



Sage Wosminity, 'Locutions: Fragments out of a Deluge', *BlackFlash* 41.1, Spring 2024

# LOCUTIONS: FRAGMENTS OUT OF A DELUGE

By Sage Wosminity

**CHUKWUDUBEM UKAIGWE'S APPROACHES** to artistic media are limitless. Ukaigwe has intertwined all aspects of his artistic practice, proving that ideas for producing music can lend themselves to ceramics, and that film-making methodologies can echo a painter's approach to canvas. It's all interchangeable; it's all fluid. "Locutions: Fragments out of a Deluge," shown at Neutral Ground Artist-Run Centre in Regina, SK from September 23–November 11, 2023, is a true testament to the ever-changing nature of Ukaigwe's work. Strict rules ascribed to certain media fall away, and what is left in their place is a freedom to convey rich interactions between artist and subject, artist and experience, past and future.

For "Locutions," the normally white walls of the gallery have been painted an intense shade of cobalt blue. As though I have been swept away by a tide into the exhibition, "Locutions" transports me into a rich world of audio and visual intrigue that envelops the senses. Voices of Ukaigwe's friends and family ebb and flow against the sound of distant jazz music. Clips of documentaries course through the air, refracting off the surface of ceramic vessels placed throughout the exhibition. With each step I take into the gallery, I notice changes taking place—nothing is static.

Throughout Ukaigwe's work, he investigates notions of identity, from the macro—concerning the implication of place, class, and status—to the micro, which often deals with intimate personal connections. He looks to his community of fellow creatives, friends, and family members to help ground complex notions of identity, creating space for a multitude of voices to be heard.

In "Locutions," a series of ceramic vessels—*Untitled (Turnover)* (2022)—lean rather precariously along the wall, held up only by a few wooden dowels and metal rods. The positioning of the vessels is almost rhythmic. They flow in a pattern reminiscent of melodies composed across a sheet of music. This fluid ornamentation, coupled with Ukaigwe's use of solid blocks of color, is reminiscent of modernist painting customs, a nod to the rich history behind ceramic's ascent as an artist's medium. The black and yellow vessels originate from Ukaigwe's memories of the never-ending flow of buses along the streets of his childhood home in Lagos. Ukaigwe reflects on this endless parade of buses as a representation of dynamic social interactions, in which travellers interact with one another as they make their way around the city, their experiences shaped by their encounters with each other. The buses can also be viewed as an acknowledgment of the overarching structures that govern everyday life—as Ukaigwe describes, the bus fare fluctuates based on economic or political shifts.

Beyond the colouring of the vessels, Ukaigwe also considers the reductive connotations of ceramics as women's work or as a solely utilitarian medium. Ukaigwe subverts these notions by physically turning the pots upside down and arranging them in a skewed formation, bound by a layer of burlap. The rough burlap beneath each piece acts as an inexpensive, utilitarian pedestal that elevates each vessel. This framing nods to those responsible for the creation of similar vessels throughout history; it makes a monument to these hand-crafters and their loving work.

**Page 52:** Chukwudubem Ukaigwe. *Untitled (Verso)*. 2022. Ceramics, sound, wood. Photographer: Size is variable. Mika Abbott. Image courtesy: Neutral Ground Artist Run Centre.



Chukwudubem Ukaigwe. *Locutions installation view*. 2023. Ceramics, sound, cinder blocks. Size is variable. Photographer: Mika Abbott. Image courtesy: Neutral Ground Artist Run Centre.

**Page 56, top:** Chukwudubem Ukaigwe. *Untitled (Linesman)*. 2023. Ceramics, sound, cinder blocks. Size is variable. Photographer: Mika Abbott. Image courtesy: Neutral Ground Artist Run Centre.

**Page 56, bottom:** Chukwudubem Ukaigwe. *Untitled (Commercial Garden)*. 2023. Wood, sound, plant garden. Size is variable. Photographer: Mika Abbott. Image courtesy: Neutral Ground Artist Run Centre.

**Page 57, top:** Chukwudubem Ukaigwe. *Untitled (Performing Library)*. 2023. Books, sound, organ, ceramics. Size is variable. Photographer: Mika Abbott. Image courtesy: Neutral Ground Artist Run Centre.

**Page 57, bottom:** Chukwudubem Ukaigwe. *Untitled (Turnover)*. 2022. Ceramics, aluminum, wood, burlap, gravel. Size is variable. Photographer: Mika Abbott. Image courtesy: Neutral Ground Artist Run Centre.

Aspects of shared authorship permeate Ukaigwe's practice. To investigate the relationship between self and collective identity, Ukaigwe calls upon his community for *Untitled (Moulding Identities)* (2022). This series of projected videos consists of short clips depicting people as they perform everyday activities such as journaling, praying, or crocheting. Through these small but intimate glimpses into the lives of many, Ukaigwe asks: How do we define identity? What makes us who we are? Is it our status, our race, our cultural background? Is it who we surround ourselves with? Or are we made up of the small, seemingly mundane activities we perform effortlessly day in and day out?

There is something underneath the surface of these seemingly mundane acts: a sense of autonomy to be achieved through the mundane. Even the smallest acts of care take time, sacrifices necessary for nurturing ourselves and those around us. All these little things come together to make us who we are and govern how we show up for those we love. Taken together, each shot in Ukaigwe's videos forms a quilt of people going about their own lives simultaneously, and while each shot records a solo act, here all participants are side by side in time, and a holistic sense of humanity emerges.

Agency and multiplicity of authorship is also crucial to *Time Off* (2022), a video depicting swimmers freely flowing through the water, intermittently diving below, and breaking the surface. Layered over the video is audio recorded from a 2018 jam session by friends of Ukaigwe, who were partaking in a jazz program at the time. Thoughts of ritual and gathering begin to rise to the surface, much like the swimmers coming up for sips of air. Ukaigwe's video was inspired by his once-standing Thursday night ritual of meeting a close friend at a local swimming pool. Ukaigwe reflects on this time of comradery and refuge from the pressures of everyday life as an act of defiance against societal expectations placed upon young Black men. The music from the jam session underlines this sense of nourishment through community support. The feeling of being seen and supported flows through both the audio and visual elements.

Just like the free-flowing water of the pool, jam sessions are not structured. Artists are free to try new things while also giving space for their peers to do the same. Sound as a fluid mode of expression permeates Ukaigwe's practice. Audio from bustling streets, the voices of family members, and organ music act as reminders of Lagos, while interspersed Jazz and Blues rhythms and endless stacks of books lend moments of recognition to the work of western writers such as bell hooks and Audre Lorde who have influenced culture greatly, thus resulting in a transatlantic flow of creative influences. Creativity, expression, and sharing with others are a form of nourishment for Ukaigwe. "Locutions" identifies the sense of reciprocity and nurturing found within a strong community, whether that be a room full of musicians or a single swimming partner.

In slight contrast to the effortless ease of *Time Off*, *Igba* (2019) interrogates notions of gender performance through the interaction of nine young Black men. Ukaigwe invited these men to his studio, a highly curated, tailored, and ultimately foreign environment where they were asked to partially undress and then move about the space in response to abstract melodies. Rigid and strained movements, embodying discomfort or fear, gave way to fluidity as the men became more comfortable around each other. The tension slowly melted away as the men joked with one another and formed a sense of comradery. *Igba* acts as a rich exploration of movement, relation, masculinity, and Blackness as the participants let go of gendered and racialized expectations and display a yearning to freely express themselves.

In the centre of the exhibition at Neutral Ground sits a large wooden bed frame with a sea of plants sprouting from it. This bed of leaves also emits audio of Nigerian television advertisements from Ukaigwe's youth, inspiring a sense of nostalgia and familiarity. Other elements of the exhibition have a focus on external relationships, but *Untitled (Commercial Garden)* (2023) acts as a refuge, a place of grounding within the exhibition that gestures towards rest and rejuvenation. The living nature of the plants reminds us of the need to nurture ourselves as well as those around us, in order to thrive. Ukaigwe often returns to the technique of incorporating elements of the domestic into his exhibitions. In *Coltrane's Leap* (2022-2023), for example, armchairs face one another in a warmly lit nook with a selection of books sourced from the artist's personal library. Using domestic furniture to facilitate reading and viewing experiences creates a welcoming space in Ukaigwe's work and parallels his work beyond the gallery as a community facilitator, where he readily offers up his library as a source of inspiration, learning and nourishment. The importance of acknowledging the past to continue growth is ever-present in Ukaigwe's work, and this is no exception. *Untitled (Commercial Garden)* is a sanctuary of sorts. At the centre of an exhibition's sea of motion, where elements flow, moving together and apart, we are offered a moment of calm.

While audio and video loop, and motifs around kinship, healing, music, and the rhythms of life recur across his practice, Ukaigwe's work is anything but repetitive. At Neutral Ground, each step into the gallery reveals a new layer to the complexities under the surface of identity, community, and relationships—and this is true across the artist's practice more broadly. Ukaigwe examines complex social structures through an empathetic lens that is both insatiably curious and persistently community-minded. Ukaigwe's practice uplifts those around him while also sharing an intimate piece of himself. **BF**

*Sage Wosminity is an emerging art writer and curator from Regina, Saskatchewan, located on Treaty 4 Territory. Sage has recently graduated from the University of Regina, completing a Bachelor of Arts with great distinction in Art History. Sage has worked as a gallery assistant and co-ordinator for many years and is extremely passionate about supporting local artists.*



