

TRANSCRIPT

Hear, Now
Episode 8

A Glittering City:
Ayo Akingbade with
Duchamp & Sons

A Podcast from Whitechapel Gallery

JS: Hello, and welcome to Hear Now, a Whitechapel Gallery podcast that delves into the stories behind the exhibitions on view at the gallery here in the heart of East London. Each episode invites a curator to be in conversation with artists, collaborators and other thinkers about the works and themes explored in the displays, giving you special access to the ideas that shape the artworks.

My name is Jane Scarth, Curator of Public Programmes, introducing you to today's episode featuring artist, Ayo Akingbade, in conversation with Curator of Youth Programmes Renee Odjidja and members of the Whitechapel Gallery Youth Forum, Duchamp & Sons. They speak about the exhibition, A Glittering City, which includes a newly commissioned film, Fire in my Belly, developed in collaboration with and featuring members of Duchamp & Sons.

Ayo will also be in conversation with Alisha Morenike Fisher, Co-founder and Director of Migrant's Bureau, about the ideas explored in the work such as urbanism, community, place and home. The conversations focus on the exhibition, A Glittering City, which is on display in Galleries 5 and 6 from 19th May until 15th August 2021.

RO: Hello, my name is Renee Odjidja and I'm the Curator for the Youth Programmes here at Whitechapel Gallery. I'm delighted to be in conversation with artist Ayo Akingbade via Zoom, during the ongoing COVID pandemic, to discuss her new film commission, Fire in My Belly, which forms part of her upcoming exhibition, A Glittering City, at Whitechapel Gallery.

Ayo was born in 1994 in London, UK, and continues to live and work in the city. She creates moving image work that takes London as a site for exploration, forging conversations on urbanism, gentrification, power and resilience. Her work gives voice to the concerns of migrant diasporas living in the capital.

For her upcoming exhibition at Whitechapel Gallery, Ayo presents two films. The first is a new documentary *Fire in My Belly*, co-developed with the Gallery's youth collective Duchamp & Sons, exploring the themes of home, community and crisis. The second is her 2019 work, *Dear Babylon*, a film essay that follows three art students and their investigations on the future of social housing across the country. These works are on display in Galleries 5 and 6, our spaces dedicated to showing exhibitions created through our education programme, featuring projects developed in collaboration with artists, young people, local schools and community groups.

In this project, Ayo collaborated with Duchamp & Sons, the Whitechapel Gallery's youth collective, made up of 30 15-to-24-year-olds from across London. They meet regularly to explore art, curate exhibitions, music and performance events, alongside artists and other creative practitioners. Their choice of name combines a reference to the artist Marcel Duchamp and to the shop Albert & Son on Whitechapel High Street.

Over a six-month period in collaboration with Ayo, they explored ideas of place and belonging; they ask,

how do you come to feel part of a community? Through workshops, screenings and field work in the local area, they trace memories of displacement and the meaning of home, interrogating present challenges and future aspirations.

JS: First, we hear from the four members of Duchamp & Sons that feature in the film, *Fire in My Belly*. They talk with Ayo about the themes in the work, the collaborative process, and their experience and ambition for working with film and moving image in the future.

M: I'm Mohammed, I'm 23 and I'm a recent graduate of Fine Art painting.

K: Hi everyone. My name is Kimberly, I'm 17 and I'm currently in Year 13 doing my A levels.

W: Hi everyone. My name's Willam and I'm 18 years old and I'm currently studying media studies.

D: Hi everyone. My name's Dwaynica, I'm 23 and I'm a researcher in the field of neuroaesthetics.

AA: Great. Nice to see you guys. How did you think the ideas we talked about in the process of collaborating came out in the film, for example, crisis, community, London?

D: Some of the shots...some of us recognised some of the places and obviously we can see that some were in East London and South London, different aspects of London. So I think it's quite nice because in our

first session we actually had to go into groups depending on where we are and where we live in London, and had to talk about landmarks et cetera. So it was quite nice to see the different areas, different postcodes in London, actually make it to the film as well because it kind of shows...well, it reflects the process that we basically had to do ourselves, so...yeah.

M: I think the film really reflects exactly how we collaborated. I think at first we had obviously workshops and stuff like that so we were really thinking about, you know, where we're from in London. And there was this strange thing of actually realising you've been there all your life but you haven't really reflected on it like that. But then you get hit with the entire pandemic, so you've got this idea of crisis coming into it. And the film, kind of, brought in both of those aspects that, sort of, yeah, we talked about these kind of things but then we bring in this idea of crisis which came through...which materialised kind of randomly because of things around our situation.

And I think it reflected the collaboration really well because we didn't really get to complete the collaboration and it left, like, an open question in the...the film left an open question so it didn't really summarise what we did.

AA: Yeah, sorry, it's funny the open question. But don't you think films...that that's the intent. And I think that's, you know, testament to good film-making and

good storytelling because you don't want to feed everyone everything.

M: I think that's interesting just in art in general; I had that kind of similar response where if it doesn't kind of leave you with something else to go by other than what you're telling them, it starts and ends when you finish the film, it doesn't really take you anywhere.

W: Yeah, I was going to say that, like, it didn't tell you everything that was going on in the film, literally everything, like for me because when I finished watching it I was still thinking about the film. I'm still thinking about the film now. And I feel like that's going to happen with a lot of people that they're going still be thinking about the core themes of what's going on. But because the film didn't take that route of just spoon-feeding you, it definitely makes you, has an affect on whether you're going to keep remembering the film with the core ideas of crisis and what not.

K: I feel as though we kind of like touched on topics. But for example, when we touched on what a crisis means, I feel like in some ways we kind of flipped it. And my answer, I feel like it was kind of influenced by all of the...everything that had happened in lockdown but just, you know, these are things that do happen every single day. So I guess, I was thinking about it in, like, the broader aspect. And I think also too, just kind of like what everybody said, not just spoon-feeding people and make up their own decision as to, like, what community means to them.

D: Can I also add something to the whole thing about crisis? I just find the topic of crisis really interesting because I feel like now obviously it's very clear what kind of crisis we can talk about in terms of, say, the lockdown and the pandemic et cetera. But, say, before that, okay, we were talking about gentrification and those kind of crises. Or, obviously, there's positive things to come out of that as well, which we actually spoke about in one of our sessions when we were writing a monologue about our area. And I think for me, I kind of took a positive spin on that.

But just to go deeper into crisis, I think it's nice to kind of look at the different types of crises. And one thing that did make it to the film was who exactly is going to solve these crises? Because I feel like being quite solution-focused is definitely the way forward in life, but then a lot of the times we have to actually figure out who's in charge of this solution. I think one thing I did say is about working bottom-up. And I think that draws it back to the community of what can we do in our circle of influence to kind of solve the crisis that we can, or do as much as we can because obviously sometimes we can't, sometimes we can. So it was quite interesting that we...I think me and Kimberly kind of addressed that a little bit in our answers so it was quite nice to see that as well.

AA: Your bottom-up comment still makes me cringe a lot. But it's funny, it's all about power, like, this is something that's in our every day. A crisis, I think, is an everyday thing, it's not a flare-up, it's every day. But the thing is, how can we make sure that it's at a

minimum level so it doesn't affect you, you know? But yeah, it's all to do with power and also this idea of community. Many people say they don't have a community and we live in a society that's increasingly individualistic, it's self-orientating in a sense of what can I get from you, how can you help me. And as an independent artist that's a thing I experience all the time. So how can you rise up against that? Either you mould yourself to fit into a community or you just get on with it, but it's good to hear how you guys deal with it.

Do you want to explore film-making, and how did the shoot inform your own thinking about making films – do you want to pursue it?

M: I think it's just, it's a fun thing; yeah, especially as an artist myself I really love being involved and being hands on and stuff like that. Being interviewed, really made me actually enjoy thinking about being an interviewer, being able to probe people; it actually made me really interested in that kind of role that you played as interviewer.

AA: That's the thing about the response, you know, if this wasn't a Whitechapel commission would people actually care? These young Londoners talking about what they want out of life. Unless there's a, you know, a twang in the council estate or just got out of something, like, are people really interested? So, what I really like is that you were interested and it wasn't being spotlighted because so and so; you had a genuine interest and wanted to, you know, explore something.

K: For me, I do want to explore film-making. I want to go into film-making and acting in the future. So I guess, I was just trying to find, like, opportunities to get on set in whatever way, whether that be behind the scenes or in front of the screen. So yeah, I was just very glad that I could have this opportunity. And also too, just because I love, like, Ayo's work. I can remember the first time we kind of found out that we were going to be making a film with you and just seeing, like, the films that you had made in the past, Dear Babylon, Street 66. I'd never watched films like that before. I didn't know that films like that even existed. I didn't know that you could explore all of these themes in such a way.

And I think also too just like the whole process, and just looking back at it now, just seeing all of the things that we did I feel it was just really fun. And I felt as though...it feels kind of like a space for me to just be able to talk about things, no matter how silly they sounded. I wasn't forced to say something; like, those are my words; that's my voice, that's me speaking. And yeah, it was just really fun. And I guess, I was nervous at the start but I feel like after a while we kind of just figured it out, yeah.

AA: Yeah, you're leading the way, you're one of the first people that, you know, that was interviewed.

W: For me, I make quite a lot of my own movies because in media studies you do get to explore quite a lot of filming. And I also do some Saturday film school as well. But we don't really do the kind of film that Ayo

makes. So it was really cool just to look at that side of the film and kind of just, like, be a part of it, because I don't think I've ever had that opportunity before. I mean, I've had a few opportunities to do, kind of, narrative films and stuff but not that kind of side. So I was really glad I got the opportunity.

And also, for me, because I'm mostly behind the camera, I also thought that it was interesting to have myself in front of the camera. Like Kimberly, I was quite nervous because I'm not really in front of the camera; but because I got the opportunity, I definitely feel like I've got confidence from being in front of the camera now. I'd definitely like to do more of that, definitely, just to show off who I am and, kind of, my views and what not.

AA: Yeah, it's good that you are all young and you know what you want to do – so you have to pursue it.

JS: Here, Curator of Youth Programmes Renee Odjidja is in conversation with Ayo about the new film and exhibition more broadly, exploring her influences and inspirations for the project, including places, activists, writers and musicians.

RO: I'm here now with Ayo to talk about the new work *Fire in My Belly*. When we watch the film we see young people journeying through different parts of the city from urban spaces to natural settings. There are three locations I find iconic. The first is the scene at Embankment where we see the large bronze sphinx. And then you find yourself at Highgate Cemetery looking at the towering bust of Karl Marx and the

grave of Claudia Jones, who I think is an overlooked but very important activist. Then there's a scene at Brixton, which has been a vibrant hub for creativity and historically a home for the black community in London for decades. What led you to these locations and what were you trying to put across in your framing?

AA: I wanted to fuse together, like, a roadmap of London and many landmarks. That was my first objective; I wanted to film everywhere, East, South, North, West; that was the starting point. And so, I remember maybe around June I was walking around BFI and I remember seeing the sphinx. This was with a friend and she took portraits of me in front of it. That was one of the landmarks I wanted to feature, and when we shot on the day it was very sunny and it was very beautiful so that was great. And also, during lockdown I was going to Highgate a lot to meet a friend, just talking about things in general and I was like, wow, this would be a great spot, it has this kind of enchanting but strange vibe. And then we go to South, that's where Farouk is based and that's where the mural is. But I wanted to just have all nuggets of, like, London, things that people see in it every day but they may take for granted or don't really understand its appeal.

RO: Going back to Claudia Jones and the idea of discovery, I had no idea that she was there. But I think within the black community there's a sense that she's very important, particularly as the founder of the Notting Hill Carnival, so it was quite interesting to see how you placed her in the film.

AA: Claudia Jones is...how did I discover her? I think it was at secondary school. I don't know, we were looking at something, maybe we were looking at her, but I think someone mentioned Karl Marx and somehow I found out that Claudia Jones is buried next to him. And then I did some research and I was like, wow, she founded the West Indian Gazette in the 1940s. She, you know, founded Notting Hill Carnival. She was a Communist. She was forced out of New York in the 40s and she came to London and forced herself to find this community. And it's funny, like, many years down the line, as a person who isn't originally from here in terms of my parents' origin, it's very hard to find community in this so-called metropolitan city of London. So it's kind of interesting knowing that she carved that out and Notting Hill Carnival is renowned for bringing communities together. And so, yeah, Claudia Jones is really an underdog and her legacy still lives on.

RO: So let's talk about the title of the show that you've got coming up at Whitechapel Gallery. A Glittery City – why did you choose that title?

AA: During lockdown, like many things I was doing lots of reading and I came across this book, it's called A Glittering City and it's by this Ibibio Nigerian writer Cyprian Ekwensi. The book is set in Lagos, like, 1940s so this is when it was really vibrant, high-life music. This was before the war, everyone was kind of happy but music and jazz was really erupting. So it follows this jazz musician, who's also a womaniser trying to, like, make his money doing what he has to do. But

somehow he's forced down this, kind of...he's not a criminal but, you know, there's like this nasty side of the city which he encounters and ultimately leads to his...you can assume what happens to him. I read that and, like, wow, this is it. Essentially the film was an ode to Claudia Jones and Buchi Emecheta, who's a Nigerian writer and her book *Second Class Citizen* is something that I really love and if I had, like, money and became a millionaire tomorrow I would love to adapt that.

But it's interesting, you know, saying this and thinking back, like, my exploration is always the city and how people feel in it, and how they navigate it. And it's just like, yeah, it's fun and enchanting, I don't know. So that's the name of it and I felt it worked well with *Dear Babylon* because *Dear Babylon*, these young people are also navigating the city, in a way, to bring awareness to this bill that's being passed, and it questions their livelihood and their community. And *Fire My Belly* is kind of the opposite in terms of approach, but I think they can be moulded together as one piece, so...yeah.

RO: It's interesting that you mention music because that's the next area that I'd like to cover. So, upon entering the first gallery of the exhibition, the visitor will be immersed in this, kind of, visually striking dark plaid wallpapered walls, composed of these interlocking lines of black, green, purple and yellow. You created this design drawing on your interest in dub reggae music and so can you tell me a bit more about the design and also how music then influences your work?

AA: Well, I love listening to music, to the annoyance of my neighbours; music is something that I just enjoy. And dub and reggae is music which kind of puts me in a very good mood. It's resistance music but it's like...it kind of makes me bullet proof in a way. Like, I can... I guess, Sade says, like bullet proof soul, and I feel like it just makes me stomp and it gives me energy.

And so, I know that reggae and dub kind of erupted in Jamaica, and unfortunately I'm not Jamaican, but I remember growing up and my mum played lots of reggae so maybe it's that influence from her. But Dear Babylon is like the name, the title of that film, it's partly from Babylon which was directed and it was by Franco Rosso. And that's had a big resurgence because it's got re-released in America so people are now paying attention, even though when it was released in the 80s it was banned everywhere.

RO: When you were making the design, you talked about Mundell?

AA: So, the pattern that you see is called Mundell, and Hugh Mundell was a reggae dub artist from Jamaica, and his music is so good and I really adore him. And sadly, he was murdered when he was really young, I think maybe 23 or 21, he was like a prodigy. I felt like yeah, this is it, it's a Mundell print. And also, Mundell is a Scottish surname and so if we look at legacy of slavery, most Jamaican or Caribbean people, or West Indians, if you like, they have Scottish surnames or the origin is from there. So it's kind of interesting

piecing something, kind of, so foreign but really close to home. So yeah, I do want to look more into that and visit Scotland and kind of understand that relationship.

JS: Delving into questions of urbanism, here Ayo is joined by Alisha Morenike Fisher about her work as the Co-Founder of Migrant's Bureau, the forces of gentrification in London and the meaning of community.

AA: I came across your work fairly recently, but I wanted to talk about your socially engaged design practice and what led you to co-found the Migrant's Bureau.

AMF: At the time, I was a university student and I went to an event that was being done by an environmentalist-architect called Yasmeen Lari – incredible human, incredible work. And I was sitting next to this guy and we just started talking and we had so many interests. And there was also another girl as well, called Jess, and we all three of us just really came together and we wanted to create these radical systems where architecture no longer was oppressive, no longer was kind of rigid. And what we wanted to do, and a lot of the conversations that we had is how can we create a space for ourselves that reflects our identities, and they're complex.

So we then started a competition at the time and we got another girl in from Mexico, and it was all digital. I was in Hull at the time, Hani was in Manchester, my friend was in Oxford. And we managed to pull it off

and I think it allowed us to understand that actually we have the power to do so many things.

We then decided we would formalise into Migrant's Bureau. And we really, at the time, I think myself and Hani because we're from migratory experiences, and because we are black, we thought to ourselves, okay, let's start something. Let's start something that is not really happening that much here that we can see from young people. And then at the same time, both of us had this, kind of, vision of dismantling what it means to work, what does it actually mean to work sustainably. What does it mean for us to really make sure we have boundaries and healthy boundaries? What does it mean for us to actually work with communities? We just try and make sure that we're working with and for communities.

We still try and really be critical of who we're associating ourselves with. And then at the same time, migrant and disenfranchised communities have been so oppressed and there's so much hyper violence. And if we're going into spaces that are hyper violent, we really need to think about, okay, so what does this mean for people with chronic illnesses, what does this mean for people with mobility and sensory challenges? What does this mean for all these different complexities? And not just looking at it from one kind of narrative or one type of experience, but really having a genre of experiences and being open to it.

And I think we definitely try and challenge even what it means to be a migrant – where does this definition

come from, who is telling the story of migration? Looking at disenfranchisement, what does it mean? And really coming back to this understanding that communities is about the plural. So you can have a black community and you can have a brown community, but really it's not really that – it's more communities, because at the end of the day you have so many subcultures and so many experiences. And actually even in many communities, even in white communities, there's still a lot of violence. So it's really, like, challenging what it means, challenging the language, but also really being able to design and build agency with migrant and disenfranchised communities to feel like, actually I have a say, and, actually I can design what I want to do, if that makes sense.

AA: When people say, oh yeah, community they usually think, you know, working-class, black, brown. And it's this thing, it's very strange, but it's good to kind of know...yeah, you explained it really well.

AMF: When we start to break down gentrification, we recognise the power it has to deconstruct and unearth the violence onto migrant communities. In what ways do you believe we can alleviate this pain, confusion and even the silence creativity?

AA: In terms of my intersection as an artist, like, I made things because I wasn't kind of given permission. So, David Hammons, he was like, I give myself permission. And I think that ultimately is it. So in terms of this exploration of gentrification, I had to do it because I wasn't seeing what I was seeing. It felt as

if I was a mad person. No-one kind of knew what was happening at the time in Dalston. I started secondary school in 2007 so when...I started noticing the changes when I was in Year 9. It's like I saw Alexa Chung lining up for Marks & Spencer, like, in a line. And, like, that is Dalston; it's a weird clash. So, that was what I was seeing in my every day and I was trying to understand it and so that's how I started this exploration.

My only hope is that with these works I make, I can alleviate this idea of people's stories not being shared or these buried histories. I think silence is also kind of important as well but, like, it's how you use your silence. If you're using your silence to kind of rest and, I don't know, meditate and then come back with full force I think that's perfectly fine. But if you're just silent and just not doing anything and then expecting change, then that's just not really good, so...yeah.

AMF: Agreed on so many levels definitely, and even like...yeah, I one hundred per cent agree. And, you know, I think that that's when it becomes that whole discussion about being complicit. And I think even as you're talking it just... I don't know, it's really...personally it's really healing for me because it's so nice to be in conversation with someone who is really going through that understanding of integrity. Like, what does it mean to be integral to your artistry, to your work, to your actual practice? And I think so many people at the moment... Don't get me wrong, there's nuances in place as well and there's definitely context, but I think it's so easy to, kind of

like, just do things because of money and do things because, I don't know, it's about trying to please people. But actually at the end of the day, what is actually art if that's all that is?

And I think it was so good also to hear architect and friend, Farouk on the film as well because he kind of touched on his understanding of Brixton as well, and how it's home to him. And I just thought that was such an amazing reflection. And yeah, you can only just keep fighting, if that makes sense, with these things. And keep fighting for, you know, spaces that you feel like you've built and created with other people to still exist but also exist sustainably.

JS: Thanks for listening to this episode of Hear Now. You can find all of our other episodes online at www.whitechapelgallery.org on the Bloomberg Connects app, as well as iTunes, Spotify, Stitcher and SoundCloud. Don't forget to visit the exhibition A Glittering City, from 19th May until 15th August 2021. Bye for now.

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