

In Search of Verbs by Chukwudebem Ukaigwe

December 2022

The Apotheosis of Homer was completed in 1927. The grand painting which was commissioned just a year earlier by King Charles X of France portrays Homer, the 8th-century Greek poet being crowned with a laurel wreath by a winged woman, an allusion to a universal triumph. In this vast image, the protagonist is circumscribed by forty-four other cultural icons flanking him in acclamation and reverence. The French painter, Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres achieved a wider portrait or portrayal of Homer that resists simplistic definitions and signals his trickling legacy and influence across multiple centuries, diverse geographies, practices, and traditions. Amongst this many-branched family tree are musicians like Mozart and Orpheus, poets and playwrights like Shakespeare and Virgil who in his time wrote sequels expanding on Homer's *Iliad*, great philosophers like Plato, Socrates; his predecessor, and Aristotle his Successor, emperors like Alexander of Macedon, artists like Poussin and Michelangelo, polymaths, mathematicians, prophets, dramatists and tragedians from France, Italy, Portugal, England amongst

many. Encountering this painting, the rendered images of these men are liberated from mere forms on a canvas, they represent an abstract cross-pollination of exploits, actions and occurrences over generations that shaped the then 18th-century reality. The questions: “Who/what, is/was Homer?” are insatiable, and their implications are inherently verbal*.

Over decades, media art has perpetually triumphed over absolute definition. Artists are continuously finding new ways to interact with ever-evolving technology, creating work by improvising, embracing happy mistakes, researching etc. Audiovisual performance has been a recurring cultural module; from stage lightning in music festivals, to coups d'états or world cup scores announced through the radio, to an immersive audio experience in Spain, to TikTok sync or ASMR on Instagram reels, to Chicago speakeasies in the 20s, to New York dance and rap battles, to sending a cute voice note to a lover, to the Jamaican independence parade in the 60s, to DJ and artist; Stan Douglas making mixtapes in a Vancouver club in the 80s, to singing along with the projected lyrics of a hymn in Port-Harcourt, the revival assisted by an electronic organ, to code art, to a family 6mm film reels, to street-political- megaphone-campaigns in Dominica, to French cinema, to stethoscopes in stereo, to theatre houses in Chile, to bright and lit advertisements on boulevards in Tokyo, to

poets performing over live percussion, to automotive commercial breaks, to customized ringtones, to surveillance cameras in penitentiaries, to an obnoxious VR display in a gallery space, to drag shows, to YouTube music videos left to shuffle in dance parties. Ever ping-ponging between the provisional luxury of asking for more and the ingenuity that accompanies scarcity, contemporary makers are always finding better, or more specific ways to question and problem-solve.

During the pandemic, curators across Canada; Constantine Katsiris, Kofi Oduro, Jennifer Smith, Emma Hendrix and Julie Gendron gathered virtually, spending months to grapple through the expanse of A/V art, its meaning, and its porous boundaries. Questioning authorship, access to equipment, and the diminishing presence of A/V art in contemporary discourse within the North American domain when compared to other scenes like Europe and Japan. The brainchild of these ever often meetings; *Unbound A/V Art: Redefining the Undefined*, which screened on VUCAVU from November 29th to December 11th, 2022. Julie Gendron declares in their curatorial statement:

“The strongest characteristic of A/V art for me is that it provides an interpretive abundance. There are no direct paths to meaning. It is like a multidimensional painting.

Instead of an instance in time, it is an immersive journey through a time-based flow.”

To Kofi Oduro, the most enjoyable gift of the genre is the uncertain journey the audience is made to take, and the fascinating submission to a suspense-filled generative possibility. Jennifer elaborates on their research process, pointing out how this genre has evolved from live performances in physical spaces to now online performances, or documentations of performances disseminated digitally—a case for increased accessibility. Emma reflects on how the group went about their selection process and the care that went into the choices; they claim that the exercise of cherry-picking the diverse spectrum of nineteen works included in this programming was synonymous with making a mixtape—nostalgic. In conclusion to the curatorial statement, Constantine affirmed:

“Through our discussions about what denotes A/V artworks and the associated boundaries, the concept took on a prismatic quality, once everyone's perspective was considered. Similarities between the various works were like disparate nodes strewn about a chaotic space until eventually they were connected and coalesced into thematic programs.”

On accessing *Unbound* via VUCAVU (a streaming platform for Canadian independent film and video), I realized that the curators had split the nineteen videos into four categories to guide viewers in navigating the project contextually, each segment representing a theme. The category *Processing Anatomy* housed artworks that spoke to the meditative quality of movement, shape, surface, and texture, challenging and expanding the viewers' perception of the tangibility of form at large. *Á®†3f@ç+*, one of the videos in this category explores degradation and generation loss. Pulling decay to the forefront, the artist erψn temp3st choreographs disintegration and disorder. Within a glitched landscape of densely superimposed references from nature, figures emerge contemplative. Seeping into the permeable layers, as washes of lime green and magenta dominate. Purples, blues, and yellows make consistent appearances. Ominous whispers of bird chirps and inaudible phrasal sounds beckon from time immemorial. Dissonant, as a broken radio, the video comes across as tangentially apocalyptic. The dancing figure multiplies in disparate layers below thresholds, like flashbacks of memory—a cathartic ritual.

The second grouping of videos titled *World Building* presents the fantastical and the transcendental. The artists featured in this

segment usher viewers into imaginative journeys, persuading the viewers to augment reality. Erin Gee describes the media performance, *We as Waves* as an abstract invitation into queer and feminist epistemologies of sound, how it touches you, and how we are psychologically implicated in its intimacies. The performed text was written by Jena McLean, and video-graphed by Michel de Silva. The hair-raising performance starts with an inducing call “Welcome, welcome. Thank you for joining this experiment in wave reforming mind technology.... Do not mistake your confusion or doubt for panic, you are going to have to buy into this a little...” The artist throws her gaze dart-like out of the screen, directly to the viewer, commanding attention. Cropped in a passport-frame, and cast on a black-voided background, she continues “Breathe in, breathe out”, this urge is followed by a not-quite melodic background hum arising into relatively steady amplitudes. She gesticulates with her hands and fingertips in an attempt to hypnotize the viewer, her voice reverberating here and yonder. Murmurs of spell-like incantations are uttered in the background-inaudible. “...Imagine we share the same voice...” going on with her attempt in preparing us for an experience we are blindly tending towards. She compels us to focus on her voice and the sound waves coming out of her diaphragm as a mixture of hand actions, hums, sounds of boiling water and whispered chants

intensify. Reminding us “Don’t forget to breathe.” she maneuvers as if pulling a rope, stripping us of our senses and swiping through our consciousness, rearranging our instantaneous cognitive perception. We lose our bearings. She sharply beckons to us “Pay attention. Be in control.”. Around the onset of the last third of the video, the frame changes briefly to an aerial view, creating a still-life composition of her hands, a pen, a bottle of lip-gloss, a pair of scissors, and a make-up brush all on a wooden table. The original frame returns, misplaced in continuous cacophony, and she spills “...Keep it fucking together...”. Towards the conclusion of the performance, she promulgates “Waves are productive metaphors for feminist orientations to knowledge...” I lose track of the rest of the sentence. It seems to me that this displacement of the viewer is intentional. We are carried across an empirical bridge and left to find our way. Perhaps I as a man should be excluded from this coded spillage. I have lost trajectory. Possibly, this map is contrived and permuted for a movement that requires encryption. I am sucked back in by an absurd cry in the background, she concludes; “They can try but they cannot contain waves, our waves.”

The third category, *Abstract Screenscape* exercises timelessness. Viewers are immersed in observation of immediate–now, its vagueness and its abstraction. The works in this grouping indulge

the viewer in meditative witnessing. *Broken Sound* by Gary James Joynes is an examination of the process of 'silencing speakers.' Utilizing macro-photography, the artist dramatically documents the degradation or 'magnetic traumas' of lined copper wires in speakers after ample sonic experiences over time. From the onset of the video, the artist employs sublime multi-framing, making use of half, and quarter screens. Copper wire, resembling strips of wooden flooring melts in a downward motion, accompanied by a static sound, both motion and sound stay languid and relaxed. As time passes, there is a multiplication of these copper strings with an assortment of colour shades, particularly light and warm gold alternating at intervals accompanied by different notes and sound pitches. This slowed-down reality creates an illusion of the viewer falling into eternity, or a feeling of being in an elevator that is slowly and endlessly going down. To others, the video may feel like a meditative, moving, modernist colour-field painting. As the notes mature the wires darken, the screen splitting into two, and then four cotyledons of expanding and contracting planes. The dynamic composition ferments with time, taking the shape of water trapped between a glass screen and wooden panels, bubbly abstractions and passages of form. Next, there is a subtle difference in the velocity of the falling planes, slow and soft chords have been introduced percussively, they shift the colour tonality of

the copper material in real-time. Eventually, points on the moving material start to experience what looks like organic decay.

Perhaps moulding? Perhaps rotting? Could it be fungal growth or just scraped flooring? The abstract imperfections on the now darkened material are undulating vis-à-vis tonal intervals. The sound in the piece roughens into graininess toward the end, as sections of the dropping wood-like landscape putrefy into waterlogged highways. The straight copper warp in decomposition, assuming stances of decayed bamboo logs, perishing. Then a period of darkness and quiet like obsidian, followed by a loss of symmetry. Slowly twisting wood-like twigs of copper drizzle down the screen in echoing tranquil. Such graveyards, remembered! Such a peaceful escape! Brown deaths with old age; yellow beauty in wrinkles; blue quiet; red peace; such imperfection; a silent procession in a vivid recollection of events.

The final theme, *Stage and Platform* traverse the territory of performance, live audience and improvisation in contextual congruity with technology. Freya Olafson's *Field of View* entails a web camera feed manipulated through the software "Unity" to create an effect that freezes video frames while continuously printing new ones atop the previous, resulting in painting trails of movement. Upon pressing play on the video, Olafson enters from

the bottom right corner of the screen, looking at you – serpentine and multiple; spinning tentacular through the white space. She floats, drawing and erasing, building scapes and topographies—sculptural as dance. Then she split into two, her pair being a humanoid; both robotic and human avatars possessing a multiple-trail behind them. Olafson flies and swims through the screen creating roads and furrows. Her humanoid twin is more glitchy, while she glides smoothly; both keeping to the pulsing beat of the staccato rhythm. Spilling over her canvas like gauche, with arms spread open to a crucifix form, the artist uses her black jacket to reveal its red lining. She paints red ribbons up to down and left to right, and then maps yellow routes by spinning a pair of yellow pants ending in a puddle of yellow. This constant cyborgian shelling, shedding, and renewal signal us toward world-building. A blue petal explodes through the terrain and then a yellow line zooms through the middle, dividing the halves. So many flesh tones move, dragging with it, its pinks and greens—an intruding white. Is it a flooded and restless painting? It washes and carries on with it debris from the past moment. Time is quality. However, it does not control this deluge. Anagrams of red and silver, an ocular swirl of white shoes, a graph of hands—the artist is presently present. She rolls and twists in occasional absentia, pausing and resting. Lacking obduracy, she propagates herself –

liquid and diatomic. Select quotes from Manifest.AR collective's 2011 'Manifesto for Augmented Reality' are overlaid throughout the video asking the watcher to interpret their own "field of view". *Field of View* concludes with an overlay of the Windows XP 2000s 'Solitaire' computer game-ending that shows each stack of cards falling to the bottom of the screen, bouncing and creating digital painting trails of rails and bridges. Olafson divulges her codes in overwhelming detail.

Iron Tomahawks is an ongoing (2005 - present) Live Cinema/ Scratch Video performance artwork by Tekeniyaáhsen Ohkwá:ri. Utilizing gesture-controlled vinyl-tracking technology in conjunction with specialized software to edit, manipulate and 'scratch' audio/video media in real time. The artwork incorporates elements (samples) of documentary and Hollywood films, Internet videos, and television news clips into an aural/visual remix intended as a cultural critique. Political monologues and Indigenous chants are mixed in with effervescent thumping sounds. The performance is a surge, a proclamation, an eruption, a revolution—unbound.

If we return to Ingres' momentous painting, *The Apotheosis of Homer*, we cannot help but realize some of the limitations of his representation of global cultural exploits. Tangentially, there are women in the composition who are rather symbolic or allegorical

reductions. A winged lady is presiding over and crowning Homer acting as a metaphor for the universe - the mother nature cliché. There are also two other women subdued and sitting at the great poet's feet, the lady to the left is a personification of the *Iliad*, while the other woman to the right is a metaphoric representation of the *Odyssey*, both acclaimed literary works of Homer. No single woman artist, musician, philosopher, priest, diviner, politician, or doer was included. This creates an absence of verbs when portraying women. Producing a tragedy of annihilation. Women in many artistic canons or records are reduced to nouns, in this case - epic poems. In many other cases; muses, sculptures, landscapes, songs or anything that can be controlled. Surprise! Surprise! There is also an absence of non-white world-shapers in the picture. Most 18th-century paintings almost exclusively point to non-white bodies as subjects of chattel, as property, the maid, etc. Sadly, this exclusion of or gatekeeping of the verbal, or the ability of doing by the disenfranchised demographics also presides over the contemporary A/V arts scene today. People on the cultural and financial margins are widely excluded from participating in this art form that requires expensive technology and time. Most contemporary art institutions are also Eurocentric circuses. The avant-garde becomes a luxury or a surviving necessity—a void bridges these poles. For “Unbound A/V”, this

group of curators have factored in the need for creating equitable space, hence they selected artists from diverse backgrounds. 13 out of the nineteen artists featured in this programming are women and non-binary artists. An anti-colonial method of curating and making is important as it not only gives a playing field to all but also because we all lose out on the brilliance and intellect of many artists usually excluded by the status quo.

Chukwudubem Ukaigwe is a Nigerian-born song, dispersed by a transient Atlantic breeze, currently passing through Canada. He consciously uses a variety of mediums to relay a plurality of ideas at any given time. He approaches his art practice as a conversation, or a portal into one, and in some instances, as an interpretation of this ongoing exchange.

Chukwudubem operates as an interdisciplinary artist, curator, writer, and cultural worker. Ukaigwe is a founding member of Patterns Collective.

Instagram: [@chukwudubem.ukaigwe](https://www.instagram.com/chukwudubem.ukaigwe) & [@artist.in.the.pond](https://www.instagram.com/artist.in.the.pond)

Twitter: [@ukaigwestudio](https://twitter.com/ukaigwestudio)

*Verbial is defined by the author as a word to describe the portrayal of action and participation.