Nigerian Contemporary Art in the 21st Century: Visual (New Media) Culture and its impact

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Abstract

Culture as the totality of a people's way of life has transcended beyond the borders of one's ethnographic territory to the numerous evolving cultures of the world as made possible through the media, most precisely, the social media. In the 20th century Nigeria, artists in the quest for nationalism have produced works greatly inspired by the Pan-African and negritude movement. However, as independence and democracy have both been long achieved, Nigerian artists have moved on from the main motive of activism to other objectives. Nevertheless, the impact of visual culture in African art, with utmost precision to 21st-century, Nigerian art has largely been discussed by art historians, critics and art cravers all over the world. Some contemporary Nigerian artists have begun experimentations on New media. Many of them have not necessarily crossed the shores of Nigeria, but they have been heavily influenced by social media which is a reflection of various cultures of the world. This paper addresses how visual culture has inadvertently influenced our artistic expressions and objectives in Nigeria. This has become more accurate with time, events and record-keeping as largely reflected in the subject matter of the Nigerian art, with signs and symbols replicated in their creative works. This paper attempts to broaden the knowledge, perception and appreciation of Nigerian contemporary art in the 21st Century as not being just mere pictures but conceptual documents triggered by visual culture and has as a result, have become of visual and contemporary significance.

Introduction

While the whole world and Nigeria precisely, was still recovering from the shocking wave of the COVID19 pandemic and its accompanying economic recession, others were deeply entangled with the mouth-watering hard and crypto currencies they were doling out from a digital world whose appreciation skyrocketed as a result of the global lockdown. The social media went agog in the June/July of this year, 2021 when it was garnered that Prince Osinachi Jacob sold $75,000 worth of NFTs in 10 days. Non-Fungible Tokens (NFTs) are pieces of digital content linked to a block-chain, a digital database for crypto currencies such as bitcoin and Ethereum. Unlike crypto currencies which are fungible (replaceable and exchangeable), NFTs cannot be mutually exchanged or interchanged for one another, giving them scarcity value and worth. Osinachi is not a professionally trained artist. He is like any other person whose hobby is an art of some sort. He studied library science in the prestigious University of Nigeria, Nsukka, but had been painting leisurely with Microsoft word as

pastime. This unpopular use of New media has suddenly become the talk of the world, most especially for the creatives who are still very much obnoxious, ignorant and blind to the digital world. It only explains one thing. The world has evolved. Society changes, and as it changes, so do the demands and aspirations of members. Art and culture, which are major components of life itself has evolved too. The question here is, to what extent has the Nigerian contemporary art succeeded in meeting the needs of the changing society? How far gone are we in this ladder and how much farther left behind are we? This paper attempts to answer these questions, by looking at the trend of the development of art in Nigeria, most especially, as it begins to question the relevance of an art education and acknowledgment of galleries, when anyone who can create and successfully sell an exorbitant piece of art beyond these borders, can now be tagged a "valuable artist."

Historical Precedence

Art is as old as man. Any form of creativity is art. Man has been creating since time immemorial: from the shamans in the caves to the modern man and we have always resorted to any medium within our reach in any age. Our art evolved as we did from the cave walls, to our hut walls, down to our bodies, clothes and canvases. When technology came, we embraced it too. We use computers and mobile devices to make art. Our insatiable wants keep leading us to newer forms of expressions. New Media has been there, but probably not the same way as we perceive it today. They are not as novella as the trend makes them appear as there is absolutely nothing new under the sun. Judging from the recorded histories of visual art, silver-haired celebrity and culture hero, Andy Warhol--promoter of the Brillo box, the Campbell's soup can, and the instant photographic silk-screened portrait, producer of voyeuristic movies and superstars may have been a major proponent/ progenitor of New Medias seen from his digital paintings of icons like Debbie Harry, Marilyn Monroe and Campbell's soup cans. Interestingly, his earliest digital paintings were produced as far back as 1985. Meanwhile, somewhere in Africa in the 19ᵗʰ century around 1895, Western forms of art made their first informal appearance through a then young student, Aina Onabolu (b. 1882), the grand patriarch of Nigerian Modern art. He was fascinated with the Western conceptions of art at the time and was hell-bent on debunking the myth that "there is one barrier he (an African) cannot surmount, one door he is unable to open; that in the sphere of art (Western type) he is not capable of reaching even a moderate degree of proficiency" (Onabolu, 1920). And conquer, he did! As he went on to successfully own his western form of art in 1953 with the establishment of the Department of Fine Arts at the Ibadan campus of the Nigerian College of Arts, Sciences and Technology (NCAST), Zaria, which was later transferred back to Zaria. Moreso, with his help and that of Kenneth C. Murray, an art department of the Yaba Technical Institute, now Yaba College of Technology was established in 1952 to render 'in service training for graphic artists in different departments' that saw the need to employ artists to aid their expanding functions.(Fasuyi, 1973). It is worthy to mention that computers were owned by affluent few and big government parastatals after its introduction in 1963 by IBM (International Business Machine) for the African Education Centre at the University of Ibadan, basically for the analysis of the 1962/63 national census. Hence, digital art was never taught in Nigerian schools apart from

the graphic students who were taught the basics after the gradual influx and commonization of personal computers.

Now, New Media as we see it, does not reconstruct history, but it engages with a present moment that is enmeshed with signifiers of the past. In this present time, with the broadening of New media, every human being is an artist (Joseph Beuys). Through participatory cultures and media literacy, we no longer have to wait for an art degree to certify us a professional artist or for a gallery to pick us up and consider us to be valuable.

Visual (New Media) Culture

For the scope of this study, I will describe *Contemporaneity* as a transversal concept found on all five continents of the world, much more far superior to modernity as it does not belong to any given tendency, while I situate Visual Culture as that aspect of culture expressed in visual images like the social media, television and the internet, leading to cultural assimilation of different tribes and nations of the world. I employ the use of Nigerian Art here to address all art done within and outside the borders of Nigeria by Nigerians. Chika Okeke (1997) describes Nigerian Art as "…the summation of the ever-changing experience of the masquerades". The "masquerades" being the diverse tribes and cultures in the entity called Nigeria. The various mediums of visual culture have interchangeably exchanged the different cultures of the world to make it globally one. As television, personal computers, smart phones and the internet came to dominate the twentieth (20th) century life, a new category of art emerged and met these advancements with a spirit of curiosity and critique. This category is termed "New Media". It is expansive and broad and continues to evolve in tandem with the exponential growth of the technologies we experience today. New media can be seen more like a fundamental shift in tools, mediums and subjects available to the artists, resulting in new modes of creating and interacting with art. It can also be seen as the use of technology as a means to an end, whereby digital tools are used to create a static image such as experimental photo collages. New media is the new possibilities of art and technology and an ever-expanding frontier that artists of varied mediums and backgrounds can approach. As in the case of Africa's foremost crypto artist- Osinachi Igwe, a new generation of 21st century innovative Nigerian artists, the likes of Chigozie Obi and Alexis Tsegba amongst many others who have emerged. They think work of the older generation to be insufficiently energetic for the challenge of the new Nigeria. (Oloidi, 2000). Chigozie Obi (b.1997) is Lagos based multi-dimensional artist who obtained a bachelors degree of Visual Arts from the Creative Arts department, University of Lagos, Lagos State, Nigeria in 2017. Her multi-media works tell captivating stories of Black people. On the side of the divide is the Benue State London-based female artist, Alexis Tsegba, who despite studying Law in the University of Reading, completed her Masters in Creative and Media Enterprise from the University of Warwick where she discovered her infinite artistic possibilities. She explores afro futuristic themes in her oeuvres. These modern Nigerian artists, who may be politicians, medical personnel, administrative figures, school drop-outs, legal practitioners, historians, architects, teachers, critics and free-lancers are not only working in pictorial, plastic and digital forms, they also design and beautify their society through their artistic contributions to the environment. They are adopting the New media to challenge the rigidity of traditional

mediums and re-imagine the ways we experience works of art as viewers. Nowadays, many exhibitions are done online using 360-degree camera as witnessed extensively during the challenging COVID-19 global lockdown.

With New media comes "new money", which is cryptocurrency. These include bitcoin, alt coins and NFT. The later turned Prince Osinachi Igwe into a millionaire artist, who had gone on to launch his own social currency called $OSINA. There is different creative software at our disposal with New media. This ranges from Adobe creative suite like Photoshop, CorelDraw, Paint, Adobe sketchpad and numerous others that hit the digital market every day. Unlike his contemporaries, Osinachi uses a common word processing tool "Microsoft word" as his medium to create "engagingly political drawings from conversations on gender, tradition and race". Osinachi was born and brought up in Aba. In 2020, he held his debut solo show "Osinachi: Existence as Protest" at the Kate Vasse Galerie in Zurich, Switzerland after joining the crypto art scene in 2017. However, my scope is limited to my basic knowledge of cryptocurrency as it takes someone with the technical know-how to put one through with the record-breaking NFT market of the 21ˢᵗ century creatives.

Prince Osinachi Jacon, *Untitled*, c.2019, New Media, size is not known. Courtesy, Konbini.
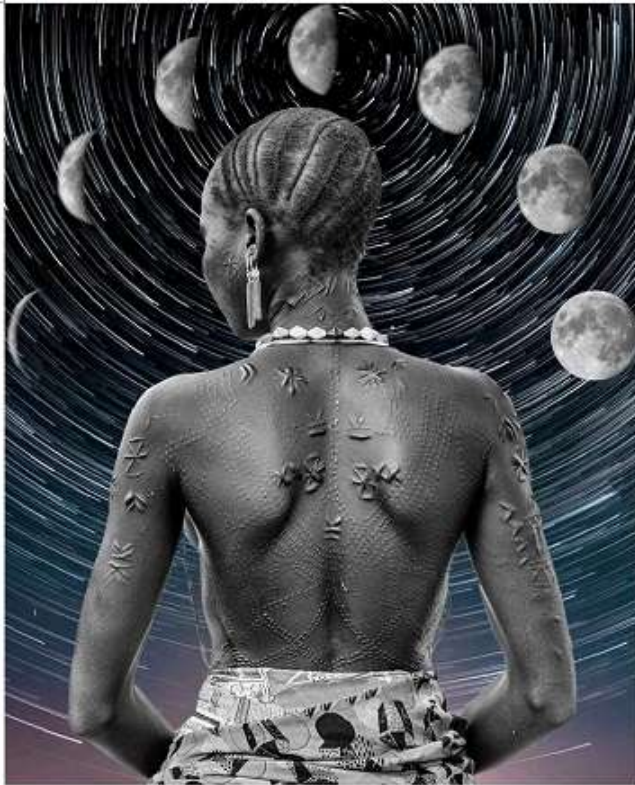
Alexis Tsegba, *Constellations* c. 2020, New Media, size not known. Courtesy, Alexis Tsegba.

Chigozie Obi, *Nia* c.2020, New Media, size not known. Courtsey, Chigozie Obi)

A recent study from the Pew Internet & American Life project confirms that more than one-half of all teenagers and adults alike have created media content, and roughly one third of them who use the Internet have shared content they produced. (Lenhardt &Madden, 2005). This process is called participatory culture. A participatory culture is a culture with relatively low barriers to artistic expression and civic engagement, strong support for creating and sharing one's creations, and some type of informal mentorship (affinity spaces) whereby what is known by the most experienced is passed along to novices(Collective intelligence).A participatory culture is also one in which members believe their contributions matter, and feel some degree of social connection with one another (at the least they care what other people think about what they have created). Forms of participatory culture include:

-Affiliations — formal and informal memberships in online communities centered around various forms of media, such as Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram.

-Expressions — production of new creative forms, such as digital sampling, fan video making, fan fiction writing, zines, mash-ups).

-Collaborative Problem-solving — working together in formal and informal teams to complete tasks and develop new knowledge (such as through *Wikipedia* and alternative reality gaming).

-Circulations — Shaping the flow of media (such as podcasting, blogging).

A flowering body of scholarship suggests that access to this participatory culture functions as a new form of the hidden curriculum, shaping which youth will succeed and which will be left behind. It also suggests how media shapes perceptions, and their practices as media makers and participants in online communities regardless of the digital divide. Most scholars

emphasize on schools and afterschool programs devoting more attention to fostering the new media literacies: a set of cultural competencies and social skills that young people need in the new media landscape. The new literacies almost all involve social skills developed through collaboration and networking.These skills build on the foundation of traditional literacy, research skills, technical skills, and critical analysis skills taught in the classroom.

Ashley Richardson, Heather Lawver, Blake Ross, and Josh Meeter are who made waves as children and teenagers as politicians, activists, educators, writers, entrepreneurs, and media makers.The skills they acquired—learning how to campaign and govern; how to read, write, edit, and defend civil liberties; how to program computers and runa business; how to make a movie and get it distributed—are the kinds of skills we might hope our best schools would teach. Yet, none of these activities took place in schools. Indeed, many of these youth were frustrated with school; some dropped out and others chose to graduate early. They developed much of the skill and knowledge through their participation in the informal learning communities of fans and gamers.

Most youth who use the Internet—could be considered media creators. A media creator is someone who created a blog or webpage, posted original artwork, photography, stories or videos online or remixed online content into their own new creations.

"While to adults the Internet primarily means the world wide web, for children it means email, chat, games— and here they are already content producers. Too often neglected, except as a source of risk, these communication and entertainment focused activities, by contrast with the information-focused uses at the Centre of public and policy agendas, are driving emerging media literacy. Through such uses, children are most engaged— multi-tasking, becoming proficient at navigation and manoeuvre so as to win, judging their participation and that of others, etc.... In terms of personal development, identity, expression and their social consequences— participation, social capital, civic culture- these are the activities that serve to network today's younger generation."
—Livingstone, 2003, pp.15-16).

Looking back, we have not only valued art classes because they help to identify and train artists, but also because the creative process is valuable on its own; carving a niche for every child to express him- or herself through images, even if most will never practice professionally. These experiences change the way young people think about themselves and alter the way they look at the creative output of others. Most public policy discussion of new media have centered on technologies—tools and their affordances. The computer is discussed as a magic black box with the potential to create a learning revolution (in the positive version) or a black hole that consumes resources that might better be devoted to traditional classroom activities (in the more critical version). However, media operate in specific cultural and institutional contexts that determine how and why they are used. A computer is nothing in the absence of a user. The computer does not operate in a vacuum. Injecting digital technologies into the classroom necessarily affects our relationship with every other communications technology, changing how we feel about what can or should be done with sound and images, pencils and paper, chalk and blackboard, colour and canvas, clay, fibre and metal. Therefore, it is of utmost importance if Nigerian institutions should embrace this global change and become part of the digital culture with the rest of the world by introducing digital art in our school curriculum later than never.

Conclusion

The internet as a medium of visual culture is playing a significant role to assert the existence of solidarity between the numerous centres and the peripheries- "Africa and the rest of the world" or "Europe and others" "the Primitives and the Modern" or as Chinweizu Ibekwe puts it "The West and the rest of us". These visual historical changes have counter-opined the French psychologist, Lucien Levy-Bruhl amongst other critics, who stated in 1923 that:

"The way in which the minds of the primitive peoples work is essentially different from that of Europeans, such differences being hereditary and impossible to change".

With this wave of New Media in the 21st Century Nigerian Art, it appears that we are at the verge of recovering all the time stolen from Nigeria and Africa at large and all the attention denied its artists.

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