Working Bodies, Poignant Cloth: Materialising Histories of Labour in Ann Hamilton's *indigo blue* (1991, 2007) and Ibrahim Mahama's *Occupations* (2012–)

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ABSTRACT

Working Bodies, Poignant Cloth: Materialising Histories of Labour in Ann Hamilton's *indigo blue* (1991, 2007) and Ibrahim Mahama's *Occupations* (2012–)

Sarah Amarica

American artist Ann Hamilton (b. 1956) once described her country's history as being guilty of the erasure of labouring bodies, and, like Ghanaian artist Ibrahim Mahama (b.1987), she uses textiles in her installation art to poignantly reflect on histories of labour. This thesis addresses the critical connections between labour, capital, and contemporary material practices by examining Hamilton's *indigo blue* (1991, 2007) and Mahama's ongoing *Occupations* series (2012–), both of which utilise cloth to unearth the histories of labour in their home countries. Hamilton's artwork comprises 6,000 kilograms of blue-collar clothing stacked into a colossal heap and reflects on the history of indigo and cotton production in the American South, and the slave labour that sustained these industries for centuries. Mahama's work reconfigures old jute sacks, used to transport coal and cocoa in Ghana, into vast patchwork panels, then drapes them across buildings worldwide to manifest the labour behind these industries and the global demand that sustains them. Structured around these case studies and drawing primarily from material culture discourse, this inquiry negotiates the stories behind things produced, the human bodies behind globally-consumed commodities, and ultimately, the manifestation of these discussions through cloth. There is significant value in comparing Hamilton and Mahama's artworks, not only because in both cases commodity production can be linked with socioeconomic conditions (of the United States and Ghana respectively) but because their art practices implicitly advocate for the role that contemporary artists may play in critically examining labour, past and present.

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INTRODUCTION

As I write this thesis in 2018, in today's supposedly post-industrial climate, the topic of labour is ever-present and often tense, as global markets estrange consumers from labourers, and the realities of production and exchange behind the things we consume remain relatively unknown. With this socioeconomic context in mind, what can contemporary art offer to current discourses surrounding labour? I believe that artists not only play an important role in interrogating the precarious, dislocated, and seemingly invisible labour behind our global economy but, they can also succeed at making this labour *visible.*

My thesis will address the critical connections between labour, capital, and contemporary material practices in relation to artworks by American artist Ann Hamilton (b. 1956) and Ghanaian artist Ibrahim Mahama (b. 1987). More specifically, my research argues that their installations, Hamilton's *indigo blue* (1991, 2007) and Mahama's *Occupations* series (2012–) harness textiles to unearth the histories of labour behind major industries in the artists' home countries: cotton and indigo production in America's South, and jute production in Ghana, respectively. Structured around these case studies, my thesis will explore the narrative and evocative potential of cloth, while also questioning past and present histories of working bodies, and the commodities produced by these workers.

When speaking about *indigo blue*, Hamilton once described the history of the United States as being guilty of the erasure of labouring bodies, and indeed she introduced textiles into her installation art to reflect on these hidden histories of labour. Since the 1980s, her immersive installations have harnessed textiles, text, sound, and other media to explore notions of memory, the body, and labour through sensorial and poetic means. Hamilton's *indigo blue* was commissioned by the Spoleto Festival in Charleston, South Carolina in 1991 to create an artwork in response to the social history of the city. While briefly living in Charleston, the artist became increasingly aware of the official accounts and particular narratives established for its tourist industry, which mostly omitted past and present labourers despite the city's significant ties to plantation slavery.[1] Her response, *indigo blue,* a large-scale installation which deployed textiles to poignantly evoke the bodies and histories of past workers, and the commodities they produced as distinctly tied to the socioeconomic history of South Carolina. The installation was acquired by the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art in 2007.

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[1] "*indigo blue*," Ann Hamilton Studio, accessed on 10 October 2017. [http://www.annhamiltonstudio.com/images/projects/indigoblue/AH_indigo-blue-project-description.pdf].

Hamilton's *indigo blue* encompasses 6,000 kilograms of blue-collar workers' uniforms stacked into a great heap (fig. 1). When making the installation, the artist and her collaborators folded and piled selected shirts and pants onto a massive five-metre wide by seven-metre long steel platform, smoothing and adjusting each item. In its entirety, the accumulated layers form a towering mound over five metres high, a monumental presence in the old mechanical garage the artwork occupied (fig. 2). Blue sleeves and collars poke through the heap of clothing, some bearing tags, labels, or names indicating their origins and former owners. Whether approaching the artwork head on, or from the windows overhead, one cannot underestimate the breadth of such a substantial artistic endeavour and the labour necessary to its formation.

Hamilton's materials are as symbolic as they are political. The blue clothing can be linked to two of colonial South Carolina's prominent crops: indigo and cotton, both of which used slave labour throughout the eighteenth century to establish Charleston as a thriving commercial hub. The blue-collar uniforms are also a marker of the anonymous working-class, and so Hamilton reintroduces the presence of workers and the necessity of manual labour industries, past and present. The clothes themselves, sourced from a commercial supplier, were once worn by workers who had presumably been laid off or who had been hired by companies that had gone out of business.[2] Every element of Hamilton's artwork, I argue, references moving, working bodies; the African-American slaves who cultivated the cotton and indigo centuries ago, the blue-collar workers who once inhabited the uniforms, the artist and staff who installed the artwork, folding and piling each item (fig. 9). The artwork also included a performer who sat at a table close to the pile of clothes, over the duration of the installation, using an eraser and saliva to erase the pages of historical novels; thus the artwork included different kinds of labourers while challenging official histories (fig. 10).[3]

Like Hamilton, Mahama utilises cloth in his large-scale installations to poignantly reflect on notions of labour, globalisation, and commerce. Born in Tamale and based both in Accra, Kumasi, and Tamale, Ghana, Mahama experiments with material processes and incorporates everyday textile objects into his sculptures and installations. Since participating in the 56th Venice Biennale, Mahama has gained international acclaim for his ongoing *Occupations* series, in which the artist transforms jute sacks into massive blanket or quilt-like structures, which are then draped across various public spaces and buildings. These monumental works are made with the help of collaborators, local workers whom the artist employs for each project, who work collectively in studio environments to join together the many panels of fabric. This thesis demonstrates that Mahama's chosen materials, as well as their acquisition, transformation, and final display, allude to a broader history of Ghanaian labour, wherein jute, in its affiliation to mineral and agricultural industries, stands in for the workers involved in such trades and the global demand that sustains them.

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[2] Joan Simon, *Ann Hamilton* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 2002), 105.

[3] *Indigo blue* contained another component, situated in an office space adjoining the garage, comprised of wall-hung woven-sacks filled with soybeans, which sprouted and died over the course of the exhibition, filling the room with a putrid rotting smell. I will not be discussing this component of the artwork.

Since Mahama's *Occupations* series began in 2012, the artist has obtained his material by way of trade, exchanging new jute sacks he has purchased for tattered ones obtained from local industries, which he then repurposes into art. Jute itself is embedded in colonial histories, and today jute sacks are widely used across Ghanaian markets to package and export agricultural commodities—cocoa, rice, grain, charcoal, and others. The artist obtains these bags in their final stages of life, when the once-sturdy material has become too tired from transporting heavy charcoal to remain functional, or, in the artist's own words, "when the material fails completely."[4] The sacks are often discoloured and disintegrated, ranging from dark to light brown, tightly woven to threadbare, and weathered from natural elements, human sweat or otherwise (fig. 15). Sometimes, clusters of trinkets and household materials—authentication tags, braided rope, netting—are sewn into the fabric, further evidence to how these bags were originally made, identified, and exchanged (fig. 14). Often, panels are branded with their trademark place of origin, or "Product of Ghana," others stamped with sporadic dates or signifiers indicating past travels, former owners, and previous lives.

Mahama has intervened into several kinds of landmarks worldwide, ranging from private to public spaces, from the monumental to the obscure. In 2012, he created a temporary installation at the Mallam Atta Market in Accra, wherein he draped his patchwork jute over a large but somewhat commonplace pile of charcoal (fig. 13). Drab and deliberately banal, the lumpy cloth-covered mound is an eyesore of sorts, hardly attracting any attention to itself. But because it is made from the very fabric sold in Ghanaian markets and by the very workers who frequent the site, Mahama's artistic gesture engages with the local commerce inherent to the space. For another exhibition in 2018, Mahama draped his heavy jute panels atop the picturesque Stünkede Castle in Herne, Germany, obscuring the building's bleached baroque walls with frayed, discoloured, charcoal-stained fabric (fig.16). The artwork's title, *Coal Market*, not only references coal production in Mahama's native Ghana but connects to the Ruhr region in which the artwork was exhibited, which has been shaped by its coal industry for centuries but now invests in new industries like arts and culture.[5] Mahama's jute interventions into different architectural spaces interrogate the histories of labour and commerce imbedded in the sites themselves, and, I argue, further suggest that these sites are continuously shaped by changing economies.

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[4] BiennaleChannel, "Biennale Arte 2015 – Ibrahim Mahama," YouTube video, 03:23, posted on 7 May 2015. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VAc3vx0YXVA].

Hamilton and Mahama's works are comparable in their monumentality, their site-specificity, and their material-focus, but differ significantly in their sociopolitical contexts. With this in mind, I have chosen to pair these artists and their artworks together not in spite of their differences, but deliberately because of them, and, as such, this will be the first time that their artworks have been placed in conversation with one another. There is significant value in discussing these installations together, to think through the histories of global and local labour that emerge through artistic deployments of textile materials, in varying geographical and historical contexts. Together, Hamilton and Mahama's artworks offer a global perspective on labour, contemporary art practices, and the intersection of the two. Furthermore, I see great potential in comparing Hamilton and Mahama's artworks, not only because in both cases commodity production can be linked with sociopolitical workings (of America's south and Ghana respectively) but because their art practices implicitly advocate for the role contemporary artists may play in addressing issues surrounding labour today.

Moreover, Hamilton's *indigo blue* and Mahama's *Occupations*, made over twenty years apart, are part of a larger history of contemporary art and draw from important conceptual and aesthetic strategies in installation art and site-specific art from the late twentieth century onwards. In the book *Space, Site, Intervention: Situating Installation Art* (2000), author Erika

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[5] Sabine Peschel, "Coal and Art: An Unlikely Pair," *DW*, 8 May 2018. [http://www.dw.com/en/coal-and-art-an-unlikely-pair/a-43684752].

Suderburg describes installation art as a process, the root of the word stemming from the action of installing, a process by which artists sought to create immersive environments, altering surfaces to envelop the viewer, and harnessing objects to reallocate and disorder space.[6] While Suderburg notes various sources and legacies of installation art, she recalls Kurt Schwitters' *Merzbeau* (1920-34) as a seminal experiment in which the artist created a living assemblage out of his living room, altering space through the mutation of materials, object and environment.[7] While site and architecture would remain an integral component of installation art, over the course of the twentieth century, the focus moved from inside the gallery to outdoors, as artworks occupied alternative public sites, and, in turn, set out to blur art with public life. Alongside rising discussions in institutional critique, site-specific installation art also became a means of critiquing the gallery or museum space, or more specifically, the ideological and institutional frameworks that exhibited art.[8] Artists Christo and Jeanne Claude, for example, are noteworthy for their ambitious interventions into architecture beginning in the 1960s, in which they wrapped significant landmarks in polyethene fabric as a form of critical commentary. Their *Wrapped Reichstag* (1995) in Berlin, perhaps their magnum opus, demonstrates an engagement not only with site but with national identity and public memory. This tendency in public art helped pave the way for works like *indigo blue* and *Occupations,* by encouraging engagement outside of the traditional confines of the museum, in everyday life, and by considering how contemporary art might also address social concerns circulating in the public sphere.

Hamilton and Mahama's artworks can also be considered as part of a larger preoccupation in contemporary art, with alternative forms of commemoration. Art historian Lisa Saltzman notes the emergence of a new type of monument, one which critically engages with the past through the use of new technologies and diverse materials, as demonstrated in the work of Krzysztof Wodiczko and Kara Walker. Other contemporary artists have addressed the past through evocative materials, experimenting with crumbling, disintegrated matter to symbolise tragedy, death, or political tension, as is the case with the works of Anselm Kieffer and Teresa Margolles, or by manipulating cloth and other found materials according to their social charge, as seen in the work of Christian Boltanski, Doris Salcedo, and Kader Attia in recent years. These are but a few examples of contemporary artists who have adopted key concepts from the legacy of installation art—site, public space, memory—but who are also concerned with accessing memory through materials, found objects, and things. I am drawn to Hamilton and Mahama's installations for their critical interrogation of site, history, and labour, but especially for their engagement with the meaning of textiles.

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[6] Erika Suderburg, ed., *Space, Site, Intervention: Situating Installation Art* (Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 6.
[7] Ibid., 11.
[8] Ibid., 5.

With this material focus in mind, this art historical inquiry draws extensively from material culture theory, itself an interdisciplinary approach to examining the relationship between humans and their material world. A material culture approach emphasises the cultural and economic conditions surrounding how objects are made, used, traded, bought, and even discarded. So too, this line of thinking can be applied to contemporary art. Why do Hamilton and Mahama use found objects in their installations? Why incorporate cotton and jute, in different material states? More importantly, I want to ask: how do the artists' material choices contribute to widespread discussions of labour and our world today? With this material culture perspective in mind, I propose that Hamilton and Mahama's artworks offer unique ways of thinking through the diverse histories of individual and collective labour that are embedded in the objects and things that we use daily. My research aims to bring these different facets of labour to surface.

To organise this research project, my thesis is structured into three sections. Hamilton and Mahama harness castoff objects in their artworks and so, my first section, "Theories of Objects" examines concepts of the commodity and the thing. I begin by exploring the commodity as a material representation of global trade, as outlined by cultural theorists Arjun Appadurai and Igor Kopytoff, who study the networks surrounding a commodity's "life," from its production to its circulation and use. Using this model, I discuss the histories of indigo, cotton, and jute, the commodities referenced in Hamilton and Mahama's respective installations, to uncover the complex histories of labour present in the many stages of each commodity's life. Next, I look at the use of found objects in modern and contemporary art, from the foundational 1961 exhibition *The Art of Assemblage* to the practices of twentieth-century French sculptor Arman and Ghanaian contemporary artist El Anatsui, who accumulate and manipulate discarded objects through innovative means, much like Hamilton and Mahama. I end by discussing "thingness," drawing on Bill Brown's scholarship to ask how disintegrated, wrecked materials are not only evocative but might offer insight into the state of our world today. Ultimately, this section recognises the important role that objects play in our everyday, and the creative and critical implications of collecting, transforming, and even discarding objects in contemporary art.

Since textiles are essential components of Hamilton and Mahama's artworks, I explore the narrative potential of cloth in my second section titled "Use and Production of Textiles." More specifically, I consider the historical legacy of textile production and its familiar presence in our daily lives to prove that cloth simultaneously represents intimate, personal histories and the seemingly impersonal global state of textile production today. Using cotton and jute as case studies, the primary materials in Hamilton and Mahama's individual works, I speak about the development of global textile manufacture from the Industrial Revolution to today, from the radical efforts of American textile workers in the 1900s who fought for better working conditions across manual labour sectors, to the globalization of textile sweatshops, to ultimately emphasise the necessary and often invisible human labour behind the making of textiles. The bodily presence of makers and workers, I argue, lingers in Hamilton and Mahama's materials, especially considering the material memory, and the communicative and affective qualities inherent to cloth, which is my last point of discussion in this section.

My third and final section "Histories of Labour and Site" unpacks the distinct physical and historical contexts in which Hamilton and Mahama's installations were conceived, with particular emphasis on the labour inherent to each site. First, I examine Hamilton's inclusion in the 1991 exhibition *Places with a Past* in Charleston, South Carolina, in relation to how Charleston's official histories omitted slaves and manual workers, as this inspired Hamilton's *indigo blue*. Then, I examine Mahama's *Occupations* series within two contexts: first, within Ghana, with a particular focus on the building projects initiated in a post-Independent state, and their subsequent uses today; second, Mahama's participation in the 2015 Venice Biennale, in which he showcased Ghanaian labour to international audiences. Drawing from Miwon Kwon's examination of site-specificity as an important strategy in contemporary art, in which site and audience are integral to an artwork's meaning, I argue that Hamilton and Mahama negotiate important histories of site and labour through their installation art, at local and global levels.

I conclude my thesis with some remarks on how contemporary art plays an important role in interrogating past and present issues surrounding work, especially in sharing the stories of labourers known and unknown. When preparing for *indigo blue* and beginning to delve into labour histories known and unknown, Hamilton asked herself: "How do you tell the other story?"[9] Ultimately, I will further expand this question into how materials can tell stories of individual and collective labour.

THEORIES OF OBJECTS

Objects, like people, occupy significant roles in our world. What does it mean to incorporate objects into art, and how might they influence an artwork's meaning? In short, why do objects matter? Cultural theorists, art historians, and artists alike have noticed how objects are implicated in larger systems that characterise our world and our everyday. The following section will unpack how objects, commodities, things, and materials can be integrated and manipulated through art, and how they offer the potential for artistic experimentation and critical discourse alike. Hamilton and Mahama both harness castoff objects in their installation art, and so I will first turn to theories of the commodity and the thing to analyse their work.

In his pivotal volume *The Social Life of Things* (1988), cultural anthropologist Arjun Appadurai claims that commodities are objects imbued with social potential because they derive meaning from the global systems within which they circulate. Appadurai's discussions stem from Marx's commodity theories, which stipulate that commodities are manufactured goods circulating within modern capitalist economies.[10] Across different societies, Marx claims, products are made to be used and their value is determined by their usage, but within capitalist systems, their value is primarily defined by their exchange, a system that transforms the commodity into capital.[11] For Marx, this shift from use-value to exchange-value, in which commodities are impersonal, defined by monetary value alone, ultimately alienates the commodity from the human labour behind its production.[12] Appadurai, however, sees commodities as the material evidence of complex and specific socioeconomic systems, and turns instead to their global trajectories to trace the social and political contexts that are fundamental to their being.[13] Appadurai explains: "We have to follow the things themselves, for their meanings are inscribed in their forms, their uses, their trajectories."[14] His theories advocate for studying the networks, however small and ordinary, of objects, in order to reveal the social and political relations of the societies they move through. He continues, "It is only through the analysis of these trajectories that we can interpret the human transactions and calculations that enliven things…it is the things-in-motion that illuminate their human and social contexts."[15] Ultimately, Appadurai considers commodities as valuable sources of knowledge and encourages us to look at the larger context of an object's life, including the modes of production, labour, consumption, and global trade inherent to their being. Tracing the histories of commodities thus provides as much insight into people, places, and politics as it does objects.

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[9] San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, "Ann Hamilton on the Inspiration for *indigo blue,*" YouTube video, 03:10, posted on 28 February 2011. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HnM_BsZE3XI].

[10] Arjun Appadurai, "Introduction: Commodities and the Politics of Value," in *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*, ed. Arjun Appadurai (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 6-7.

[11] Ibid., 7-8.

[12] Ibid., 8.

[13] Ibid., 5.

For example, while Hamilton's installation used denim clothing, it is possible to examine the history of indigo and cotton as commodities. In its earliest uses, indigo was a luxurious product from India, imported by the West as part of fifteenth-century trade. Seventeenth-century settlers introduced indigo crops to the Americas, where they were cultivated by South Carolina plantation slaves, who processed the plant into a natural dye, to be exported to Europe and used across Britain's thriving textile industry.[16] Indigo eventually intersected with cotton—which has been described as the world's first industrialised commodity—yielding blue denim clothing. Like indigo, cotton dominated local and global economies for centuries, a commodity so desirable it propelled the first industrial age and new models of labour worldwide: plantations in America's South, factories, and cotton mills in nineteenth-century America and Britain, most of which relied on slave, child, women, and rural labourers.[17] Fustian cottons, like corduroy and denim, cheap and durable, even clothed the workers that produced it, becoming an emblem of the working class from the nineteenth century onwards. The blue jean, the quintessential American cultural commodity, tied to industrial labour and twentieth-century pop culture alike, thus embodies the fusion of two thriving commodities, and their development from homegrown crops to global phenomenon. The presence of indigo and cotton in Hamilton's installation can therefore be regarded as tapping into meaningful histories of commerce, exchange, and labour.

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[14] Appadurai, *The Social Life of Things*, 5.

[15] Ibid.

[16] See Andrea Feeser, *Red, White, and Black Make Blue: Indigo in the Fabric of Colonial South Carolina Life* (Athens & London: The University of Georgia Press, 2013).

[17] See Beverly Lemire, *Cotton* (New York; London: Bloomsbury, 2011).

The jute fabric in Mahama's installation also alludes to past and present histories of commodities in circulation, and the local workers and global consumers behind them. Jute, a plant used to make burlap, yarn, twine, and other coarse textile blends, originated in India and was exported globally by the British beginning in the seventeenth century.[18] During the Industrial Revolution, jute replaced hemp as a mass-manufactured material used to make sackcloth, largely used to package and ship agricultural products worldwide.[19] It is still used today. In West Africa, jute sacks—first made in India or Bangladesh, then distributed worldwide—undergo many multifunctional uses across different economies and everyday life.[20] First, jute is used to transport food products such as coffee, rice, and cocoa from West Africa to Europe and the Americas (fig. 22).[21] The sacks are used only once to move cocoa beans—one of West Africa's most valuable exports—across international borders, then reused to transport other domestic crops locally.[22] After being utilised in the food markets, jute sacks are repurposed by Ghana's mining industries to transport coal, another commodity, until they are eventually weathered and unusable.[23] As materials and products move from one place to another, jute thus intersects with different industries and different people, including Ghanaian farmers, packagers, and other workers, and, indirectly, consumers worldwide.

These commodities, given the globalised nature of their production, exchange, and consumption, also reveal deep-rooted histories of colonialism. Cultural theorist Igor Kopytoff uses the term "commoditization" to refer to the process in which objects acquire specific meaning in relation to the larger systems in which they were conceived, and their small-scale exchanges between people and other commodities.[24] Kopytoff explains that from an economic perspective, commodities are produced and exist within economic systems alone, but from a cultural view, commodities are unique, shaped by the shifts and differences of their cultural contexts: “commodities must be not only produced materially as things, but also culturally marked as being a certain kind of thing.”[25] Kopytoff thus proposes a framework for examining commodities according to their distinct “biographies,” which involves posing the same kinds of biographical questions about things that would be asked of a person: “In doing the biography of a thing, one would ask questions similar to those one asks about people…Where does the thing come from and who made it?... How does a thing’s use change with its age, and what happens to it when it reaches the end of its usefulness?”[26] What’s more, Kopytoff claims that things, like people, have several possible biographies— “psychological, professional, political, familial, economic, and so forth”— based on a set of culturally-specific circumstances, depending on who perceives them and how they are perceived.[27] What is significant about cotton’s biography, to use Kopytoff’s vocabulary, is that it is an agricultural commodity born of colonial circumstances: transplanted by the British empire into colonial-America to be harvested by African-American slaves and turned into clothing worn by Europeans, then, centuries later, mass-produced in factories in China, Southeast Asia, and Central America to supply consumers in the West.

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[18] See Gordon Thomas Stewart, *Jute and Empire: The Calcutta Jute Wallahs and the Landscapes of Empire* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1998).

[19] "Future Fibres: Jute," Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), accessed on 18 November 2017. [http://www.fao.org/economic/futurefibres/fibres/jute/en/].

[20] Bonaventure Soh Bejeng Ndikung, "Ibrahim Mahama," *documenta 14*, accessed 26 September 2017. [http://www.documenta14.de/en/artists/13704/ibrahim-mahama].

[21] "Ibrahim Mahama," White Cube, accessed on 26 September 2017, [http://whitecube.com/artists/ibrahim_mahama/].

[22] Cristina Ruiz, "Ibrahim Mahama Presents a Portrait of Ghana Told Through its Objects," *The Art Newspaper*, 28 February 2017. [www.theartnewspaper.com/amp/news/Ibrahim-mahama-presents-a-portrair-of-ghana-told-through-its-objects].

[23] BiennaleChannel, "Bienale Arte 2015 – Ibrahim Mahama."

[24] Igor Kopytoff, "The Cultural Biography of Things: Commoditization as Process," in *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective,* ed. Arjun Appadurai (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 73.

In addition to these important historical origins, cotton also acquires meaning through its prominent role in our daily lives, by being worn or used. Some of the mass-produced cotton shirts featured in Hamilton’s installation, for example, are embroidered with the names of their former users, and thus they were made within the larger conditions of industrialised clothing production but are also shaped by the specific contexts of people’s lives.[28] Sourced from a commercial supplier, the blue uniforms are marked with a typical clothing tag indicating the garments’ production company but also with employees’ first names, which distinguish the individual from other workers bearing the same uniform, but also identify the employee as belonging to a larger corporate entity. These identical cotton uniforms differ from other cotton garments because they disclose the wearer as inextricably tied to an employer, a worker within a company. These biographical details not only present cotton as a commodity tied to industrialisation and the spread of empire, but also link cotton to the lives of individual people and workers, demonstrating that commodities can still be meaningful and distinctive. Tracing the global trajectories of the objects Hamilton uses—how they are grown, traded, shipped, and used—tells us about the life of people, workers, and consumers, and, sometimes, the state of our world.

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[25] Kopytoff, “The Cultural Biography of Things,” 64.
[26] Ibid., 66-67.
[27] Ibid., 68.
[28] Simon, *Ann Hamilton*, 105.

The jute used in Mahama's artworks, and its association with cocoa and coal more specifically, also carries colonial connotations and speaks to the unequal distribution of wealth and power that accompanies the production of consumable commodities in Ghana. The cocoa bean industry, for example, in which half of Ghana's population participate, accounts for twenty-percent of the global market today.[29] As author Órla Ryan has demonstrated, while the cocoa beans essential to the industry are in the hands of smallholder farmers, who grow, harvest, and package the beans before they are processed into chocolate abroad, they receive only about 4% of the final price of an average chocolate bar. This is a meager amount in comparison to the 75-billion-dollar annual profits generated by major corporations.[30] Regardless of the integral role African labourers play in this industry, their efforts and lived realities of extreme rural poverty remain relatively unknown to consumers enjoying a decadent and luxurious product like chocolate.[31] These histories of labour hidden behind ordinary food-products like chocolate bars make clear that in today's globalised markets, the wealth and consumption of some are dependent on the labour of others, making us all connected if not complicit in the unequal power relations of commodity production. To refer to the materials used in Hamilton and Mahama's artworks as commodities allows us to understand the specific colonial conditions that conceived them and the global capitalist markets today that sustain them.

Commodities undergo complex transformations as they are used and, in many cases, eventually discarded, but here, instead of being thrown away, Hamilton and Mahama repurpose them into art. This interrupted trajectory, the transformation from a mass-produced object into fine art, demonstrates that commodities may divert from their assigned processes and become something new. Echoing Kopytoff, Appadurai explains that the flow of commodities shifts alongside various paths and diversions, acquiring specific biographies and cultural value as they move between locations and people: “The commodity is not one kind of thing rather than another, but one phase in the life of some things.”[32] For Appadurai, diversion is made possible through desire and demand, and changing historical contexts. What’s more, Appadurai explains that when commodities move across different spheres, from everyday objects into art, for example, they may lose their cultural context and meaning.[33] I would take this one step further to suggest that art is never fully outside the commodity system, yet presents something different, something more interesting than a commodity, or a material representation of capitalism, alone. But it is precisely these differences and similarities between art and commodity that allow for meaningful discussions to arise in contemporary art, like the artworks I am exploring here. Moreover, this thesis argues that putting commodities and art in conversation with one another also holds great possibility for critical discourse, in terms of questioning the worth or importance we assign to different types of objects, including which objects we choose to conserve and which objects we decide to throw away. This intersection of art and commodity thus reveals the different value systems assigned to both, a concept not lost on artists, who have been using and manipulating “found” objects through various artistic means since the early twentieth century.

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[29] Òrla Ryan, *Chocolate Nations: Living and Dying for Cocoa in West Africa* (London & New York: Zed Books, 2011), 23, 25.

[30] Ibid., 6.

[31] Ibid., 54.

Hamilton and Mahama’s artworks recall a tradition of modern and contemporary artists reclaiming and reusing commodities through art. During the early to mid-twentieth century, Kurt Schwitters, Pablo Picasso, Georges Braque, Marcel Duchamp, and many other artists turned to assemblage and other object-centred practices to critically engage with materials and their world. The 1961 exhibition *The Art of Assemblage* in New York was the first official inquiry into art made from used or “found” objects, and its controversial presentation of commonplace objects and media disrupted the fine art institutional hierarchies that prioritise artworks made from a limited number of materials, such as marble, stone, and oil paint.[34] Instead, assemblages were made from non-traditional materials, bits and pieces from the artist’s immediate environment, some especially worn, broken, even ephemeral, while their makers appeared more “beachcomber, collector or scavenger” than artists.[35] Moreover, the artists’ prioritisation of prefabricated, mass-manufactured objects not only challenged notions of artistic genius traditionally used to authenticate art, but blurred the very boundaries between art and everyday life.[36]

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[32] Appadurai, *The Social Life of Things,* 17.
[33] Ibid., 28-29.
[34] William C. Seitz, *The Art of Assemblage* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1961), 48; 83.
[35] Ibid., 38.

French artist Arman (1928-2005), for example, became famous for his sculptures made out of accumulated discarded objects, which, in their crowded states, stressed themes of over-production and waste.[37] Arman developed a formal strategy of what he called “critical mass,” in which he would pile up relatively identical objects—razors, spoons, among others—each with only slightly different formal qualities, to shift the focus away from the singular object and instead consider broader notions of plenitude, surplus, and affluence.[38] His sculptures, which he called “accumulations”, capture the accumulation inherent to the lifecycle of a commodity: accumulated capital and raw materials make goods, which are accumulated by mass media, stores, and consumers, and, eventually, accumulate in the trash.[39] Could these artworks made from everyday objects speak more candidly, more significantly to the individual experiences of daily life or the socioeconomic realities of a post-industrial world, than the artworks that came before? Appadurai himself explains that throughout our day-to-day politics of social behaviour and control are not necessarily visible because they are shrouded in routine and daily customs.[40] Turning to everyday objects then, and the artworks that utilise them, might reveal the power relations embedded in the small-scale social exchanges that comprise our daily lives.[41] The fusion of commodity and art holds tremendous potential for both artistic experimentation and social commentary, especially concerning notions of excess and mass-consumption.

As had Arman, Hamilton and Mahama use excess as an artistic strategy to speak to the socioeconomic realities of commodity production in their respective countries. The presence and weight of 6,000 kilograms of cotton (Hamilton’s *indigo blue*) or 3,000 kilograms of jute (Mahama’s *Out of Bounds*) make overtly visible the relatively unseen commodities necessary to American and Ghanaian economies, and the relentless global demand that sustains their production. The choice of objects used, combined with this act of accumulation, is also worthy of study.

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[36] Seitz, *The Art of Assemblage,* 48.

[37] Benjamin H.D. Buchloh, *Neo-Avantgarde and Culture Industry* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2000), 270; 276.

[38] Jaimey Hamilton, “Arman’s System of Objects,” *Art Journal* 67.1 (2008): 61.

[39] Ibid., 61.

[40] Appadurai, *The Social Life of Things,* 57.

[41] Ibid.

Interestingly, Mahama and Hamilton do not acquire just any type of object for their artworks but choose ones that are distinctly used rather than new, recalling a preoccupation with junk and refuse in contemporary art. In her book *Junk and the Politics of Trash* (2011), Gillian Whitely sees the recycling and reuse of objects in art as particularly radical, from twentieth-century ready-mades and found objects to contemporary junk art practices, claiming: "Working with trash, creatively or in any other way, has historical, cultural and social connotations which relate to the hierarchy of materials at particular times and in particular places. Detritus has ideological, social, political contexts and associations."[42] Whiteley explains that the very category of rubbish, and the art made from it, is a relatively recent phenomenon resulting from increased industrialisation and urbanisation, while it is both a product and symbol of mass consumption.[43] Furthermore, she reminds us that garbage is an offshoot of luxury because it is dependent on excess production and wealth, meaning the presence and manipulation of detritus in art has the ability to engage with political issues, such as the geopolitical disparities in wealth that afford abundance to some and poverty to others.[44] Describing the material and radical characteristics of junk art, Whiteley claims: "With its deployment of the ephemeral, the discarded and the filthy, it has been viewed as a disruptive, transgressive art form which engaged with narratives of social and political dissent."[45] However, Whiteley also notes that while trash often carries negative connotations, the recycling of objects can also be seen as resourceful and necessary acts, and the transformation of something old into something new brings with it endless creative potential.[46]

In *The Art of Assemblage* exhibition catalogue (1961), art critic Lawrence Alloway coined the term "junk culture" to describe the throwaway material of cities, which, when integrated into sculptural assemblage, he claimed, carried with it meaningful connotations of former interactions, places, and usages. Alloway describes junk art reverently as remnants of urban life: "Assemblages of such material come at the spectator as bits of life, bits of the environment."[47] Like Arman who amassed found objects into sculpture, Ghanaian sculptor El

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[42] Gillian Whiteley, *Junk and the Politics of Trash* (London: I.B. Tauris & Co. Ltd, 2011), 5, 9.
[43] Ibid., 14.
[44] Ibid., 4.
[45] Ibid., 8.
[46] Ibid., 13.
[47] Lawrence Alloway quoted in Seitz, *The Art of Assemblage*, 73.

Anatsui (b. 1944) constructs largescale sculptural assemblage out of bits of trash and throwaway materials, using, in his own words, “whatever the environment throws up.”[48] However, unlike Arman, El Anatsui’s assemblages are made of waste that has been transformed beyond recognition; thousands of collected liquor bottle tops are flattened and polished, then woven together into shimmering, colourful metal wall hangings which appear luxurious, even magical, transcending their garbage status into something extraordinary. Thus, while the accumulation of used materials is integral to Anatsui’s process, his work differs from Arman’s sculptures because his discarded objects undergo a remarkable transformation process, becoming something else entirely. Moreover, El Anatsui’s transformation of commonplace commodities in West Africa into glimmering contemporary art also contrasts the particularities of local experience with the destructive, mesmerising power of global trade and consumption.[49]

Drawing from elements of both Arman and El Anatsui’s sculptural practices, Hamilton and Mahama amass discarded materials with particular histories, and transform them into large-scale sculptural assemblage. Arman’s art stressed an accumulation of throwaway objects, a surplus of commodities crammed tightly into a container or spilling out from a frame, which in their amassed state spoke critically to the surplus of commodities circulating within capitalist economies. El Anatsui also collects goods destined for the trash, but does not showcase them as-is, and instead transforms them beyond recognition, showing a particular concern for the aesthetic treatments of each object’s surface, form, and materiality. Hamilton’s enormous pile of clothing and Mahama’s large panels of sewn-together jute bags similarly play with abundance, accumulation, or excess as artistic strategies. Whereas Hamilton carefully folds and places each of her garments into a towering mound, she is not as concerned with their transformation as Mahama, who deliberately acquires old jute bags, then takes them apart, and sews them together into something new. Hamilton reclaims used clothing and Mahama old jute sacks, commodities that were repeatedly used and destined to be thrown away, because they carry valuable knowledge and material evidence of their socioeconomic circumstances. What’s more, the material states of discarded objects, specifically their decaying, weathered or scarred qualities, can provoke further poetic and political readings.

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[48] Lisa M. Binder, “El Anatsui: Transformations,” *African Arts* 14.2 (2008): 24.

[49] Binder, “El Anatsui: Transformations.” 24-27.

Cultural theorist Bill Brown offers insight into the materiality of things with what he calls "thingness". Brown identifies objects as functional, identifiable, and coded with meaning, but these objects, once they have stopped working, assert their material presence and become things.[50] True to throwaway culture, when an everyday object breaks, or a piece of clothing is stained, the common inclination is to throw it away, because, in its tarnished or failed state, the thing is worthless. Brown, however, challenges the general view that objects are valuable or interesting only if they are useable or recognisable and asserts that meaning also lies in a thing's physicality. Brown's thing theory not only advocates for the agency and value of things, and our many everyday confrontations with them, but ascribes an aesthetic dimension to thingness. The very form and matter constituting things, their "material *habitus*" as Brown would call them, are physical manifestations of something more.[51] Describing some of the sculptural work present in *The Art of Assemblage*, curator William C. Seitz, seemed to anticipate Brown when he asserted that materials in their altered, decrepit states are especially meaningful; "When the paper is soiled or lacerated, when cloth is worn, stained, torn, when wood is split, weathered or patterned with peeling coats of paint, when metal is bent or rusted, they gain connotations which unmarked materials lack."[52] Objects are especially expressive in their broken-down or seemingly failed states, and their thingness is particularly evident in Mahama's work.

Mahama acquires jute bags in their final stages of life, when the once-sturdy material has become too tired from transporting heavy charcoal to remain functional, or, in the artist's own words, "when the material fails completely."[53] It is at this late stage of their biography that he repurposes them into installation art. The threadbare state of Mahama's jute accurately reflects the exhaustive processes that the material underwent, passing through many industries, across many hands, from its first role as a carrier of cocoa or coal to its final stage as artwork. Mahama's fabric once served a purpose, then collapsed, and is evocative in its purposeful failure and material decomposition. What's more, this example demonstrates that things, and, most importantly, their material composition, might reflect their settings or circumstances. Brown will even go so far as to say that things are formless, tired, or overworked it is because they are reflections of a weary world: “They are tired of our longing. They are tired of us.”[54] So too, Mahama’s flaccid cloth, faded burlap, strings, stitches, in their seemingly lifeless states evoke weary, working bodies.

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[50] Bill Brown, "Thing Theory," *Critical Inquiry* 28.1 (2001): 3-4.
[51] Ibid., 2.
[52] William C. Seitz quoted in Whiteley, *Junk and the Politics of Trash,* 45.
[53] BiennaleChannel, "Biennale Arte 2015 – Ibrahim Mahama."

PRODUCTION AND USE OF TEXTILES

Thinking through Hamilton and Mahama’s materials, and their meaning, cultural value, and histories, it is important to consider that the artists do not integrate just any type of found object or commodity into their installations, but rather, they make use of textiles. By considering the historical legacy of textiles alongside their meaningful presence in our everyday, I want to investigate how textiles, and their subsequent applications in art, can simultaneously represent local, personal histories and the seemingly impersonal, global state of textile production today.

Textile production underwent tremendous change with the Industrial Revolution. The shift from manual to industrialised processes, in particular, the move from hand to machine if you will, profoundly altered how textiles were made, sold, and consumed. Cotton and jute, for example, the textiles featured in Hamilton and Mahama’s respective installations, have spread to the many corners of the world since their industrialisation, each of their histories linking cloth with commerce and empire. During the eighteenth century, ongoing international competition with India pushed Britain to develop new and speedier machinery for weaving and spinning, which birthed cotton manufacturing and led to Britain’s Industrial Revolution.[55] Over the next two centuries, textile technologies spread to the rest of the world, and with them, an insatiable global demand for cotton.[56] According to historian Beverly Lemire, the structures set in place with the industrialisation of the cotton trade profoundly changed the world, establishing a global cotton network that crossed borders and reformed modes of commerce and consumption.[57] Likewise, in the nineteenth century, Britain and colonial India were world leaders in the factory manufacturing of jute goods, whose global presence was maintained through the international trade routes established by the British empire (fig. 17&18).[58] Today, the production of jute is concentrated to a few countries in Asia and Latin America, but it is then distributed and used worldwide as packaging material.[59] The mechanisation of textile industries combined with the realities of global capitalism and international trade, as exemplified through cotton and jute, have not only affected the products but also the labour behind them.

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[54] Brown, “Thing Theory,” 15.

[55] Lemire, *Cotton,* 98. And Jessica Hemmings, ed., *The Textile Reader* (London & New York: Berg, 2012), 65.

[56] Hemmings, *The Textile Reader*, 65-66.

[57] Lemire, *Cotton*, 98.

From spindle to mill to plantation to factory, textile production, particularly clothing production, has been shaped by changing socioeconomic conditions, and thus reveals valuable information about labour past and present.[60] Today, the global apparel industry is largely centred on the mass-production and circulation of identical garments, often produced by underpaid workers in factories at the lowest cost possible. The sweatshop model perhaps best exemplifies these realities of capitalist clothing production, in which retailers rely on exploited labour to manufacture disposable goods to meet the fast pace and unpredictability of the fashion market.[61] The sweatshop has undergone many historical changes since its establishment in the late-nineteenth and early twentieth centuries when three million immigrants poured into the apparel industries of major American cities forced to work for low wages and under deplorable conditions.[62] Textile production has been a critical facet of the development of workers' rights and labour politics in the United States in the twentieth-century.[63] The Triangle Shirtwaist Fire of 1911, for example, which claimed the lives of over one hundred mostly immigrant and women garment factory workers, catalysed reforms across New York and nationwide for safer working conditions.[64] In the 1930s, American textile workers also radicalised for higher wages and the abolition of child labour, and, in their collective persistence, helped establish unions and national standards for labour that bettered the lives of workers across many manual labour sectors.[65] In spite of these important victories for workers in the West, the apparel sweatshop survived in innumerable global contexts, as multinational retailers established garment factories in Bangladesh, Honduras, China, among many other locations.[66] In 1961, only four percent of clothing bought in the United States were overseas imports (made by overseas workers), but in the 2000s, this number rose to ninety percent.[67]

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[58] Stewart, *Jute and Empire,* 3-5.

[59] Jayana Bagchi, *Jute: Regional Focus* (New Delhi: I.K. International Pvt. Ltd., 2006), 1-2.

[60] Lemire, *Cotton*, 98.

[61] Alan Howard, "Labor, History, and Sweatshops in the New Global Economy," in *The Object of Labor: Art, Cloth, and Cultural Production*, Joan Livingston and John Ploof, eds. (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2007), 31-32.

[62] Ibid., 32-33.

[63] Beyond the scope of this project is the gendered dimension to textile manufacturing; women have been the primary labour force behind global garment industries since the nineteenth century.

[64] David von Drehle, "Uncovering the History of the Triangle Shirtwaist Fire," *Smithsonian Magazine*, August 2006. [https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/uncovering-the-history-of-the-triangle-shirtwaist-fire-124701842/].

[65] Howard, "Labor, History, and Sweatshops," 35-36.

This statistic is important because it points to the increasingly globalised nature of the American economy, through the lens of textile production. Moreover, the largescale, decentered state of today's global textile industries discloses a complex relationship between consumption and production, consumers and workers. As textile industries move further away from local soil, the realities behind the production of the things we use daily become more cloudy and unknown. In 1995, a human rights group in Honduras came across dozens of Bangladesh workers in a garment factory, working eighty hours per week for twenty cents per hour, sewing shirts for the multinational retailer Walmart, where hundreds of millions of Americans shop annually.[68] The Bangladesh garment industry remains one of the largest exporters of clothing and employs over three million workers, who are among the world's lowest-paid and who work under dangerous working conditions.[69] In 2012, a fatal fire broke out in a garment warehouse in Dhaka due to a lack of fire safety measures (a common occurrence in Bangladesh factories) and claimed the lives of 112 workers who were producing clothes for Walmart and other American companies.[70] This tragic event proves that while the locations of sweatshops may have changed, the mistreatment of workers has not. And although global consumers are estranged from these realities of textile production, they sustain the demand for disposable clothing and contribute to the exploitation of factory workers, on whose labour they ultimately depend.

In Hamilton and Mahama's installations, cotton and jute, two widely consumed textile products, are at the forefront, their presence familiar but their origins less so. The sheer excess of the cloth used in each installation is enticing, as viewers are drawn in, taking a closer look at each item's surface, stitches, and tags. Bearing only the occasional indicator, like a generic word or name stitched onto cotton or a "Product of Ghana" stamped onto jute, Hamilton and Mahama's accumulations of cloth do not immediately disclose the specific circumstances behind their production. The artists' use of these textiles thus prompts the question: where did this material come from? Who made it? And, because the artworks themselves do not offer a straightforward answer, a more pointed question may emerge: do you know the story behind the things you consume? While Hamilton and Mahama's artworks may not necessarily provide direct answers, they activate a line of questioning that encourages us to consider where the goods we use come from, and who made them. In turn, these artworks ultimately reveal that there is a profound disconnect between those who buy consumable commodities versus those who make them, and yet, these two groups are inextricably connected through the flow and demand of international capital.

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[66] Howard, "Labor, History, and Sweatshops," 37-39.
[67] Ibid., 38.
[68] Ibid., 37. And "Nearly Every American Spent Money at Wal-Mart Last Year," CNBC, published on 12 April 2017. [https://www.cnbc.com/2017/04/12/nearly-every-american-spent-money-at-wal-mart-last-year.html].
[69] Vikas Bajaj, "Fatal Fire in Bangladesh Highlights the Dangers Facing Garment Workers," *The New York Times*, 25 November 2012. [https://www.nytimes.com/2012/11/26/world/asia/Bangladesh-fire-kills-more-than-100-and-injures-many.html].
[70] Ibid.

First exhibited in Charleston, South Carolina, Hamilton's *indigo blue* encompasses histories of indigo, cotton, and denim production in the United States, especially in the South. Cotton and indigo were cultivated in the American South beginning in the eighteenth century, when a seemingly limitless supply of land, slave labour, transatlantic trade networks, and a relentless hunger for indigo and cotton products in Europe allowed these commercial crops to flourish. African and Indigenous slaves on southern plantations worked to seed, cultivate, and harvest the indigo plant, then process it into a dye, which, at its peak in 1775, surpassed over one million pounds for export (fig. 3).[71] Cotton cultivation also relied upon specialised and extensive slave labour to grow, maintain, pick, and process the plant into long fibres like thread and yarn, producing, by the 1860s, more than four million bales of cotton annually to become the fastest-growing industry in Western history (fig. 4).[72] While indigo cultivation eventually declined in the United States in the late 1700s, ultimately replaced by an artificial blue dye, cotton production carried on through human labour, and became a largely mechanised process in the West by the late nineteenth century (fig. 5 & 6).[73] Woven by steam-powered looms in factories across the United States, hard-working cotton fabrics, and, more specifically, the blue jean, became linked to the industrial working class that made and wore it.[74] With this brief history in mind, Hamilton's *indigo blue* sheds light on the sociopolitical realities in which textiles are produced and consumed, and how these factors are tied to American labour. The installation's giant pile of blue cotton clothing materialises the history of textile production in the United States, from plantation slavery to industrialisation to today's global manufacturing. *Indigo blue* not only speaks to how American textile workers past and present have shaped their country through their labour but, in light of the recent closing of the United States' last major denim manufacturer, also speaks to how today's manual labour sectors are changing or being replaced altogether.

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[71] Feeser, *Red, White, and Black Make Blue,* 83.

[72] Giorgio Riello, *Cotton: The Fabric that Made the Modern World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 195-210.

[73] Feeser, 125.

The increased dependence on international textile suppliers and manufacturers has had palpable consequences at a local level. In 2017, International Textile Group Inc. announced the closure of the last major manufacturer of raw denim in the United States (fig. 7).[75] Founded in 1905, the Cone Mills White Oak Plant in Greensboro, North Carolina had been a staple for local denim manufacturing for over one hundred years, and, though the plant was once one of the world's largest, its closure is linked to a decreasing demand for authentic American fabric as consumers source cheaper denim from overseas.[76] With 200 employees accordingly laid off, the company's closure reflects a distinct shift from local to global textile manufacturing and, consequently, American denim companies must now turn to Japan to source their denim.[77] Interestingly, various news outlets describe the plant's closure as a devastating blow to American national identity, as "true blue" denim leaves American soil, demonstrating the very fusion of textiles, labour, and nationalism.[78] The White Oaks closure also comes at a particularly tense moment, when jobs and American labour are regular topics of public discussion, with President

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[74] Feeser, 125-128.

[75] Alex Williams, "No Room for America Left in Those Jeans," *The New York Times*, 10 November 2017. [https://www.nytimes.com/2017/11/10/style/goodbye-american-selvage-jeans.html?_r=0].

[76] Williams, "No Room for America." And David Shuck, "Cone Mills to Close White Oak Plant, Las American Selvedge Denim Mill," *Heddels*, 18 October 2017. [https://www.heddels.com/2017/10/cone-mills-close-white-oak-plant-last-american-selvedge-denim-mill/].

[77] Matthew Schneier, "Made in Japan, Coveted in the U.S.," *The New York Times*, 5 November 2015. [https://www.nytimes.com/2015/11/06/fashion/mens-style/japanese-denim-coveted-in-the-us.html].

[78] Williams, "No Room for America." And Western Bonime, "Tellason, Denim and America, Why the White Oaks Closure Matters," *Forbes*, 26 November 2017. [https://www.forbes.com/sites/westernbonime/2017/11/26/tellason-denim-and-america-why-the-white-oaks-closure-matters/#2cd7b870254d].

Trump and the Republican Party promising growth in local manufacturing and demonstrating a particular animosity towards foreign labourers.

In fact, the blue cotton or denim uniforms used in the artwork reinforce this notion of a diminishing labour force, having been once worn by laid-off workers or sourced from companies that had gone out of business.[79] Stacked one on top of the other, thousands of blue shirts and pants, remnants of the unemployed, form a towering mound, a visual manifestation of jobs lost, and labourers come and gone (fig. 8). Piled together, the garments form a collective whole, a reminder that the loss of jobs is a collective, even national issue, affecting millions of individuals. And yet, while these blue-collar uniforms allude to the anonymous or unemployed worker, in some instances, embroidered names adorn the clothing—Oswaldo, Margaret, Kenneth, Mike, and others—providing small markers of identification to otherwise nameless workers.[80] I take note of this small detail of Hamilton's work to suggest that though cloth's fast-paced, mass-produced origins are important in understanding the realities of globalised labour and production today, they do not necessarily constitute the end of the story. Cloth is eventually worn, used, and touched, and is an intimate part of our everyday lives.

As was the case with Hamilton's clothing, the burlap used in Mahama's installations also retains moments of contact between people and places. Unlike Hamilton, however, Mahama's cloth is not used as-is, rather it undergoes various stages of transformation from its initial beginnings as a packaging material to its eventual reconstruction into art. Jute crops grow in tropical and subtropical regions, and require ample labour to plough, sow, weed, cut, strip, and extract the desired fibre from the plant.[81] After being dried and collected, raw jute, composed of long interconnecting fibres, is sold by farmers to merchants, who transfer the product in bulk to a secondary centre, where it will be transformed into yarn (fig. 21).[82] The following manufacturing process involves several stages depending on the type of yarn and the desired end product; to make jute sacks, low-grade raw jute is softened and treated by various machines, then spun into yarn, which is woven into a heavy-grade fabric, and finally sewn together to make sacks (fig. 19&20).[83] The new, flattened sacks are branded and bundled, then exported worldwide, and, in the case of West Africa, used as a packaging material for agricultural products.[84] It is after the jute sacks have been used by various industries, broken down by their travels and deemed too worn for further commercial use, that Mahama acquires them through trade. Once in Mahama's possession, jute undergoes yet another series of transformative processes by more working bodies.

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[79] Simon, *Ann Hamilton,* 105.

[80] Ibid.

[81] R.R. Atkinson, *Jute: Fibre to Yarn* (Bombay: B.I. Publications, 1964), 15.

[82] Ibid., 18.

[83] Ibid., 35, 38.

The making of Mahama's artworks begins with an intentional unmaking. The collected jute sacks are disassembled, stitch by stitch, into separate pieces, then joined together, like a quilt, into enormous, combined panels (fig. 23). The creation of Mahama's large-scale artworks relies on local workers, rural or urban migrants whom the artist employs for each project.[85] Mahama and his many collaborators work together in communal settings, which are often former sites of production—abandoned factories, train stations, markets, or courtyards (fig. 24&25).[86] For *documenta 14* in 2017, for example, Mahama and his collaborators occupied an old Henschel Factory in Kassel, Germany, one of the first locomotive factories in Europe, to produce the jute panels for his installation *Check Point Sekondi Loco 1901-2030* (fig. 26).[87] Bound together by the repeated gestures of unstitching and restitching, Mahama's collaborators transform individual sacks of jute into a collective whole. This collaborative process enrichens the artwork, wherein each maker contributes their own set of skills and experiences to the creation of something new. Moreover, moving between different working hands and spaces, the porous fabric often preserves sand particles, sweat, and other evidence of one setting or maker, then transfers them to another, ultimately picking up more traces anew. From the collaborators who first stitch and mould the burlap material to the occasional viewer who might graze the textile's rough surface with their hand, Mahama's artwork invites human traces, which are facilitated through the tangible and evocative qualities of cloth. The burlap fabric and artwork, the product of entangled lives and bodies, are meaningful because they are as dependent on people as they are jute sacks.

When considering the evocative and commemorative potential of cloth in Hamilton and Mahama's artworks, it is worth considering how textiles remember, or, more specifically, how textiles can stand in for bodies. Cultural historian Peter Stallybrass notes cloth's historical prominence in everyday life, used for millennia across different cultures for utilitarian, economic, ritualistic, and commemorative purposes.[88] From the ancient Incas to Renaissance England, the symbolic and economic value of textiles has long been recognised, as cloth was exchanged and gifted as a form of currency, kinship, and status.[89] The communicative qualities of textiles also appear in tapestry, quilting, and other historical textile objects, which harnessed printed or embroidered symbols and motifs as meaningful, storytelling devices.[90] The narrative qualities of textiles has even extended into social and political life, communicating community, generational knowledge, and cultural identity, but also propagandistic, revolutionary, or nationalist rhetoric.[91] For Stallybrass, cloth has communicative qualities, a life of its own, not only for its symbolic uses across ceremonies, death, and daily life but also because it retains the physical traces of those it comes into contact with. Cloth tends to be associated with memory because cloth *is* a type of memory.[92]

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[84] See International Jute Study Group, accessed on 22 April 2018. [http://jute.org/].

[85] "Ibrahim Mahama," White Cube.

[86] Soh Bejeng Ndikung, "Ibrahim Mahama."

[87] White Cube Gallery, "Ibrahim Mahama, documenta 14," video, 07:46. [http://whitecube.com/channel/beyond_white_cube/ibrahim_mahama_documenta_2017/].

In its many interactions with flesh, gestures, and environments, cloth is a meaningful repository of human imprint and experience. As malleable and conforming material, composed of woven membranes and porous tissue, textiles preserve bodily memory, and, more importantly, retain *specific* traces.[93] He explains: “The magic of cloth, I came to believe, is that it receives us: receives our smells, our sweat, our shape even.”[94] A child’s blanket or a loved one’s item of clothing, recalls Stallybrass, however misshapen, unwashed, or decayed, carries emotional weight because it retains material memory.[95] In fact, in the absence of a body, clothing can stand in its place, an artefact passed from one person to the next, carrying memory, genealogy, sentiment, and literal material value: “Bodies come and go; the clothes which have received those bodies survive.”[96] Textile scholar Jessica Hemmings similarly recognises the sensorial and affective qualities of surface, especially when considering the temporal similarities between cloth and human life. She says: “Unlike that of metal or stone, the life span of the textile is not dissimilar to that of our own bodies: newness gradually replaced by wear and tear until worn out.”[97] Stallybrass reiterates this claim, noting the mortality of both human life and cloth as fleeting and thus tragic and poignant. Describing the textile, he notes: “it endures, but it is mortal.”[98] There is evocative potential in the very material composition of cloth, as a fragile and porous substance, not unlike human flesh, and its subsequent applications in contemporary art.

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[88] Peter Stallybrass, “Worn Worlds: Clothes, Mourning and the Life of Things,” in *The Textile Reader*, ed. Jessica Hemmings (London: Berg, 2012), 70-71.
[89] Ibid., 70.
[90] Sonja Andrew, “Textile Semantics: Considering a Communication-based Reading of Textiles,” *Textile: The Journal of Cloth and Culture* 6.1 (2008): 47, 53.
[91] Ibid., 47.
[92] Stallybrass, “Worn Worlds,” 71.
[93] Ibid., 70.
[94] Ibid., 69.
[95] Ibid., 69, 71-72.
[96] Ibid., 69, 74.

HISTORIES OF LABOUR & SITE

Curator Miwon Kwon examines the complex and rich relationship between art and site in her book *One Place After Another: Site-Specific Art and Locational Identity* (2004). Site-specific art emerged in the 1960s and 1970s alongside land art, installation art, conceptual art, and performance art, with a particular regard for an artwork’s physical site and its viewers, and one of its most significant contributions includes the development of public art outside of institutional frameworks and museum walls, within the everyday fabric of the city.[99] Since these earlier site-oriented practices, Kwon notes “an important conceptual leap in the public role of arts and artists” occurring in the late-twentieth century, which stemmed from the transformation of site as a fixed, physical location to an expansive and discursive issue.[100] This understanding of site, she explains, rather encompasses several interrelated and overlapping spaces and economies, that together comprise a system not separate but a part of social, economic, and political discourse.[101] In turn, the particular characteristics of a site, its historical and cultural associations, generate endless possibilities for artworks, both conceptually and physically, but also for artists, who can take on new roles engaging with social issues outside the traditional, institutional confines of art.[102] Ultimately, Kwon considers the site-oriented practices of twenty-first-century artists not only as a new genre of art, but as a way to mediate broader discussions between art and the "social, economic, and political processes that organize urban life and urban space."[103] Hamilton and Mahama incorporate these social dimensions of site into their respective artworks to speak to larger historical connections between labour and the built environment. I therefore examine their artworks within the specific contexts of the sites they engage with in an attempt to demonstrate how they facilitate important discussions between the past and present by unearthing hidden histories. Moreover, the histories of site I focus on are concerned with human labour and the production of commodities, topics not explicitly addressed by Kwon in her book.

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[97] JHemmings, *The Textile Reader*, 57.
[98] Stallybrass, “Worn Worlds,” 69.
[99] Miwon Kwon, *One Place After Another: Site-Specific Art and Locational Identity* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2004), 12-13.
[100] Ibid., 30.
[101] Ibid., 14.
[102] Mary Jane Jacob, “Making History in Charleston,” in *Places with a Past: New Site-Specific Art at Charleston’s Spoleto Festival* [exhibition catalogue] (New York: Rizzoli International Publications, Inc., 1991), 17, 24.

In a review for the *New York Times*, critic Michael Brenson described the 1991 exhibition *Places with a Past*, curated by Mary Jane Jacobs, as visceral and profound, noting not only the development of a new, critical type of art, but also "a new attitude towards history."[104] As part of the Spoleto Festival U.S.A. in Charleston, South Carolina, twenty-three contemporary artists, including Ann Hamilton, were commissioned to create artworks for *Places with a Past*, with the starting point of Charleston's history. In the year-and-a-half leading up to the exhibition, the selected artists visited Charleston to pick a site and conceive of their projects.[105] They were encouraged to choose unconventional landmarks for their artworks—old edifices, churches, Confederate houses, parks, a decommissioned jail, among others—in other words, to occupy sites outside of Charleston's prominent tourist attractions that went relatively unnoticed but were charged with cultural associations.[106] The festival's artworks and events extended across Charleston, and as such was the first exhibition in the United States to make use of an entire city, which in turn generated a rich, multi-layered experience of Charleston at a particular moment and place in time.[107] Jacobs describes the artworks produced for *Places with a Past* as truly site-specific, in that they could not exist elsewhere, but also because they engaged with their respective locations through Charleston's unique social past while negotiating issues of identity and culture that the sites raised or suppressed.[108] The exhibition's particular regard for history was timely considering discourses of postmodernism and institutional critique occurring in the art world at the time, which critically examined the authoritative role of institutions, in the arts and beyond, and their privileging of dominant narratives and histories. *Places with a Past* and its commitment to site-specificity is significant when considering Charleston's careful construction of its public image alongside the rise of its tourist industry in the twentieth century.

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[103] Kwon, *One Place After Another*, 6.
[104] Michael Brenson, "Review/Art; Visual Arts Join Spoleto Festival U.S.A.," *New York Times*, 27 March 1991. [https://www.nytimes.com/1991/05/27/arts/review-art-visual-arts-join-spoleto-festival-usa.html].
[105] Nigel Redden, "Foreword," in *Places with a Past: New Site-Specific Art at Charleston's Spoleto Festival* [exhibition catalogue] (New York: Rizzoli International Publications, Inc., 1991), 8.
[106] Jacob, "Making History in Charleston," 17-18.
[107] Ibid., 17.
[108] Ibid.

In the exhibition's catalogue, American historian Theodore Rosengarten traces the history of the city of Charleston, from its plantation-based beginnings to its eventual reliance on tourism, which depends on the formation of a selective and idealised past. Charleston, Capital of the Old South, prospered throughout the eighteenth century from its busy seaport and brutal plantation economy, ensuring trade with Europe due to a steady influx of slaves and immigrants.[109] As Charleston's rice, indigo, and cotton industries thrived, so did its merchants and planters, who developed an appetite for luxury, buying fine houses in the city, more slaves, and, in turn, intensifying the social and economic disparities between the white elites and the black majority that would persist well after plantation slavery ended.[110] During the nineteenth century, slave uprisings were recurrent, and free black leaders were often accused of conspiracy or rebellion and were executed as examples.[111] By the mid-twentieth century, buildings deemed historically-important were refurbished, ruins were patched and painted, but, according to Rosengarten, these projects preserved a memory of Charleston only up until the Civil War, in turn suppressing the contributions and lived-experiences of Charleston's immigrants, Indigenous peoples, and African-Americans, who had built the city through their free and enslaved labour, and who were still dealing with poverty, inequality, and segregation.[112] This official remodelling of both discourse and the built environment, reinforced by the tourism industry, was a clear stance by the old elite against changing times and values, one which sought to eternally preserve Charleston from the changing social and political landscape of late-twentieth-century America. Rosengarten ends his essay with a call to action for Historic Charleston to create a more accurate and inclusive image of itself, not unlike the curatorial aims behind *Places with a Past*.

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[109] Theodore Rosengarten, "History Alley, Memory Lane," in *Places with a Past: New Site-Specific Art at Charleston's Spoleto Festival* [exhibition catalogue] (New York: Rizzoli International Publications, Inc., 1991), 21.

[110] Ibid., 21, 23.

[111] Ibid., 33, 36-37.

[112] Ibid., 45, 48.

Hamilton's *indigo blue* thus focused on the common worker as an important but neglected subject of Charleston's history and took its initial inspiration from indigo production.[113] As described earlier, indigo became important to the American economy in the eighteenth century, as part of a larger colonial commercial network. Indigo was introduced to Charleston in 1744 by Eliza Lucas Pinckney, who, while running her father's plantation, encouraged other planters to grow it as a companion crop to rice.[114] Pinckney's spearheading role of one of Charleston's most historically profitable industries is memorialised throughout Charleston, including a street named after her—the chosen site of Hamilton's installation. Hamilton's massive pile of blue cloth manifests the prominence of indigo in Charleston's history, but also, in her use of workers' garments, turns focus away from Pinckney or other celebrated figures, and recognises the efforts of indigo workers, whose enslaved labour built indigo, and were therefore largely responsible for Charleston's thriving commerce. This deliberate turn away from official narratives is further emphasised in the artwork's performative component, in which the artist situated a person at a table, in front of the pile of clothing; over the course of the exhibition, this performer erased old history books, scratching the printed words away, page by page, with spit and an eraser until the text was illegible (fig. 11).[115] This desk-bound worker could stand in for white-collar workers, which, contrasted against the blue-collar workers represented by Hamilton's pile of clothing, calls attention to differences between these two types of labour; wherein white-collar workers are separated off from the rigorous, physical labour of manual work and are often privileged with larger salaries and a higher-class stature than their blue-collar counterparts. *Indigo blue* then acknowledges not only the labouring body, but speaks to different kinds of labouring bodies, and makes up for the working bodies absent from Charleston's History.

Housed in a former auto-repair shop, *indigo blue* interrogates the prior, historical uses of its site, offering a glimpse into the world of manual labour.[116] Once alive with machines and moving bodies, the sparse, cold industrial warehouse shows little evidence of the workers it once housed. Whether a reflection of the current economic climate, and the ongoing elimination of manual labour jobs in post-industrial America, or simply a sign of changing times, the abandoned garage symbolises labourers come and gone. Hamilton's collection of blue-collar clothing, remnants of working bodies, makes overtly visible the integral but overlooked labour fundamental to Charleston, past and present. The artwork's display also plays with the spatial and social dynamics of the working environment. After entering the space, viewers either encountered the artwork head on, a sea of blue bodies towering overhead, or from a small, secondary room, a former manager's office, which offered an overhead perspective from which to survey the bed of clothing, the same way that an employer would oversee employees (fig. 12).[117] The artwork breathes life and relevance back into the abandoned workplace. According to the exhibition's curator, Charleston's blue-collar workers who still work in the neighbourhood would stop by daily to watch the artwork being built, filling the formerly deserted garage with workers once more.[118] Thousands of exhibition visitors also visited *indigo blue*, one of the festival's most frequented installations.[119] Remarking on the evocativeness of Hamilton's monumental display to labour, Brenson noted: "it is possible to feel the presence of a mountain of forgotten people."[120]

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[113] "Ann Hamilton, *indigo blue*" in *Places with a Past: New Site-Specific Art at Charleston's Spoleto Festival* [exhibition catalogue] (New York: Rizzoli International Publications, Inc., 1991), 74.

[114] "Ann Hamilton, *indigo blue,*" 74.

[115] Hamilton combed through Charleston's second-hand bookstores to find books fitting to her performance and ended up selecting military manuals which outlined the town's legal boundaries between land and water. These books also bore an indigo-blue cloth cover, reinforcing the colour throughout the artwork. Simon, *Ann Hamilton*, 105.

[116] "Ann Hamilton, *indigo blue,*" 74.

Like Hamilton, Mahama's internationally-exhibited *Occupations* series negotiates important histories of place and labour. In his home country, Mahama connects workers with the built environment, which has been shaped by Ghana's fluctuating political and economic climate over the last sixty years. When Ghana gained its independence in 1957, the first sub-Saharan African country to do so, its first president Kwame Nkrumah commissioned numerous public building projects in an attempt to forge a national identity.[121] The colonial fortifications established during British rule were remodelled to accommodate the Nkrumah administration's preferred modern and International styles of architecture, which they considered emblematic of a newly-unified nation, symbolising progress, modernity, and political achievement.[122] Grand buildings and monuments erected during this period—the National Museum, The State House, Nkrumah Ideological Institute, the Ghana Bank, Independence Arch, Black Star Square, The Presidential Stand, and others—manifest the state's prioritisation of a distinct nationalist identity through Accra's built environment. After Nkrumah's overthrow in 1966 however, architectural projects associated to his rule were condemned; monumental statues were destroyed, and restrictions were placed upon the erection of new monuments, leaving many of Nkrumah's architectural projects ruined or abandoned altogether.[123] Recent years have brought a resurgence of urban transformation projects in Accra to meet the realities of an increasingly globalised metropolis, in which foreign investment has played a key role in its transformation process.[124] With this unique and significant architectural history in mind, Mahama has intervened into public spaces across Ghana—train stations, markets, churches, bridges, among others—to interrogate the past uses of these sites and their future in a post-independent society.[125]

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[117] "Ann Hamilton, *indigo blue,*" 76.
[118] Jacob, "Making History in Charleston," 18.
[119] Colleen K. Reilly, "Staging Charleston: The Spoleto Festival U.S.A." (Doctoral thesis, University of Pittsburg, 2009), 124.
[120] Brenson, "Review/Art; Visual Arts Join Spoleto Festival U.S.A."
[121] Janet Berry Hess, "Imagining Architecture: The Structure of Nationalism in Accra, Ghana," *Africa Today* 47.2 (2000): 42.

Considering Ghana's history of state-initiated architectural projects, Mahama's artworks negotiate these sites through the lens of labour. Mahama has occupied public buildings across Ghana—libraries, museums, apartment complexes—even Accra's National Theater, an impressive 11,900-square-meter complex built in 1992 as a gift from the Chinese government.[126] Today, the theater serves many multifunctional purposes, housing concerts, dance, and exhibitions, but also attracts market vendors and other public social events. Launched on Ghanaian Independence Day, Mahama's installation *Malam Dodoo National Theatre 1992-2016* (2014) sought to interrogate the history of the building, from its momentous inauguration by the Chinese to its actual uses as a public space for Ghanaian culture and commerce, in turn calling attention to its monumental architecture as well as its social function (fig. 27).[127] Southwest of the National Theater is Accra's largest open air market, Makola, where many Ghanaian workers, including Mahama's collaborators, look for work and live.[128]

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[122] Berry Hess, "Imagining Architecture," 45, 48-50.
[123] Ibid., 53-54.
[124] Richard Grant, *Globalizing City: The Urban and Economic Transformation of Accra, Ghana* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2009), 9.
[125] White Cube Gallery, "Ibrahim Mahama, documenta 14."
[126] Alyn Griffiths, "Ghana's 'UFO-like' National Theatre Photographed by Julien Lanoo," *De Zeen,* 6 September 2017. [https://www.dezeen.com/2017/09/06/julien-lanoos-photographs-ghanas-ufo-like-national-theatre/].
[127] Ric Bower, "Bodies of Evidence" *CCQ* 9 (2016): 20.

In 2012, for an installation titled *Untitled (Adum Railway Station)* (2013), set in Kumasi in southern Ghana, Mahama covered an old local railway bridge in jute fabric (fig. 28). While the train tracks themselves are no longer in use, Ghanaians cross the bridge daily to get from one side of town to the other, and, as a result, impromptu commercial stands have emerged.[129] His artworks, made with jute sacks abundant across various Ghanaian industries, sewn together by local workers, then displayed in public spaces that facilitate commercial endeavours, showcase a built environment that is continuously adapting to and shaped by the workers, vendors, and passerby who circulate it. In *One Place After Another,* Kwon suggests an interesting facet of site-specificity, in which the site is not only based on geography or architecture but a network of social relations.[130] The artwork, explains Kwon, can become an integral extension of the community so that the people who participate or frequent the artwork inform its meaning.[131] In these Ghanaian contexts, Mahama's artworks both reflect the knowledge and habits of locals, and they are, as Kwon suggests, as relevant to its artwork's meaning as the art itself. For example, Ghanaians would be no doubt familiar with the jute material used in Mahama's work, having perhaps participated directly or indirectly in the mineral or agricultural industries that use jute sacks, or having even repurposed jute fabric in their homes as decoration or costume.[132] When Mahama's site-specific artworks are presented outside of Ghana, they also evoke histories of commerce and national identity, but, in their increased visibility and international audience, their meaning changes.

Since gaining international attention in recent years, Mahama's public projects have become increasingly ambitious, adorning the architecture of metropolises worldwide, but always engaging with the politics and labour inherent to each site. In 2015, Mahama participated in the 56th Venice Biennale *All the World's Futures* with his installation *Out of Bounds.* One of his largest projects to date, Mahama draped 3,000 kilograms of jute fabric over the walls of a 300-metre-long corridor (fig. 29). The artwork's position was somewhat unconventional, as it occupied the passage between two buildings leading to the entrance of the Arsenal, the second venue of the Biennale's activities, but proved interesting to the artist, especially considering the site's historical links to commerce and labour.[133] Constructed in the early twelfth century, the Arsenal of Venice acted as a shipyard, armoury, and production centre for building and maintaining the state's naval fleet, in turn, ensuring Venice's military and economic power. One of the largest industrial enterprises in European history before the Industrial Revolution, the Arsenal was a great working hub composed of dockyards, foundries, and workshops for carpenters, sailmakers, ropemakers, and blacksmiths, occupying, at its peak, over 60 acres and employing up to 2,000 workers per day.[134] Its reputation as a remarkable site of both trade and war was well-known, even made famous in Dante's *Inferno* for its likeness to hell: a busy, crowded spectacle of industrial labour.[135] In its contemporary usage, the Arsenal is not the bustling site of manual labour it once was, the hammering and stir of worker and commerce are quieted and relatively forgotten, despite their importance in establishing Venice as a thriving city and seaport. Covering the very walls of the factories that once made cloth, rope, and other materials, Mahama's artwork, the product of intense labour itself, seems to awaken the labour once inherent to the site, ultimately bridging histories of labour centuries apart and continents apart.

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[128] Billie A. McTernan, "The City as Canvas: Ghana's Artists are Building—and Engaging—Communities," *ArtNews*, 11 July 2018. [http://www.artnews.com/2018/07/11/city-canvas-ghanas-artists-building-engaging-communities/].
[129] Osei Bonsu, "1:54 FORUM 2014: Osei Bonsu in Conversation with Ibrahim Mahama," YouTube video, 1:02:34, posted on 28 March 2016. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=peYpM3FC8h0].
[130] Kwon, *One Place After Another*, 6.
[131] Ibid.
[132] Soh Bejeng Ndikung, "Ibrahim Mahama."

The Arsenal of Venice, a pre-modern production centre turned exhibition space, is especially interesting when we consider the circulation of capital inherent to this site, which, I argue, Mahama is very much aware of. As a port city, Venice has and continues to profit and grow from the coming and going of goods and people. Walking up and down the Arsenal's long corridor, passing Mahama's procession of pieced-together commodities, passersby mimic the cyclical flow of capital which secures Venice's economy, like many other major metropolises. So too, considering the site's function as a space for contemporary art, we can think about the circulated objects and commodities that make up the collections of museums, galleries, and art festivals worldwide, and on which the art world ultimately depends. The Venice Biennale, a dazzling display of amassed artworks and international crowds, mimics, in many ways, the spectacle of commodity production and the bustle of merchants and workers that was once the Arsenal. In the curatorial statement for *All the World's Futures*, curator Okwui Enwezor even emphasised capital as one of the main concerns of the exhibited artworks, the festival, and the world at large. He explains: "There is one pervasive preoccupation that has been at the heart of our time and modernity. That preoccupation is the nature of Capital, both its fiction and reality. Capital is the great drama of our age. Today nothing looms larger in every sphere of experience."[136] Mahama's *Out of Bounds*, and his artistic practice more largely emphasises the socioeconomic conditions of site to suggest how infrastructure and architecture, and in turn, national prosperity, is contingent on global trade and global workers. Swathing the buildings of cities worldwide—whether London, Copenhagen, Tel Aviv, Athens, or Michigan— Mahama's installations and their 'Product of Ghana' stamp assert the presence of workers in the built environment and remind viewers of the integral role of labour in today's world economy.[137]

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[133] BiennaleChannel, "Biennale Arte 2015 – Ibrahim Mahama."

[134] John Julius Norwich, *A History of Venice,* eBook (New York: Penguin Random House, 2003), Chapter 7. And Frederic C. Lane, *Venice, A Maritime Republic* (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 1973), 362.

[135] Lane, *Venice, A Maritime Republic,* 163.

As the circulation and acceleration of global capital blur geographic boundaries, the particularities of sites, their memories, their people, are as important as ever, and it is contemporary artists, like Hamilton and Mahama, who can reveal these histories.[138]

CONCLUSION

In the catalogue for the 2003 exhibition *Work Ethic*, one of the first major American exhibitions exploring artistic labour in its many forms, curator Helen Molesworth claimed that contemporary art might hold the key to "both resisting and shaping new forms of labour."[139] Hosted at the Baltimore Museum of Art, the exhibition showcased performance, installation, and sculpture by forty artists, and it remains one of the largest curatorial projects to address the intersections of work and contemporary art. Molesworth took inspiration from the economic climate surrounding late-twentieth-century America, particularly the effects of the massive national shift away from industrial production to an emphasis on service sectors, which, she claimed, altered what work meant for artists as well. In the exhibition catalogue, Molesworth outlines some historic changes occurring in the arts from the 1950s onwards in response to these new kinds of labour, such as the development of process-based, performative practices, or the inclusion of readymade objects, among other concerns. She also reflects on the influence of social movements of the 1960s, in which artists too critically reflected on the social conditions of art production by highlighting that which often went unnoticed: unpaid and undervalued labour. These artistic and conceptual influences manifest in the exhibited artworks, in which artists like Mierle Laderman Ukeles, Yoko Ono, Chris Burden, Eleanor Antin and others questioned their own labour, consumption, and production alongside the changing economic landscape of post-war America.

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[136] "Okwui Enwezor: *All the World's Futures*," Universes in Universe, accessed on 13 April 2018. [https://universes.art/venice-biennale/2015/tour/all-the-worlds-futures/curatorial-statement/].

[137] "Ibrahim Mahama, documenta 14."

[138] Kwon, 157.

[139] Helen Molesworth, ed., *Work Ethic* (University Park, PA: Penn State University Press and The Baltimore Museum of Art, 2003), 50.

In my opinion, Molesworth's exhibition made two important declarations for labour and contemporary art. Firstly, by presenting an extensive group of artists with diverse practices and backgrounds, Molesworth showed that contemporary artists could participate in critical discussions regarding the socioeconomic issues affecting their country in unique and meaningful ways. Secondly, this exhibition recognised that as new forms of labour develop at both local and global levels, art must change too; and so, today's artists, curators, and researchers must work within the new precarious conditions of labour that define our twenty-first century. *Work Ethic* thus offers a foundation for discussions of labour and contemporary art discourse, especially as art and work continue to evolve today.

In 2017, another interesting curatorial experiment into art and labour titled *99¢ or Less* unfolded at the Museum of Contemporary Art Detroit (MOCAD). Over one hundred American artists were invited to create artworks out of cheap, everyday, consumer objects, which were then exhibited and sold for 999$ each to support the museum. Encouraging artists to purchase their materials at a dollar store, curator Jens Hoffman not only nodded to the tradition of readymade sculpture but sought to critically engage with the dollar store as an emblem of global capitalist production and rampant consumerism. Small electronics, balloons, kitschy toys, and other cheap merchandise flooded the museum, not unlike the endless aisles of mass-produced commodities that fill the thousands of dollar stores across the United States. Set in Detroit, the birthplace of mass production, the exhibition engaged with the city's ongoing economic crisis, as the former industrial capital of America faces an uncertain financial future since declaring municipal bankruptcy in 2013, the city's issues of joblessness and growing economic disparity mirroring the country at large.[140] What interests me most about this exhibition, is the interconnectedness of art, commodity, and labour throughout, as artists reflect on significant social issues through the transformation of various objects and materials.

I present these two exhibitions as successful projects over the last few decades occurring at the intersections of contemporary art and labour but also as remarkable examples of the increasingly blurred worlds of art and commerce.[141] I believe that museums, galleries, and the art world more largely can continue to be sites for critical discussions on labour, involving artists, scholars, and curators as well as the voices of workers themselves. As examples like *Work Ethic* and *99¢ or Less* show, exciting conversations are already happening in the arts around labour, but even more are needed moving forward.

This thesis argues that Hamilton and Mahama are examples of such artists participating in, and even challenging discourses of labour through their installation art. More specifically, Hamilton and Mahama contribute to larger discussions on labour and commodity production through the very objects they use, highlighting the commonly overlooked working bodies behind the production, circulation, and consumption of global commodities. Despite their different socioeconomic contexts, when positioned alongside one another, Hamilton and Mahama's artworks speak to the global reach of capital and, in turn, the global perspective needed to address labour discourses that affect workers and consumers worldwide. Their artworks and this research more broadly advocate for the rich insight objects and materials offer into notions of national identity, collective memory, and labour. Going back to Appadurai, we are reminded that the theory of the commodity is not only about objects. Rather, it obliges us to pay attention to the human labour that accompanies every stage of an object's life. Hamilton and Mahama's deployment of textile materials is meaningful because it evokes this necessary and often overlooked human presence.

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[140] Chris Hampton, "In Detroit, Artists explore the Riches of the 99-cent Store," *The New York Times,* 28 June 2017. [https://www.nytimes.com/2017/06/28/arts/design/museum-of-contemporary-art-detroit-99-cents-or-less.html].

[141] Beyond the scope of this project, there is a discussion to be had about invisible labour in the arts, especially the manual workers who maintain museums and galleries with little recognition or adequate compensation. The art world is not exempt from labour issues that occur inside or outside museum walls.

My involvement with this project began with Hamilton and the art criticism surrounding her practice, which, I realised, only briefly acknowledged labour and said little further on the topic. Next, I came across Hamilton discussing her inspirations behind *indigo blue* and referencing Howard Zinn's book *A People's History of the United States* (1980), which recounts a history of the United States from the view of the oppressed, including labourers. Throughout, Zinn prioritises slave histories, immigrant and working-class perspectives, and labour and social movements, piecing together the stories of groups who, despite their integral role in the economic development of America, are largely exempt from national histories. Zinn's insistence on these histories is a purposeful and political act, one which recognises the intentions and repercussions of presenting and omitting facts and people. Hamilton and Mahama, I argue, similarly prioritise workers' histories throughout their artworks, and I have tried to do the same in my research.

In our fast-paced, ever-changing, globalised world, it is often easy, or perhaps convenient, to forget about the workers that shape it. And when this becomes the case, I believe we should turn to things themselves, and the artists who manipulate them, to bring histories of labour to the surface.

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FIGURES

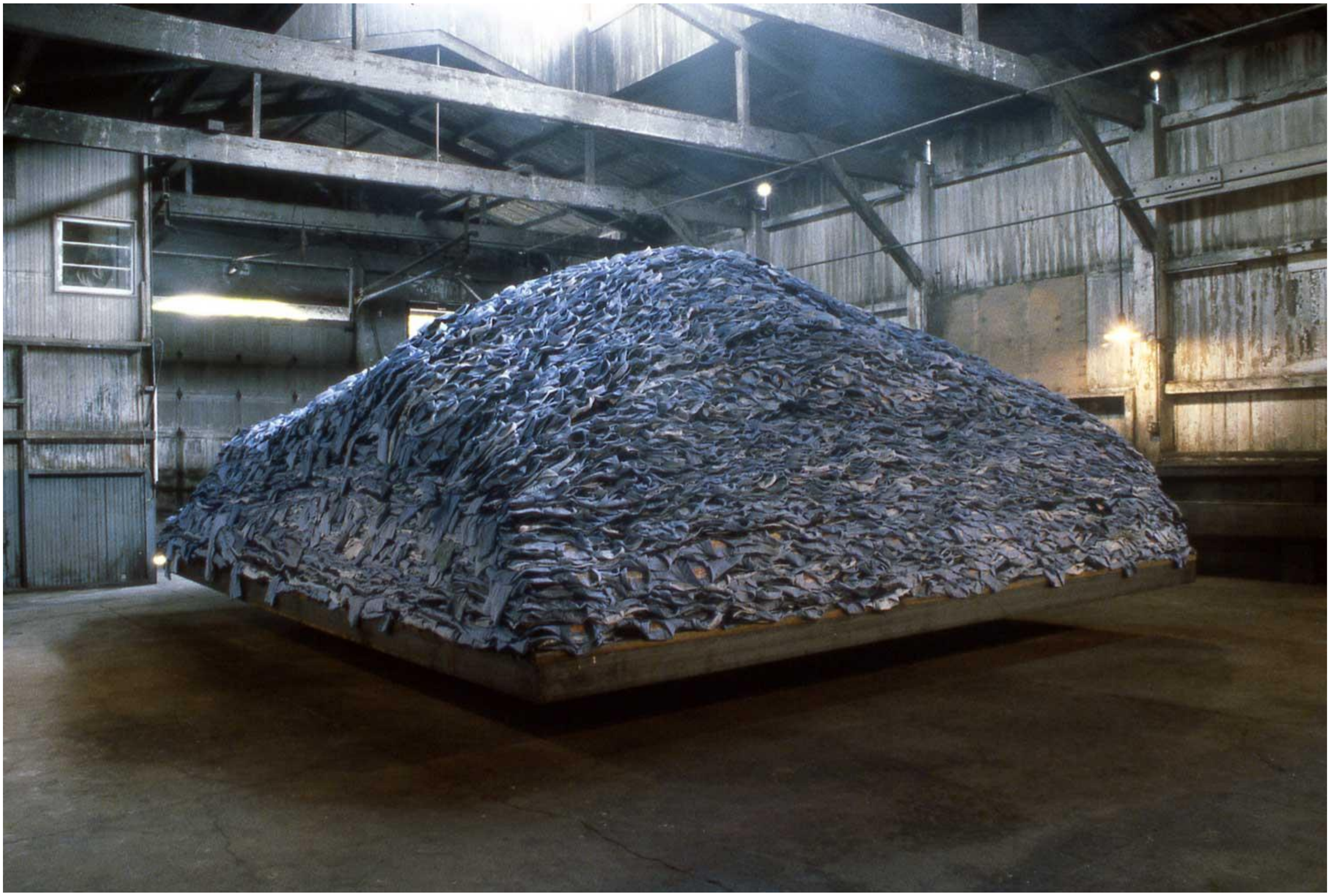


Figure 1 — Ann Hamilton, *indigo blue* (1991). Blue work clothing, steel and wood base. *Places with a Past*, curated by Mary Jane Jacobs, Spoleto Festival U.S.A., Charleston, South Carolina (May 24 to August 24, 1991). Photo by John McWilliams. Image courtesy of Ann Hamilton Studio.

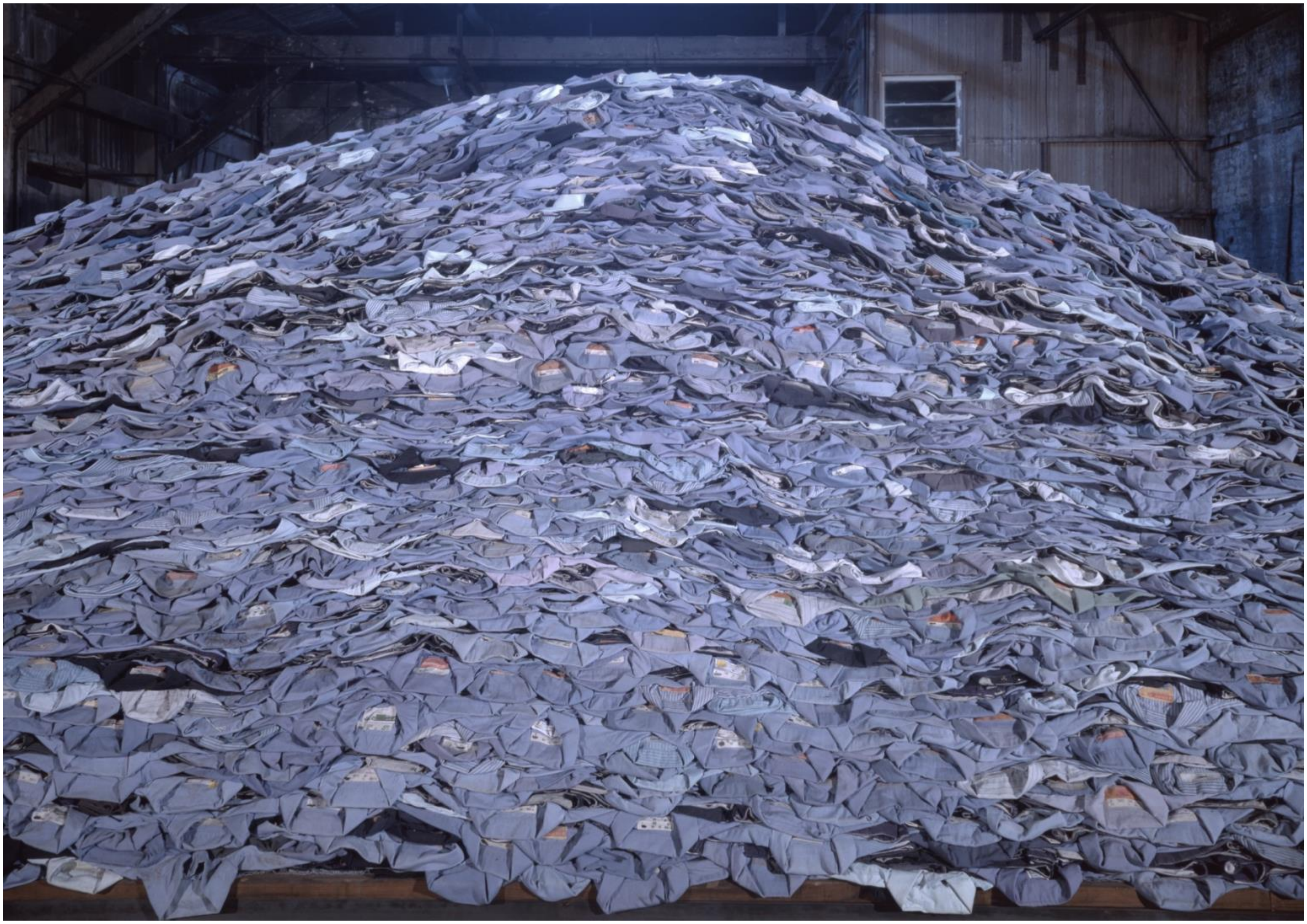


Figure 2 — Ann Hamilton, *indigo blue* (detail) (1991). Blue work clothing, steel and wood base. *Places with a Past*, curated by Mary Jane Jacobs, Spoleto Festival U.S.A., Charleston, South Carolina (May 24 to August 24, 1991). Photo by John McWilliams. Image courtesy of Ann Hamilton Studio.

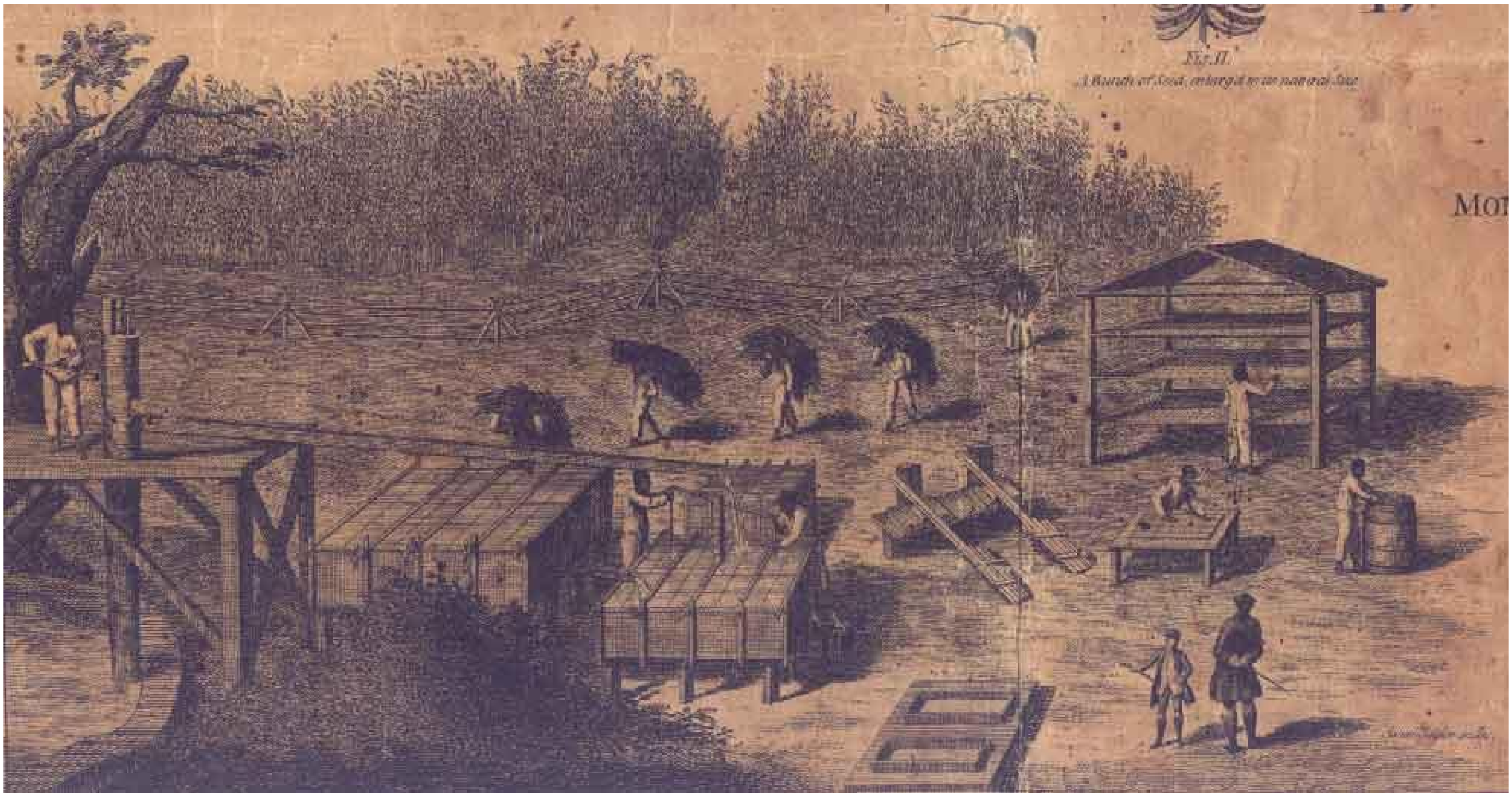
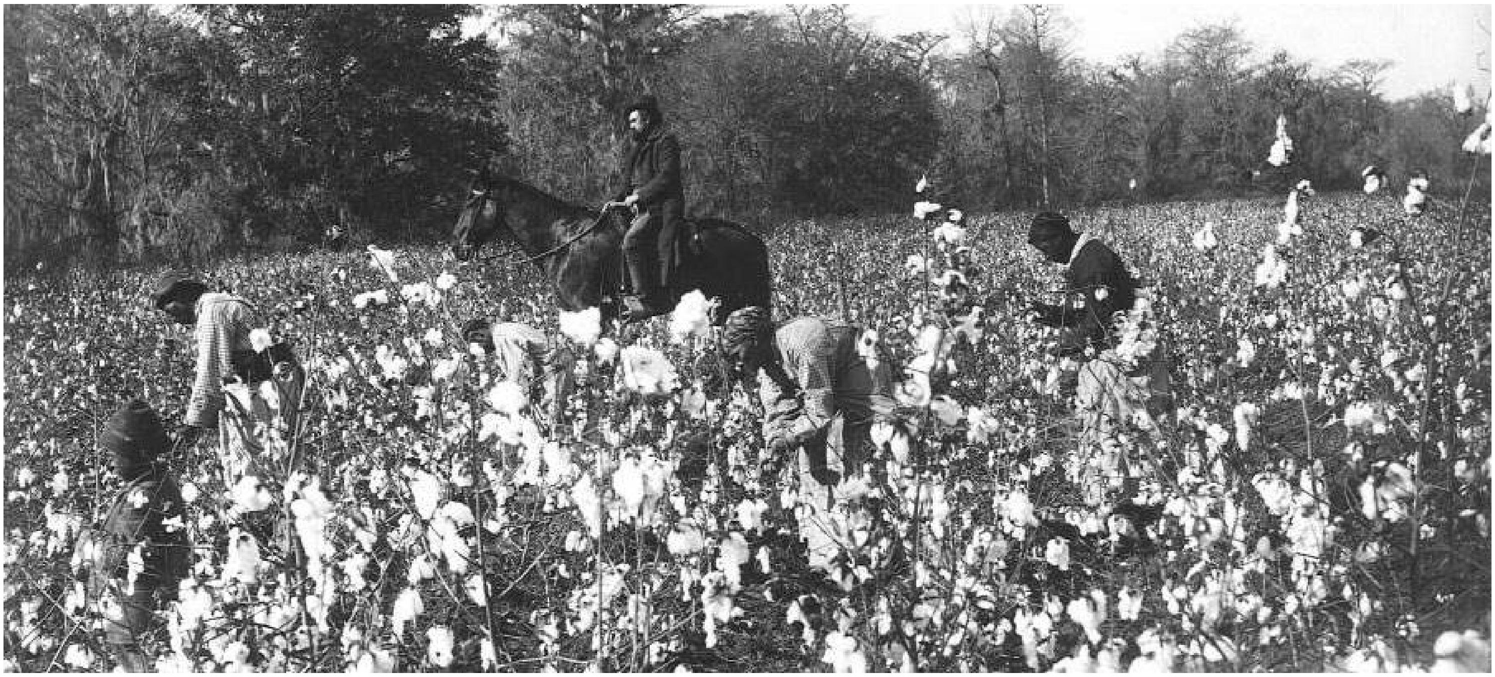


Figure 3 — Henry Mouzon, *A map of the Parish of St. Stephen*. Stages of indigo processing in South Carolina in the eighteenth century. Courtesy of the Rare Book, Manuscript, and Special Collections Library, Duke University. Image Source: Florida History Online. Accessed on 30 June 2018. [https://www.unf.edu/floridahistoryonline/Plantations/plantations/Indigo_Cultivation_and_Processing.htm].



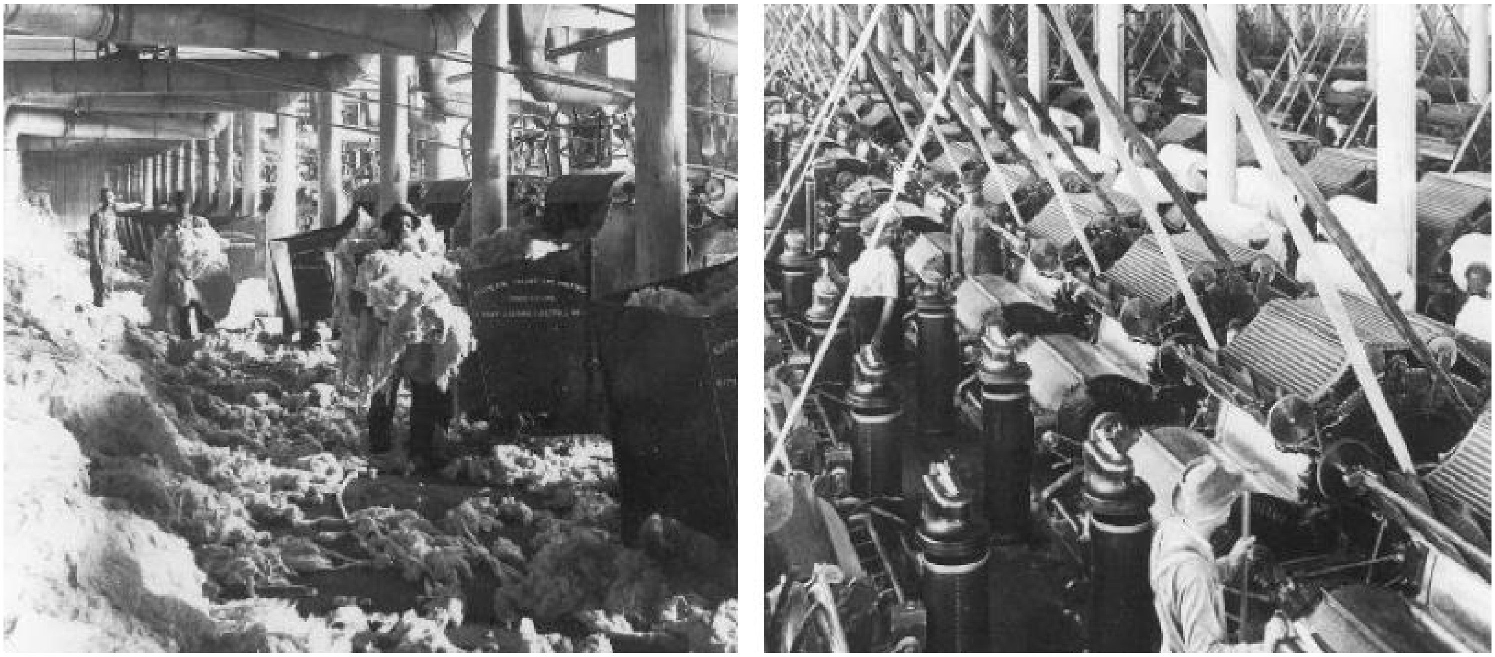


Figure 4 — Slaves picking cotton under the watchful eye of an overseer. Photographer unknown, c. 1895. Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division. Image source: History Matters. Accessed on 30 June 2018. [http://historymatters.gmu.edu/d/6711/].

Figures 5 & 6 — Workers opening bales of cotton and tending the loom machines at the White Oak Mill in Greensboro, North Carolina, 1907-09. National Museum of American History. Image Source: Old West Durham History. “Southern Cotton Mills.” Accessed on 30 June 2018. [https://www.oldwestdurham.com/history/southern-cotton-mills.html].

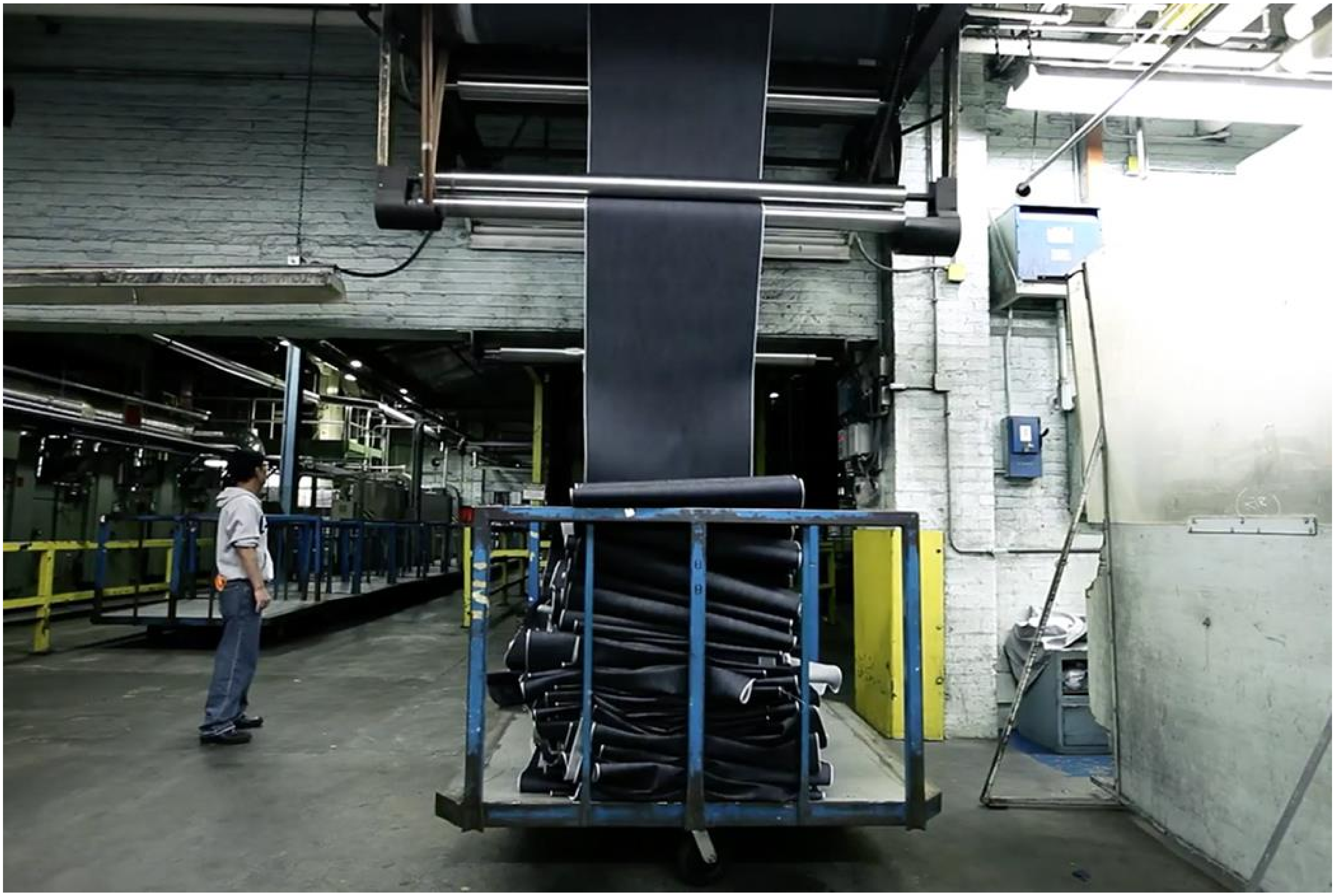


Figure 7 — A worker oversees the final Cone Denim product made at the Cone Mills White Oak Plant, Greensboro, North Carolina. Photo courtesy of Self Edge and Roy Denim. Image Source: David Shuck. “Who Killed the Cone Mills White Oak Plant?” *Heddels*, 21 February 2018. [https://www.heddels.com/2018/02/killed-cone-mills-white-oak-plant/].

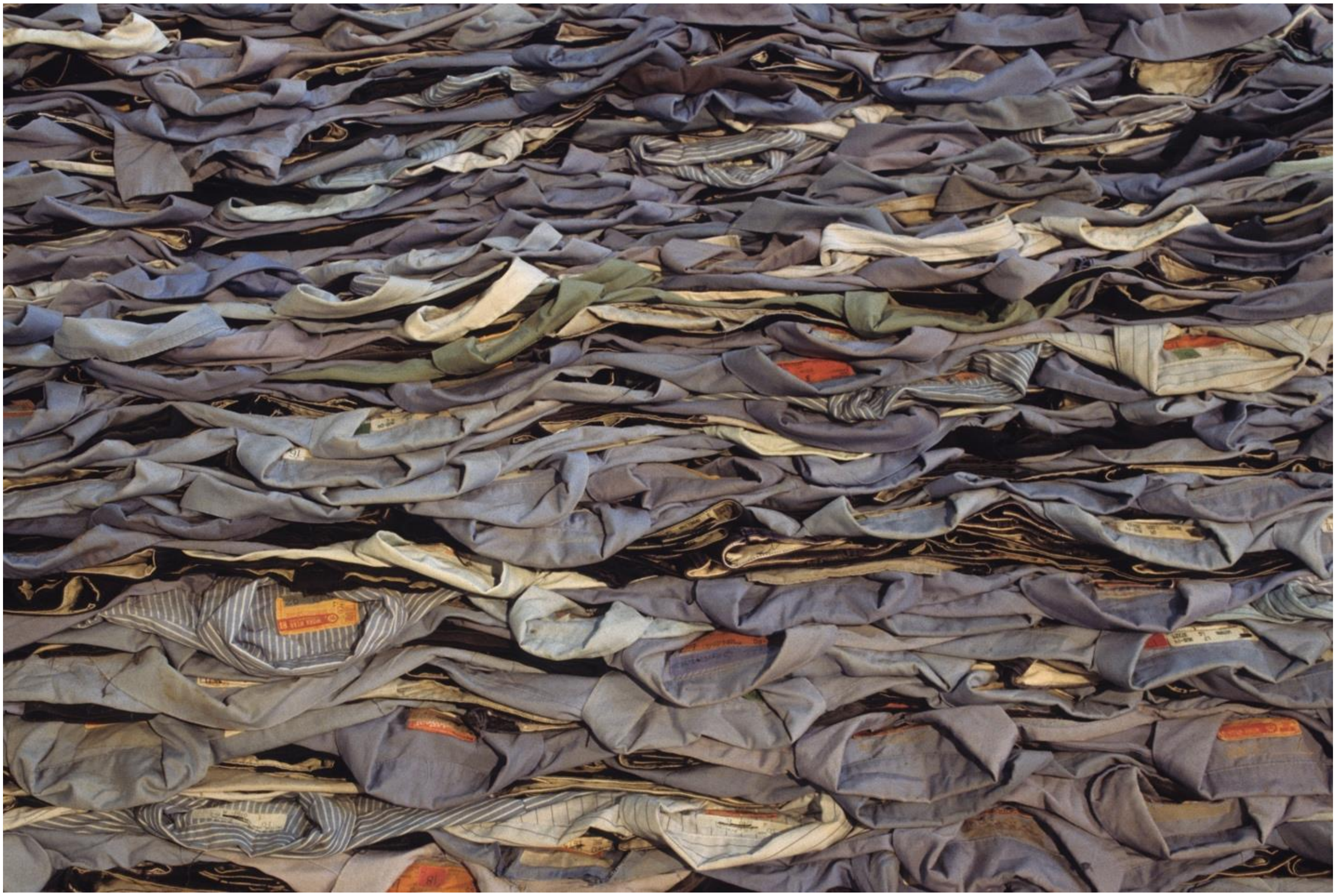


Figure 8 — Ann Hamilton, *indigo blue* (detail) (1991). Blue work clothing. *Places with a Past*, curated by Mary Jane Jacobs, Spoleto Festival U.S.A., Charleston, South Carolina (May 24 to August 24, 1991). Photo by John McWilliams. Image courtesy of Ann Hamilton Studio.

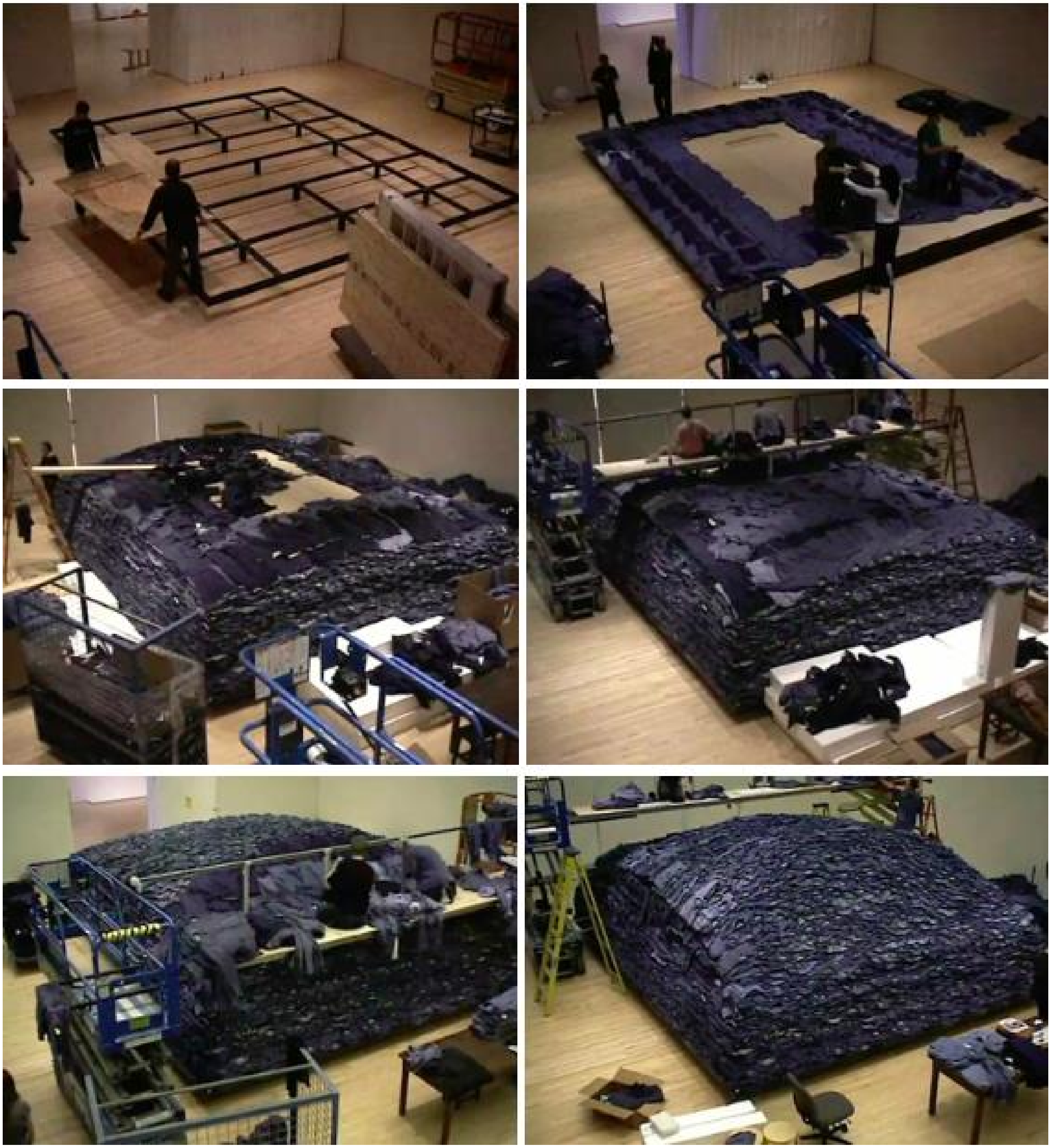


Figure 9 — Time-lapse footage of the installation of Ann Hamilton's *indigo blue* (2007) at San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (SFMOMA) in Spring 2007. Image Source: Video stills from San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, "Time-lapse of Ann Hamilton's installation of *indigo blue.*" Video, 03:21. Accessed on 30 June 2018. [https://www.sfmoma.org/watch/time-lapse-of-ann-hamiltons-installation-of-indigo-blue/].

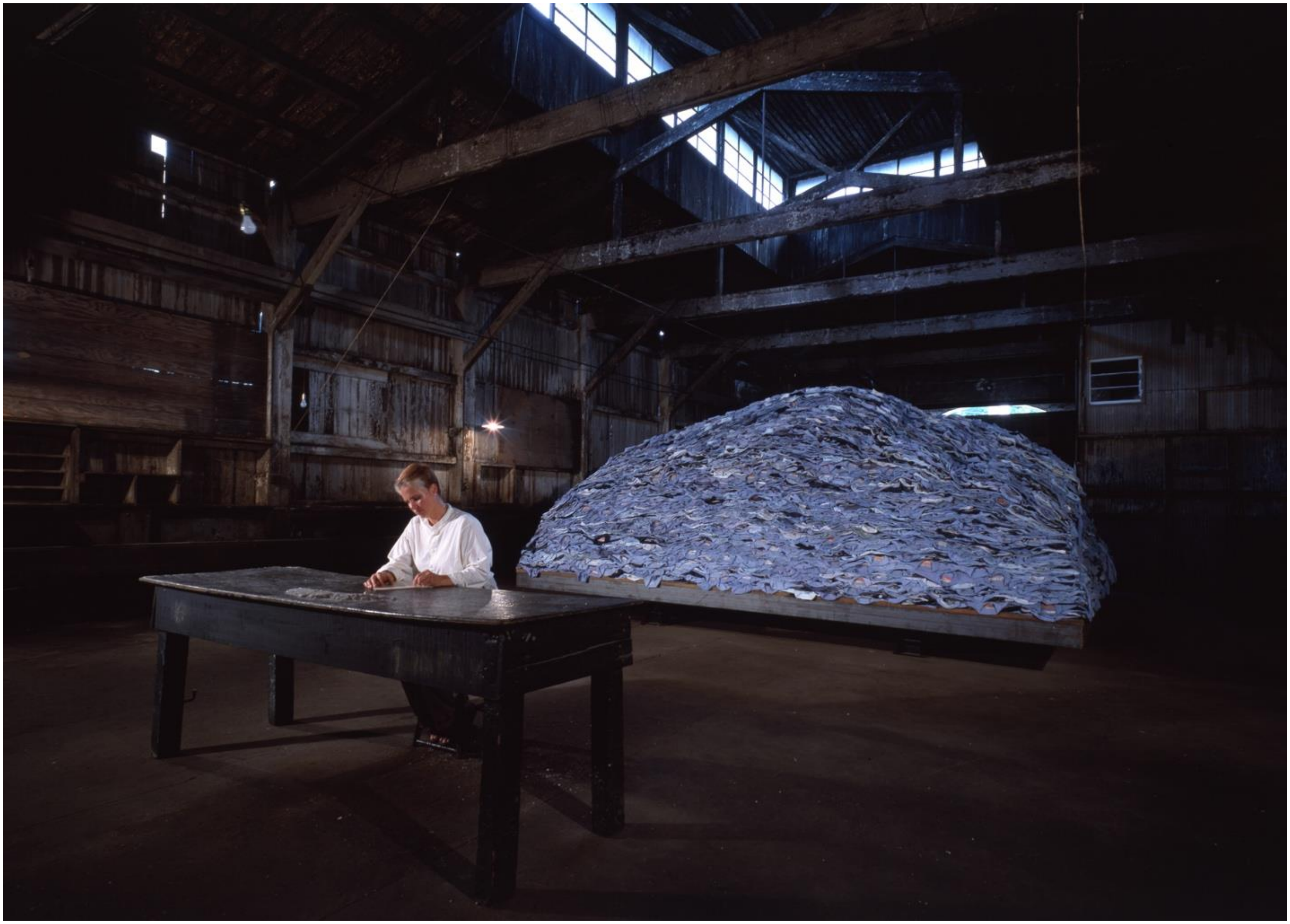


Figure 10 — Ann Hamilton, *indigo blue* (1991). Blue work clothing, steel and wood base, wood table, chair, light, bulb, books (military regulation manuals, blue bindings), salvia, pink pearl erasers. *Places with a Past*, curated by Mary Jane Jacobs, Spoleto Festival U.S.A., Charleston, South Carolina (May 24 to August 24, 1991). Photo by John McWilliams. Image courtesy of Ann Hamilton Studio.

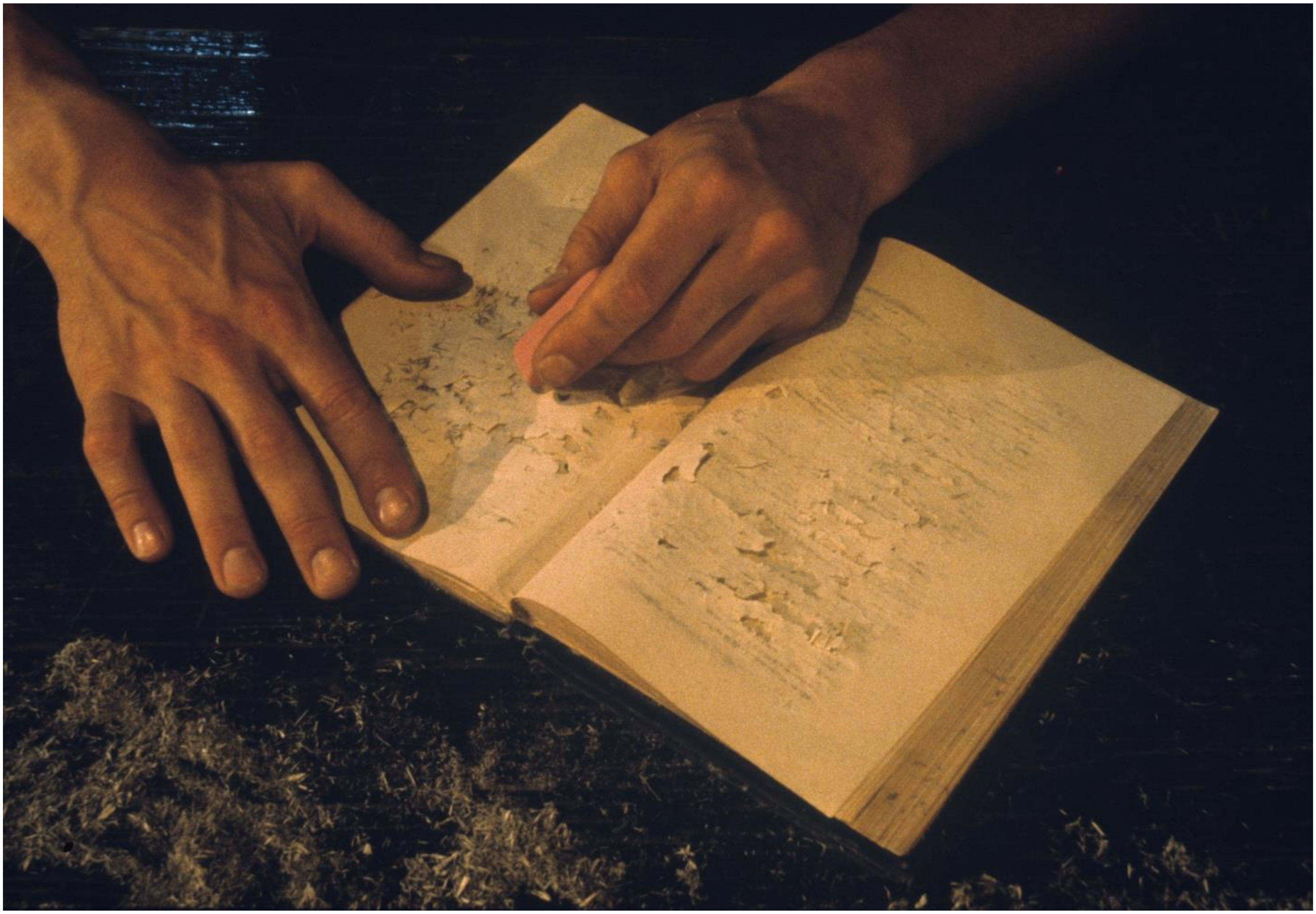


Figure 11— Ann Hamilton, *indigo blue* (detail) (1991). Performer, books (military regulation manuals, blue bindings), salvia, pink pearl erasers. *Places with a Past*, curated by Mary Jane Jacobs, Spoleto Festival U.S.A., Charleston, South Carolina (May 24 to August 24, 1991). Photo by John McWilliams. Image courtesy of Ann Hamilton Studio.

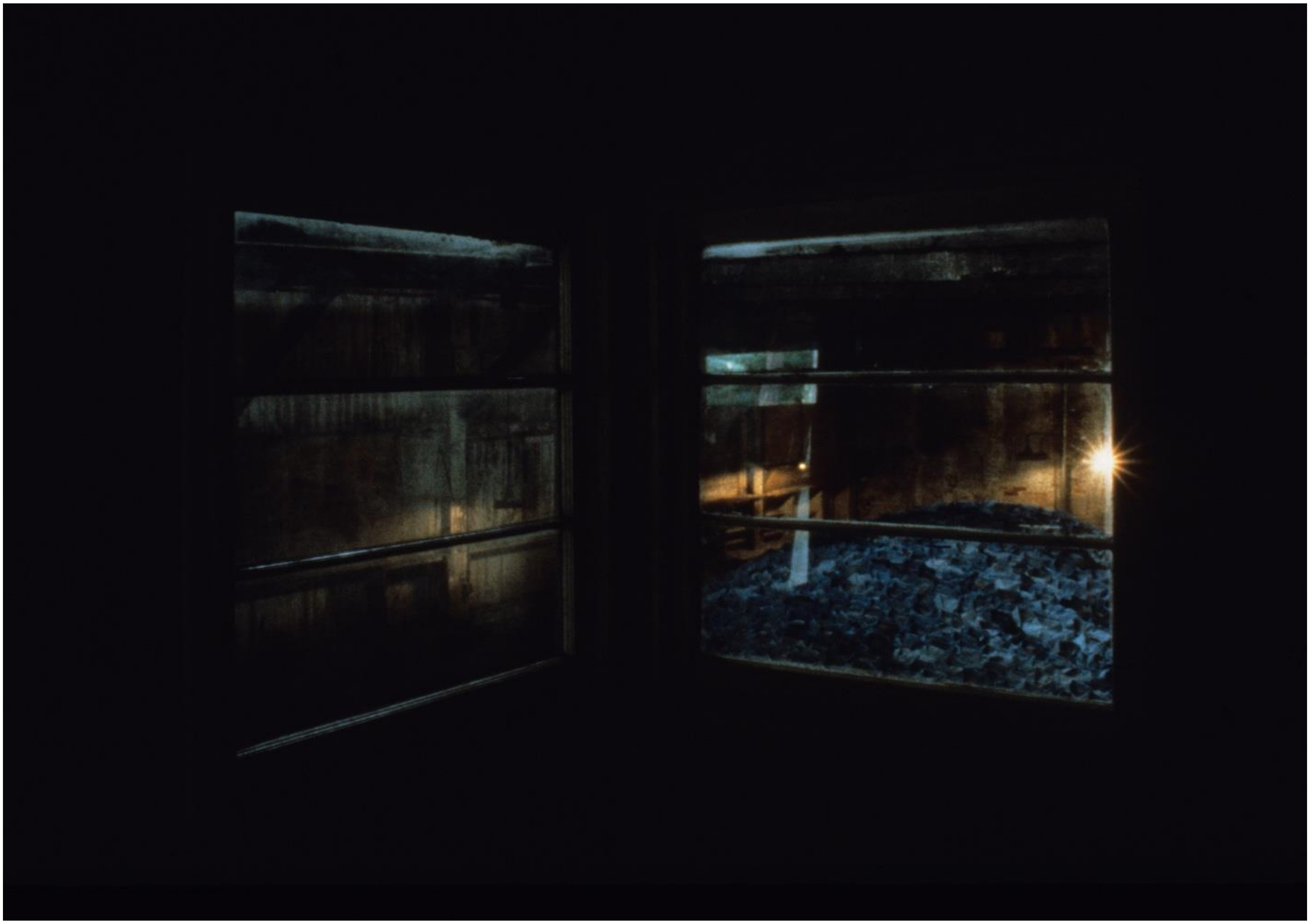


Figure 12 — Ann Hamilton, *indigo blue* (1991). Overhead view of installation. *Places with a Past*, curated by Mary Jane Jacobs, Spoleto Festival U.S.A., Charleston, South Carolina (May 24 to August 24, 1991). Photo by John McWilliams. Image courtesy of Ann Hamilton Studio.

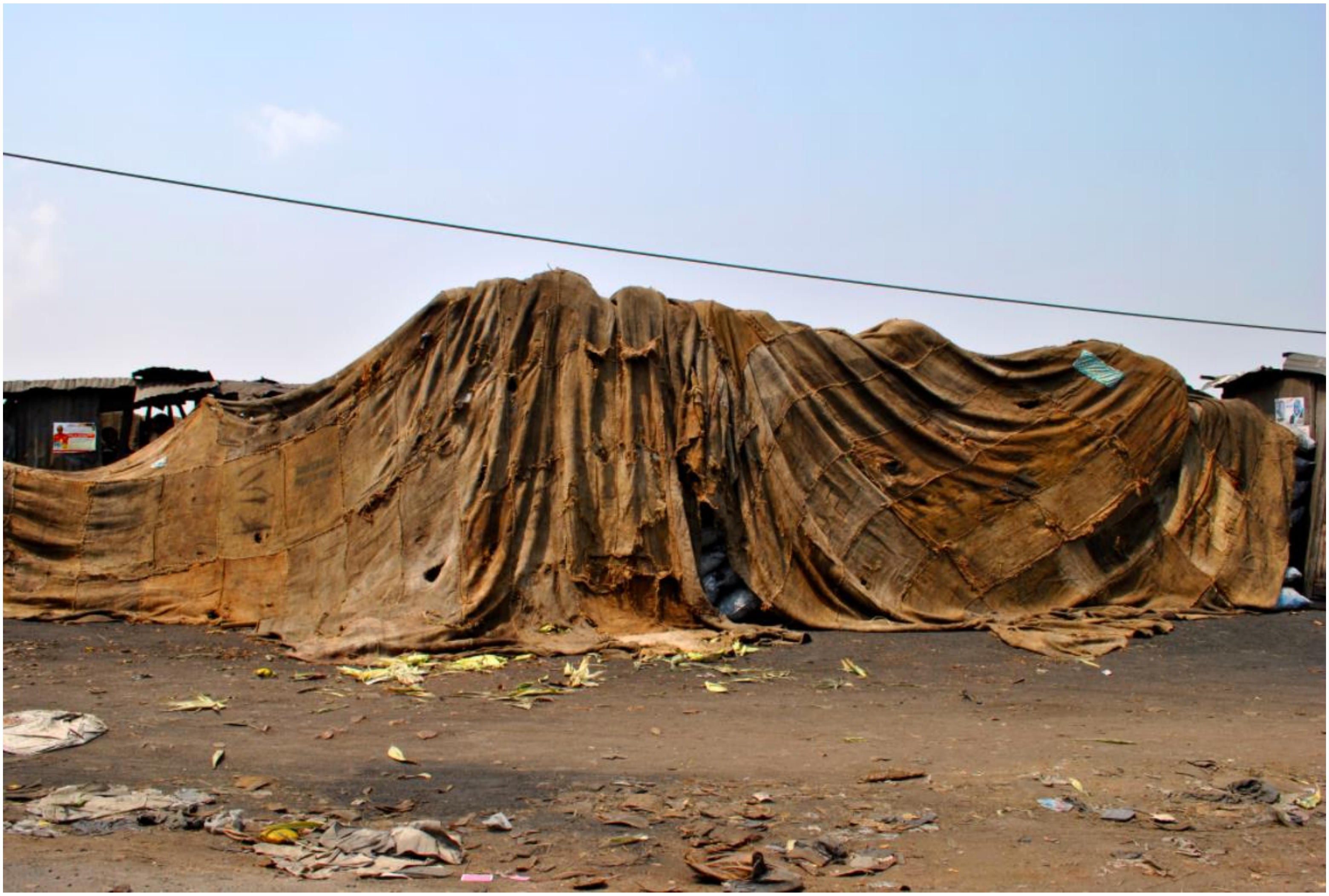
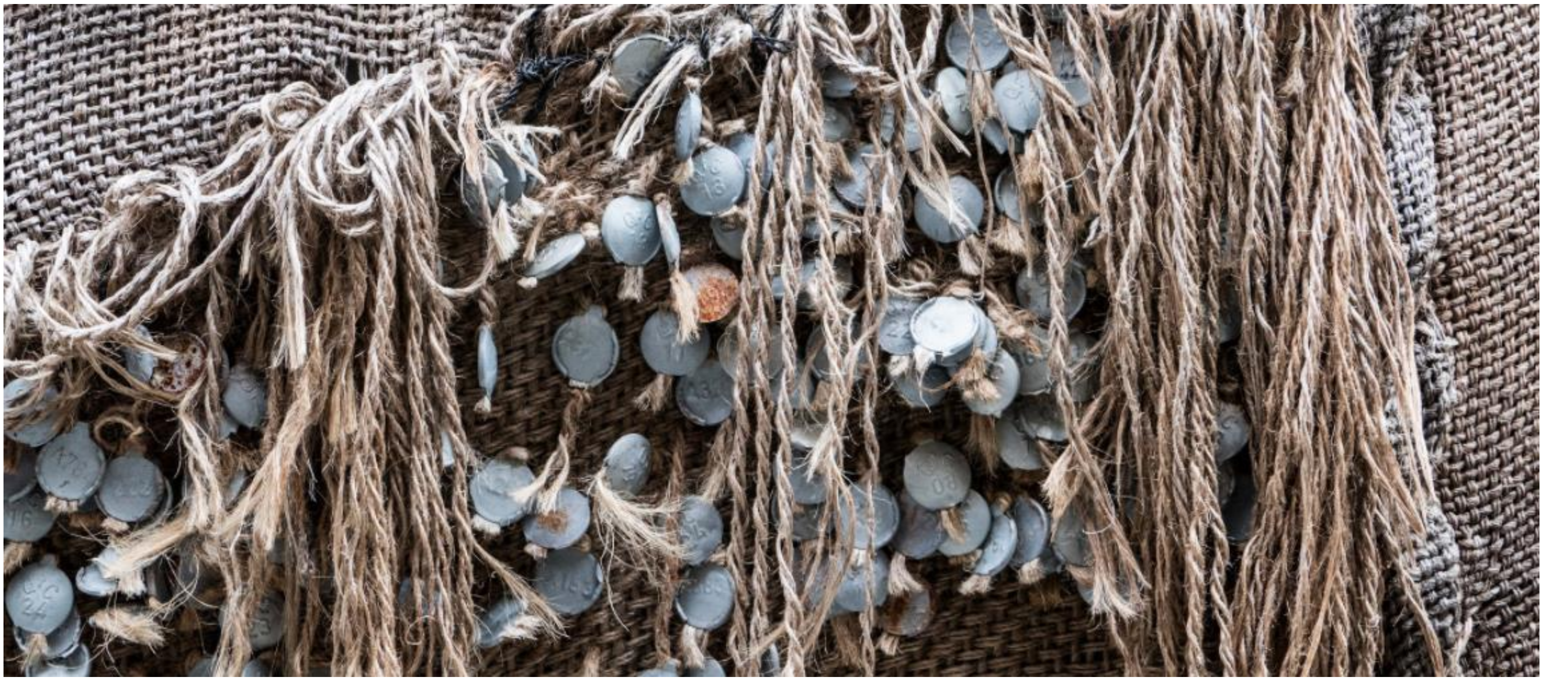


Figure 13 — Ibrahim Mahama, *Untitled* (2013). Jute and mixed media installation. Mallam Atta Market, Accra, Newtown, Ghana. Image Source: Public Delivery. Accessed on 21 June 2018. [https://publicdelivery.org/ibrahim-mahama-jute-sacks/].



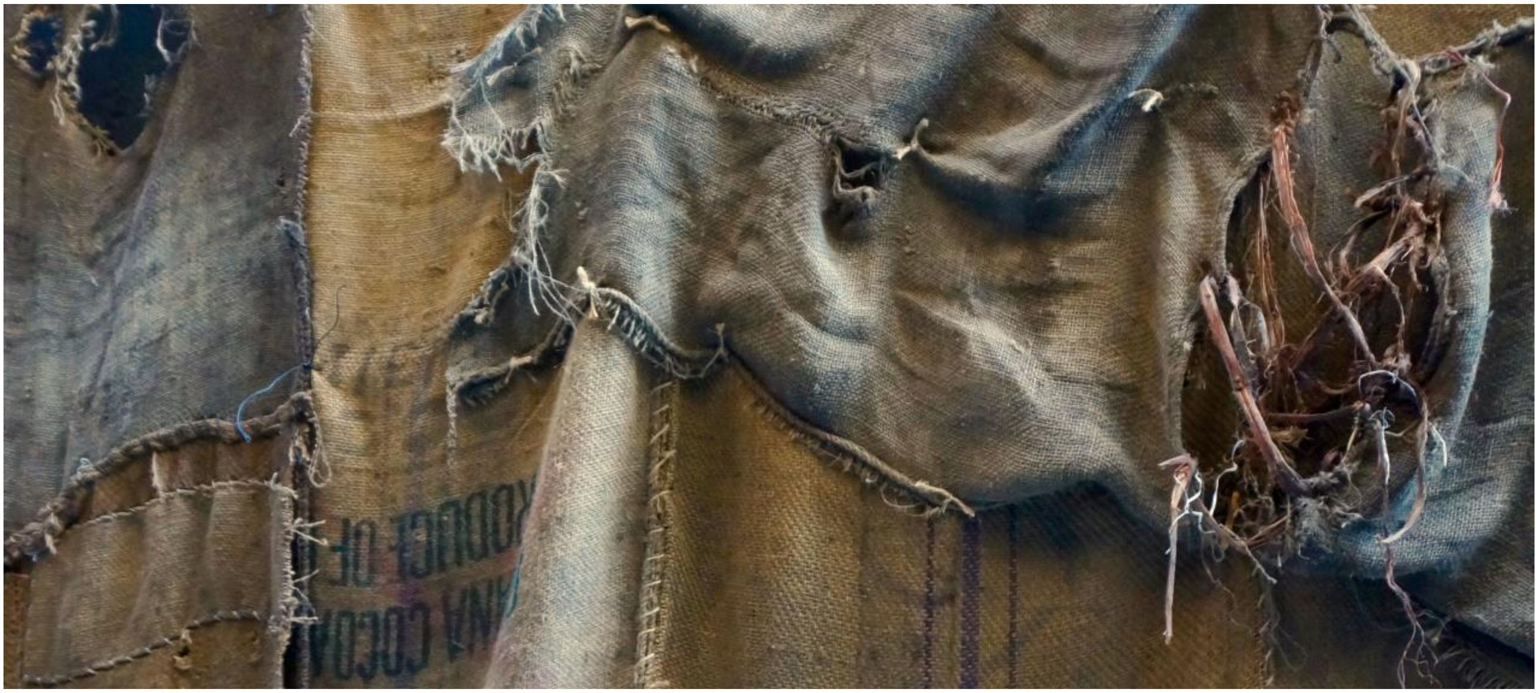


Figure 14 — Ibrahim Mahama, *Out of Bounds* (detail) (2015). 56th Venice Biennale, Italy. Jute and mixed media installation. Photo by Margriet Zwarthoed. Image Source: Margriet Zwarthoed, Flickr. Accessed on 30 June 2018. [https://www.flickr.com/photos/margrietzwarthoedfotos/23081156060/].

Figure 15 — Ibrahim Mahama, *Out of Bounds* (detail) (2015). 56th Venice Biennale, Italy. Jute and mixed media installation. Photo courtesy of A Palazzo Gallery and Ibrahim Mahama. Image Source: Public Delivery. Accessed on 21 June 2018. [https://publicdelivery.org/ibrahim-mahama-jute-sacks/].

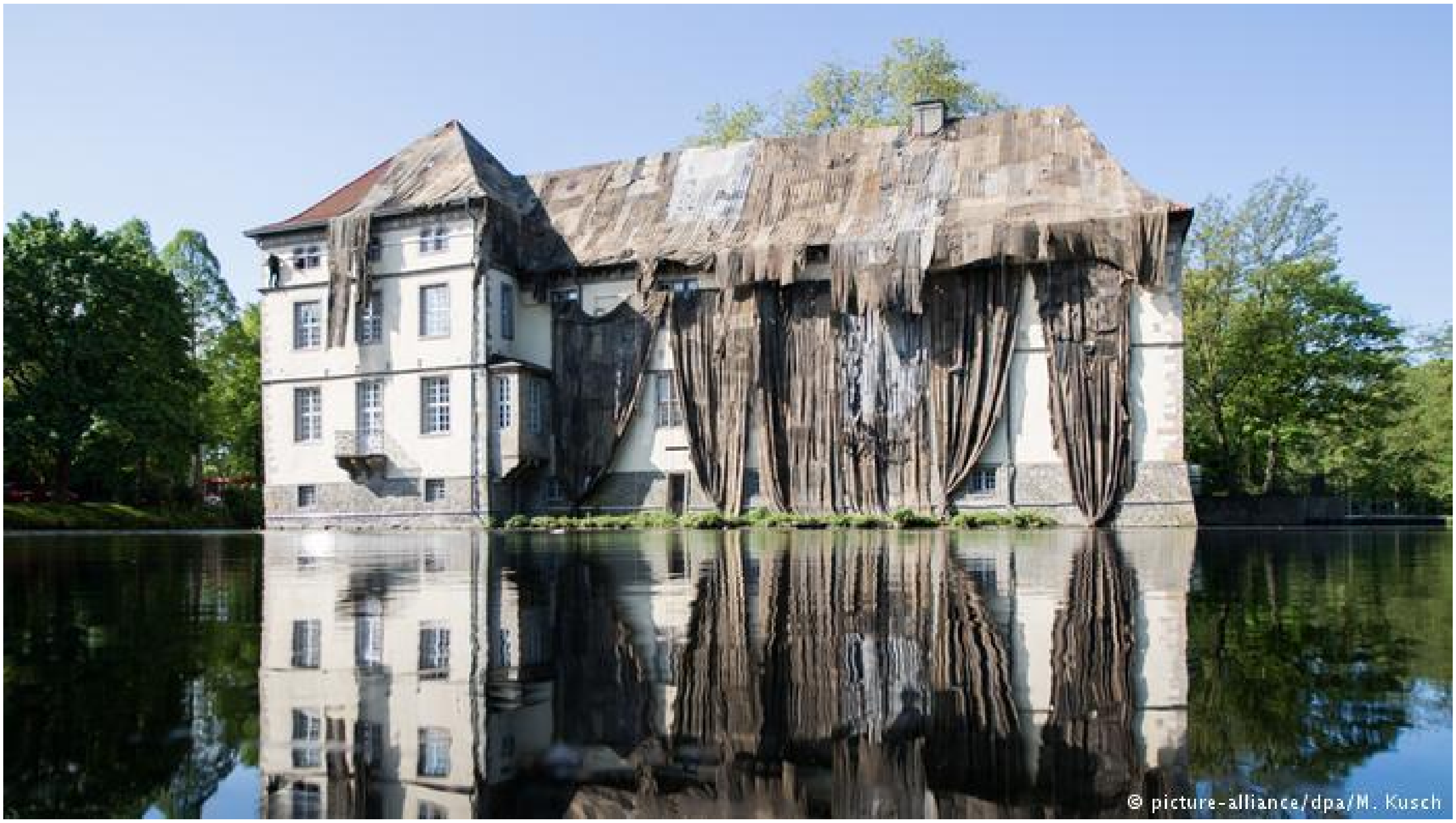

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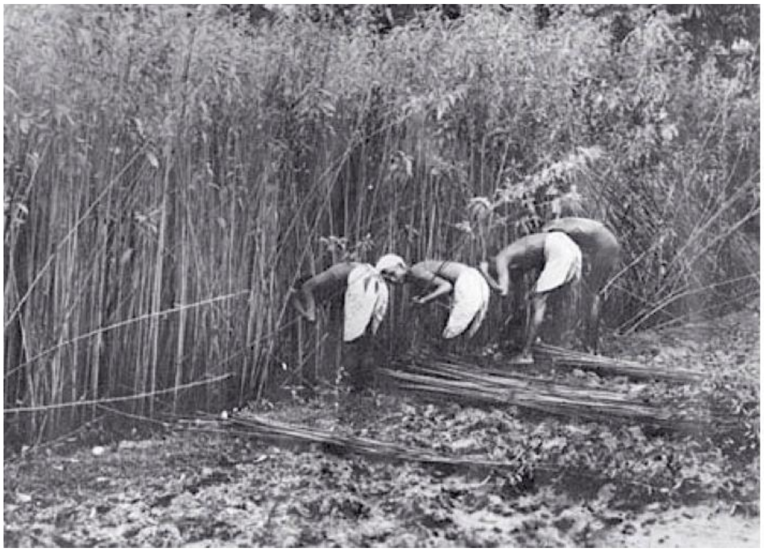
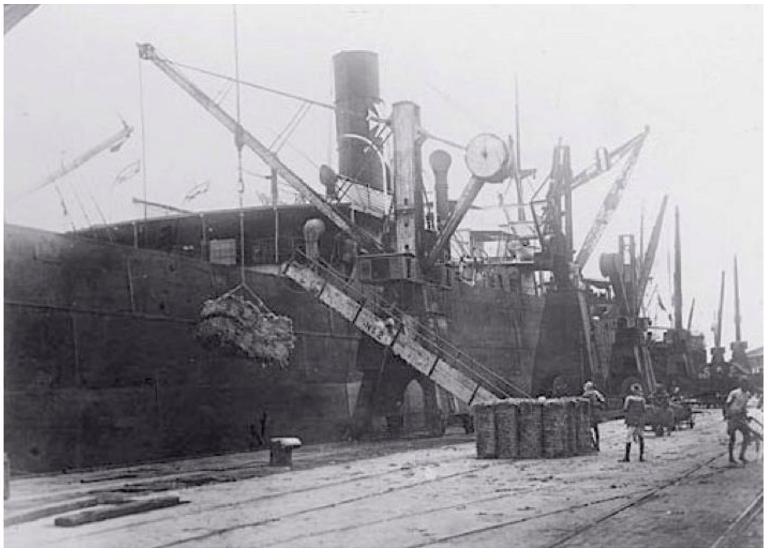
Figure 16 — Ibrahim Mahama, *Coal Market* (2018). Jute and mixed media installation. Schloss Strünkede, Herne, North Rhine-Westphalia, Germany. Image Source: Deutsche Welle (DW). Accessed on 21 June 2018. [http://www.dw.com/en/coal-and-art-an-unlikely-pair/a-43684752].





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Figures 17 & 18 — Cutting jute in West Bengal; Loading jute from wharf into export steamer, Calcutta. c. 1900. Photographer unknown. University of Dundee Archive Services. Image Source: "Dundee, Jute and Empire." Open Learn. Accessed on 30 June 2018. [http://www.open.edu/openlearn/history-the-arts/history/dundee-jute-and-empire/content-section-3.1].

Figures 19 & 20 — Jute production at a jute factory in Kolkata, West Bengal. Image source: Ludlow Jute & Specialities Ltd. Accessed on 30 June 2018. [http://www.ludlowjute.com/gallery.html].

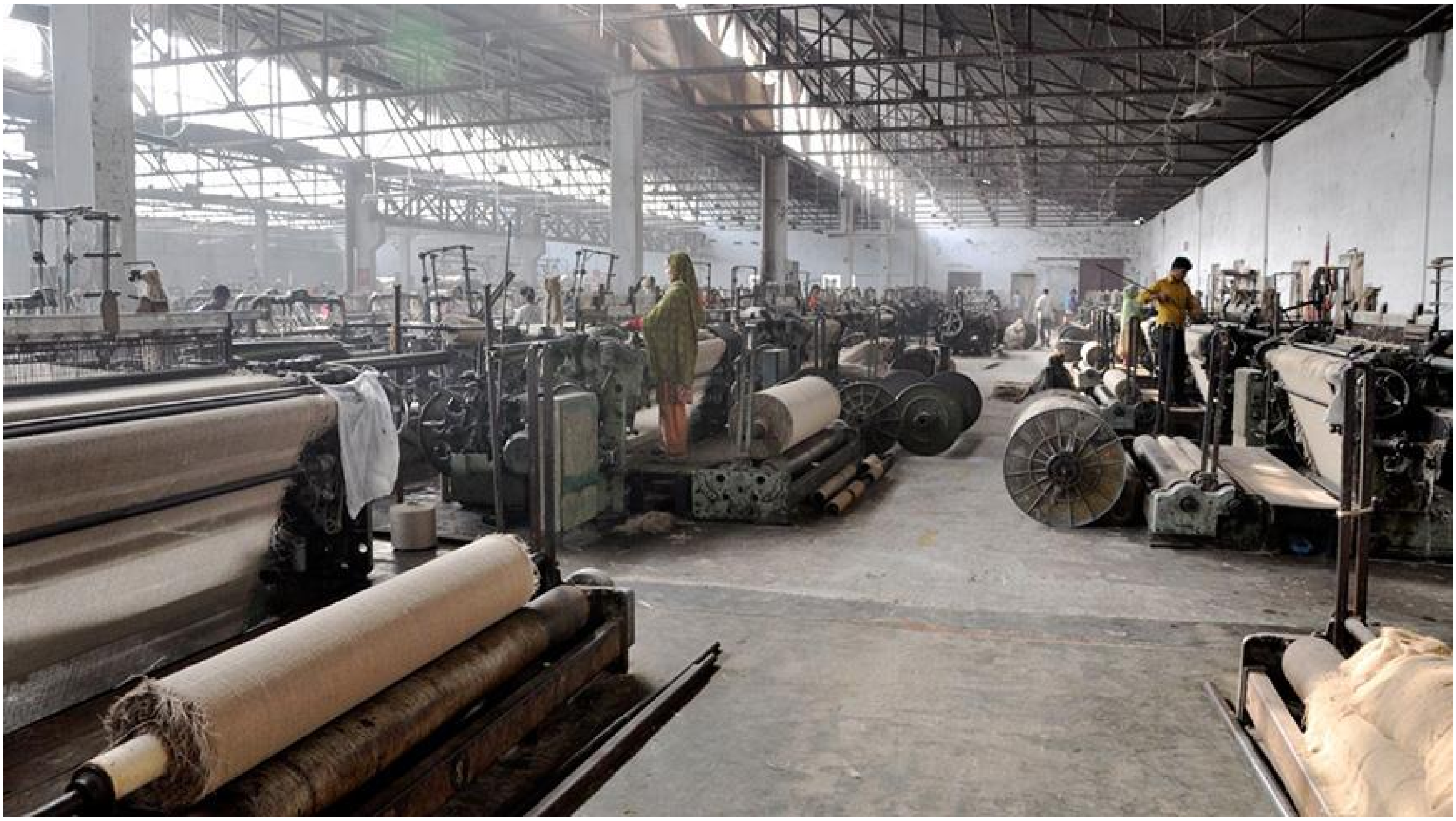

Figure 21 — Jute mill in Bogra, Bangladesh. Image Source: Hasibur Rahman Bilu. “Private Jute Mills Creating Job Oppotrunities in Bogra.” *Dhaka Tribune,* 22 July 2013. [https://www.dhakatribune.com/uncategorized/2013/07/22/private-jute-mills-creating-job-opportunities-in-bogra-2].

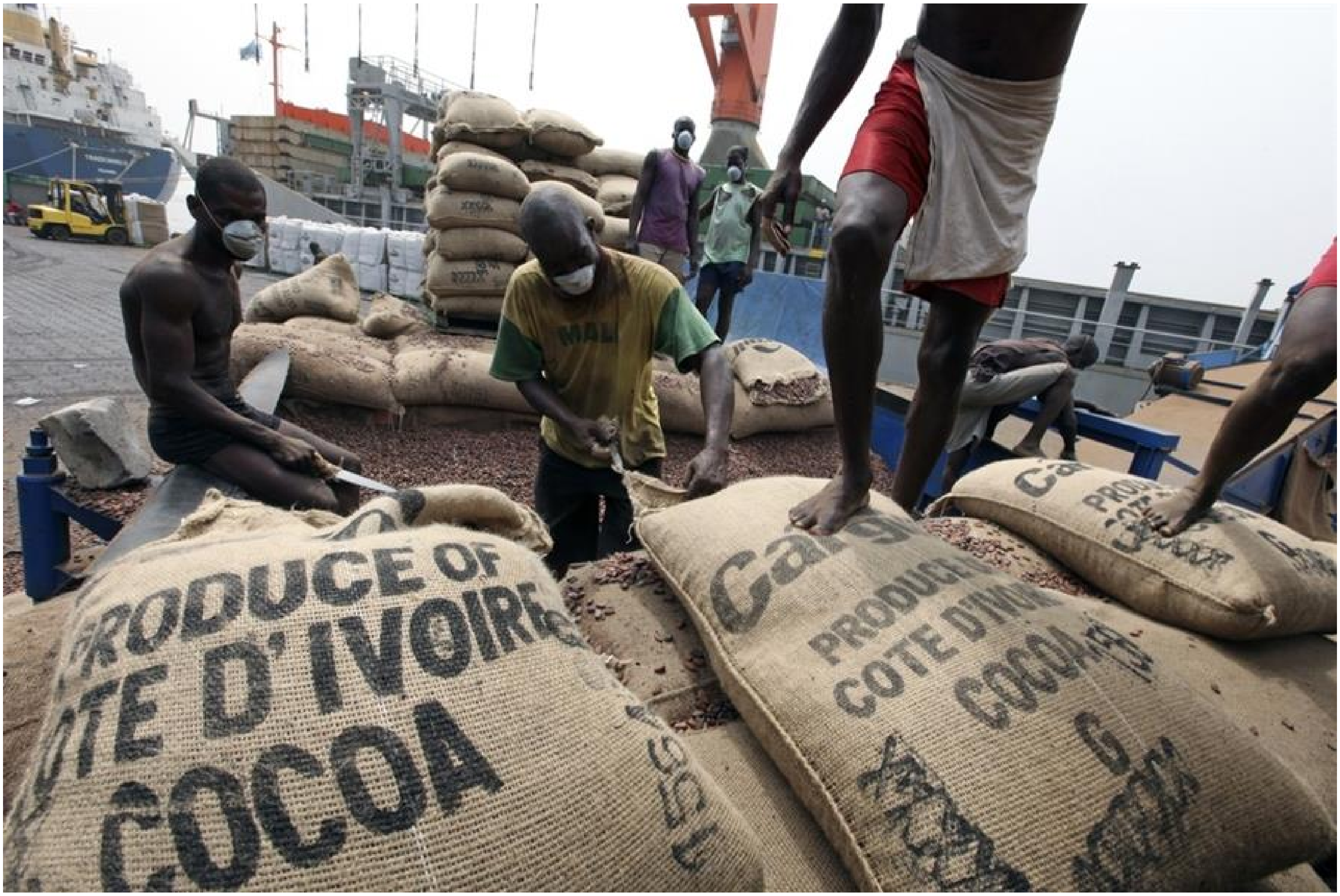
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Figure 22 — Workers of the West African cocoa industry. Image Source: Le Conseil du café-cacao, Côte-d'Ivoire. CommodAfrica Society. Accessed on 30 June 2018. [http://www.commodafrica.com/02-03-2018-le-conseil-ivoirien-du-cafe-cacao-aurait-sur-estime-la-campagne-mettant-mal-des].

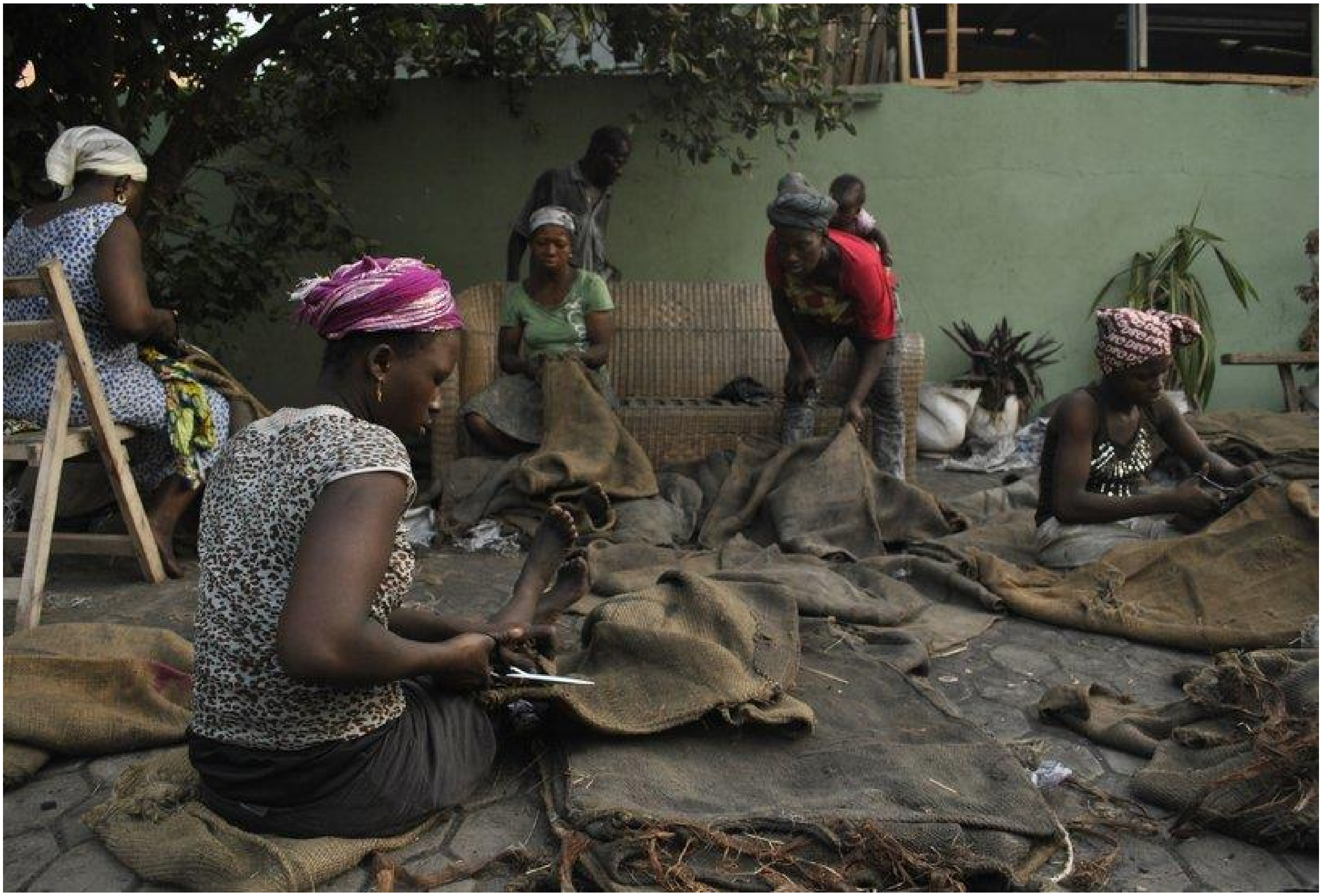
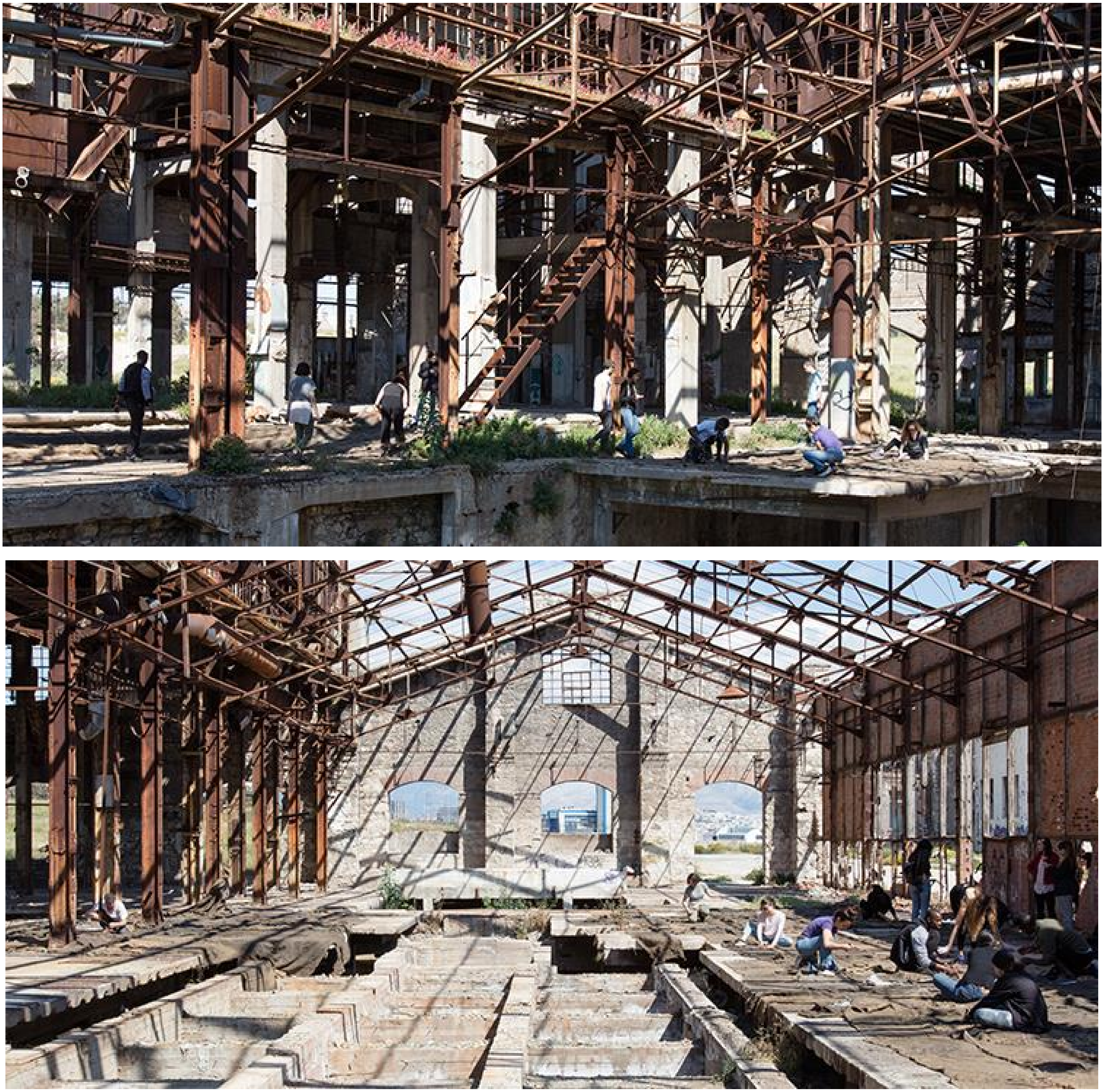


Figure 23 — Ibrahim Mahama's collaborators sewing panels of jute in Accra. Image Source: Gasworks, London. "Residency: Ibrahim Mahama, 14 October to 22 December 2013." Accessed on 30 June 2018. [https://www.gasworks.org.uk/residencies/ibrahim-mahama/].



Figures 24 & 25 — Ibrahim Mahama, *Check Point Prosfygika* (2016-17). Working in the Drapetsona Fertilizer Factory, Piraeus, Greece. Image Source: Select Art. Accessed on 30 June 2018. [https://www.select.art.br/ibrahim-mahama/].

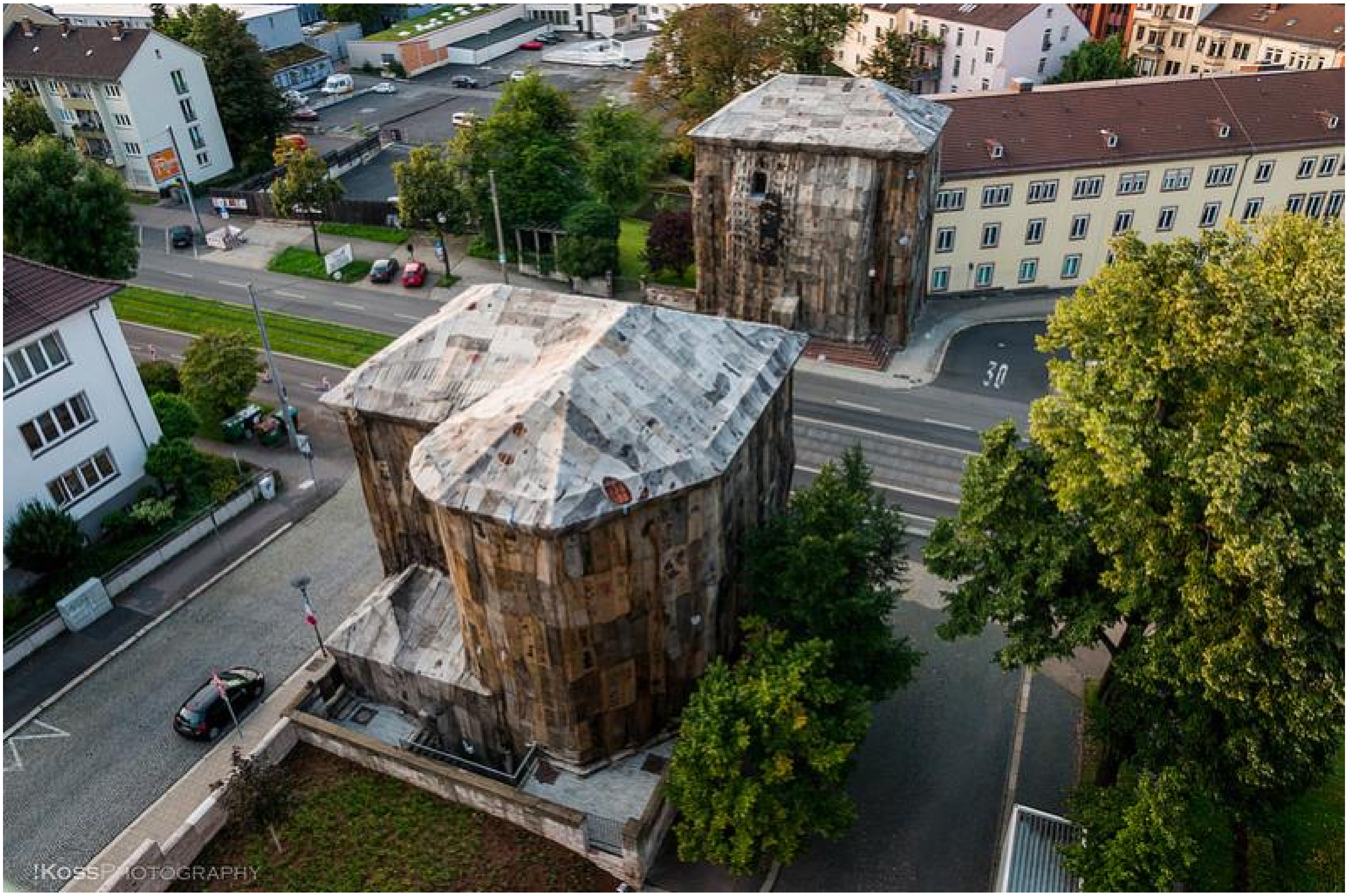


Figure 26 — Ibrahim Mahama, *Check Point Sekondi Loco 1901-2030* (2016–17). Jute and mixed media installation. Torwache, Kassel, Germany. *documenta 14.* Photo by Immo Koss. Image Source: Immo Koss Photography, Flickr. Accessed on 21 June 2018. [https://www.flickr.com/photos/immokoss/35901464934].

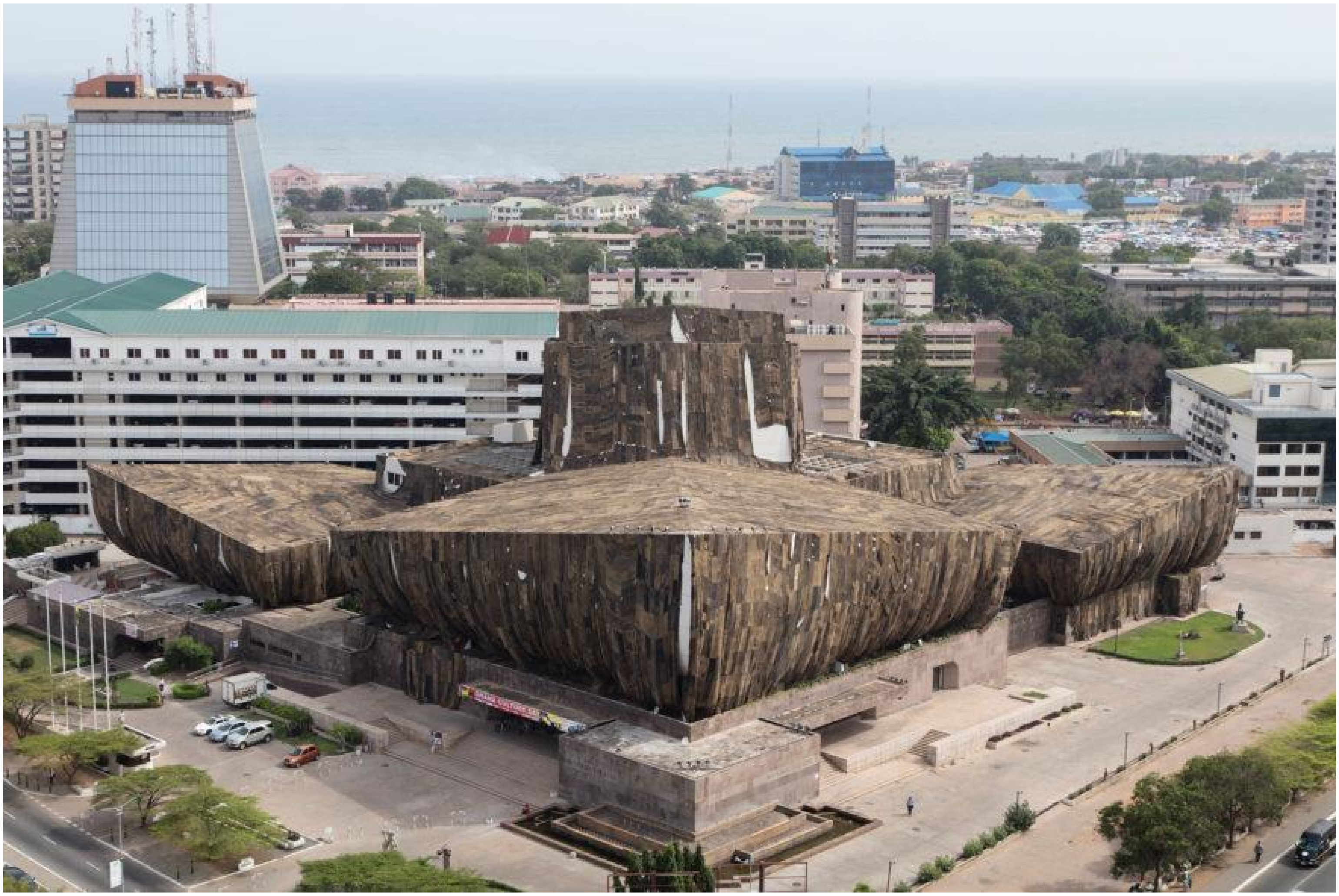


Figure 27 — Ibrahim Mahama, *Malam Dodoo National Theatre 1992-2016* (2014). Jute and mixed media installation. National Theatre of Ghana, Accra, Ghana. Image source: Public Delivery. Accessed on 21 June 2018. [https://publicdelivery.org/ibrahim-mahama-jute-sacks/].

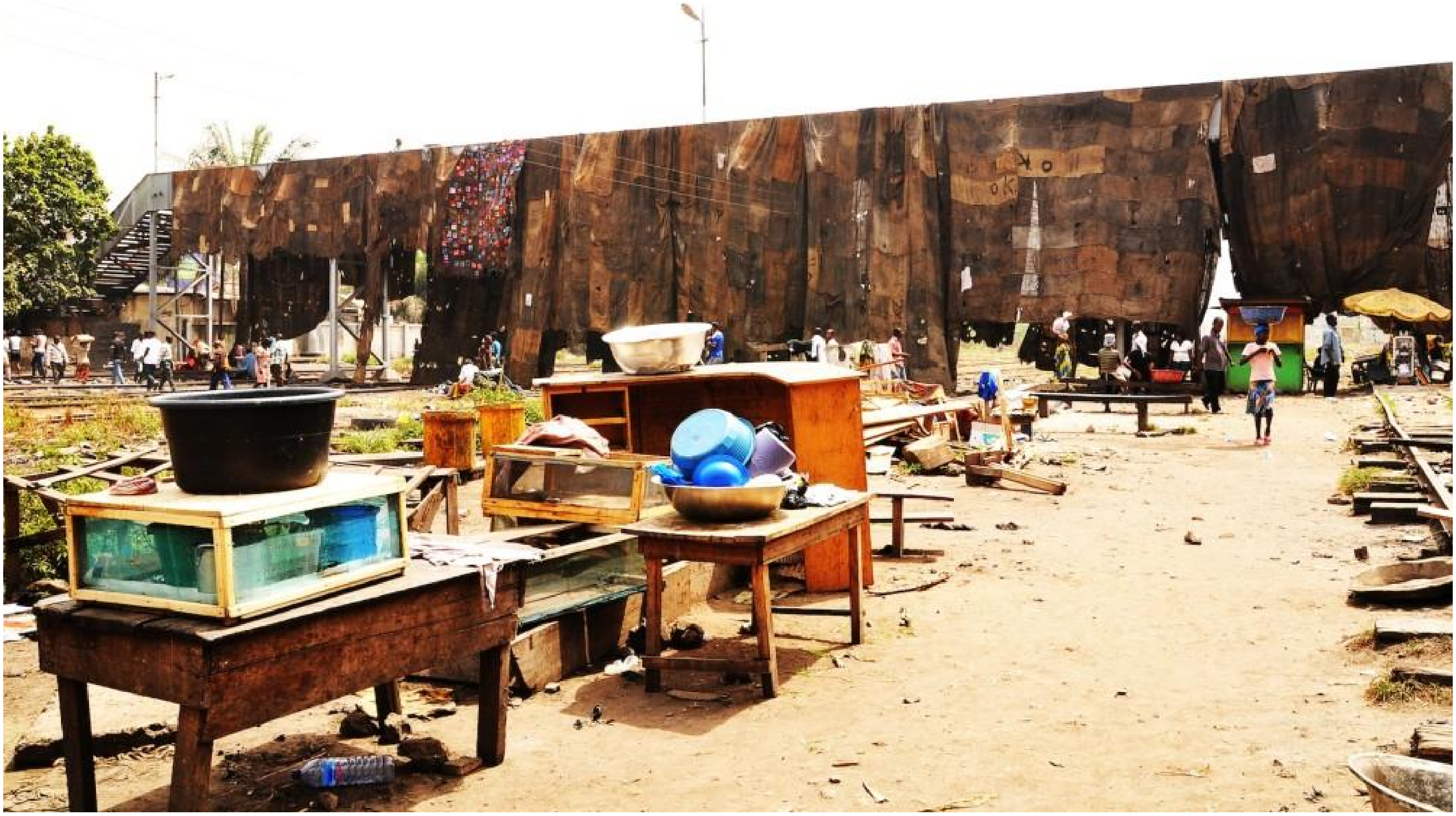


Figure 28 — Ibrahim Mahama, *Untitled (Adum Railway Station)* (2013). Jute and mixed media installation. Kumasi, Ghana. Image source: Public Delivery. Accessed on 21 June 2018. [https://publicdelivery.org/ibrahim-mahama-jute-sacks/].

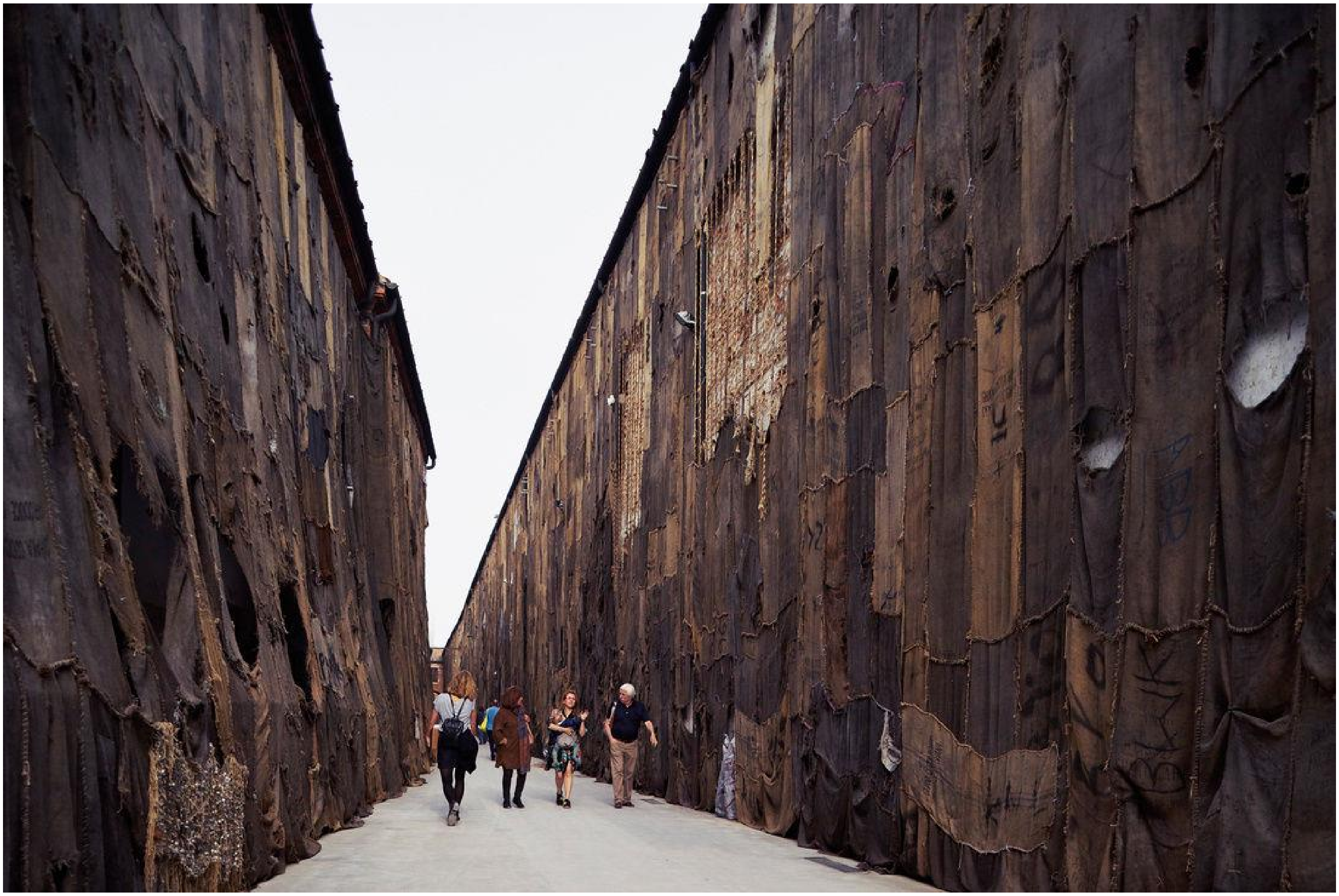


Figure 29 — Ibrahim Mahama, *Out of Bounds* (2015). 56th Venice Biennale, Italy. Jute and mixed media installation. Photo by Alex John Beck. Image Source: Artsy. Accessed on 21 June 2018. [https://www.artsy.net/article/artsy-editorial-okwui-enwezor-venice-biennale-all-the-worlds-futures].