

Waste-To-Art Practice and the Need for Cultural Specificity in the Works Production

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Abstract

The evolution of culture is a continuum, and as culture develops, the modus operandi of the people is modified in all ramifications to align with the prevailing development of the citizens in the society. There would always be introduction of new ways of life as adopted from other cultures, because man as a gregarious creature would always interact. But, when an innovation is exotic and incomprehensible in a given cultural certain, it hinders its acceptance as well as adoption. This paper seeks to highlight the imperativeness of waste-to-art practice in Nigeria, but further addresses the extraneous approaches that would frustrate effective appreciation of its products. There would be examination of some waste-to-art products in Nigeria to ascertain their level of acceptance, appreciation and patronage within the country. Besides, there would be review of relevant catalogues, journals and textbooks. It was found out that when works are congruent to a given societal expectation, it facilitates profuse appreciation, and encourages patronage.

Introduction

Nigerian artists and indeed Africans have of recent embraced the utilization of waste materials in the production of fascinating works of art. Their use of wastes as media of expression is not peculiar because it is currently in vogue worldwide. But, it is of utmost importance that artistic creativity is made relevant to its place of production. When the products of art are comprehensible, congruent and applicable to a specific race's situation, it galvanizes appreciation and induces effective patronage and vice versa.

Contextualizing Waste into Works of Art an Exclusive Reserve for the Artists Endowed with the Knack of Creativity

El Anatsui, one of the most renowned artists in the world who has tremendously explored waste in his ingenious artistic creation, opined that "even the garbage has its own beauty" (Adewunmi, 2005:1). The groundbreaking creative revelation which discarded objects can offer is quite incredible. It is equivalent to the rejected stone which later turned to be the most valuable among all as Jesus stipulated in one of his biblical exegeses. Wastes are contemptuously handled by many except very few creatively endowed individuals who can see beyond the ordinary. Obeagu (2007:24) posits that "the ability to discover an object that has been thrown away or abandoned by nature demands both physical and spiritual activities which require insight." This fact is corroborated by Odoh, et al (2014:12) who aver that "transforming waste and found objects to works of art imbued with new meaning, value and function requires a fertile imagination and a great deal of artistic freedom." The most impressive aspect of waste-to-art practice is the manner it embraces creativity and enterprise (Nzewi, 2008:5). Based on numerous impressive attribute of

waste-to-art practice, many artists worldwide have engaged in its creative enterprise. Asogwa et al, (2013:1) highlight that multitudinous artists worldwide have recently creatively explored waste materials and that has attracted the attention of art historians and critics. Waste transmutation into works of art exemplifies the enormous power of the human imagination, and also showcases the inherent creative potentials that such materials possess, (Odoh et al, 2014:1).

It is quite obvious that any creative adventure demands transcending beyond the limited realm, which the physical qualities of the medium to be used, present before the artist. Ikenegbu (2007:7) is of the view that “creative or artistic imagination involves going beyond what is given, the voluntary generation of some symbolic supplement to our modification of the actual.” He further highlights that “the artist sees more than what is generally perceptible, and symbolizes his vision that others may share it.” The waste-to-art practitioners should engage themselves in creation of works that are relevant and congruent to the environment where their creation is taking place. That will create room for better understanding of the works, promote appreciation and galvanize patronage.

The Importance of the Consideration of Societal Wants in Conversion of Wastes to Works of Art

Wastes as media of artistic expression have been employed beneficially by the artists in different societies in solving numerous human social, political, economic, religious and educational challenges. Obeagu (2007:23) highlights that “in contemplating issues in his society, for example, politics, culture, religion, fashion, globalization, ethnicity and gender, among others, the artist can, with discarded materials, provide bases for dialogue and debate about art and life.” Art has always been a viable means of raising, dialoguing and resolving cultural matters. Alleva (2012:65) states that “as a scholar one needs to retain a sense of historical and cultural specificity in relation to the works of art one is studying.”¹⁰ Cultures vary and their world views are highly diversified. Works of art emanating from a specific cultural zone are supposed to be unique visual documents expressing issues as they relate to the people’s socio-cultural activities. That is to say that, there is neither one tradition nor one modernism, but multiple of them according to different races.

Foucault (1982:21) posits that history designate our enquiring about who we are with regard to our awareness; searching into the political forces that determine our culture and the unique ethnical choices we make which direct our social relationship. The effective understanding of ourselves, what we are, where we are, issues confronting us and what we ought to be, influence our artistic productivity to a very large extent. Works of art are not mimetic, they are not a way of capturing the exact characteristics of the real world; instead, artworks are value-laden interpretations of the world which differ from culture to culture and period to period (Moxey, 1994).

Contrarily, Focillon (1982:21) refutes cultural specificity of works of art arguing that politics, religious, economic and social conditions are apparently irrelevant in shaping artistic creation.¹³ Focillon’s proposition is questionable for works of art are not created in a vacuum, but are meant to solve related human problems, which may be political, social, economic and/or religious. Alleva (2012:46) postulates that “art is widely seen as affecting and being affected by religion, politics,

social structures and hierarchies, cultural practices, tradition and intellectual currents.” A reputable Germany philosopher, Ernst Cassirer (1953:96), is of the view that works of art are allegorical fundamental principles encompassing symbolic values in a given culture, in the sense that we can visualize artworks as religious, philosophical, social or economic related issues as documented by the artist. Similarly, Araeen (2010:280) enjoins that “it is important not to separate the discourse of art from the overall social conditions that are fundamental to the production.” Ottenberg (2006:219) wrote about Obiora Udechukwu and his works of art produced after Nigeria/Biafra War, stating that “the developing contemporary Nigerian art drew on tradition, war time experience, and postwar Nigerian life.” So, it is incontestable that works of art are always being shaped by the happenings in a given geographical zone. The art of waste transformation should be channeled in line with the societal expectations in order to guarantee a prospective sustainability.

Besides, Alleva (2012:35) posits that ‘every utterance exists in space and time; it is produced by a speaker (sender) and sent to a listener (receiver) in a particular context that brings them together.’ Likewise, every artwork is created in a particular place and in a specific period. It is create by an artist and presented to the viewer who is expected to understand and appreciate the work, for the symbolism applied by the artist is supposed to be one that is culturally congruent. It is an effort in futility for one to speak to another in a language that is not shared by both of them, for no communication will take place. In like manner, when an artist produces works of art that are very exotic and incomprehensible by the people of his immediate environment, such an artist should expect neither appreciation nor patronage. He will end up being the sole consumer of his products.

Ellis Erimona was cited by Odiboh (2015:33) where he states that “modern art is impervious to socio-religious aspirations, and Nigerian art should be no exception.”¹⁹ Erimona’s view strives to homogenize the entire world’s art modernism. There is no one normative modern art which epitomizes what all others should follow as a standard. Different parts of the globe operate discrete cultural norms. As far as cultures remain heterogeneous, waste-to-art practice as an aspect of the modern art of the whole world cannot be unified. Waste-to-art creation in Nigeria should be useful in Nigerian context and not ignoring all the happenings in the country in order to align itself to the ostensible global modernism. When modern art in Nigeria addresses Nigerian issues, it will not be indecipherable to the general public and the chances of effective appreciation will be high. When there is effective appreciation, it increases sales opportunity. Udenta (2008:30) states that “artworks speak for themselves, and therefore should have the capacity to generate and attract more audience, more views, more comments and invariably more value.” Marx’s idea of commodity fetishism expresses that the value of products in a capitalist’s state is measured by their financial worth (Lukacs, 1971:83). Besides, Nicodemus (2013:20) highlights that “in the era of modern African Art, artists were supposed to produce works for an art market and an initiated audience.” She however laments and regrets the sluggish pace of viable art market development in Africa. Sequel to the aforementioned situation, she highlights that “African modern artists, those who have not gone abroad, have worked within limited and weak cultural structures and mostly been obliged to rely on benevolent foreign expatriates and embassy personnel as their patrons.” It is extremely imperative to point out the fact that ‘weak cultural structures’ as stated by

Everlyn Nicodemus is a consciously perpetrated influence by the colonial masters. It is one of their ideal ways of perpetuating neo-colonialism, for subjugating other cultures helps them to remain as world power.

The cultural specificity of indigenous artistic creativity should remain paramount in waste-to-art practice until its products entice the public towards its patronage. Nzewi (2008:6) states that “the contemporary understanding of art as luxury that is only affordable to the bourgeoisie negates the central role art played in African traditional society.” In the traditional era, works of art were appropriately channeled in accordance with societal wants. Sequel to that, patronage was guaranteed, for people could not do without the produced art objects.

The Challenges of External Influences in the Production of Works of Art

But, the colonial masters came, stereotyped African art as primitive and contemptuously devalued it. They went ahead and dictated to us what our art should be and we fell prey to their slavish trap. Thenceforth, most of the art practices in Africa have been emulating them, which make the end products to be incongruous to the societal wants and therefore lost appreciation cum patronage.

If waste-to-art contextualization will be sustained, it must not follow the same trend of holistically adopting an alien artistic ideology that majority cannot decipher. Such prejudicial adoption hinders sales for no one buys what one does not need. “A collector would prefer a work of art that has appreciable value and the beholder desires a piece he must treasure” (Udenta, 2008:31). Ikwuemesi (2005:13) asserts that “it is to the African themselves that the blame returns as regards the sorry state of art...in the continent, for the inaction of a group, only shores up the action of others.”

African artists must strive to shatter all the yokes militating against the development of art in the continent. Art is a lucrative discipline; it is entrepreneurial in nature and it guarantees self-reliance. The onus of artistic liberation lies in the hands of the artists of African origin both those at home and the diaspora. hooks (lower case used on purpose) (1994) asserts that when ordinary people who possess no authority courageously ventilate their views and stand by it, a revolutionary gesture is made. African artists have to unite, in order to build functional domestic art market, despite all odds. Unless this is done, art in general not only waste-to-art practice in the continent will never achieve professional independence. If the success of African practicing artists depends on the benevolence of the West, we will perpetually remain their slaves. No doubt, a slave must be obedient to his master or face severe sanction. African artists must strive to develop an identity that is pertinent to our culture, despite the influence of other alien cultures. Ezenwa (2015:xi) states that “Nigerian artists having been trained in the methods and styles of European art, at one time, had to cope with an identity challenge.”

Fortunately, this issue had been perfectly handled before by the Zaria Art Society. Ghariokwu (2015:4) proclaims that “the Zaria Rebels, as they were often called, laid the foundation of contemporary art in Nigeria... They were aware that they should not deny their African root.” But currently, that laudable statuesque seems to have been abandoned. That is because another culture is beating the drum which African artists are dancing to its rhythm blindfolded, owing to financial enticement.

Ikwuemesi (2005:9) laments that “like the socio-political terrain, African art is in conflict, with itself, a conflict engendered largely by both internal and external factors.” Similarly, Rasheed Araeen as cited by Smalligan (2010:263) regrets that

it has not been easy for modern African artist. First they faced the conditions of colonialism and then, after independence the legacy of colonialism lack of modern support structures or institution within Africa, and when they migrated to the west, they faced the institution that still perceived them as ‘primitives’ or the ‘other’ if they defied this perception they were ignored and written out of history.... Every African artists who defied the colonial predetermination of their subjectivities and what they were expected to produce as art had faced the same fate.

So, “any African artists who produce anything other than what the West considers to be legitimate African art are destined to be forgotten” (Smalligan, 2010:263). Again, Araeen (2010:284) states that “for Europe, Africa has always been, and still is, its Other, its suppressed unconscious, the land of savages and primitives frozen in a state of blissful innocence.” Europe had always stereotyped other cultures in accordance with its own perception (Kawaguchi, 2005:4). The attitude of creating a single story about other cultures in a subjective manner and the usage of all possible means to intimidate the weaker cultures into adopting any of their approved normative views are inherent in the West.

Waste-to-Art as an Innovation and the Possibility of Its Acceptance within Nigerian Society

There is no doubt that challenges are bound to occur when one engages in such an innovative enterprise like waste-to-art Practice. Conversion of wastes to works of art is not a common practice on this side of the globe. Though there is nothing wrong in the utilization of waste objects for artistic creativity, but the end products have to be related to what are expected within the vicinity. Ojobor (2008:10) highlights that “when foresighted people are involved in groundbreaking, development-oriented programmes like waste-to-art, they are bound to meet hurdles and experience problems.” But, Anidi (2007:20) opines that “man as a product of the environment, adjust to the reality and dynamics of change in the society.” That is to say that if waste-to-art products are designed to suit the current situation of Nigerian society, it would definitely be accepted, even though the practice is new in the locality. Rogers and Shoemaker (1971) state that people’s acceptance of any innovation is dependent on its compatibility with what are obtainable within the culture. It is clear that “Innovations usually bring changes to the social systems into which they are introduced” (Ojobor, 2008:9). Therefore, if such change is incongruous, within the vicinity where it is introduced, it risks being ignored, rejected or abandoned.

African artists should realize that works of art are invaluable treasures that inevitably attract economic buoyancy, if designed to be indispensable in the society. Marx and Engels (1976:394) posit that works of art are not indecipherable objects

produced by mythic geniuses but are reliable sources of income generation. The ugly situation of art profession in Africa, where artists cannot depend on the income generated from their products for sustenance, is quite disheartening and needs to be thoroughly examined for possible redemption. Ottenberg (2006:218) regrets that “only a few extremely well-established Nigerian artists... have been able to live solely through selling their art.” Similarly, Ikwuemesi (2005:10) states that “the successful artists in African are those who have penetrated the highly-policed walls of the Western market.” The West’s selective sponsorship and patronage is craftily designed for the actualization of their unabated hegemony and unyielding neo-colonization. Nigerian waste-to-art practitioners should be astute in their production in order to curb this ugly trend. There would not be any better means of generating fund through waste-to-art practice more than producing saleable works and adopting strategies that would enable the targeted audience access the works in order to facilitate patronage.

Onyishi (2006:2) posits that the practice of waste-to-art goes beyond inspiring artists to be creative ... to focusing on how to turn wastes into wealth and how to draw the attention of the public to waste management.” If these objectives remain the driving force of waste-to-art practice, its production would be streamlined in order to attain financial viability. If the intrusion of the West and their dictation of what should be produced and what should not is not checkmated, the worst case scenario of the practice becoming defunct may soon become a reality. Nzewi (2008:6) points out that “waste-to-art practice provides a framework for the artist to be creatively and entrepreneurially engaged.” Nzewi’s proposition should remain a watchword to the operation of waste-to-art activities.

Globalization: A Bane or a Boom

It is this same prejudicial approach to transnational matters that the West has entrenched in globalization arena. Orimolede (2015:20) states that “the effect globalization has had on cultural identity is immense and diverse in that it has affected people’s cultural behaviour in different ways, and influenced how they live their lives.” He goes further to highlight that “globalization has been of much benefit to intercultural relations and collaborations, but it does have its drawbacks in the view of proffering the ideology of a possible singularly ubiquitous yardstick for all cultural ideologies.” So, it is advisable that Nigerian waste-to-art practitioners thread with caution while embracing globalization ideology. It should be adopting only what is positive to Africa’s unique identity and should boldly jettison all ideologies that are prejudicial.

On the other hand, Ellis Erimona as quoted by Odiboh (2015:33) is of the view that “it is obvious that the world is fast becoming a close-knit community with mergers of the several smaller entities into large complex wholes, and art has not been left out.” He further states that “Nigeria-and indeed Africa-is in need of an art that addresses positive programmes, which align with the modern world. There is a desperate need for an art which can speak across borders for addressing a future man and society in which the diverse complexities of present national identities can be distilled.” It is erroneously deceptive to dwell in the illusion that globalization will ever unite the entire cultures of the world to become one inseparable structure. What determines the level of freedom of participation any culture has in the world art

mainstream is how viable their cultural art is. Any culture that is dependent on Western patronage for the survival of her art practice can only speak when she is told to and must utter the exact words that is expected of her to say no matter how globalized the world becomes. The West can never willingly tolerate any of the Others as equals. Creation of a sustainable viable domestic market, which guarantees artistic independence, is the only way to achieve freedom of self-expression. Ikwuemesi (2005:10) asserts that

today, art is perhaps a major tool for neo-colonization in the emergent cultural monologue known as globalization.... Cashing in mainly on the lack of patronage and the little economic value placed on art in Africa and coupled with its own hegemonic desire, the West became from the 1960s – but particularly from the 1980s – the chief judge and advocate of African art.

Conclusion

The waste-to-art practice is a welcome development in Nigeria. But, its practitioners should focus attention in studying the domestic needs of Nigerians to enable its end products to be useful to the people. If this is meticulously handled, it will create room for better appreciation and will also encourage patronage. Positive exotic ideologies should be harnessed and integrated into their skilful production, while all extraneous ideas should be avoided.

The target of the practitioners should be that of production of works which meet the 21st century's world class artistic standard. But structurally, the products have to be made very relevant to African artistic ideology. If these steps are taken seriously, the acceptance of waste-to-art products and its sustenance will surely remain feasible and will soon be attained.

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