

## Research Article

# “Who Says We Shall Not”: Revealing Artistic and Cultural Resilience in Times of a Global Pandemic

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**ORCID**Samuel Nortey: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-096-7338>**Abstract.**

Ama Ata Aidoo famously stated, “Who says we shall not survive among these turbines?” (c 1964 – 1965). This paper looks at revealing artistic and cultural resilience in times of global pandemics. In what ways could our much-needed return to indigenous ways of social, cultural and ecological engagement with the environment initiate sustainable practices? In this paper, I focus on a diversity of contemporary art concerns, allied practices that anticipate emergent formats, media, transformative futures, and translation configurations. I make recourse to collaborations that bring resilience, such as Gudskul (Jakarta) and blaxTARLINES KUMASI. Through a critical reading of the innovative approaches to cultural resilience in art, this study is built on the lessons we can garner from the sort of resilience that characterizes such audacious projects embarked on by extremophile collectives such as blaxTARLINES and Gudskul. A model is developed as a guide to acquainting ourselves with strategies that would provoke us to a more responsible practice and existence. Art can be more resilient and reach contested spaces if we think of synergies and inclusivity.

**Keywords:** resilience, contemporary art, pandemic, sustainable practices

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Iranian movie *Life Goes On*, directed by Abbas Kiarostami in 1992, was based on the 1990 earthquake in Iran that killed over 30,000 people. In this second movie by Abbas Kiarostami, he searched for stars from his first movie, *Where is the friends home*, who have been devastated by the earthquake. It portrays how turbulence, such as earthquakes, takes away the foundations of projects we have toiled to build for years. The cast in the first movie was needed for the second episode. However, turbulent times destroyed or scattered the foundation that has been built over the years. The situation highlights how resilient we should be in our practice. This reference to the movie finds

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expression in Ama Ata Aidoo's poem *Cornfields in Accra*, which reflects resilience in moments of crisis. In that epithet, the issue of resilience was demonstrated through planting corn on land that is petrol filled, all kinds of metal scraps, and skeletons of cars that have destroyed the fertility of the soil. Can the corn be resilient to grow in such a contaminated soil condition? Earthquakes and other attacks have hit the world, the latest being the covid-19 pandemic. The pandemic is causing havoc and has affected even the most robust economy, art, and cultural spaces. Industries have gone down as well as the loss of jobs. Indeed, it has been a challenging and dark time for the present generation.

However, in turbulent times, some artists have used objects from wars or materials used during pandemic periods in their artistic productions. Nortey et al. [1] mentioned how artists such as Silvestrio Siteo, Cristovao Canhavato, and many others derived inspiration from reflections on the Mozambique War and decommissioned weapons used in the war to provide hope and artistic transformation. Though these turbulent times inspired artists and the like, how resilient has our art been within these turbulent times? The current covid-19 pandemic appears to have provided more damage and questioned the resiliency of our art practices. This study is hinged on the lessons we can garner from the resilience that characterizes our art production, such as audacious projects embarked on by extremophile collectives such as blaxTARLINES KUMASI and Ruan-grupa's Gudskul. Within these pandemic crises, can our ethical, artistic practices ensure a more holistic approach to health in the burgeoning future to surmount such crises as those that the COVID-19 pandemic is wrecking the world? What possible insights would be revealed to us when we acquaint ourselves with strategies of resilience that would provoke us to a more responsible practice and existence?

In this paper, I focus on art in a traditional and contemporary space that communicates and engages complex ideas, inspires, questions, and connects to society.

## 2. METHODS

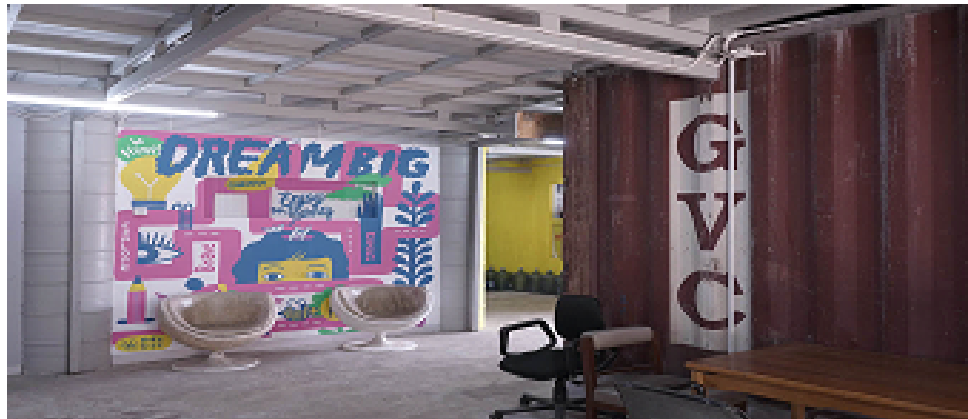
This study employed heuristic and argumentative approaches in examining how resilient art can be in the face of turbulence. It engages exhibitions such as those organized by the blaxTARLINES KUMASI collective in the Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology (KNUST) via the critical reading of how artists have shaped their works towards resilience, endurance, or tackling of hegemonic histories. Before we can build

resilience in our art practice and artworks towards endemicity, we, first and foremost, need to examine the resilience of the pandemic. Via a critical reading of the innovative approaches to cultural resilience in art, this study is primarily argumentative.

### 3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

#### 3.1. Honing Resilience: Lessons from blaxTARLINES KUMASI and Gudskul Project

blaxTARLINES KUMASI has often been described by its loosely constituted membership as a vibrant space for facilitating independent artistic practices in contemporary art. The Department of Painting and Sculpture of the Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology (KNUST) Kumasi hosts the project. At the core of blaxTARLINES KUMASI's activities are the notions of inter-dependence, multiplicity, economic emancipation, equality of intellect, and an investigation of how to wrestle with the challenges of our times, particularly those debilitating effects of colonialism, exploitation, and emergent crises like the COVID-19 pandemic, amongst several others. The blaxTARLINES experiment is relevant because the current art world, according to Akoi-Jackson, "cannot be trusted to lead us out of the precarity" that has resulted from its complicity with capitalism and Neo-Liberalism. What this pedagogic and pragmatic experiment does is to, quite like Ruangrupa's Gudskul project, propose "possible alternative models of engagement" [2] with our present realities. A few photographs (figures 1-3) from a selection of exhibitions organized by blaxTARLINES and projects by Gudskul included in this text speak to some of the ideas discussed so far. It is little wonder that Gudskul invited blaxTARLINES KUMASI as part of its Lumbung community together with the Staedtschule, Frankfurt, for Documenta 15 in Kassel, Germany. In critically situating their innovative experimentations in resilience work, Akoi-Jackson [3] has maintained that blaxTARLINES KUMASI can arguably be considered in Nicolas Bourriaud's idea of a "hubschool," [4]. In this case, blaxTARLINES inhabits a conceptual space that becomes, in Akoi-Jackson's terms: "[a] *non-static space of contingent research*, [a] *turbulent laboratory of failure and success in dialectical measure* and [an] *effervescent space of criticality and context*" [2].



**Figure 1:** Va-Bene Elikem Fiatsi. Durational Performance. Image(c) blaxTARLINES KUMASI.



**Figure 2:** Image from the Ruangrupa Gudskul campus with repurposed shipping containers as classroom. Ruangrupa's projects have shown resilience in times of political adversity and artistic censorship.

### 3.2. My Model of Building Resilience in Art Practice

To build resilience in art, artists must look at how to produce cross-genre works simultaneously tied to traditions. Nortey et al. [1] commented that artists whose works are inspired by traditions provide substantial archives of exchange and resilience. Such works become metaphors that mirror the paradoxes of society and therefore reflect social structures and the critique of these very structures. Works produced collaboratively through community engagements, whether small or large, tend to garner conceptual longevity and remain in the collective consciousness. We must be willing to go beyond our particular genres or individual practices to create more vibrant artworks. Such practices ensure and also believe that art's foundations are strengthened against events such as 'lockdowns' or pandemics. A case in point is the Ibrahim Mahama's general practice that involves mobilization of diversities of communities, which speaks volumes of how the various ethnic groups in Ghana are connected to exporting cocoa and exploiting labour and the critique of the failures of political and economic experiments in the country.

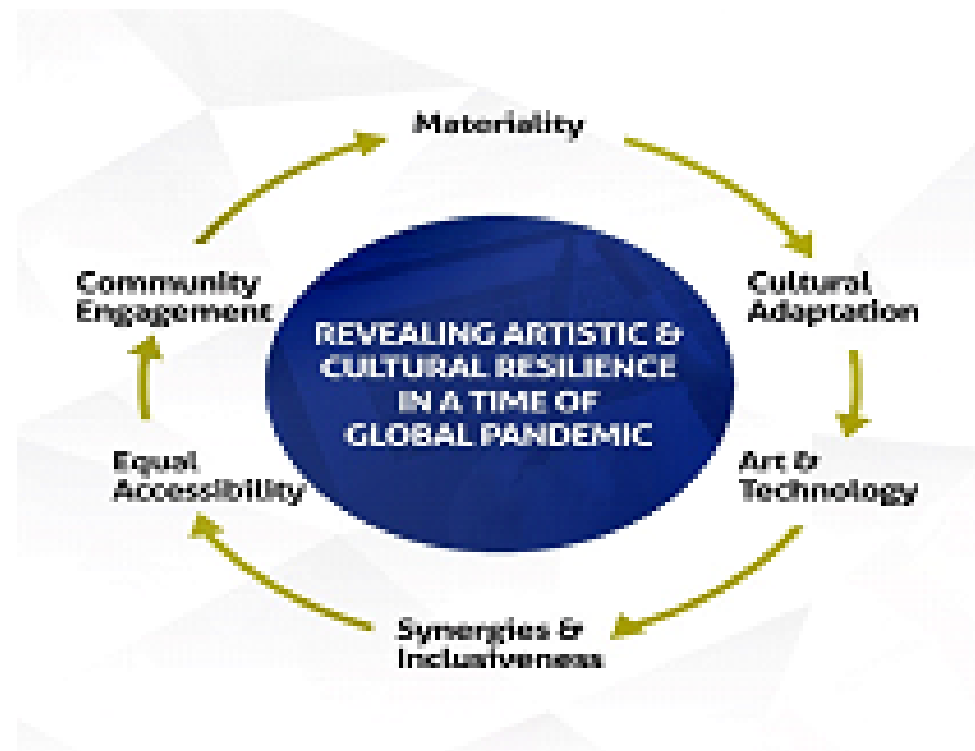
In times of crisis, as we have mainly seen with the outbreak of the COVID-pandemic, we noted that collaborations brought much resilience to our practices. Even long before the pandemic, artists like Andy Warhol and Jean-Michel Basquiat engaged in many collaborations in such projects as *Paramount Artwork*. Before the pandemic, innovative projects such as blaxTARLINES KUMASI and the Indonesian collective Ruangrupa's Gudskul Art were seen. Collective and Ecosystem Studies speak to community building, focused on working with art collectives to study and teach collaborative and sustainable practices. Through experimental dialogue and experience-based learning, we have continually sought to foster resilience against hegemony, political oppression, or artistic censorship. We are informed that Gudskul thrives on the deep cultural value of Indonesia and builds on collectives inspired by the collective cultural practice of *lumbung* (the rice barn). This concept is what Ruangrupa brought to their collective curatorial proposition for Documenta 15.

Building resilience in our art, design, and education is expedient for our practice. Based on theories and practices of contemporary art and the various observations made before the pandemic and exhibition histories, a model is proposed and presented in Fig. 3. The developed model proposes equal accessibility, cultural adaptation, materiality, community engagement, synergies, inclusiveness, art, and technology. This model incorporates ethical and artistic practices ensure a more holistic approach to future practice to surmount such crises as those that the COVID-19 pandemic.

### 3.2.1. Equal Accessibility towards Resiliency

We need equal accessibility in our practice if we desire resiliency in art, design and education. Several buildings, especially in sub-saharan Africa, do not provide equal accessibility to users. Imagine a building without the provision of access space for a wheelchair user. How would one access the conference or exhibition space up there on a building or the washroom within the building? How can such a building be resilient in times of turbulence? When we do not provide equal accessibility in our art, design and education, we cut off a significant majority of our community from interacting with our practice. We need to strategize our practice to hone equal accessibility.

Are we exhibiting in spaces that gives them a challenge to interact with our works and teachings? If we desire resiliency in our practice in times of pandemic and turbulence, then we have to rethink where we install our work. Just as Keith Haring puts it “the



**Figure 3:** Proposed model for building resilience in Art. Source: Samuel Nortey.

public has a right to art/the public is being ignored by most contemporary art. Art is for everybody” [5]. As artists and educators, our practice must cut through all levels of people. And, these are strategies we can acquaint ourselves with towards a more resilient practice.

### 3.2.2. Building Resilience through Community Engagement

Community engagement helps to promote and strengthen cross-cultural experiences. The essence of community engagement is to share experiences and learn from each other. Therefore, when our practices engage the community, experiences and knowledge are shared, improving the outcome of whatever is produced or taught. We are assured of resilience whenever our artworks fall on solid social connections in production. The pandemic was fought through engagements of diverse backgrounds, bringing diverse expertise on board to address the issue.

Similarly, there are positive results when art and cultural issues are discussed collectively by engaging the community. Therefore, we need to have our work in the public or marketplaces, providing a vital ground for community engagement. We currently tend to dwell more on beauty than on providing a public space for communities to interact

with what we do. If we desire resilience in our practice, we must begin to build our practice by promoting opportunities for constructive interaction among communities.

Ibrahim Mahama, the Ghanaian contemporary artist, at his Savanna Centre for Contemporary Art provides the opportunity for community members to come over to his space to interact with his works. In so doing, Mahama involves these visitors as part of the production process. The visitors also feel they own the work because there is a sense of fulfillment that they are part of the artist's artwork. If our artworks can reach out to the youth and children in our communities, they will follow our practice. When the community accepts what we do and produce, artists will not be hard hit when we have pandemics and turbulent times.

### 3.2.3. Materiality and Resilience

One key thing to review in our design, art, and education is our materiality. Materials play an indispensable role in our art production, our designs' realization, and our teaching or education. How have we reviewed our materiality? Are we still stacked to formats and traditions? A ceramist must use clay; a sculptor must use wood or clay; and a textile artist a fabric? Bodjawah et al. [6] argued in favour of going beyond just the physical matter and the issue of matching a discipline with a particular material. Bodjawah. The authors called for media heteronomy and expansion of the practice.

To remain resilient, artists must look beyond established formats and media and repurpose materials for art making and teaching. Just as painting was set free from the bondage of representation with the advent of photographic technology's ability to document and record versions of reality, art is now liberated from expectations of labour-intensive processes. Furthermore, the demand is that works of art display levels of material mastery [7] Ibrahim Mahama identifies materiality as key in his art practice by putting decommissioning jute sacks together in cloaking facades and buildings worldwide. The materials Mahama used are rich in the history of cocoa exportation from Ghana to Europe, and these sacks depict the rich Ghanaian history. These materials, therefore, become an archive for social commentary, just as Nortey et al. [1] put it, exposes and preserves the people's culture and histories and examines the government's management of resources through the exportation of national commodities such as cocoa. According to Ohene-Ayeh and Akoi-Jackson [3] they juxtaposed materiality and history. They pushed the aesthetics of these jute sacks through political lenses

with architectural sites, brings it into a stronger relationship between work and viewers. Indeed, such provocative works become resilient because viewers can interact and find meanings and answers to their rich history through materiality.

### **3.2.4. Building Resilience in Art and Technology**

One way of ensuring resiliency in our artwork is by incorporating technology and scientific knowledge in our artwork. Applying these innovations would include a further understanding of the materials we use in producing our works. Just as art is helping shape the thoughts of the world, so is technology as well. To strengthen our resilience practice, bring art and technology together to provide new aesthetics and broaden our perceptions. Are our artworks resilient to withstand the turbines and pandemics such as what the covid-19 wrecked on the world? The artist must begin to look at art and technology to build resilience in the art to strengthen resiliency. We can access and be part of ongoing exhibitions and also interact with works all over the works. Benjamin Walter [8] suggested that we extensively explore opportunities to integrate both the old and the new, digital imaging, robotics, and second life, from bitcoins to the fusion of digital and analog production strategies. There is technology even in the traditional practice, just as Nortey et al. [9] there is the need to reconfigure our installation and experimentation and relate to today's technologies.

### **3.2.5. Identifying Synergies and Inclusiveness towards Resilience in Art making**

Identifying synergies and inclusiveness bring resilience to practice — the need to collaborate and include as many diverse backgrounds as possible cannot be overemphasized in solving global challenges. Knowledge from various fields enable us to re-examine different thoughts and ideas. For example, the covid-19 pandemic brought the world together to provide solutions to stop the spread of the pandemic. Experts from different countries, experiments from diverse professionals, teams from different backgrounds came together to fight a seemingly health issue, a pandemic. These are clear examples of synergies and inclusiveness that we need to have in our art making and teaching practices. For example, Nortey and Bodjawah [10] collaborated with indigenous potters on the boundaries between craft and design and innovations in pottery making in Afari, a pottery town in the Ashanti region of Ghana. This synergy produced some



resilience for these indigenous potters as their initial products were receiving lower demands comparatively. The synergy and inclusiveness produced creative thinking and innovations. Subsequently, their works are in high demand while maintaining cultural consciousness.

### 3.2.6. Cultural Adaptation and Resilience

Just as this article alludes to Ama Ata Aidoo's poem *Cornfields in Accra* as a prophetic description of the city of Accra's resilience, so can one say of Shakespeare that he was an apt adaptor of myths and narratives of his milieu into artistic and cultural products for public consumption? Almost all his works were based on the harnessing of existing sources. We fundamentally need to adapt. Why must we separate traditional or indigenous art from what transpires in contemporary art space when the two could be adapted to exciting ends? Our artworks have deeper meanings when we do have them based on cultural adaptations.

For a resilient practice in today's world, we need to adapt beyond our regions of habitation. More often than not, artists in the global south tend to accept the ideals of Western art, and this cripples the natural flow and skills of the artist in the global south. Therefore, cultural adaptation becomes very crucial, and one must go beyond Westernization in art practice.

## 4. CONCLUSION

The discussion has revealed that to make art resilient and capable of becoming endemic, our art practice must be critically connected to and reflective of the culture of the community. If our art has to be resilient, we need to strengthen partnerships like Gudskul and blaxTARLINES are currently doing. Through partnership and cross-fertilization of ideas, our arts can withstand any turbulence and pandemic such as COVID-19. Artists must begin to build, renovate, innovate, conceptualize, decontextualize, democratize, recontextualize and provoke conversations that would lead to resiliency in the art. Moreover, when we build resilience in our art, then shall we finally, together with Ama Ata Aidoo say:

Finally,

*When we have reaped, gleaned and threshed our corn,*

*And roasted it aromatic – that is, after office hours on Saturdays and throughout the whole of Sunday –*

*We shall sit firmly on our buttocks and plant our feet on the earth.*

*Then we shall ask to see him.*

*Who says we shall not survive among these turbines.*

*Who says we shall not survive among the turbines? (Aidoo 1964).*

By evoking such a bold stance as proposed by Aidoo, we could make our art resilient towards endemicity. We can argue that the declaration readily captures the essence of the sort of resilience that we witnessed via the arts when the global COVID-19 pandemic most encumbered us. Art can be more resilient and reach contested spaces if we consider synergies and inclusivity.

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