



Interview Ibrahim Mahama

Ibrahim Mahama (b. Tamale, 1987) works with found and transformed materials to examine issues of migration, trade and globalisation. His large-scale installations bring together historic and everyday objects to question the interweaving of labour, resources and unjust social conditions. Mahama's new installation – *Garden of Scars* – includes sculpture, sound, and film. It addresses the entangled history of Amsterdam and Ghana, where Mahama has established numerous cultural and social projects offering employment and creative education to local people. Prior to the opening of the exhibition, Mahama spoke with Oude Kerk curator Marianna van der Zwaag and Colin Sterling (University of Amsterdam) about the project.

Colin Sterling: How did this collaboration come about? What was the initial spark for the project?

Marianna van der Zwaag: Against the backdrop of the immense global shifts of our time, we invite artists from a non-European context to reflect on and work with the heritage of Oude Kerk, offering a more global perspective. Ibrahim impressed at the 2015 Venice Biennale with *Out of Bounds*: the high walls of the Arsenale were papered with burlap bags sewn together.



Visitors walked through an endless corridor, where the company logos, handwritten names and addresses, remnants of coal, rice, grease and sweat, damage spots, decorations and repairs on the bags depicted histories of exclusion and poverty.



Two years later, in 2017, we also saw his work at Documenta in Kassel. It was in the winter of 2019 that we invited Ibrahim and he first visited the Oude Kerk.

CS: Can you remember your first impressions of the space Ibrahim? How did you feel walking into the church? It's quite a powerful environment, I think.

Ibrahim Mahama: Yes, very powerful. It was very intimidating. I'm not typically modest with the kind of work that I produce, but the space is very charged. It has its own beauty, and you don't want the work to be too dominant. That was one thing that I was very mindful about. Some of us are not just making art to be shown in galleries, but to explore the relationship between the work and the space.

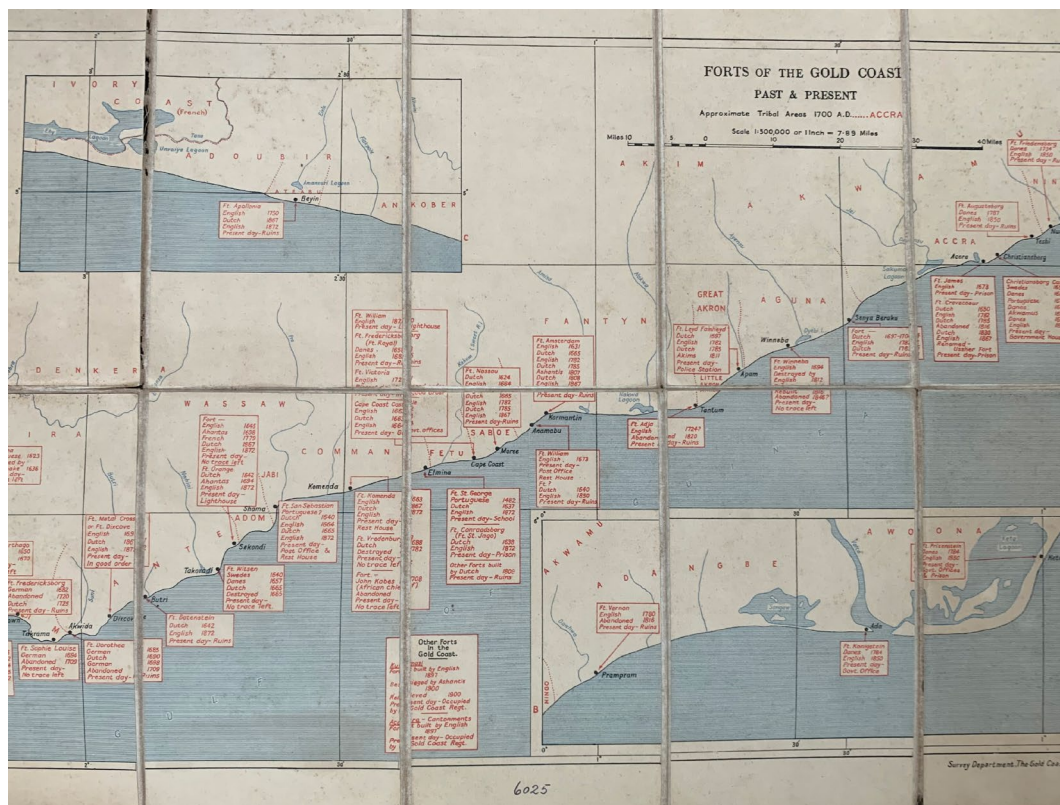


MvdZ: Every artist navigates the building in a different way, focusing on different elements, asking different questions. And so, these first visits always give a lot of information, and it's nice to see how installations develop from this initial idea.

CS: Which elements of the building spoke to you most directly on the first visit? Were you immediately drawn to certain things?

IM: One was the floor itself, the texture of the floor. And secondly, the composition of the space. The building was constructed over an extended period of time; its architecture wasn't defined from the beginning. Although the building comes together holistically, there are certain parts that are asymmetrical. Many of the works I've done previously engaged with

modernist structures, which are very symmetrical. In this building there are so many elements of surprise: the smell, the way light plays within the space. Given this, I realised it would be important to focus on the floor, looking at the relationship between the floor and the history of the church, as well as the relationship between what the building represents and other spaces geographically.



CS: What do you aim to highlight by focusing on the floor in this way?

IM: It is really about the condensation of history. For this work we took moulds from the floor which we bought together with materials in Ghana that might have been

exported from Europe for building forts and castles four or five hundred years ago. We mixed them together with soil and cement, building these modern tombstones. They look very polished.



But within them there is so much mixing, in terms of the processes that have gone into it, and the relationship between the moulds taken from Amsterdam and brought to Ghana, to cast these stones which are then brought back to Amsterdam. I was really looking at the transfer of forms from one place to the other, knowing that historically we've shared so much. The moulds taken from the floor, which are inhabited with all these ghosts, were taken to a place where actions were carried out that produced their own ghosts. And now we are combining these ghosts and bringing them back into these spaces for a material confrontation. For me,

it's not so much about the people buried here. It's more about the relationship between the forms. The relationship between the mould touching the floor in the Oude Kerk where people have stepped on it over time, and it going to West Africa. It's not so much a question of slavery or exploitation; it's more about the material conversation, that is where I want the work to start from.

CS: You often work with everyday materials and use them in new ways, but here you're dealing with a place that is already very monumental and spectacular. Is this bringing together of materials a way of showing that these spectacular places also impact on everyday lives and histories?

IM: Yes, I think so. If you were to break the building down into molecular parts, every single atom within this church has so much to tell. There should be a way to teleport people from the building now to the geological formation of its materials. It's almost like the architecture created a time vault for different scenarios and compositions to happen. The social conditions are important, but I think that in art it's a bit of an injustice when we reduce it to that; there's a lack of respect for the materials that have come together to produce this object that we are witnessing.



CS: Marianna, I know that the conservation and heritage of Oude Kerk is an important part of how you programme the space. How does this expand your idea of the heritage of Oude Kerk, to think of the geologic?

MvdZ: I think it is interesting, also the use of the word 'witnessing'. Stepping into places like Oude Kerk is stepping into history, it is about witnessing. The various artist installations that have emerged here in recent years add to this, each time producing different scenarios and compositions that include fragments of time hidden within the object that is Oude Kerk. Thus, witnessing the past inside the present and enabling visitors to think differently about how to move forward.

CS: Do you see your work playing a similar role, Ibrahim, integrating time into the space, perhaps in a different way?



IM: Yes, certainly. I think time is one of the most essential elements within this whole work. I'm trying as much as possible to use very simple gestures. But – here's a confession – it's one of the most difficult works I've ever produced. It's like building a house. And we built it almost in the same way as the brutalist silos in Ghana built by the Russians. This is something that was important to me because the colonial period in which the Dutch, Portuguese and British were in Ghana is very different from the time in which the Eastern Europeans were there. Where the centuries before were geared towards material exploitation, the projects of Polish, Yugoslavian and Russian architects involved more economic independence programmes. So those two histories and different timelines are also encapsulated

within the work. Some of the moulds are taken from cemeteries in Ghana, including the Russian cemetery in Tamale. Taking soil from those places, or the casts of the tombstones within those spaces, and combining them with the moulds from the Oude Kerk is very important. It allows us to go back and forth between different histories. One history that was clearly involved in exploitation and another that was more about economic and political independence, and how this reshaped the consciousness of an entire generation.



CS: How do you imagine visitors interacting with the installation?

IM: There are different elements within the exhibition. There are the tombstones on the ground, which will have details of soil and stones. An installation of bats

will hang from the beams. And then we have a sound installation, recorded from the voids of some of the architecture, which is very subtle within the church. Finally, we have the film, which looks at the practicality of making the work itself, especially transporting materials from one space to the other. I think generally people will experience it as they would a traditional exhibition, but they might have to take a bit more time to navigate between the elements. I think generally people will experience it as they would a traditional exhibition, but they might have to take a bit more time to navigate between the elements. I don't know. I'm curious. It's the first time I've done a work like this, so I'm curious to see what becomes of it.



CS: What are your expectations, Marianna?

MvdZ: It will be interesting to see what will happen. Hopefully it will encourage visitors to think about the Oude Kerk in relation to the global histories and connections Ibrahim mentions, as well as offering them a way to understand the weight of the past in a building like this. I expect it to be quite disorienting, but in a productive way.

CS: You mentioned ‘teleportation’ earlier, Ibrahim, that you’re somehow opening portals to other places and times in the project. Do you see each of the monuments as a portal, or the work as a whole as a portal?

IM: I think the various elements are portals in themselves. And the church itself is a portal. And the work as a total is also another portal. There are so many different techniques which have been used in producing these different works that are coming together. Even if the objects were in a gallery space, they would be quite special just in themselves. Being in the church makes it even more interesting. It makes it a lot more significant with regards to how the material formations come together.

CS: The title of the work is *Garden of Scars*. A garden obviously connotes ideas of nature,

or at least a human managed natural environment. How do you see this as a garden?

IM: For me, the garden is the entire idea of making the work in itself. Then taking various soil materials that might be used for growing food, and using them instead to make these objects that are then brought back to this space. When I think of a garden, it's not really about organic materials. The garden also connotes the composition that is coming together with the bats and everything else. The idea is that we can bring different histories together. This time around it's a garden that is not meant to grow anything but is instead toxic. these different works that are coming together. Even if the objects were in a gallery space, they would be quite special just in themselves.

MvdZ: For visitors the Oude Kerk is a connection to times that came before their own lives. It makes sense that contemporary artists add to this, incorporating the heritage of Oude Kerk into the present, so relations are made visible for people to think about, individually or collectively, into the future.

CS: How do you see your work speaking to that issue of shaping the future together or shaping the future differently?

IM: At the end of the day, we all have a collective history. We constantly have to be reminded about what happened in the past and what can happen in the future. The idea of collectivity is important, now more than ever. The idea of sharing resources instead of the constant exploitation of each other and the environment, which is causing so much disruption around the world. For me it's important that the work offers a way to reflect on how we can think differently about a future that is yet to manifest itself. The objects are a reminder of the formation of time. We know time is not something static. Though most of this work is coming from a more historic timeline, it's also important to project this into the future to influence actions we might take to change our current situation.

