its place within the horizons opened up by perception. There can be no question of describing perception itself as one of the facts thrown up in the world, since we can never fill up, in the picture of the world, that gap which we ourselves are, and by which it comes into existence for someone

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Figure 9. Akoi-Jackson. *Untilted* (kokoo). Installation. Location: Kumasi Cultural Centre.



Figure 10. Olafur Eliasson. *Weather Project*. Installation. Assessed: 14/12/2008. Source: <http://www.ensuinghijinks.com/uploaded images/WeatherProject-757617.jpg>.

CHAPTER 4

A PARADIGM SHIFT

This section traditionally saddles the researcher with the responsibility of documenting the study, but since such documentation ritually bears the guise of a modernist recipe book (in its pretensions of objectivity), the chapter maintains an indexical 'I' in articulating the study's phenomenological concerns.

Also, since the study's narrative resist mediation and it is meant to be experienced firsthand, it must be noted that photographs (which one will find in this chapter and beyond) are not adequate means of documenting the musing, since it fails to capture the study's nuances as-well-as adjunct implications.

I began the journey in a state of anxiety, lost in a maze of a thousand and one unconnected scraps of ideas. Confused as to either surge on or retreat, I fell into a state of compulsive gathering. I soon realized that my activity was catching glances (perhaps suspect of a neurotic disorder), since the presumed normal guy would surprisingly bend with a look of serendipity on his face, only to pick and tuck in his luggage a rusty and dirty steel rod or broken scissors! Having scavenged enough consumer waste (empty water bottles, bicycle hubs, engine plugs, pipes, found wood etc), I was hit with an idea.

Coming from a strong formalist background, my earlier intention was to attempt a miniature figurative composition in the group (that is in the hundreds and thousands), since that has never been attempted in the Ghanaian art context.

I began the tortuous process (which I have abridged because of its monotonous structure) by cutting the scavenged scraps to desired lengths. After preparing all the scraps (which basically entailed cleaning, measuring and bending), I then continued the cumbersome

process of assembling the disparate parts of the composition in sections. No other posture would allow me good contact with the horizontal piece of found wood than squatting. I therefore crouched while I tied and welded painstakingly; moving mostly from one end of the found wood to the other. However, in consolation for the enormous stress on my knees and thighs, this posture would later manifest itself as a useful metaphor in the reading of the musing. I soon realized that not only is the rendition process getting painfully slow and laborious, but also the academic year was far spent; having used close to four months of it devising an approach to the study and scavenging in the metropolis of Kumasi. To make matters worse, I soon discovered that Eyram's mini-welding machine (which I had borrowed) could work for only a few hours per day (since it was not purposed for heavy welding). As a result, I had to endure intermittent breaks (of at least 20 minutes, even when I was in a high spirit to work), only to get the machine to cool and not abruptly short circuit.

Despite the fact that conditions at the time were very trying (to the point of rationing with Mitchel my studio mate), the rendition processes were also extremely monotonous. I had to routinely clean, straighten, measure, cut, bend, tie and weld within regulated welding hours only just to realize an unbelievably small amount of work done for a day. One trying activity that tested my patience was the routine task of locating desirable weld points (amidst the organic structured miniature sized figures), while I had my almost opaque lensed welding goggles on. It was like trying to thread a needle with both eyes blindfolded. It had become a gamble, which was made even more challenging since the whole piece in rendition had been circuited, as a result illuminating undesired spontaneous blinding lights at any wrong gamble.

Mitchel (whose project involved modeling with clay), had no choice but to vacate the studio since we realized from the onset that the pair of us could not share the space as directed by the authorities. Not only was the space too small for us, but also the spontaneous blinding lights did disorient him. Subsequently, I had to also jettison all preliminary sketches (figures 13, 14 and 15), since with my almost opaque lensed welding goggles on, I could not accurately determine desired weld joints at the incident of striking an arc (sometimes, even after about 3 minutes of gambling). It was therefore dreadful and most frustrating when sometimes I did accidentally touch red hot molten metal with my naked hands; since vision was almost impossible with my protective glasses on. I would consequently attempt (out of frustration) to weld with sun glasses (which afforded me an appreciable level of visibility) only to realize that, I was not only developing a poor eye sight with time (presumably as an effect of the near blinding lights that were emitted when an arc was made) but also my health was being threatened (by the incessant choking fumes that filled the ill ventilated studio). I grew from bad to worse, but I would persist ignorantly; not only under the schizophrenia of a modernist genius, but also under the influence of an equally delusive awe struck visitors who fueled my ego with wild exclamations (especially at first blush with the idiom when they visited my studio). I would later visit the KNUST Hospital only to be referred to a specialist at KATH (see Appendix A). But need I go through this ordeal to create art only to elude praise from viewers at the peril of my sight? Can't art evoke issues other than technical proficiency, beauty and mimetic representation? Who will it be his privilege to decide whether something is beautiful or not (that is even if beauty and good form were the only worth-while concerns of art)?

Hayward Louis Oubre
Wife Sculpt- Eternal flame
Alabama State Unvrsity
memory of President J. f. Kennedy

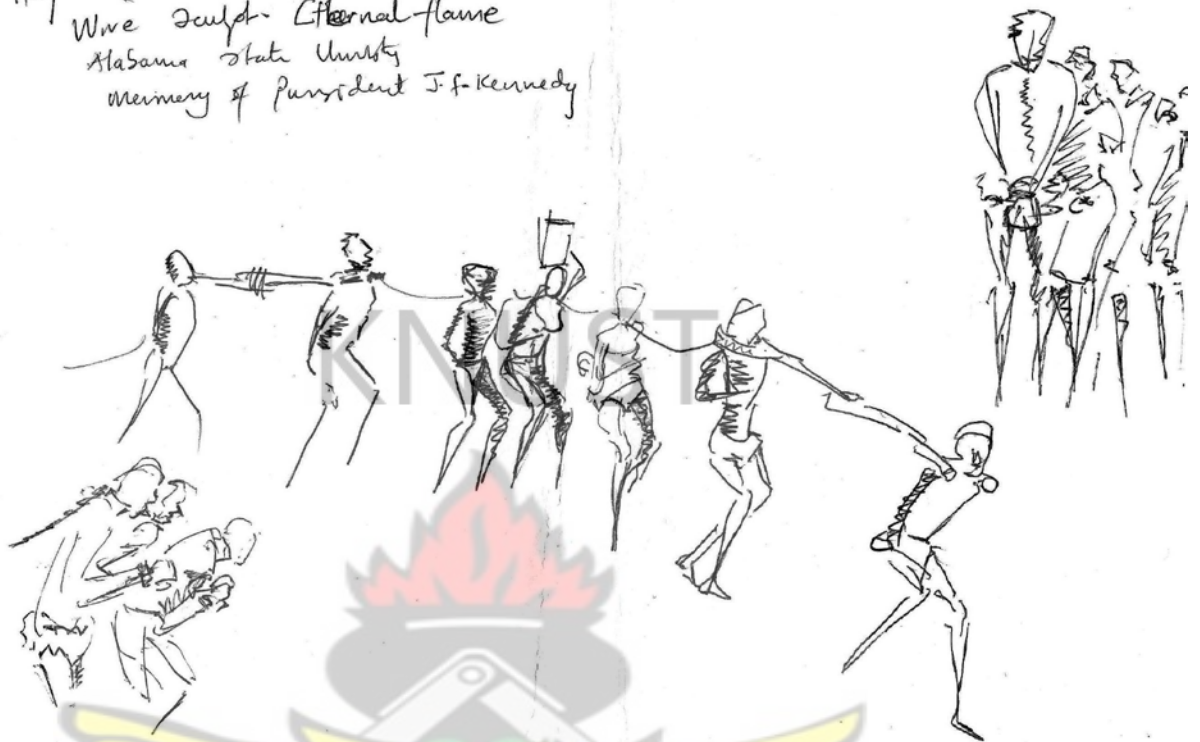


Figure 11. Preparatory Drawings. *Untitled* (2008). Michael Manu-Kobia.

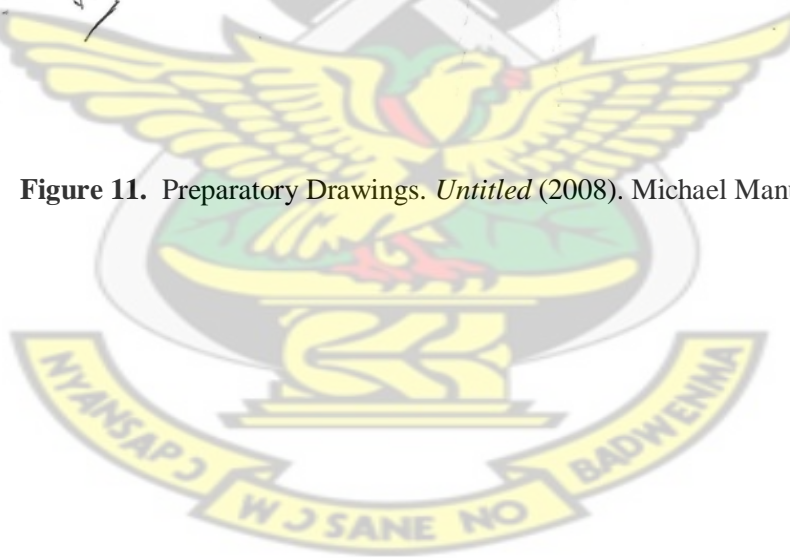




Figure 12. Preparatory Drawings. *Untitled* (2008). Michael Manu-Kobia.



Figure 13. Preparatory Drawings. *Untitled* (2008). Courtesy Mitchel Tetteh.

In any case, aren't other things not (traditionally) considered art also beautiful? What do we make of their good form? Who really is Duchamp? And what does he stand for? What lessons can we gather from his revolutionary approach to art which stands in diametric opposition to our current practice? Is the object even so central to art? If so why does the object fail to communicate subtle nuances like say odours or temperature? What about taste or sound? What at all is art? What informs our form of art? What are the socio-political, economic and the ethical implications of the form of art that we have elected? And what do those decisions reveal about our consciousness of the larger art world?

These and many other questions nagged me as I worked the praxis (figures 14 to 22), and it was in this questioning attitude that the project was conceived. Like Saul (who would later become Paul), it was only a tempering with the eye which could perhaps awaken my consciousness to the appreciation of a superior ideology. This ordeal would mark not only a new dawn in my philosophical consciousness but also symbolize my transition from a deeply entrenched tradition (which I had once been honored for mastering: see Appendix B). This is a tradition which Akoi-Jackson rightly describes as not only "steep in quasi-European Classical and Renaissance theory, some misquoted Modernism and the colonial insistence on art as a mere 'Vocational' undertaking, [but also] devoid of broader implications of meaning, value and power "(2006, p.77).

Taking cognizance of this fact, I quickly introduced myself to some modern critics with the hope of empowerment to confront the once venerated tradition; for practice without sound and compelling contemplation is worthless (Nkrumah 1964, p.78). But the transition will not be an undemanding one. The academic year was almost over and I had to now struggle through a dense array of (for a redeemed Modernist apologist) unfriendly

seemingly erudite discourse; not to mention the fact that I had to brace myself to resist the persistent temptation of retreating. It had now become apparent why some people would prefer to wallow in the familiar; even though they know there could be compelling alternatives. Overwhelmed by the gulf between my laurelled recent past and stripped yet wealthier present reality, I will begin to anticipate the prospects of such a sweeping venture in a poor receptive milieu such as mine. What if ... (the nerve racking question would rear its head)? However, I will affirm as evinced in a poem (see Appendix C) not to look back.

Having purged myself of my initial intent, many other conspicuous issues which would have otherwise not been considered (including the museum's notoriety of garnishing things into bourgeois objects of status) had become issues of essence to my study. The study had come to be characterized by what I call detour, re-structuring and making it up as I go along. I introduced myself to Julian (the Director of Alliance Française, Kumasi) to discuss the possibility of exhibiting in his gallery, only to know (after several meetings and even a visit to my studio, on my invitation) that he could not host the exhibition. Revealing of his orientation, he will argue that the works were few in number (perhaps because of their horizontal structuring). But I will counter argue to no positive result that the premise of the exhibition is hinged not on form but concept. I therefore resorted to the KNUST museum.



Figure 14. Ambience of studio during welding. (2008). Michael Manu-Kobia.



Figure 15. View of rendition process. (2008). Michael Manu-Kobia.



Figure 16. Artist in a crouch during rendition. (2008). Michael Manu-Kobia.

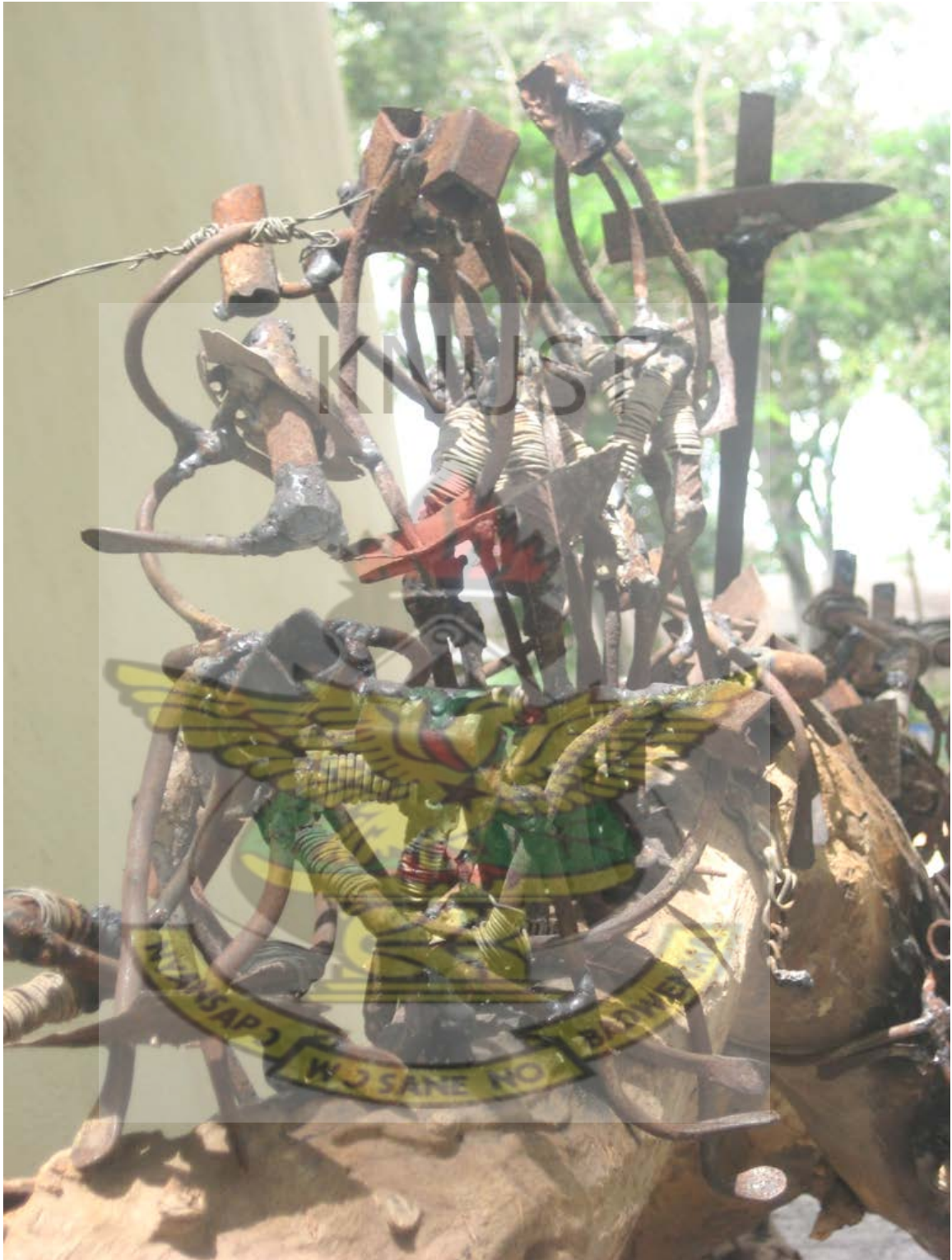


Figure 17. Close-up view of musing. (2008). Michael Manu-Kobia.



Figure18. Close-up view of musing. (2008). Michael Manu-Kobia.



Figure 19. View of musing. (2008). Michael Manu-Kobia.



Figure 20. View of musing. (2008). Michael Manu-Kobia.



Figure 21. View of musing. (2008). Michael Manu-Kobia.



Figure 22. View of musing. (2008). Michael Manu-Kobia.

Needless to mention its good condition, the KNUST museum is one of the new buildings on campus, a legacy of the late professor Kwasi Andam (which was commissioned in the year 2007). It stands just a few meters from the MFA studio (a museum in itself, but of a different kind) in a distance which I playfully refer to as 200 meter dash to sublimation. Interestingly, the MFA studio is one of the earliest buildings for starting the then Kumasi Institute of Technology (1951), which later matured into a university. Unlike the museum, it is a gloomy, cobweb filled, mouse infested and dilapidated asbestos edifice which has served the school in various capacities in its glory days. Worn out with time and disrepair from having served not only as the institution's main assembly hall but also church, research laboratory and now art studio; the edifice appeals as symbolic not only of the power system in the institution's culture of non maintenance but also its complicity in presiding over a system in which art plays second fiddle (It is worth noting that the studio is also the site and object of the *Lazarus Project I* (2005); a politically charged ephemeral endeavor which I was lucky to have witnessed). Art is an accessory in this community; it has no other social relevance beyond its abject display of skill and dutiful littering of spaces with so called beautiful things. Discussions travel not beyond mimetic representation and the pathetic expression of how beautiful the object is (in sheer oblivion of other readings) even at the faculty level, save-for a few individuals who continue to make efforts at stimulating the system out of its catalepsy.

Discarding the superfluous approach to appreciation which naively projects the object as autonomous and pristine especially when introduced into the matrix of the museum, a juxtaposition of the museum and the studio opens up a rather interesting discussion on spaces of production and consumption. Finding immediately evident the disparity of their

physical structures, one can also infer by the juxtaposition an uneven binary economic and political order which can be paralleled to that of the exploiter and the exploited. The essential relationship between them is that of parasitism; it is a play of power and privilege. This is a relationship in which the fruits of one party are incessantly wrenched under the pretext of insulating them from the vicissitudes of tangible life; but the masked motive here is not only one of appropriation but also one of creating an alluring market condition (for the appropriated commodities) by subtly adopting “department store techniques” (Henning, 2006, p.33). Department store techniques as asserted by Henning, helps construct a body of display structured on appeal and a wish to possess by making commodities engage our emotions and senses (2006, p.31). This is achieved not only through a mesmeric employment of spot lights on objects but also through subtle control of emotions (with colour, music, temperature etc) and a mute sanctioning of shopping culture. In addition, a large empty area which hints more of wealth than accumulation and clutter (which is suggestive of poor taste and poverty) is required (Henning, 2006, p.35). Exploring the idea that this technique “turn things into objects” (2006, p.7), Henning notes that, even

[i]n museums that contain once-useful objects (tools, say, or household artefacts), the detaching of these objects from their use-value turns them into signifying things....The museum processes them in such a way that the visitor, who might encounter similar things outside the museum and give them little regard, approaches them as objects of contemplation and instruction, as things which ‘speak’. In the case of art, the transformation process is more complex, since art is already an object of contemplation rather than use (2006, p.27).

It therefore becomes evident that by adopting department store techniques, not only does “the visitor...become like a window shopper” (Henning, 2006, p.33) but also art is connected to business (Henning, 2006, p.35). In this regard, “aesthetic contemplation in the museum [becomes]...not too different from the contemplation of goods in the marketplace (Henning, 2006, p.29). “[O]bjects gain value in proportion to the difficulty in acquiring them” (Henning, 2006, p.26) and this consumer behavior is perceived as tightly wedded to their “status, wealth, power, class etc” (Lloyd, 2008, p.124). Acquisition of these expensive commodities thus comes to amount to “domination [which] is exercised by the bourgeoisie in the form of symbolic power” (Lloyd, 2008, 127). This according to Lloyd, becomes possible

because commodities have a fetishised value that is closely related to exchange-value, but different from it ... social capital [comes to be] directly related to the objectified cultural capital that one is capable of appropriating, which is in turn related to a display of one's economic capital (2008, 127-128).

It is perhaps, why Stallabrass asserts (in his account of production and consumption in the global art world), that the focus on consumption is a tactic aimed at averting the attention of buyers from exploitation of the poor class (2004, p. 98). Consumed with irking out a living, the proletariat working class (by whose labour the fetishised cultural commodities are produced) do not have the luxury to share in the wealth they themselves create, the museum thus becomes (by this inequitable structure) a privileged cultural space where the fruits of the working class are reserved for the consumption of the elite few.

Ironically, the poorly lit, ill ventilated studio space with exposed wires, leaching roofs etc is the churning site of the much coveted commodities in the KNUST milieu. Being ubiquitous in most capitalist production sites, realization of the commodity is paramount: the final product is valued as less labour's effort as exemplified by my experience. The logic is also teleological; i.e. story lines of hazardous studio practice are muffled out under the excuse of advancing of an objective scientific endeavor. Taking this phenomenon as a microcosm of the world experience, will we irresponsible continue to tuck into oblivion the hazardous spaces of production in the name of profit and ostentatious consumption? Or we will assume the posture of an ignorant consumer who indirectly endorses the inhumane conditions which go on behind the scenes? Being not only object centered but also demand motivated what is the fate of such a paradigm which allows itself to be preoccupied with satisfying the whims and caprices of consumers to the neglect of its own ontological, epistemological and institutional quest? What about other interdisciplinary issues like global capitalism and the environmental cost of practice? I guess, it is perhaps the fact that the operational paradigm of KNUST Art cannot identify, much more locate and make relevant its position in the global and contemporary jumble of things; that is why it is not only disconnected but also neglected in its immediate milieu as symbolized by the ironic juxtaposition of the museum and the studio at just a proximity of only 200 meters (figure 23).



Figure 23. View of MFA studio (above) and KNUST Museum. (2008). Michael Manu-Kobia.

Seeking to expose the commercial intent of expositions in the milieu of KNUST (taking cognizance of the predominant use of the archetype department store technique), *Gift Shop* is conceived as a parody taking consideration of not only this superficial approach to serious art practice but also the detached and romanticized approach to experience such a practice engenders. With the hope of evoking a nauseating and enigmatic feeling which is further hoped to stimulate a dialogue, viewers will be immersed in a multi-sensory situation which plays on this archetypical approach to exhibition (possibly to a reverse effect).

What will happen when viewers anticipated mode of legitimate experience is twisted (taking cognizance of the fact that the general consciousness on art in the milieu is predominantly set in the mould of Greenberg's formalism)? Can this venture generate any meaningful discussion on the ontological, epistemological and the institutional quest of art? What about the capitalist parallel practice of commodity fetishism which is geared at simultaneously maximizing profit and tucking into oblivion the exploitation of the poor working class?

The musing is structured to hypnotize at first blush so that on later attuning to and unveiling the construction of its murky field, viewers will be tempted to mock it. On immediately encountering the dark expanse of *Gift Shop* (from the sun lit space where viewers can find the intervention's only entrance), viewers may unexpectedly be thrown into a brief uncomfortable state of nyctalopia. As if this is not unnerving enough, a symphony of successive whirrs (in wavering pitches) mostly of thunder, raging storm, low flying aeroplanes etc (often employed as sound effects for thrillers) will diffuse a hovering sense of solitariness and the uncanny in the dark otherwise quite expanse.

Rather than allay the initial sense of alarm, viewers will simultaneously acclimatize to an ambience of lighted candles which hints of a shrine perhaps.

Having acclimatized to the seemingly surreal ambience of *Gift Shop*, viewers will be confronted with an array of (what appears to be frontally organized) horizontal visual stimuli. However, a problem may be posed for some prejudiced viewers since the visual stimuli appear arranged in a clustered manner (ie. the intangible atop the tangible). Also, not only does the visual stimuli's rather precarious source of light (candle) flicker and thus deflect attention from the seemingly displayed now shady objects (which for some modernist viewers should have been the point of focus) but also it sacrilegiously casts shadows on the interior walls of the museum (which for serious modernist and commercial practice is a bane). Faced with these difficulties, the prejudiced modernist viewer may be tempted to conclude among other things that unlike his/her familiar archetypal display model, *Gift Shop* is a confused construction.

Also, since the consciousness of art (as a commodity) in the milieu does not capture the idea of art as something intangible and ephemeral, some modernist viewers may be disappointed to realize that the situation largely consists of (shadows, music, temperature, consciousness candle light etc); which they will rather not want to associate with or purchase (since they do not pass for substances of social and economic capital).

Ultimately, faced with the modernist aspiration of categorizations, some viewers may be thrown into quandary, since they cannot easily decipher whether the situation is either a painting or sculpture; or at all art, more especially as the artist employs some appropriated materials.

Having now concluded that the construction is another failed stunt, modernist viewers may be encouraged to further scrutinize and ridicule the mechanisms which (to them) seek to puppeteer and thus reconstruct their traditional notion of what art is. But the viewer may be surprised to experience that unlike his/her prejudiced notion of what art is, the deconstructed space is a mesmerizing and disorienting one. The dark expanse of the heroic architecture may make one feel lost and insignificant. The resonating whirrs may continue to diffuse an awful creepy feeling. The ambience will continue to be unwelcoming (especially if it is experienced alone). The relentless denial of clear vision may educe achluophobia. The visual stimulus is opaque and does not readily yield to comprehension. It may leave the viewer in an unresolved quest to interpret the musing especially as one may find in the middle of a suffering mass of working people what appears to be a crucifix. The cold coupled with the whirrs together leaches out a lethargic feeling, and this may send the viewer on the low the longer he/she wants to engage with the musing. The musing may bear down upon the viewer and faced with this difficulty, he or she will be forced to make a decision to either retire or continue.

Having failed on several attempts to hold an exhibition (as intended) outside the premise of KNUST, I will resort to the occasion for the (MFA) viva voce. I targeted this period because it will offer me a special kind of spectators; the people I call indices on anything Art as far as KNUST is concerned. Being all male and predominantly rightists (except for a few dissenting soldiers who have broken ranks), this is the caucus whose vote of validity one will need to deem or annul something as art. Structured in a vertical order, the top hierarchy never hesitate to pull rank on any one, if only it will result to quelling

anything that doesn't come out of the crucible. Art is either painting or sculpture here and this is the milieu in which the study was conceived.

Rumors about the viva start making the rounds again, and as it has always been a faux, I will leave the hoax to fade away. However, it is persistent this time and for once it appears there is a bit of substance in it. I will visit a desk of the department to inquire, only to be handed an invite (which is about three weeks late in delivery) to the viva. A hefty amount (see appendix D) demanded of candidates will further hold me up (since I had to do magic here and there to conjure the sum) before I finally get to campus. I acquired some sheets of second hand curtains and a few boxes of candles from Kumasi central market, pack along a laptop, amplifiers and some discarded soda bottles to set up my musing.

I get to campus very early, a day before the commencement of the viva. My intended space (one of the rooms on the lower floor of the museum) is secured, courtesy Mitchael. I haul in the horizontal oriented pieces with the help of Theophilus Mensah, mitchel and Samuel Sampa. I will attempt stopping-up the light openings with the purchased curtains, but this will prove to be unsuccessful. I send Atta (a manual worker at the department) to buy me some opaque polythene sheets and it is this that I segmented into pieces and applied as blinds on all the light penetrable openings with the aid of fasteners; this was done to mimic the museum and department store culture of insulating the space from the hustle and bustle of daily life. I step out of the closed exhibition interior after a series of experiments (figure23-32) and am surprised to realize that it is almost 4:20pm. What really happened today? Time slipped by too fast! Or perhaps I lost my sense of time in the almost sound proof space? I turn off all the lights in the white walled space and am

immediately thrown into pitch-darkness. I am happy things are working well but Atta needs to leave now, so I express my gratitude with a few Ghana Cedis and we part company for the day.

I arrived at the exhibition site quite late. It is November 13, 2010 and the time reads 9:15. I recite my affirmation over and over again but generally am quite anxious. The situation evokes a rather low point in my secondary school days when my first try at reading a series of announcements to the whole school (in the dining hall) was foiled by an irate mob of students who will stop at nothing but have their lunch. Recalling how my rather low pitched voice drowned in the mist of the non receptive mob always sends nervousness and excitement down my spine when I need to do a similar thing (especially for the first time in a new environment). But there's not much to fear for my estimated audience (whose number will be nowhere near the rather 'naughty' hundreds of students of my alma mater) will come in prepared to lend me their ears and thus save me the catcalls and heckling.

I project the shadowy images on the walls, switch on the ceiling fans as-well-as the air conditioners, setup the sound system and now Gregorian's *Mirror Medusa* (from his album *Master of Chant*, 2000) is weaving a hovering sense of the uncanny in the atmosphere. Am caught in the space of the intervention in a quest to put clinical touches to things, I think am done but my viewers haven't arrived yet. Time seems to be shuffling (for it is now almost 3:15pm), and this is giving me too much time to be pessimistic. My set of candles burn out and I hastily change them. As soon as I am done, am alerted of the coming of my viewers. Having waited in the intervention for long, I immediately observe that not only are my viewers all members of the academic staff but also as expected they

are male populated with only one female (who is there as secretary of the graduate school). I recognize for the first time that on entering the intervention, the viewers (or should I say we) have all been stripped off some of our distinctiveness and what remains of our reduced near common forms are darkened blocks of standing images (which seem to be continues with the projected shadowy images on the walls). I exchange courtesies with the group, and we immediately get down to business. Am quite nervous now, my throat is almost filled with anxiety; however I need to spell my concerns. The murky situation wouldn't allow me to see their faces but their reverted attention on me sends chills down my spine. The Gregorian serenade will escort me and I cautiously do a voice-over. However, they wouldn't loosen their reverted attention, and am caught wondering if my voice has drowned out? Or, am not driving-home my point? Quite looms over the space for a while and I think I can read a few nods of approval. I proceed to labour the significance of process (time) and the imperativeness of an active consciousness to the study, but provocative exchanges are not forth flowing and I wonder why people are cautious to engage. Am caught wondering if it is the musing which isn't stimulating enough? Excitedly, I hear a few whispers here and there, and am happy the discussion is warming up from the periphery. Bojawa and Kissiedu (Castro) respectively throw in commendations, and so does a few others. There is a general quite on the substance of the exhibition but a few questions still gives me a glimpse of a good discussion. However, Lee sends a lethal jab to the budding dialogue by inquiring if I could use irrationalism to execute a piece of sculpture. Irrationalism to execute a piece of sculpture! Am taken-aback by the question, it appears he's jesting but he seems serious. Karí'kachä (who has until now been on the quite) appears infuriated. Making references

to surrealism, he quickly points-out that, not only is Lee's question needless but also it is digressionary. Obviously chided, Lee is bashful but he wears a grin as if to mock. But who? Me or the discourse? I don't know! Or Kārī'kachā? I hope not! The atmosphere is slightly charged. Kārī'kachā wants to rejoin, it seems he's choked with something but Cephas interjects (or should I say intervenes) with an exclamation.

He points out that he can't stand the depressing state of what he calls the "slave cave" (i.e. the intervention) any longer and thus requests that the lights should be turned on.

The stronger electric generated lights dissolved not only the darkness, but with it dissolved the projected shadowy images. It clicks me that the candle lights never burned out as I intended it to; obviously I had just lighted new ones when the viewers entered.

With the space lit in the now infamous department store fashion, remarks and admiration for the object start flowing. Off course, this is obviously a familiar territory! Old habits die hard! I am questioned on how I intend making the musing permanent (i.e. securing the tangible pieces from rust and insect attack as if they were the only ingredients of the musing)? But this is indeed revealing of an entrenched notion and approach to appreciating art! It is now apparent that my sermon on fluxes did not fall on a good soil.

The object has had another opportunity to be privileged to the neglect of all the composite factors that synchronized to orchestrate the musing (temperature, music, candle lights, shadowy images, darkness, consciousness etc). Little did my rightist viewers know that in being a product of squatting; a posture deemed irrational and primitive by Western logic; probably because it is employed by most primates for passing excreta, (see figure 44) the musing enacts the scatological. This is not only a horizontal

gesture on the concept of universal homogeneity but also a low blow on modernist practice as enacted by Jackson Pollock's "*Action painting*".

KNUST





Figure 24. Intervened space; in preparation for *Gift Shop* (2008). Michael Manu-Kobia.



Figure 25. In preparation for *Gift Shop* (2008). Michael Manu-Kobia.





Figure 26. Blinding of light vents in preparation for *Gift Shop* (2008). Michael Manu-Kobia.



Figure 27. Experiments in preparation for *Gift Shop* (2008). Michael Manu-Kobia.



Figure 28. Experiments in preparation for *Gift Shop* (2008). Michael Manu-Kobia.



Figure 29. Experiments in preparation for *Gift Shop* (2008). Michael Manu-Kobia.



Figure 30. Experiments in preparation for *Gift Shop* (2008). Michael Manu-Kobia.



Figure 31. Experiments in preparation for *Gift Shop* (2008). Michael Manu-Kobia.



Figure 32. Experiments in preparation for *Gift Shop* (2008). Michael Manu-Kobia.



Figure 33. Ambiance of *Gift Shop* (2008). Michael Manu-Kobia.

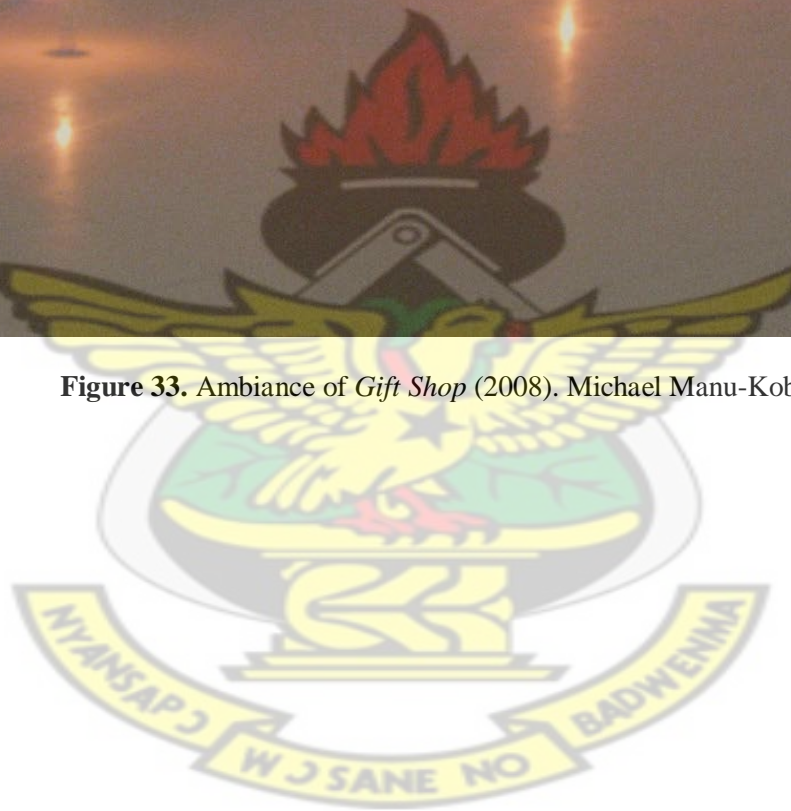
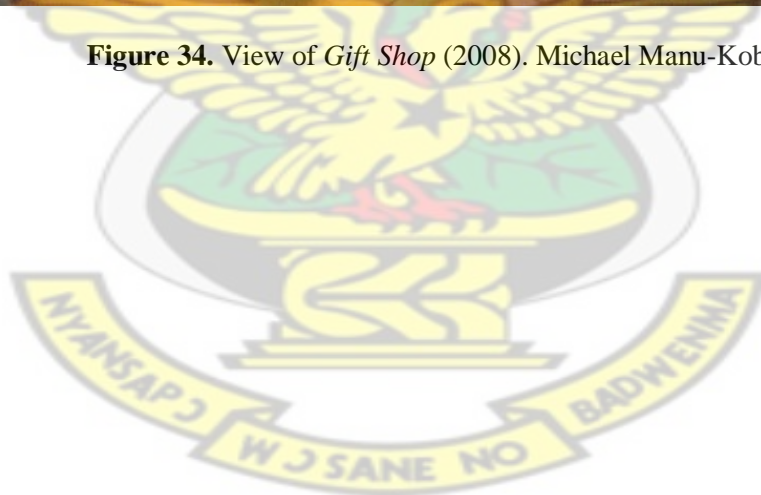




Figure 34. View of *Gift Shop* (2008). Michael Manu-Kobia.



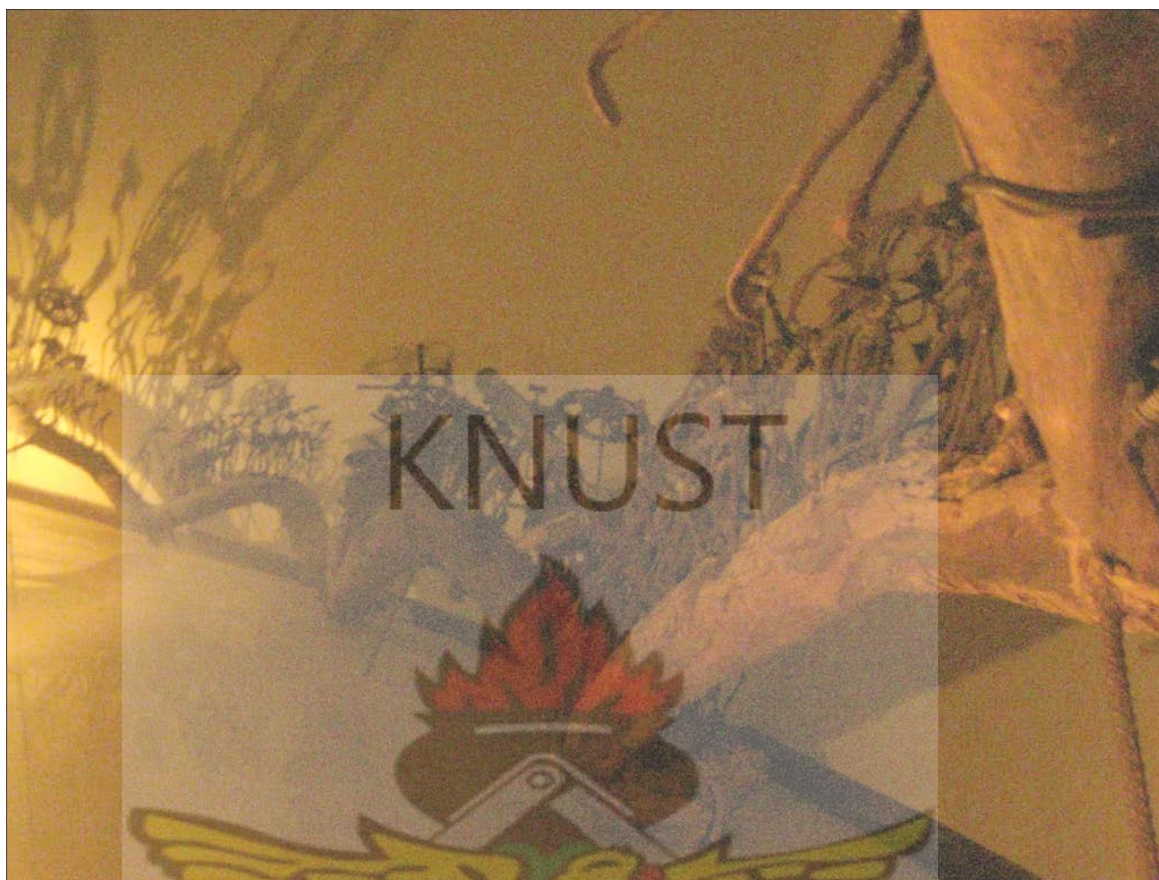


Figure 35. View of *Gift Shop* (2008). Michael Manu-Kobia.

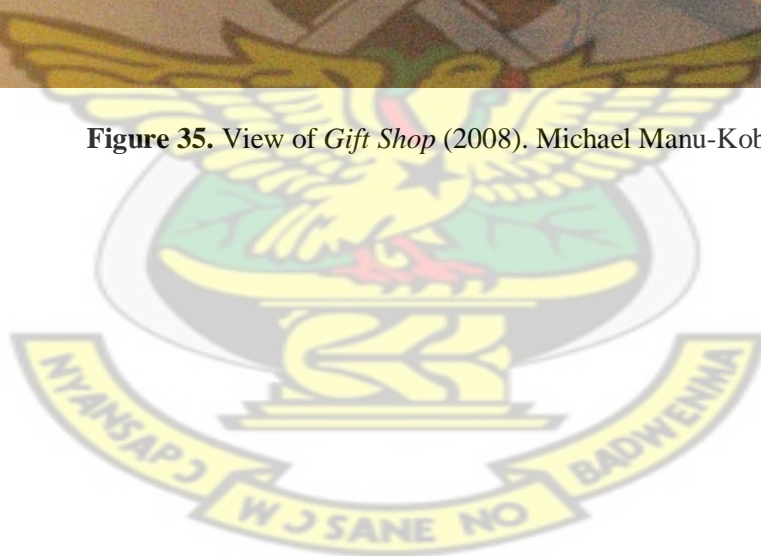




Figure 36. View of *Gift Shop* (2008). Michael Manu-Kobia.

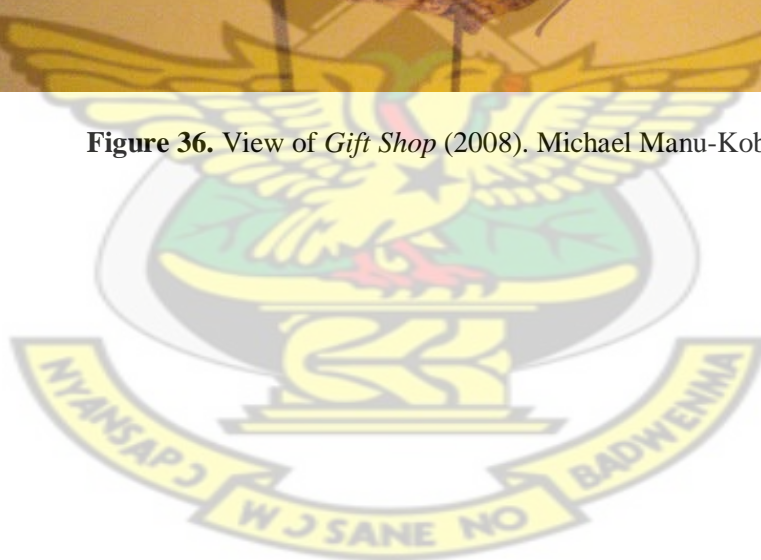




Figure 37. View of *Gift Shop* (2008). Michael Manu-Kobia.

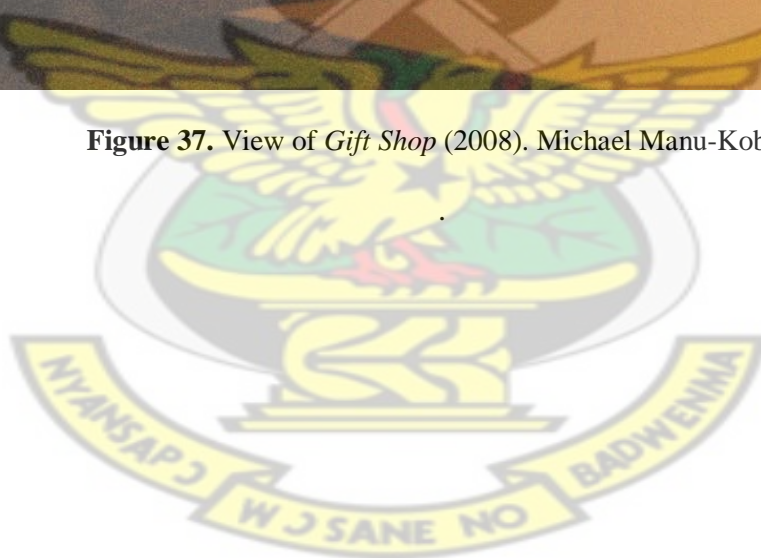




Figure 38. View of *Gift Shop* (2008). Michael Manu-Kobia.

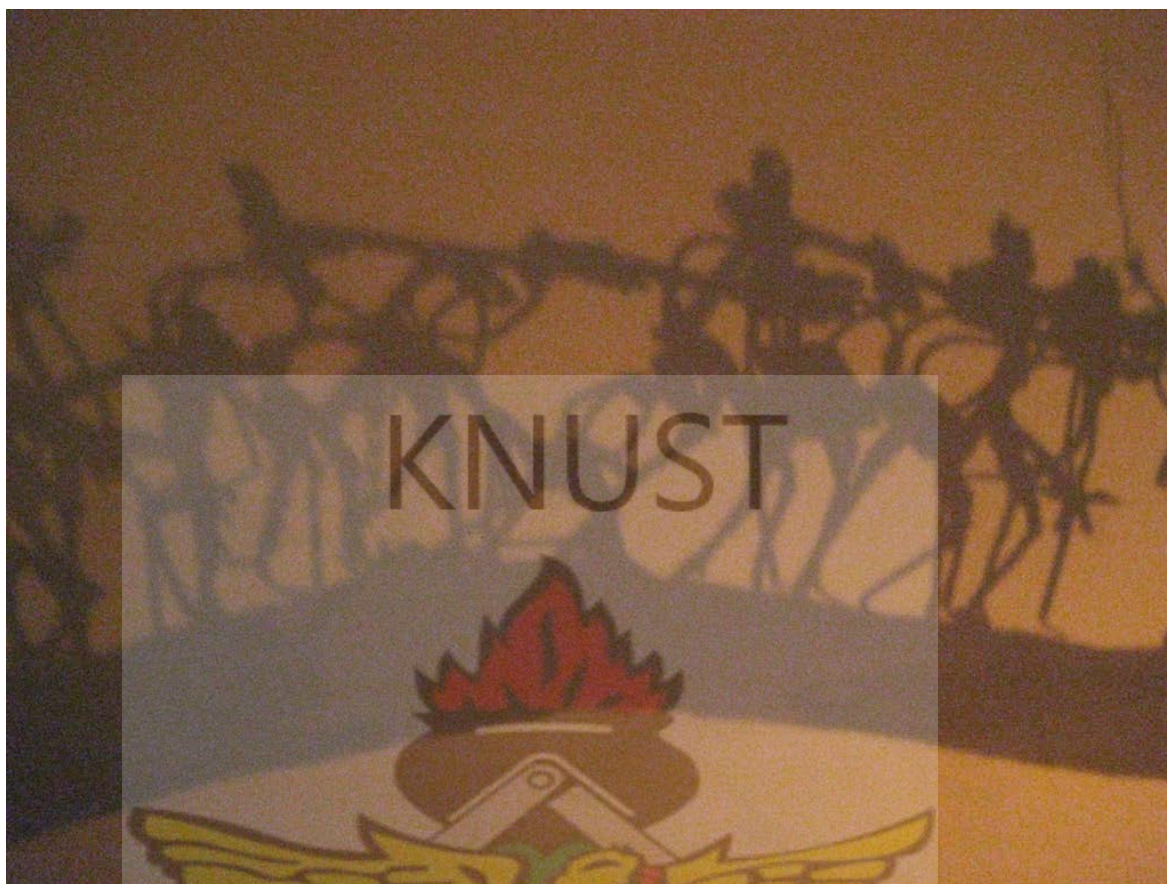


Figure 39. View of *Gift Shop* (2008). Michael Manu-Kobia.

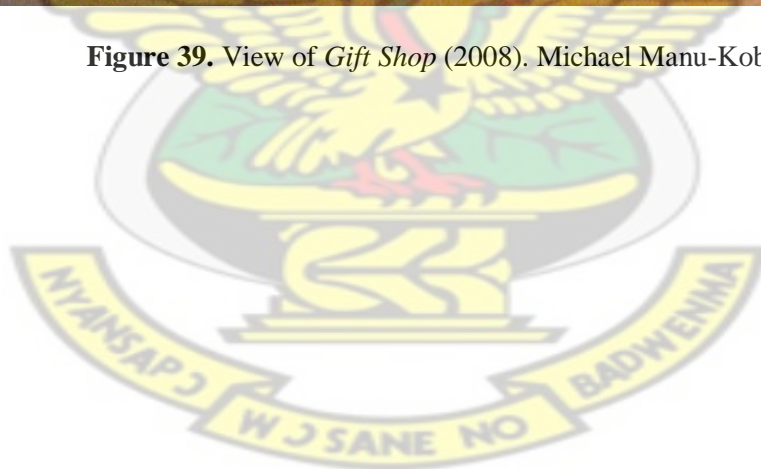




Figure 40. View of *Gift Shop* (2008). Michael Manu-Kobia.

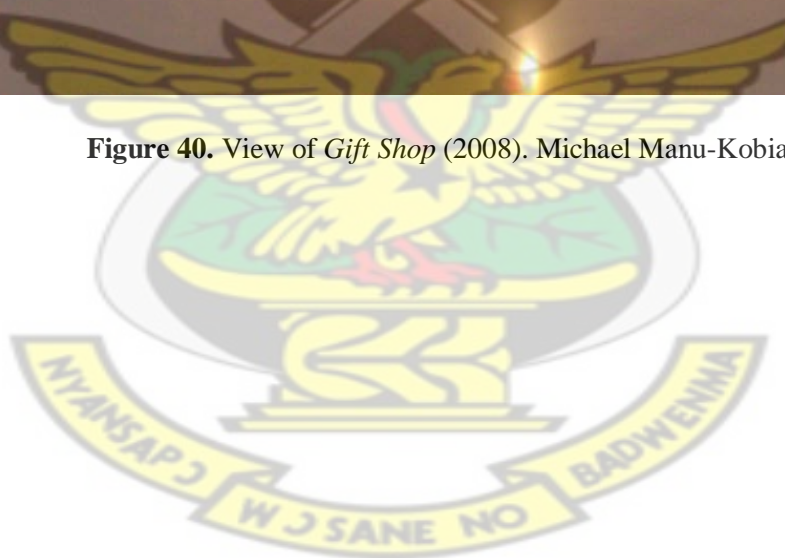




Figure 41. View of *Gift Shop* (2008). Michael Manu-Kobia.



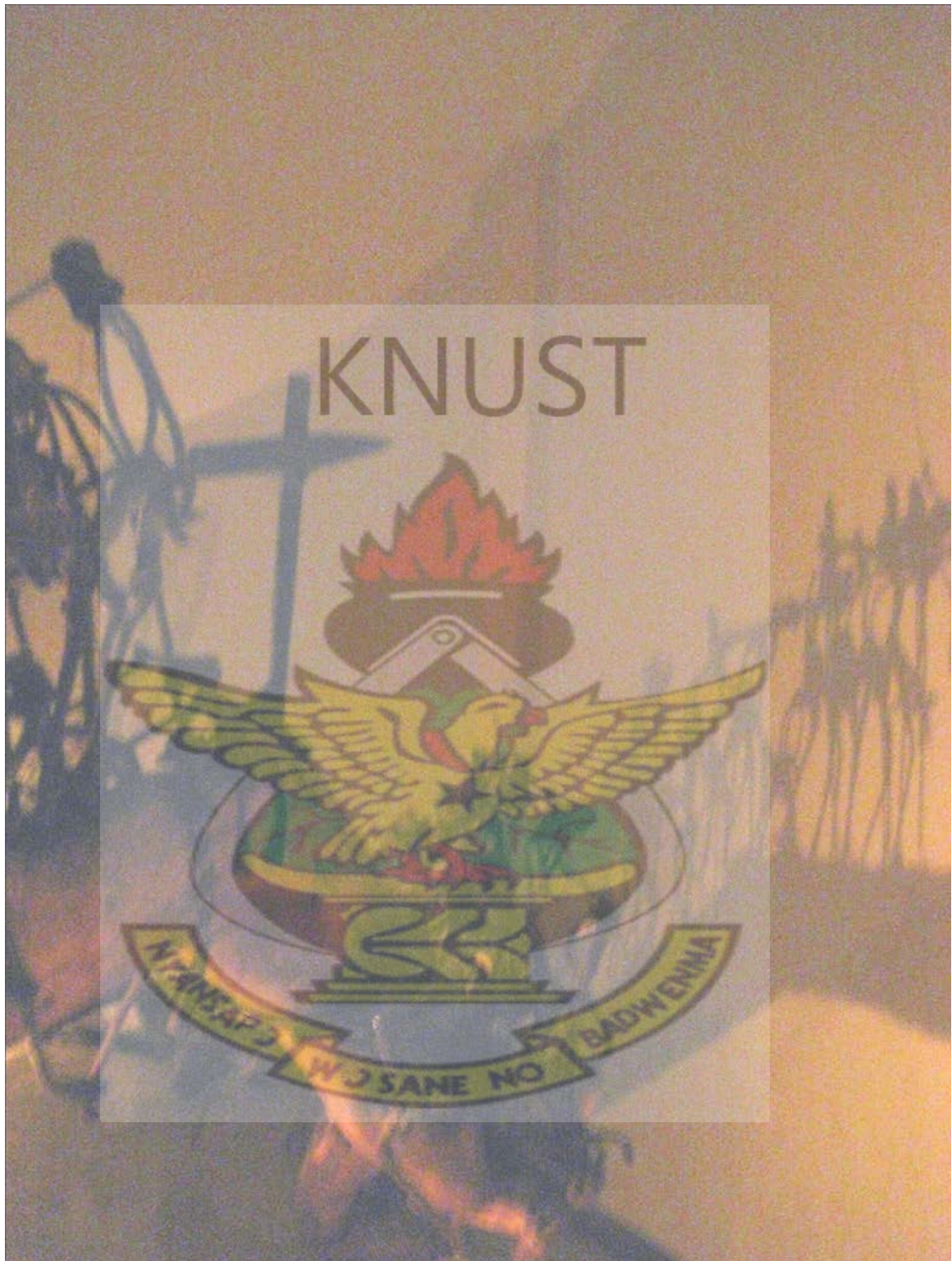


Figure 42. View of *Gift Shop* (2008). Michael Manu-Kobia.



Figure 43. View of *Gift Shop* (2008). Michael Manu-Kobia.

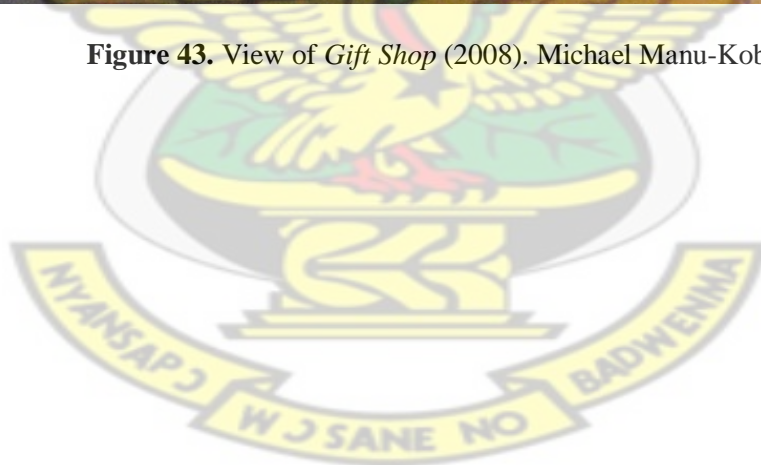




Figure 44. Artist in a crouch during rendition. (2008). Michael Manu-Kobia.

CHAPTER 5

EPILOGUE

The study underscores the fact that art as a concept, is never neutral or given to us naturally. Indeed it is politically charged and thus should not simply be acquiesced to. It also points out that once art opens its self up as an avenue for subtly propagating ideology (whether consciously or unconsciously), it cannot be insulated from pertinent social issues for the reduced and cosmetic approach to practice and appreciation.

By subordinating the object as the locus of inquiry to a multi-sensory situation, the study parody's not only modernist practice but propounds also epistemological, ontological and institutional questions by employing material like music, temperature, darkness, an active consciousness etc (which would not have traditionally passed for art's use). The study thus purges "the paper-thin layer of an autonomous visuality" (Krauss, 1990, p.433) and embraces literal space as a creative space which engenders a multiplicity of meaning (having now been salvaged from the Platonic world beyond the reach of human intervention). "Space therefore [becomes]... not just where things happen; things make space happen" (ODoherty, 1986, p.39).

Subjected to the "Principle of leveling" (krauss 1999, p.20), the study's heterogeneous approach serves as a strategy not only to integrate the otherwise exclusive disciplines but also to demonstrate that, art as a concept stands not as a closed exclusive and immutable discipline (impelled by a single universal ideology), but stands rather as a mutating complex weave which participates in the category of the unbridled. The study thus subverts the puritanical traditional script and returns art to the repressed axis.

Still bearing some vestiges of modernist practice; I will come to realize not only the limitation of the phenomenological approach I elected (after further reading) but also the paradoxical play of installation art against capital. The study thus urges for more nihilist and logically compelling interdisciplinary pursuits which are conscious not only of identity politics but also the neoliberal phenomenon. The study is a journey not a destination.

KNUST



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Appendix A

 **UNIVERSITY HOSPITAL**
KWAME NKRUMAH UNIVERSITY OF SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY
PRESCRIPTION FORM

Name: *Manny Kob*
ID No. *14/04/08*
Date of Attendance *14/04/08*

D Stre
refer Eye specialist
(KATH)




NYANSAPɔ WɔSANE NO BADWENMA

Prescription Form and Report

Appendix B



Undergraduate Certificate

Appendix C



... but confrontation evokes anxiety
cos, it is a tempering with of their calm
An agitation of the unruly heavy-eyed spirits.
A provocation of their infamous dreaded fury

It is a conflict with the 'righteous'
An enactment of the sacrilegious, cos they are outrageous
It can be frightening, yet it may be worth fighting
It could be humiliating, yet it can be emancipating...

... but confrontation evokes anxiety
cos it is a tempering with of their calm
An agitation of their infamous dreaded fury

It is a conflict with the 'righteous'
An enactment of the sacrilegious, cos they are outrageous.
It can be frightening, yet it may be worth fighting
A provocation of their infamous dreaded fury
It could be humiliating, yet it can be emancipating...

... but confrontation evokes anxiety
cos it is a tempering with of their calm
An agitation of the unruly heavy-eyed spirits
A provocation of their infamous dreaded fury.

It is a conflict with the 'righteous'
An enactment of the sacrilegious, cos they are outrageous
It can be frightening, yet it may be worth fighting.
It could be humiliating, yet it can be emancipating...



Appendix D



DEPARTMENT OF PAINTING AND SCULPTURE

FACULTY OF FINE ART

COLLEGE OF ART AND SOCIAL SCIENCES

KWAME NKRUMAH UNIVERSITY OF SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY

Our Ref: CASS/PSD

Your Ref:

Mr. Cephas Agbemenu,
Department of Fine Art,
P.O. BOX 43844, NAIROBI 00100,
KENYA.

P. O. BOX UP 50
Kumasi - Ghana
West Africa
Tel: 233-51-62150

13th September, 2010

MFA THESIS DEFENCE – FIFTEEN (15) CANDIDATES

I write to invite you for the Oral Examination of the under listed Fifteen (15) **MFA Candidates**, whose theses you have assessed as External Examiner, scheduled for **Wednesday 13th and Thursday, 14th October, 2010, at 9.00 am., at the Department of Painting and Sculpture**

First Batch – 13-10-10

1. ABRAHAM, EBENEZER KOW
2. ADJA-KOADEDE, MOKPOKPO
3. ADJARE, EMMANUEL AMOAKO
4. ADOE, VICTORIA SOPHIA (Ms.)
5. ATTAH, PROSPER KOMLA
6. BAAH, PAA KWAME JNR.
7. DOMI, PAPA YAW
8. MANU-KOBIA, MICHAEL

Second Batch – 14-10-10

9. MENSAH, SAMUEL BRUCE
10. MENSAH, THEOPHILUS KWESI
11. NORVOR, VINCENT KWAKU
12. SAMPAH, SAMUEL NII ADJAMAH
13. SARPONG, FRANK AMPADU
14. TETTEH, MITCHEL
15. TURKSON, RICHARD JOJO

I will therefore appreciate your urgent response to this letter, indicating your readiness for the exercise on the above dates which have already been approved by the School of Graduate Studies

By copies of this letter, the internal examiners concerned as well as the students involved, are being invited to attend the Viva Voce, accordingly.

Each candidate is expected to pay **One Hundred Ghana Cedis (Gh¢100.00)** towards this academic exercise.

Thank you very much.

Yours sincerely,

GODFRED ANNUM
HEAD OF DEPARTMENT

cc: Provost, CASS
Dean, School of Graduate Studies
Dean, FOA
All Examiners and **Students Concerned**
Examinations Officer/MFA Co-ordinator

Invite to Viva Voce

KNUST

