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## Rereading art workshops as an interaction ritual for knowledge formation and artists' development

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### ABSTRACT

Art workshops are organised as a space for artists to share ideas and collaboratively create artwork within a period of two to four weeks. I argue that Collins' theory of interaction ritual can be adapted in the explanation and understanding of the aims, particularities and developmental impacts of art workshops on participating artists, who are integral members and collaborators in the knowledge and identity formations in the creative community. I draw on the experiences of two Professors of art – Tonie Okpe and Jacob Jat Jari, in their participation in art workshops in different parts of Africa, Europe and the United Kingdom (U.K.), as well as their organisation of art workshops in Nigeria. Collin's theory offers fresh insights into the participation of artists like Okpe and Jari in these workshops, showcasing how continuous engagement in such intellectually stimulating and culturally rich communities enhances their knowledge and cultural capital. A major recommendation of the study is that artists can strategically supplement their learning through these informal intellectual platforms, given the impacts of art workshops and the rising costs of formal art education globally. The diverse array of experiences gained from such workshops can significantly expand their horizon and shape their worldview.

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## Introduction

Art workshops are platforms for creative engagements, designed to bring artists from different racial, generational and geographical extractions together as peers, for a short period of usually two to four weeks. During this period, the artists are expected to individually and collaboratively focus on their art practice, share ideas and experiences, explore creative innovations and possibilities, create networks and produce art. The workshop offers a different experience, away from the norm of the artists' studios, their daily routines and distractions (Adewumi & Faida, 2020). Contemporarily, the concept of art workshops has metamorphosed to suit different pedagogical agendas and contextual subjectivities. The trajectory of these varied platforms shall be discussed in this paper, vis-à-vis their linkages and disparities.

This paper has as its purpose, the conceptualisation of art workshops as an 'interaction ritual' with a focus on the communal creation and sharing of knowledge for the development of participants, who are often artists, both visual and liberal. The term 'interaction ritual' emanates from Randall Collin's (2000) general theory of interaction rituals. Born in 1941, Randall Collins is a notable American social theorist whose concepts have found relevance across different disciplines including criminology, psychology, international relations, security studies, and sociology, just to mention five. Amongst his pathbreaking ideas and concepts are his explanations of the micro-foundations of macro-sociology, credential society and interaction ritual chains (Malešević & Loyal, 2019).

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One of the notable elements of Collins' explanations of the interaction ritual chains is the appropriation of ritual symbolisms, which are common to most communities globally, in explaining the sociology of community interactions in the knowledge and identity formation process. Collins (2000) likens social interactions to spiritual rituals where there are collective codes and norms of communication and lenses through which members view their world. He calls it 'Interaction Ritual'. Although lacking the commonalities and theatrics of formal rituals (chanting verbal formulas, singing, wearing traditional costumes, etc.) his explanations align with the basic principles of a ritualistic assemblage: A group constituted by members with a common goal to collectively deliberate and contemplate (worship) an idea, object or trend (object of ritual) for a given period, towards a purpose that often transcend personal agendas.

I, therefore, argue that Collins' theory of interaction ritual can be adapted in the explanation and understanding of the aims, particularities and developmental impacts of art workshops on participating artists, who are integral members and collaborators in the knowledge and identity formations in the creative community. To reinforce this argument, I draw on the experiences of two Professors of art – Tonie Okpe and Jacob Jat Jari, in their participation in art workshops in different parts of Africa, Europe and the United Kingdom (U.K.), as well as their organisation of art workshops in Nigeria. To deliver on this purpose, I shall first offer some context by way of a review of existing literature. First, I will attempt to clarify the structural and conceptual confusions between art workshops and other similar platforms such as artists' residencies. Second, I will review different theoretical perspectives on community-based knowledge formation and development. Third, I briefly offer background information on the key informants of the study. Lastly, I juxtapose insights from my conversations with the two distinguished scholars with the major characteristics of interaction ritual chains as identified by Randall Collins.

Achieving the above objectives will clarify the significance of the study. This is the first time Randall Collin's interaction ritual theory is being applied to art workshop studies. Thus, it is hoped that the paper showcases how continuous engagement in intellectually stimulating and culturally rich communities of thought and practice enhances artists' knowledge and cultural capital, while also providing the emotional energy required for improving their artistic practice and benefiting their broader communities.

### **Art workshops or residencies? Elucidating blurred boundaries**

In recent decades, when mention is made of 'art workshops' in the discourse of informal platforms for artists' development and community engagement, 'artists' residencies' is another concept that usually comes along, invited or not. Therefore, two basic questions this part of the paper shall attempt to answer are: Are art workshops not the same as artists' residencies? If they are not the same, what are the distinctive and distinguishing nuances of the two concepts? Before elucidating the blurred boundaries of art workshops and artists' residencies, I shall first, briefly trace the trajectory of art and artists' workshops from their precolonial iteration to their colonial existence in Africa, down to the postcolonial and contemporary mutations of the concept.

Historically, art workshops can be traced to the activities of artist guilds in the pre-colonial era where artistic knowledge and skills were transferred from one generation to the other through the apprenticeship system (Adewumi, 2019; Kasfir & Foster, 2013). Since as early as the 13<sup>th</sup> century, artists' guilds such as Oba Oguola's guild of bronze casters in the Benin Kingdom, are charged with the responsibility of documenting the socio-political history of their societies, in addition to regulating the activities of their members to maintain quality (Odiahi, 2017). This offers one of the earliest examples of an art workshop setting in Africa, showcasing the rich tradition of craftsmanship and artistic expression in the region.

The colonial era in Africa witnessed the establishment of art workshops by different European expatriates to sponsor their multifarious imperial agendas which Oguibe (2002) has vehemently questioned in his article titled Appropriation as Nationalism in Modern African Art. Mainly, these colonial personalities were either administrators, cultural brokers, educators or missionaries (Hassan, 1995). The apprenticeship approach to the operation of art workshops was maintained during the colonial era in Africa. As

such, the transfer of skills and craftsmanship was executed within a restrictive creative scope (Stanley, 2011). Oye-Ekiti Workshop in Nigeria led by the Catholic Reverend Father Kevin Carroll (Ndubuisi, 2022); Cyrene Workshop in Zimbabwe led by Anglican Reverend Canon Edward Patterson (Zhou, 2017); and the Polly Street Art Centre which was established in 1949 during the apartheid regime in South Africa by the Johannesburg Local Committee for Adult Education (Mdanda, 2018) are few examples of such workshops.

As different African nations began gaining their independence, the operations of art workshops also gradually evolved from the apprenticeship model into a postcolonial character which Adewumi (2019: 7) refers to as the 'triangle model.' The coinage 'triangle model' is a derivative from the Triangle Network of art workshops which has its origin in New York. Established in 1982 by Sir Anthony Caro and Robert Loder, the Triangle Network started with the aim to facilitate cross-border engagement among artists from different nationalities (Adewumi & Oparinde, 2022; Savage, 2014). Having broken free of the colonial-apprenticeship restrictions, art workshops began to play a complementary role to formal art schools and their operation transformed into a platform of equality amongst participating artists, in direct deviation from the apprenticeship system where there is often a superior figure who decides the what, how, and when of the workshop's operation (Stanley, 2011).

Corroboratively, deductions from Kasfir and Foster (2013) focus on the colonial and early postcolonial workshop activities in different parts of Africa reveals that three major differences between the colonial and early postcolonial-cum-modern workshops are the relegation of the apprenticeship approach, the shorter workshop duration as well as the introduction of border crossing which translates into the need to travel for every workshop encounter. The colonial workshops mostly had one extended encounter with a 'superior' personality who transfers the knowledge and skill of art through apprenticeship. Conversely, early postcolonial-cum-modern workshops, also referred to as 'symposiums' in some European contexts (Du Cros & Jolliffe, 2017; Protas, 2022), strive to equalize power dynamics by allowing all participants to assume both teaching and learning roles within a brief period. This way, the 'teachers' keep changing depending on the range of participants, resulting in an assortment of shared perspectives. The location of learning also keeps changing due to the element of travelling or border crossing that has been the prominent feature of art workshops since the latter part of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Kasfir and Foster (2013: 13) call this 'a constantly changing social setting.' Kasfir and Foster (2013: 4) opinion of this dimension of art workshop is:

...an institution that shapes the imagination of its participants. As a cultural institution, it provides a setting where artists learn to see art, and learn about style and genre and how to reproduce them. At the same time, the workshop is also a social space that is constituted by its participants.

The stimulation and activation of imagination and the interpretative tendencies of participating artists are two major elements that are peculiar to the consideration of workshops as a social space of learning. Learning thus takes place through the interpretation of other's activities and one's role as a collaborator in this social space. As social actors in the workshop space, imagination becomes a potent and common tool for all participants to make present what is absent and to picture in their minds their ideas and those of their peers. Thus, 'imagination may lead to the realisation of the imagined' (Kasfir & Foster, 2013: 15), be it an artwork, a performance or a text.

At this stage, it is crucial to emphasize that I have chosen to focus on this type of art workshop – the early postcolonial-cum-modern art workshops, for three primary reasons. Firstly, these workshops adopt a pedagogical approach that fosters a balanced distribution of power, operating on a horizontal scale without any hierarchy of masters and apprentices. All participating artists are regarded as peers, aligning with my conceptualization of an art workshop as a collaborative community that co-creates knowledge and identities through art. Secondly, the key informants for this study possess extensive experience in the early postcolonial-cum-modern art workshops, making it imperative to centre my discussion around this particular version. Their insights and perspectives enrich the consideration of these workshops as interaction rituals. Thirdly, this version of art workshop places a strong emphasis on art production and the contemplation of creative ideas and trends. In contrast, contemporary or popular workshops often employ art as a means to achieve objectives beyond artistic contemplation and creation. Such

workshops, commonly held in educational, religious, or social settings during events with broader purposes, require further clarification and distinction.

The term art workshop has evolved from its colonial and early postcolonial meanings, where it referred to structured institutions with specific curricula. Now, contemporary art workshops take on a different form, becoming spontaneous gatherings where art is used as a means of communication or process, rather than solely for artistic creation. This shift signifies a transition from traditional art workshops to more generalised initiatives organized by various individuals with diverse aims and agendas, extending beyond the boundaries of art-making for art's sake, and spanning shorter periods, from a few hours to a few days. Art now becomes a tool to achieve broader objectives beyond the realm of art itself. For instance, art workshops have been utilized to foster deeper conversations and relationships among academic staff (Loads, 2009), facilitate engagement among medical practitioners (Loads, 2010), and provide support for Haitian street children (Brolles et al., 2017). These workshops are sometimes integrated into artists' residencies (Arredondo, 2021). Interestingly, a connection can be drawn between this contemporary workshop model and the colonial version, as both involve the presence of a 'superior personality' guiding the participants through the workshop process. This 'superior personality', often referred to as a facilitator or instructor, possesses superior knowledge and experience and steers engagement within the workshop.

With this clarification in mind, we can now address the initial inquiry: Do art workshops and artists' residencies share the same characteristics? The distinction between these two concepts is not always clear, and they are sometimes used interchangeably, as evident in Irwin and O'Donoghue's work (2012), where the boundary between them remains undefined. Therefore, this study aims to shed light on this blurred boundary and provide a clearer understanding of the differences between art workshops and artists' residencies.

While Lee et al. (2018) do not explicitly differentiate between art workshops and artists' residencies, they do offer a distinct perspective on the latter. They broadly conceptualize artists' residencies as spaces for productive knowledge exchange, where artists have the opportunity to operate outside the constraints of traditional employment. In this context, artists function much like freelancers, pursuing sponsored opportunities that allow them to engage with diverse environments and individuals, thereby expanding their creative repertoires and networks.

Artists' residencies have a long history, dating back to the early 1900s in the US, where designated spaces and houses served as artists' colonies for temporary accommodation (Lehman, 2017). The term 'artists' residency' focuses primarily on the physical space where artists temporarily reside for a short period. According to Barry (2024), artist residencies can vary widely in size and configuration, ranging from solitary stays in log cabins in remote areas to shared communal living spaces in inner-city studio apartments, cottages, and other ad-hoc accommodations. Reinforcingly, this notion of temporary housing for artists is reflected in different definitions of artist residencies by authors such as Lithgow and Wall (2017); Arredondo (2021); Higgins (2012); and Motalebi and Parvaneh (2021). In contrast, the concept of art workshops, as defined by Kasfir and Foster (2013), does not always emphasize the residential aspect, even though they often take place in physical spaces. Art workshops are more commonly perceived as creative and cultural institutions that foster socio-creative interactions among participants. This distinct characterization helps address the hypothesized similarity between the two platforms, highlighting their different functions and purposes.

After reviewing various literature on artist residencies and art workshops both within and outside Africa, distinct disparities between these two platforms, though similar in nature, emerged. A fundamental contrast lies in the nature and focus of the interaction. Artist residencies prioritize an artist's engagement with the local context in which they are temporarily embedded, while art workshops encourage interpersonal relations among participating artists and their spatial-cultural surroundings. Furthermore, the number of participants sets these two apart. Artist residencies, due to the need for accommodation and a semblance of a 'residence', can only accommodate one or a few artists at a time. On the other hand, art workshops or symposiums generally host a larger number of artists simultaneously, with a primary focus on cross-cultural exchange and collaborative art creation. For instance, Barry (2024) noted that ten artists were individually invited to the Berlin residency over two years, each spending a month in one of Berlin's modular refugee accommodations. Conversely, authors like Savage (2014) and Higgins

(2012) explain that an art workshop would bring these ten or more artists together simultaneously for interaction within the context, lasting between two to four weeks. Lastly, a crucial difference between workshops and residencies, as gleaned from Higgins's (2012) explanations, lies in their duration. Workshops typically last for an average of two to three weeks, whereas residencies often extend for longer periods, sometimes spanning several months.

In summary, Kirumira and Kasfir (2013) view residencies as extended versions of workshops. Similarly, Higgin (2012) highlights that residencies can be seen as conceptual variations of art workshops, resulting in both similarities and operational differences. Despite the growing popularity of artist residencies, the author strongly asserts that workshops remain essential, offering valuable short-term training for creative individuals across Oceania (Higgins, 2012: 25). Although Higgins discussion focuses on the Oceania context, the definition and adaptations of workshops presented in her analysis are applicable to various contexts worldwide. Despite the variations in platforms, artists' works often reflect their engagements in both form and content. Motalebi and Parvaneh (2021) further argue that an artist's physical environment, whether in a residency or a workshop away from their familiar surroundings, can impact their creativity. Hence, creating a conducive environment significantly accelerates artistic creativity. The benefits of artists' residencies resemble those of art workshops, with recent variations placing artists in different industries such as hospitals and research hubs (Lithgow & Wall, 2017). Arguably, these interdisciplinary settings expose artists to unique nuances and streamline their artistic skills with the context's specificities, ultimately stimulating their creativity in distinctive ways.

### **Theoretical perspectives towards community-based knowledge formation and development**

Considering art workshops as a platform for knowledge formation and artists' growth brings into focus the interconnectedness of various forms of education, such as adult, continuing, informal, experiential, and supplementary learning. These art workshops, operating outside and in complement to formal art schools, attract both emerging and established artists seeking to enrich their understanding, gain diverse experiences, and explore fresh perspectives in their personal and professional advancement. According to Sheridan et al. (2014), art workshops serve as spaces that encourage self-directed engagement and collaborative exploration, fostering a community of learners and creators free from constraints, driven by imagination, and eager to innovate while embracing the creative process as a means of learning.

While it may seem that an artist's participation in an art workshop directly leads to learning, scholars such as Kerka (2002) and Parrish (2010) suggest that learning is often not the sole or primary objective of such participation. Artists engage in workshops for various reasons, including seeking opportunities for expanding horizons, gaining professional validation, experiencing something new, networking, and fostering career growth. Additionally, according to Randall Collins, participation is essential for maintaining the continuity of the intellectual community. Learning, therefore, emerges as a consequence of participation influenced by diverse factors. Parrish (2010) emphasizes that the geographical and philosophical contexts of cultural communities profoundly impact the focus and direction of their explorations and learning. Consequently, the content of learning, whether direct or indirect, within art workshops is shaped by the multidimensional realities of the workshop's physical or geographical context.

Beyond the physical context, the philosophical context of a cultural institution also shapes the content and the interpretation of ideas during the engagements. However, realising that the presence of an overarching philosophy in a community of co-contemplators introduces the tendency of imposing a dominant and 'superior' idea on the participants, Parrish (2010) adds that this tendency is tempered by offering all participants equal opportunities to contribute their voices to the overall conversation. Rather than feeding them with information, they are included in the collaborative process of analysing issues and collectively shaping understandings and perspectives on issues. In such processes, dominant cultural narratives and stereotypes are countered and official knowledge is interrogated.

Monk (2013) proposes that cultural institutions can serve as viable venues for adult learning, as seen through the lens of Dewey's experiential learning theory. According to Dewey, learning is a social

process wherein learners draw upon their past experiences to engage with the present context. In this way, learners respond to and build upon their prior experiences to create new ones. Dewey (1997) also emphasizes the significance of experience in comprehending both the natural and social aspects of the world. He views learning as a dynamic process where individuals actively construct meaning and make sense of the world by interacting with its realities. Essentially, learning and understanding emerge from introspection and reflection on past experiences. Therefore, human growth and development, including behaviour and intuition, rely on continuous reflection on past experiences to prepare and adapt for the future. From a constructivist standpoint, experiential learning asserts that reflection is pivotal to the learning process, with learners having agency and control over their own learning (Sandlin et al., 2013).

The sociocultural theory, pioneered by Lev Vygotsky, provides an explanation for learning as a social practice. It has evolved to encompass the activity theory and cultural-historical activity theory (Scott & Palincsar, 2013), presenting a more comprehensive understanding of a person's learning process compared to constructivism. Unlike constructivism, sociocultural theory emphasizes the role of social and cultural activities in shaping a child's psychology (Scott & Palincsar, 2013; Shah & Rashid, 2018). This theory emphasizes the significance of the learner's internalization and assimilation of new information, facilitating both learning and development. While learning and development are distinct concepts, Scott and Palincsar (2013) acknowledge that well-designed learning activities can trigger the developmental process in a child.

Although the implications of these theories can be extrapolated to theorize and understand adult learning, both Dewey's experiential learning theory and Vygotsky's sociocultural explanations are quite focused on the child's learning process. However, Randall Collins's general theory of interaction ritual is considered most relevant to the conceptual focus of this study. His explanations of this theory do not only account for learning as a social practice amongst intellectuals, the theorist also acknowledged the developmental impact of such communal encounters on the emotional energy and cultural capital of the participants.

Collins (2000) challenges the sociology of ideas, which views ideas as solely products of local construction. He contends that knowledge formations are intertwined at both micro and macro levels, and these levels cannot be separated. Nothing exists in isolation, and the broader understanding arises from the amalgamation of local situations. According to Collins, the personality of a group member beyond the group is linked to the emotional energy generated within the group. Active participants leave with high enthusiasm to pursue personal and community goals, while average participants exhibit average enthusiasm. Weak or passive members may become discouraged and withdrawn. Emotional energy from interaction rituals like workshops and conferences flows into individuals' lives. When this energy diminishes, individuals seek to recharge through another encounter. Collins (2000: 23) underscores that:

Encounters have emotional aftermath; it is through this process that individuals can pursue their interior lives and individual trajectories while being shaped by social interactions ... All social life is an ecology of human bodies, coming together and moving apart across the landscape.

Members of this ecology of co-creators are often non-passive. They are actively engaged in knowledge formations and ongoing conversations. Even when they are silent, they remain conscious of their role and place in the ongoing community. They are often conscious of their past experience, the current conversation and how the current experience would shape their actions later on. This is quite similar to Dewey's position about learning as a social practice. The focus of such intellectual groups is often not the content being discussed but the act and continuity of such gatherings, linking the past with the present and the future which is important to the sustainability and the continuity of the ritual. Through such continuity, old ideas, energies, objects and networks are revisited and renewed. New members are also inducted into the ongoing community and new objects and ideas and emotional energies are created.

Collins links the cultural capital of individuals to their level of eminence and impact as intellectuals and their creativity. The more sophisticated and vaster the individual's cultural capital is by virtue of the range of their interaction ritual chains, the more creative they are and the greater their impacts within the intellectual community. In most cases, this explains the growth and development of individuals,

through interaction rituals. Thus, Collins (2000: 22-23) identifies certain characteristics as the major ingredients of all interaction rituals:

- a. A group of at least two people physically assembled;
- b. They focus attention on the same object or action, and each becomes aware that the other is maintaining this focus;
- c. They share a common mood or emotion.
- d. The mutual focus of attention and the shared mood cumulatively intensify. Bodily motions speech acts, and vocal micro-frequencies become attuned into a shared rhythm.
- e. As a result, the participants feel they are members of a group, with moral obligations to one another. Their relationship becomes symbolized by whatever they focused on during their ritual interaction.
- f. Individuals who participate in interaction rituals are filled with emotional energy in proportion to the intensity of the interaction.

In rereading art workshops as an 'interaction ritual' with a focus on the communal creation and sharing of knowledge for the development of participants, the foregoing characteristics shall then be placed side by side with some insights shared by Professors Tonie Okpe and Jacob Jat Jari of their workshop experiences, to ascertain the relevance of Collins' theory to art workshops and the development of artists' practice.

## **Methodology**

### ***Research design and sampling***

By its design, the study aligns with the qualitative research approach. I adopted the expert sampling technique (Etikan & Bala, 2017) to purposively select the two Professors as key informants for this study. As such, Professor Tonie Okpe and Professor Jacob Jat Jari were nominated by their colleagues and selected for their extensive experience in art workshop participation and organisation around the world.

### ***Research credibility and trustworthiness***

The credibility and trustworthiness of the draft interview questions being the major data collection instrument, were tested in a pilot study. This aligns with the recommendations of Ismail et al. (2017). In February 2019, the pilot study was carried out on Professor Lamidi Lasisi's workshop experience. Professor Lasisi was chosen because he also has extensive experience in the art workshop participation and organization within Nigeria. As such, his experience of the art workshop presented an apt context for testing the credibility and trustworthiness of the draft interview questions. The findings from the pilot study guided in restructuring and rephrasing the draft interview questions before administering it on the key informants for the study.

### ***Data collection***

Relevant qualitative data were collected through semi-structured interviews (Adeoye-Olatunde & Olenik, 2021), separately conducted with Professors Okpe and Jari on 17 October 2019 and 29 January 2020, respectively. Both Professors were interviewed at their offices with the interviews lasting for one hour averagely. The focus of the interviews centred on their cross-border experiences as participants, co-organizers of art workshops, and the impact of these experiences on their practice as artists and educators.

### ***Data analysis***

The interviews were listened to repeatedly and transcribed. Thereafter, the collected data was analysed, adopting Randall Collins' theory of interaction rituals. To achieve this, I reflected on two major questions: How does the theory of interaction rituals relate to the art workshop experiences of these key

informants? And how can Collins' theory of interaction ritual help in understanding the developmental impacts of art workshops on participating artists? Thus, I align with what Collins (2000) refers to as the six major characteristics of interaction ritual as highlighted above, to proffer a rereading of art workshops as a communal context of learning and identity (re)formation.

## Results and discussion

This section discusses the qualitative data gathered from the respondents within the context of Randall Collin's interaction ritual theory. First, a brief background on the key informants is presented to offer contextual insights into their background and experience. Then their collective experiences are juxtaposed against the main features of the interaction rituals as highlighted earlier.

### A brief background on Professors Tonie Okpe and Jacob Jat Jari

To understand the rationale for choosing these key informants for this study, it is imperative to briefly highlight their histories and experiences within the context of this study. The background of these informants is derived from their personal accounts and information collected from their respective Curriculum Vitae. Going forward, I will refer to Professor Tonie Okpe as 'Okpe' and Professor Jacob Jat Jari as 'Jari.'

Okpe, a Nigerian sculptor born in 1961, received his formal art training at Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria. Currently a Professor of Sculpture at his alma mater, he has participated in numerous solo and group exhibitions both locally and internationally. In the early stages of his career, Okpe chose to engage with society through art workshops rather than relying solely on galleries as intermediaries. Between 1993 and 2008, he actively participated in seventeen international art workshops, collaborating and presenting his creative ideas to diverse cultural backgrounds. Some notable workshops include the Shave International Artists Workshop in the UK (1993), Seventh International Wood Sculptor's Symposium in the Czech Republic (1997), and Svendborg International Sculpture Symposium in Denmark (2003). Through these workshops, Okpe produced various explorative sculptures and installations, many of which remained with the workshop organizers.

Jari, a Painter and Art Historian born in 1960 in Plateau state, Nigeria, received his formal art education from Ahmadu Bello University Zaria, obtaining degrees in Bachelor of Arts, Master of Arts (Art History), Masters of Fine Art (Painting), and Doctor of Philosophy in Art History. He currently teaches painting and art history at the same university. Jari's paintings have been showcased in various local and international exhibitions. He shares a similar motivation with Okpe for participating in art workshops, as it provides an opportunity to bypass the gatekeepers in the art world, such as galleries and institutions that determine what gets exhibited and sold. The gatekeepers' biases can limit artists' agency, as highlighted by Appiah (1991), making workshops a means to circumvent these boundaries and gain exposure for their works.

Jari has actively engaged in nine international art workshops within and outside Africa since 1996, utilizing them as a means to enter the contemporary art space and bypass gatekeepers. Some notable workshops include The Shave International Artists Workshop in Somerset, England (1997), Wasanii International Artists Workshop in Naivasha, Kenya (2000), and Braziers International Artists Workshop in Oxfordshire, England (2007). Drawing on their diverse workshop experiences, Okpe and Jari co-founded the Aftershave International Artists' Workshop in Nigeria in 1998. Their extensive workshop experiences and expertise made them ideal key informants for the study, as recommended by their peers.

### Art workshops as interaction rituals for knowledge formation and development

The first characteristic of an interaction ritual, according to Collins (2000) is the physical assemblage of a group of at least two people. This supposes that for a true interaction ritual to take place, it has to be done in and by a group – a conglomerate of like-minded people, congregating together. Two main elements are apparent in this first criterion by Collins: The imperative of numbers and physical presence. To be clear, all the art workshops in which Okpe and Jari participated possess these elements. They all had an average of ten participants physically present at the workshops.

Collins disagrees with the notion of knowledge creation in isolation. His insistence on numbers rides on the idea of knowledge formation as a double-levelled social practice within a community. The first level is the micro (local) and the second level is the macro (broader community). 'Local' here does not necessarily mean personal or individual formation of knowledge. According to Collins, local connotes the immediate situations within a group which forms the knowledge and cultural capital with which each participant operates in a broader macro community. This forms the second level of knowledge formation, aligning with Irwin and O'Donoghue's (2012) perspective on socially engaged art practice, where collaboration and problem-solving are essential elements.

In addition to collaboration, which is a consequence of group participation, new understandings are also formed. The physicality and tactility of these engagements hold importance for Collins. This, he argues, is a prerequisite for the realisation of emotional energy, an important resource for all participants to propel themselves to activate their knowledge capital in the macro-community. Thus, all social and communal interactions are 'an ecology of human bodies, coming together and moving apart across the landscape' (Collins, 2000: 23). This directly questions the recent trend of virtual conferences and workshops, which has gradually become our norm since the pandemic. The *Connect2Abilities* project by Lee et al. (2022) is a case in point in this regard. Despite being conceptualised on the grand idea of connecting people-to-people to multiply, interconnect and harness individual abilities, the project 'was compelled to convert its offering from a traditional face-to-face performance to an online format' (Lee et al., 2022: 45). Although the authors argue that the virtual alternative democratized and increased audience participation in the project, the emotional energy derived from the physical experience cannot simply be equated to or replaced by the virtual. Thus, if the emotional energy needed to translate the talk into real actions for self and collective development can only be gained through physical engagements, perhaps a quick reversal to the status quo ante is urgently needed.

Collins proposes a second key aspect of an interaction ritual, emphasizing the collective focus of all group members on a shared object or action while being aware of each other's identical focus. Workshops often embody this communal creative process, where participating artists maintain their unique thoughts and creative approaches, yet remain cognizant of their role as co-creators within the group. Their individual creative focus contributes to the collective action of the community during the workshop, transforming it into a ritualistic experience. Okpe's accounts of workshop encounters, like the 7th International Wood Sculptor's Symposium in the Czech Republic and the 3rd International Stone Sculptors' Symposium in Austria (held in 1997 and 2002, respectively), reveal material-focused workshops. The abundance of specific materials in the workshop's geographical context invites artists to collectively explore these materials in distinct ways. For instance, during the 3rd International Stone Sculptors' Symposium, granite served as the central object, fostering a shared carving process among all participants. According to Okpe, he 'had not worked in granite before, tougher than marble. So the opportunity to work in Mattighofen in Austria using marble, offered a different challenge.' This shared focus on new material, technique, or idea sharpens participants' skills and enriches their experiences through collaboration, brainstorming, and collective problem-solving. This confirms Collins' third criterion which suggests that the participants share a common mood during the interaction ritual. Despite the harmonious atmosphere, each artist's unique tendencies manifest in the physical and philosophical sophistication of the objects they produce after the ritual.

Collins identifies the fourth key component of an interaction ritual as the participants' mutual focus of attention and shared mood, which is expected to intensify into a synchronized rhythm of bodily movements, speech acts, and vocal micro-frequencies. This creates a vibrant atmosphere of concentration, conviviality, humour, and festivity, fostering a sense of shared identity and understanding within the group. The overall ambience reflects mutual respect, recognition, and communal engagement. Irwin and O'Donoghue (2012: 223) emphasize that within these shared moments of eating, drinking, talking, hiking, and cohabitation, novel artistic possibilities can emerge. An example of such artistic innovation is evident in Jari's 1999 performance entitled *Guess Who is Coming to Dinner*, which he presented during the Aftershave Workshop in Jos. Inspired by a 1967 movie starring Sidney Poitier, Jari's performance broke new ground, capturing the essence of collaborative artistic exploration during the workshop. Recounting the experience Jari expresses thus:



**Figure 1.** *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner*, Jacob Jari, 1999. Performance. Josef Baier and Elena Beelaerts (Bride's Parents). Aftershave International Artists' Workshop, The Museum of Traditional Nigerian Architecture (MOTNA). Courtesy of Tonie Okpe.

I did something that I had not done before and I do not think I have subsequently done anything close to that. I tried to do a performance... I took a video of everything, and it was fantastic. I think, in terms of what I would call a profound work that I have done in any workshop, that would probably be it.

Being a painter, Jari had not had the opportunity to explore and express his creative inclinations towards performance art until this 1999 workshop. The unusual blend of creative focus and camaraderie, as deduced from Collins' prescription, is evident in a still photograph taken during the performance. In the photograph, two European participants (female and male) dressed in typical African apparel, complete with cap and headgear, volunteered to participate in Jari's performance towards the realisation of his creative contemplations. The actors were captured beaming with excitement about the experience (See [Figure 1](#)). Such moments shared and encountered in this atmosphere of concentration and conviviality, usually shape the creative contemplations of participants, into creating unusual works. Unusual, in terms of media, size, and philosophical orientations.

Based on Collins's (2000) fifth characteristic of interaction ritual, the workshop fosters a charged and communal atmosphere, prompting participants to perceive themselves as members of a close-knit group with moral obligations to each other. Their bond is symbolized by their focus during the ritual interaction. The workshop facilitates the formation of alliances and various levels of relationships, even in the presence of language barriers, as noted by Okpe. Artists often resort to sounds and gestures for communication and collaboration, emphasizing the importance of networking in art workshop experiences. Engaging in cross-border creative initiatives allows artists to connect with other cultural producers, facilitating idea exchange and potential opportunities. Networking within such physical cultural communities enables artists to showcase their works and career interests, possibly leading to referrals for art projects and workshops. The idea of referrals is closely linked to Collins's notion that the communal atmosphere encourages participants to embrace moral responsibilities towards one another.

Both Okpe and Jari acknowledged having benefitted immensely from such networks as many of the workshop invitations they received were a result of referrals from people they had previously met and interacted with during workshops. For example, Okpe was invited to the International Steel Sculptors' Symposium in Austria through the influence of someone he met in Nigeria during a workshop. In Okpe's words:

There was an artist called Josef Beier who came to conduct a workshop in Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria in Nigeria and as a result of our interaction, he went back to Austria and says he knows this space where workshops are held everywhere and that it is in steel. So, he got the organizers to invite Olu Amoda and I to go.

This demonstrates the essential role of networking and physical presence through travels across borders, in fostering artistic collaborations and opportunities. Essentially, this reinforces the need and importance of travelling to maximize the impacts of interaction rituals as emphasised by Collins (2000) and Arredondo (2021). One significant finding of Arredondo's (2021) pilot study, which investigated the link between travel and creativity, is that engaging with diverse cultures beyond an artist's familiar surroundings has a positive influence on their creative abilities. Embracing new experiences holds inherent value for an artist's artistic practice. The author emphasizes that travel serves as a pivotal and essential aspect of creative education, organizing and shaping artists' perspectives and skills.

Lastly, Collins proffers that all members who participate in the interaction ritual are filled with emotional energy in proportion to the intensity of the interaction. That is, the emotional energy a participant of an art workshop takes away from the experience is usually commensurate to the level of the participant's engagement and not to the overall energy of the workshop. This means that emotional energy levels are not handed to participants, but earned. Collins (2000) clarifies further that a committed participant of the group would depart with elevated emotional energy, driven to pursue personal and communal objectives following the interaction ritual. Similarly, an individual with moderate engagement levels will display average enthusiasm beyond the group setting, whereas a less engaged or passive member tends to feel discouraged and withdraw. Therefore, emotional energy emanates from the members' involvement in interaction rituals, like art workshops, impacting their individual lives and realities.

The emotional energy emanating from Okpe and Jari's extensive workshop participation is evident in their artistic endeavours. Specifically, Jari's participation in a workshop back in 2008 sparked the development of a unique painting technique, utilizing a hot-pressing iron to create diverse impressions on surfaces, a method he continues to employ to this day. According to Jari, 'I use the pressing iron as a metaphor... rather than look at it, as something ... horrible, it could be... aesthetically pleasing... it gave very interesting result.' The workshop environment provided a temporary sanctuary for artists to reflect, interact, and create, inspiring Jari to use his art metaphorically, transforming negativity in his larger community into beauty and goodness, fuelled by the emotional energy derived from the workshop's micro-community. The profound emotional energy experienced by the duo in various workshop settings culminated in their joint establishment of the Aftershave International Artists Workshop in Nigeria. This act aligns with Collins' assertion that an individual's personality outside a group is often influenced by the emotional energy generated within the group.

After Sir Anthony Caro and Robert Loder established the Triangle Network in 1982, a notable trend emerged. The workshops, which attracted artists from diverse regions, resulted in participants returning to their home countries with renewed emotional energy, leading them to share their experiences and impact their broader communities. Consequently, this creative urge facilitated the expansion of the Triangle Network across the globe, including Africa (Adewumi, 2019). However, as time passes, the emotional energy tends to wane, prompting artists like Okpe, Jari, and others to frequently participate in art workshops as a means of replenishment. This phenomenon may also explain the discontinuation of several workshop platforms in Africa and elsewhere, alongside the persistent funding challenges. Nonetheless, repeated participation in these interaction rituals enables artists to build their cultural and knowledge capital, a critical element that complements emotional energy. For optimal impact, participants should focus on nurturing emotional energy through meaningful engagements and interactions, while concurrently enhancing their cultural capital by actively engaging in informal creative intellectual communities, such as art workshops.

## Recommendation

Lee et al. (2018) view creatively and culturally charged collaborative spaces, such as art workshops and residencies, as valuable contexts for fostering innovation. These environments facilitate capacity-building for both emerging and established artists, allowing them to enhance their practices through interactive and collaborative relationships. Often, new perspectives and methods of artistic expression emerge from these engagements. Therefore, it is recommended that institutional stakeholders recognize and support the potential of these platforms by increasing funding, creating enabling environments, and implementing policies that promote such collaborative initiatives.

Given the impacts of art workshops and the rising costs of formal art education globally (Arredondo, 2021; Stanley, 2011), it is recommended that artists should strategically supplement their learning through these informal intellectual platforms. The diverse array of experiences gained from such workshops can significantly expand an artist's horizons and shape their artistic world.

Theoretically, the paper recommends that Collins' interaction ritual theory, traditionally applied to explain social cohesion and emotional energy in ritualistic encounters, can be expanded to other realms of creative practice and interactions beyond art workshops. For instance, large-scale cultural events, such as art biennales, music festivals, and literary festivals, also involve repeated rituals of interaction. Artists, curators, audiences, and critics come together to celebrate and critique creative works, creating shared meanings and generating emotional energy. Collins' theory could be applied to explore how these temporary gatherings reinforce cultural hierarchies, facilitate the exchange of ideas, and contribute to both individual and collective identity in the broader creative industry.

## Conclusion

This study contributes to the ongoing discourse on the generation and framing of knowledge within both micro and macro communities. The interaction ritual theory offers a fresh perspective on viewing art workshops as knowledge creation hubs and spaces for individual and collective identity development among artists. It sheds new light on the enthusiastic participation of artists like Okpe and Jari in these workshops, showcasing how continuous engagement in such intellectually stimulating and culturally rich communities enhances their knowledge and cultural capital. As Arredondo (2021) rightly observed, artists who engage in these platforms tend to possess remarkable confidence when discussing their practice and experiences. I, however, acknowledge that the findings of this study can potentially take a different outlook should the key informants be different or be an admixture of experts and budding artists who have experienced art workshops in varied ways. Perhaps this is an area to further explore in subsequent research.

In sum, the concept of gatekeepers, which is pivotal to Okpe and Jari's art workshop history and practice, warrants critical examination. In my perspective, it appears to be a shift from one authority figure to another. While the participants sought to escape the influence of gallerists and curators who were perceived to be hindering some artists from gaining recognition, the realm of art workshops also has its own gatekeepers. Firstly, artists are typically required to apply and await selection by the organizing or selection committees of these workshop platforms. Secondly, even if selected, which is a daunting task considering the overwhelming number of applications received by these organizers, artists still face the challenge of navigating the stringent visa application process. In recent times, traversing national borders has become increasingly difficult and even unfeasible in certain regions, especially when attempting to move from Africa to Europe or the West. Barry (2024) highlighted this issue, questioning the visa categories offered to artists from underdeveloped countries. Ultimately, it seems that artists are left with a choice between gatekeepers, as they are encountered wherever the artist turns.

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