

Counting the Uncounted—Highlights from Ekene Ijeoma: Poetic Justice



By Jose Rolando
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Data science and visualization have garnered much interest in academic and professional fields, and 'big data' and 'algorithms' entering everyday conversations is the most striking sign of that change. Events over the past several years—such as elections and world records—have shown us that even the slightest manipulation of numbers in a data set expresses very different results from what data collectors expect. Even infrequent bursts of activity on social media websites will yield enough data for algorithms to analyze, allowing corporations to imagine identities based on a small set of numbers. A change in those numbers can (and has) similarly mean a lot in real life. Though an emerging new application of data science is still another extraction of the meaning that belies our life in and as influenced by numbers. A person at the forefront of this new application, Ekene Ijeoma, presents his data in expressive and eye-opening ways.

"I'm interested in the different ways of knowing and being and seeing," says Ijeoma, assistant professor at the MIT Media Lab and co-founder of the institute's Poetic Justice group. A data science artist, Ijeoma has spent his creative work exposing injustices and healing those who have suffered from trauma as a result of those injustices. This specific trauma is often brought on by systemic violence and discrimination against people of color in the United States, a theme explored in many of his works. The artist works across a wide variety of media, from public art installations like *Breathing Pavilion* (starting in 2021), to live performances like *Deconstructed Anthems* (starting in 2017), and even phone calls like *A Counting* (starting in 2019). No matter how he does it, Ijeoma shows us what has been lost, what is still being lost, and more importantly, how those affected understand the loss they experience.

"So a lot of times, I'm thinking about life experiences when I'm making [my] work," says Ijeoma during his lecture for the CCA Design Lecture Series on February 1st, "and thinking about data and thinking about ways to sort of bridge the gap between them." Ijeoma continues, saying that he bridges the gap between life experiences and data in his practice through representation, where he develops language to address an issue, and intervention, where he gives people the information necessary to create change in the space where the issue occurs. The artist is thus no stranger to making his own tools to express his themes and make his vision come alive—this gives his work a strong sense of humanity, warmth, and character despite their occupation with numbers. Though typically considered cold, inanimate, and expressionless, numbers indicate that at some point in time, a change was observed. Ijeoma conveys this in his art.

This is seen in the 2018 Kennedy Center performance of *Deconstructed Anthems* by the Betty Carter's Jazz Ahead Alumni Trio. As the trio performs "The Star-Spangled Banner," trumpeter Victor Haskins notices notes disappear as the anthem repeats. Andrew Randazzo, on contrabass, loses his bassline, and finally, Amy K. Bormet on piano no longer has keys to play. The artist says, for "every city that it's performed in, I generate a new composition," and in this *Anthems* performance, notes are taken away as the rate of incarcerations in Washington, D.C. increases. Ijeoma says that he is "enacting the system of incarceration on the anthem," this system having disproportionately harmed Black and Brown populations across America. In *Anthems'* latest rendition, Ijeoma rigs a piano to hold down keys mid-song. The silence creeping in represents lives cut short by mass imprisonment, while the song being played represents living life despite this risk.

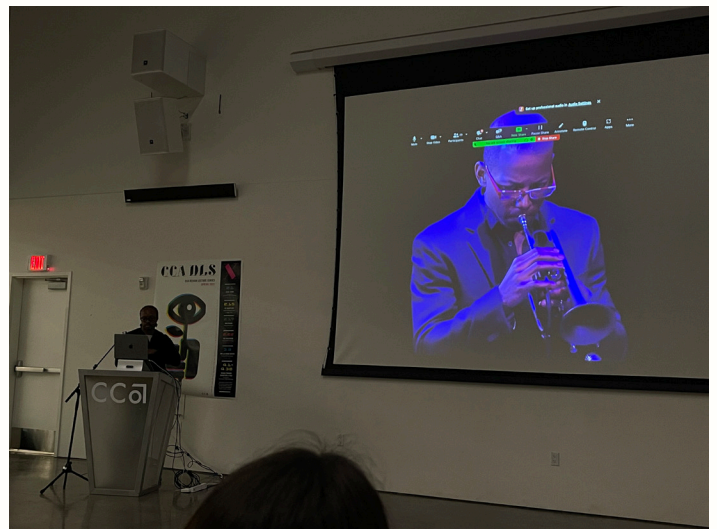
In *Deconstructed*, the artist was inspired by Colin Kaepernick's kneeling protest against police brutality as "The Star-Spangled Banner" played during a National Football League game. His next work was also informed by the oppression of non-white communities, but this time, in US government-conducted censuses. In this work, *A Counting: A Multilingual Portrait of the United States*, Ijeoma uses city-specific public phone numbers to record participants counting from one to 100 in their native languages. In *Counting*, each city-specific count begins with a language indigenous to the city, Indigenous Peoples historically left uncounted by the US government. The NYC *Counting* thus begins with kweti or 'one' in Lenape, a language indigenous to New York City. NYC yielded "over 150 languages in all," says Ijeoma. Additional versions of *Counting* composed of one to 100 spoken in languages indigenous to the US and photographs of sign language in lieu of audio are under production.

Though the artist's use of digital media, city populations, live performers, instruments, and installations can lead one to imagine that he makes great plans for each work, Ijeoma says that much of it relies on meditating and improvising. It "exists" at scale but is also tied to the community experiencing what he creates. As such, Ijeoma needs his work to "be public, interactive, community-driven, multi-site, and networked." Still, reaching the widest possible demographic isn't enough. Viewers of the artist's work aren't merely viewers, but instead, become active participants as the work breathes and comes alive. Engaging with a living work encourages participants to develop an understanding (or in some cases deepen their own) of the lived experience the artist tries to convey, together. In that sense, Ijeoma strives to bring people

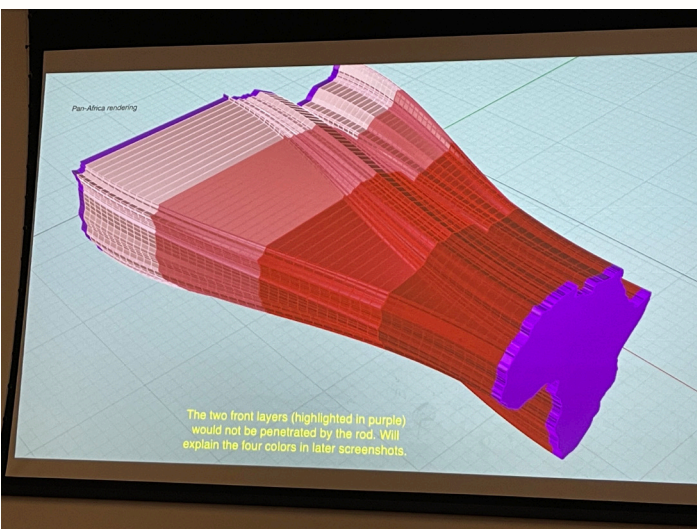
together through data rather than drive them apart and harm people as data has done in the past.

The artist's newest project, and the centerpiece of the night, *Black Forest*, does just that. Ijeoma discusses the nature of the logo's typeface, based on hand signs taken from what he calls "the Black vernacular." This invites young Black Americans who use these hand signs to speculate and discuss the nature of the work—a tree-planting event celebrating the lives of Black Americans who died due to COVID-19. The first *Black Forest* event was held in the town of Melvindale, a suburb of Detroit, MI, intended as a pilot for the rest of the work. "We worked with a group of organizers who went door-to-door and did street canvassing," says Ijeoma, to collect names of Black American COVID-19 deaths in each locale. The artist ends his talk with a video documenting one such participant who commemorates the passing of her mother by planting a tree as a part of Black Forest.

Though the artist says that his work doesn't usually have a common set of production pipelines or materials, Ijeoma ultimately defines his creative process for every single piece as "looking at what poetic justice means in graphic design, and as a conceptual artist, it's about the collapsing of form and content." Ijeoma then summarizes his process as "the physical thing is the work," at least for *Black Forest*, but this holds true for all of his other pieces because of their highly participatory, "multiplayer" approach. As such, Ijeoma's work comes alive as participants come together and recognize not just the events quantified, but also the person that lied or still lies beneath the number by interacting with the art. People then begin to see clusters of data points transform into individual lived experiences through Ijeoma's work. Poetic justice thus occurs when we see those who were, long ago, made invisible.



All photos courtesy of Jose Rolando Rojas



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