

The Baldy Center for Law and Social Policy
Podcast Season 2, Episode 13
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Podcast transcript begins

[Azalia]: Hi everyone. Welcome to the season two of The Baldy Center for Law and Social Policy podcast, produced at the University at Buffalo. I'm your host and producer Azalia Muchransyah.

This episode I have professor Victoria-Idongesit Udondian on the phone with me. She's an interdisciplinary artist and one of the 2020-2021 UB Center for Diversity Innovation Distinguished Visiting Scholars in the Department of Art. Her work is currently on display at The Space Between in 431 Ellicott Street, Buffalo, New York.

Victoria, can you tell us a little bit about yourself?

[Victoria]: My name is Victoria-Idongesit Udondian, from Nigeria, from some country in Africa – no, I'm from the country Africa. I like – I like the idea of Africa being a country the way it's always, you know, speculated. So, so I like to joke with that I'm from country Africa. Nigeria specifically, and I've been in the States for the last three years.

I'm an interdisciplinary artist. I work across different genres at this point. Um, but I do have a huge interest in global trade systems, so I repurpose a lot of second-hand clothing in my work in different ways. I create sometimes what I call hybrid costumes, and these costumes gets activated using the bodies – through performances and sometimes photography. And, in the same vein, these costume sometimes just function as sculptures if you will, installed in space.

And in the last three to four years, I've been very vested in the theme of immigration, and this has been as a result of my personal journey naturalizing in America and, sort of, dealing with the bureaucratic processes of that and getting really frustrated with this, you know, the whole system. And, one of the ways of dealing with that frustration, one of the ways of me understanding that process, has been me channeling that energy into an art project.

[Azalia]: What is your ongoing project about?

[Victoria]: So, the project I have that is ongoing, at the new space in downtown Buffalo, at the space called The Space Between, and it's part of the UB Collaboratory, and I have to also mention that I am a visiting scholar at the UB, obviously, and I'm here for the year. I've been here for the year 2020 through 2021 session, and that's through the Center for Diversity and Innovation program, but I'm a resident at the art department. So, I have been working on this project and I was excited about the fact that Bronwyn [Director, UB Arts Collaboratory] has just opened a new space in town, and I wanted to have an opportunity to engage with the immigrant communities here in Buffalo area, or within the UB campus and by extension also the Buffalo area.

And so, in the last three to four years, I've been working on a project around immigration and I was beginning a project that I titled The Republic of Unknown Territory, which is in a nutshell me creating some sort of micro-nation. And I've been collecting stories from immigrant communities as well as getting sculptures of their hands. So, thinking about the hands, literally and metaphorically, of these immigrants who've contributed so much in the building of the society, and also the hands alluding to the bodies that owned those hands, which, you could speak to the bodies that die in the course of migration, whether it's forced migration or voluntary migration, and I'm also collecting stories. So, all of these stories and all these sculptures becomes artifacts for The Republic of Unknown Territory.

[Azalia]: Why do you choose to explore the topic of immigration?

[Victoria]: I mean, as an artist from country Africa, like I said, constantly I have to deal with immigration. I mean, for example, if you're from America you could travel to several countries in the world without requiring any kind of visa application process, but as an artist from Nigeria who has worked very globally, migration is a big part of my career. And, all the time, you know, I have to constantly negotiate the system.

I've been denied visas too, for example, to go to South Africa previously. And so, it's been a constant part of my life, so every time I'm invited to do a project anywhere in the world, the first step for me has always been I have to go through the immigration process, get a visa to go there. And, of course, the actualization of that project is subject to the fact that I might be offered or denied a visa. And so that's my reality, and, eventually I moved to the States to study for my master's and because of graduation, I had a lot of opportunities in America. I had residencies I had to do, I had projects to work on; and so, I couldn't leave right after my program because I had to do all these things that followed my graduation.

But to be here, I had to begin the process of applying for a permanent residence, or, you know, naturalizing if you will, to be able to be here to do that – to do the work I had to do. Interestingly, this was also at the time that Trump had come into office, so, the steady vilification of immigrants became the order of the day at this time, within America and also in Europe. And so, that process led me to beginning this project.

In the last few years, I think the project keeps expanding. I do have a show that's scheduled sometime in the first quarter of next year in Brooklyn, New York, and this project will be culminated into the show, and that should be around the spring of next year.

[Azalia]: What are the avenues of your art as an interdisciplinary artist?

[Victoria]: Most recently I've really worked across various media, but in the last decade, I was very invested working with repurposed materials. I did a lot of projects, like I said, around, you know, using the second-hand material, second-hand clothing, which came from earlier research that I did around the influx of the second-hand clothing in the Nigerian context, for example. So, I started out investigating the histories of this clothing, and so I got really interested in the second-hand material – how it travels the world from the west to the global south, and how those histories become complicated when the locals within a context like Nigeria acquire them and begin to wear them.

I was interested in highlighting the politics of that market system, highlighting the business of it, because, like, a lot of times, that market is always started as a humanitarian venture that is supposed to help poor people within quote and unquote “third world countries”, a word I hate to use so much, and I

was very interested in highlighting all of the nuances, all the politics of this market system. And so, I did a lot of research within Africa – I traveled to Ghana, um, countries around West Africa, I did go to East Africa at the time, and then eventually I got invited for a residency in Europe. So, at the time I traveled to Europe to – I was, I did a residency in Venice, so it's Italy, specifically – I did a lot of research and realized that this market comes from humanitarianism. So, they collaborated with the Catholic organization in [geographic location unclear], Italy. They gave me a lot of information and access to their processes of collecting, and distribution, and eventual shipments of these materials. And so, I started collecting second-hand materials and repurposing them into sculptures and installations, or creating the hybrid – what I call hybrid costumes, like I said, with these materials.

But also, when you think about the post-colonial market system, it started in the early 60s when Nigeria had gained its, you know, her independence. I'm also interested in the intersectionality of this global trade system to even migration, the movement of people, the movement of goods from one part of the world to another. I'm very interested in how all of these various subject matters intersect.

In the last few years, like I said, I've been vested with immigration, but of course, um, I still do a lot of work, even with the theme of immigration, some of the projects I've done. In 2019 I got invited by the South London Gallery in the UK to do a project with their local community, which is mostly an immigrant community based on your location, and so I worked with children around – that live around there, and we created this – well, we transformed the gallery in the course of the six months project using the second-hand materials to create this large textile sculpture that drapes the whole gallery space. And, as a part of that, these kids were also invited to bring objects of importance to them. And so, they brought us objects in space and it was interesting for them to talk about these objects and how important it was to them. And then through this object, I worked with a choreographer, and we generated movements that the children eventually choreographed in the space. So, this project had taken different shapes and forms with all of this material that had been coming into play, but in different ways depending on the context. And also, being at UB now, being in Buffalo, and also this project is also expanding to, you know, accommodate a different type of exploration.

We also, you know, talking about performances, like I said, sometimes I create costumes and they could function – this costume will be activated through performances. Um, I've also had to perform, in the course of this immigration project, as a customs officer or – who was [unclear] visas to people and granting them access into the projects.

[Azalia]: Do you wish to change social policy with your art?

[Victoria]: Personally, art helps me make sense of the world. I'm asking a lot of questions in my work. I do not know if my work has the capacity to change the world. But I do tend to use the art-making process in understanding most of the world around me. And most of my work stems from my personal experiences. And, of course, I do know that the personal could be political too, so sometimes it could be making work about you or your personal histories, but by the time you put the work out in the world, you know, you have a bunch of people connecting to that histories and then the personal becomes collective, and that becomes political. And so, I see art for me – it's a tool, it's a tool that helps me, like I said, understand the world and also, I hope that in the course of putting my work out in the world, that if the work speaks to one person – yeah, I think that in that moment that that work has served its purpose, if that makes sense.

But I'm also hopeful that eventually I'm able to have more people interact with work, I'm able to have more people engage with the work, so that in that way these conversations can be had. So, the idea is that, at the end of the day, I'm able to highlight those issues and have more people talking about it and actually generate a conversation around the subject matters. And also hope people, maybe view the world from a different perspective.

I remember when I had a show – The Republic of Unknown exhibition, for example – this show was in America, and here I am sitting on American soil, subverting the gallery into quote and unquote a nation state, and having people go through some kind of immigration process to get into the gallery. Of course, there were people – there was a particular man, a white man specifically, who came to the show, filled out the whole forms – because there were forms, this was an adaptation from the American visa application form, but I did add very extreme questions. Questions that bordered on gender on, you know, relationship to abortion, etc. – and I had this man go through all that process and then he came for the interview and he was denied visas into the show. And he wanted to force himself into the show – he literally came and tried to break it because we had barricades in the space – and I physically had to stand up to stop him, and he got really angry.

So, eventually, I realized that letters were written to the director of the gallery and, in those letters, laws of the gallery being an accessible place to everyone and no one should be denied access to the gallery, were all highlighted in the letter, which is really the idea. But what was fascinating to me was realizing how entitled some people are, and the fact that this experience I was trying to draw attention to, was new to several people, because even the man in question, from engaging with him in the interview, I realized he had never applied for visas before. Because I had asked him and he said no. I suspected he probably wrote the letter because in the letter he stated the questions that he was asked in the interview, and he said in that letter that he thinks I was angry when he said he had never applied for a visa and that's why I denied him entry. Which was very, as petty and funny as it sounds, it was very interesting to me.

It was very interesting to me because, number one, I did not expect that I would have this kind of, um, reaction. Eventually people, those that got in to the show, started sharing drinks with people who didn't get in the show, because if you didn't get in the show you couldn't have access to the refreshments. So, those that got into the show actually started passing drinks across my border and sharing drinks to people who didn't have access. And then eventually, the fire exit door in the back gallery was opened and people got into the space, so there were a lot of illegal immigrants eventually, in my territory from – you know, for some reason.

But I didn't – I didn't see all that coming. I didn't plan for any of that. I didn't expect that, so I didn't have any plan to take care of that. But it was interesting to me because it's just a highlight of the microcosm of what really happens in the world. And you were just hoping that there were a lot of conversation that came up as a result of that – questions of access, privilege, class – all of these various questions that come up in, you know, in most of the conversations that we had.

[Azalia]: How can we see your work?

[Victoria]: So, for the projects I'm working on in Buffalo, it's up until March 28th – 6 [pm] to 8 [pm] [March 27] is the closing of the event – and I am actually in the space every Friday from 12:00 to 4:00 pm, so you can stop by. I'm also available any other day of the week by appointment. But on Friday's 12:00 to 4:00 it's – it's for sure I'll be there. So, you show up – if you are an immigrant, or if you have any

stories, or first generation American, or if you have an immigration story in your family that you'd like to share, I'm collecting stories – from personal stories to family histories – and I've had different kinds of stories already, and I'm very excited for you to be a part of that. So, if you have any – if you want to come in, share your story, if you want to come, make some sculptural casts of your hands, you're welcome to join me in the space on Fridays 12:00 to 4:00 pm up until March 27th, and, I'll see you soon.

[Azalia]: That was professor Victoria-Idongesit Udondian, and this has been The Baldy Center for Law and Social Policy podcast produced at the University at Buffalo. Please visit our website buffalo.edu/baldycenter for more episodes, and follow our twitter @baldycenter. Until next time, I'm your host and producer, Azalia Muchransyah.