

NETIZENS AS FLUXES AND HYPER-MOBILITY IN CREATIVE TRAJECTORIES IN MY ART

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Introduction

The human's desire to re-arrange, to revisit or re-tool its consummated past to suit the changing needs and aspirations of time and space coordinates is central to the notion of change. Change hence is a phenomenon that accords 'culture' its dynamic value and all other elements of 'culture' revolve around it. Ironically, change assumes a garb of an unchanging constant while it negotiates transformation of every other element in 'culture.' While I do not want to engage in a profound exegesis of culture as a worn out concept in present-day academic discipline, I wish to suggest, quite simplistically, that culture may be seen as a product of the human's negotiation of the inexhaustible challenges imposed on it by nature's inadequacies. It is this attempt by humans to improvise alternatives to nature and erstwhile 'culture' and their interfaces that is basically the progress ascribed to 'culture.' Could one have said, in line with certain functionalists, that culture is a superstructure in which art and technology are inextricably hinged upon? In my submission here, I deploy the net (an abbreviation for the internet) as a cultural tool that has had great impact in the mobility of 'culture.' It is this stark realization of the 'net' phenomenon that inspires my work as an artist. This paper is an attempt, therefore, to navigate across the overarching influences of this contemporary phenomenon on my art.

Brief studio commentaries.

While I may not completely subscribe to a Hegelian sense, it is possible to argue that art is a movement of the human spirit within the journey of life that reflects the internal dynamics of its society. New breakthroughs in information technology have precipitated an unprecedented chain of events. Among these is a mass participation of people into an emerging global culture mediated through information technology especially the world-wide-web (www). New technologies have generally affected the human expression called art. This paper highlights my studio engagements in mixed media and installation work derived from discarded computer interiors and other info-tech related materials. Unarguably, the world-wide-web and its information dissemination paraphernalia are currently central agents of change in cultural fluxes that are negotiating global futures. In this concatenation of ideas, the work produced through the above inspirations and considerations becomes a plastic interrogation of the effects of computer/info-tech insertion into our cultural life. Therefore, attempts will be made in this work to glimpse these appropriations and re-contextualization of used and discarded information technology materials as metaphors in the fluxes of culture. This is with a view to constructing metaphors that bring into context our apprehension of speed, space and time in the consumption of things and ideas in the so-called internet age.

In this paper, therefore, I posit a few assumptions and somehow they are drawn from my studio engagements. In the first place, the global shift from citizen to *netizen* (citizens of the

internet) definitely records dissimilarities according to localities and this can also be traced to the dynamics of governance and infrastructure in different cultural spaces. The above supposition points to the fact that global culture, after all, does not suggest a homogeneous participation. In other words, the human condition in its inadequacies and imbalances especially when ascribed to bad government policies or lack of basic amenities provide for anti social attitudes. This increase exponentially in the cyber space as a result of hyper-mobility of elements not only to urban areas but to a virtual megapolitan space called *internet*. Secondly, I suggest that human expression in art reflects the internal dynamics of its society and this can be read as an axiology for the deconstruction of same society when its cultural elements may have been superseded by time. To this effect, art as a major operator in the culture machine becomes synonymous with the mirror; it possesses a panoptic view that mediates the past to the future of global culture. Invariably, an emergent global culture, where global citizens metaphorically have become 'netizens' (citizens of the net) through virtual boarder transgressions, is constituted into metaphor for my studio process in mixed media.

My studio engagements in mixed media and installation is inspired by the fluxic changes occasioned by the computer centered information technologies. I see the use of the computer, radio or other internet related discards in my work as being circumscriptive; by exploring the subjects of eco-aesthetics and eco-ethics thereby instigating self reflexivity in creating conceptual works of art, on one hand and also sensitizing my community of the consequence of improper use of both materials and ideologies from the net. These issues and fluxes of interconnected events determine the future of our collective aspiration as Oguibe (2001.50) observes:

At no moment in history has the truth been clearer than it is today, that movement is the human condition. Whether manifested in geophysical, demographic flux constantly exacerbated by the prevarications of political or economic forces, or in the utilization of the hitherto unimaginable possibilities of information technology and the mechanics of virtuality; movement, transition, transformation, relocation, transfiguration, subjection to the enormous fluidities of location and identity, are the imperatives of existence of our age. Today to survive is to be on a constant move, to engage in an endless shift, to recognize, and acknowledge, the underlying fluidity in the nature of things.

I engage my studio work by exploring discarded info-technology materials scavenged from dumpsites in cities and towns in Nigeria and combining them with factory-made artists' materials in some cases or improvised artists medium in others. It is for me a means of interrogating the Nigerian life and its consumerist economy while also engaging the changes of socio-political issues. An understanding, even if in brief, of the origin and context of the two terms, 'Art' and 'Technology' is necessary here. Art and Technology are coevals in the understanding of human material culture. Technology derives its ontology from the Greek word *Tekhne*, which refers to skill. Though the word has been misconstrued in contemporary usage to refer to "tools application and methods, or machines and systems" however, in cultural anthropology it refers to "systems of practical knowledge associated with objects of human industry" (Ugiomoh 2012). On the other hand, 'Art' from the Roman root word *Ars* refer to skill "the word accommodates such synonyms as ability, cleverness, dexterity etc" (ibid) Technology taken from the above understanding is pertinent to the place of electronic boards in contemporary culture. What began in the late sixties from military-government project as

ARPAnet (Advanced Research Project Agency) by the U.S. Defense Department with national security as one of its goals expanded to involve people in the academia as a mode of enhancing communication on a distributed network system which unlike the telephone is not centralized and hence not clogged. From this origin the internet has grown to further instigate a changing physiognomy of the human as an *Information Technology Dependent* being called 'NETIZENS', "You are a Netizen (a Net Citizen), and you exist as a citizen of the world" (Hauben 1997).

The media mogul Marshall McLuhan identified virtual boundlessness engendered through the computer-internet socializing in 1972 when he notes that "the wired planet has no boundaries and no monopolies of knowledge" (Campbell, Martin, and Fabos. 2009: 40). There is currently more involvement of the masses in the affair of the government; "the computer networks form a new grassroots connection that allows the excluded sections of society to have a voice. This new medium is unprecedented. Previous grassroots media have existed for much smaller-sized selections of people" (Ibid).

The advent of the World Wide Web changed the previous outlook of the internet. "Developed in the late '80s by software engineer Tim Berners-Lee at the CERN particle physics lab in Switzerland in order to help scientists better collaborate" (Campbell et al.47) to this extent the Web was a text data link system designed to enable inter-computer data sharing for researchers in different geographical locations from where it became a major breakthrough as it affects human apprehension of space, time or matter. In 1994, Jerry Yang and David Filo then doctoral candidates at Stanford University created Yahoo from Jerry and David's Guide. Microsoft developed the Internet Explorer web browser in 1995, and in 1998 Larry Page and Sergey Brin another set of two PhD candidates in Stanford University created Google. Almost everybody was connected to the Web Community (ibid).

The emergence of a search engine first by the Google team and social media like FaceBook, Twitter, Wooloo, LinkedIn, Badoo and many more are opening access of information for mass use which goes beyond its original intention. For instance, Google Earth extends its search to having an aerial view of anywhere in the world from a remote corner of our globe. . Today users of the internet find it easy to send pictures, sound, video, and even transmit direct online active images of places, objects and self as can be seen in *Skype*, *Viber* or any other emerging social media. At this important incursion through information technology, the human apprehension to time, space and region demands a re-definition.

Artists seizing these inexhaustible possibilities available in new media continue to create new corpus of works reflecting the attitudinal change and shifting paradigms. To this end, Saskia notes that:

New media artists using computer-centred network technologies are enacting political as well as artistic projects in a growing number of cities worldwide. What I want to capture here is a very specific feature: the possibility of constructing forms of globality that are neither part of global corporate media or consumer firms, nor part of elite universalisms or 'high culture.' It is the possibility of giving presence to multiple local actors, projects and imaginaries in ways that may constitute alternative and counter-globalities (Sassen 2007)

The journey so far

The circuit panel as an object of evocative imagination stared right from my childhood when I began to experience them as a pictorial microcosm of lands, forests, crannies, slums,

skyscrapers, shanties, roads, water ways and all that can be seen of our earth from an aerial plane. I also have had the imaginary experience of travelling to America, England and other cities my childhood mind can recollect. Through the circuit lines I trace imaginary roads, water ways, mountains, crannies and even stops. However, it was during a studio research by creating artwork from poems as devolution of emotional content from already written poetry into painted poetry as plastic poetry under the supervision of Professor Chike Aniakor during the period of 1998 to 2001 that my interest in this object as a resource base assumed a deeper and cogitative professional and academic experience. Aniakor encouraged me to search beyond the regular mode of expression for my studio creative source. From 'Ode to Oracle' written by me in 1997 I searched for a plastic reality a year later and this became the beginning of sourcing imagery from electronic discards for studio purposes. The poem below is seminal to the plastic expression in 'Oracle' (fig.1) my early attempts at re-contextualizing the circuit panels into an art form in 1998.

Ode to Oracle

Not yesterday's foot prints to obese Iroko
Not the streams of red cap elders who let goatskin bags
Run down their shoulders as worries send them
Through shaded serpentine tracks to huge installation
The shrine your abode

Not even tremulous cry of the emissary
Between the oil bean to bread fruit trees
Nor the mystic echoes from dibia's Ogene
Piercing a loud silence
Of your pennant filled presence
Could open our eyes to know that your life is
A chameleon... changing with time and changing time
You that dance to unfamiliar tunes
You sing your strange tunes
And we were blind, we were all unseeing

To know that the milky way is a silver strand
To follow an unending tread to your wet abode
To see you shed effete garment for new ones
Because we were blind, we were all blind
As Nwokeke wails with Ogene and Konga
Not even his piercing voice makes sense to us
Ah we are blind, we are blind and deaf
No one knows the mouthpiece draped in leopard's skin
We have covered our ears with fiber from borrowed cultures
We covered our eyes with films of floating reality

You have travelled across great rivers
As you split your soul into minuscule demons
And live in matchboxes and big witch-boxes

For us to click the cowry for you to come
We are blind, we are all blind
Like the son who thinks he can have
A son before his father
And veils his sight with empty words
And forgets where his umbilicus is planted
Ah we are blind; we are too blind to see
To know that you traveled through golden bulrushes
To be adorned with royal garment by the children of others
Who love and respect you
To know that you are back to walk amongst us
And touch lofty corners of our expected dreams
To turn a twisted trunk
From patches of modeled history
Even so, welcome in your assumed guest-hood
Favoured rift-driven homes
By the bosom of your pockets and centers of
Our village square
1997

The central theme in *Ode to Oracle* traces the origin of computers to African shamanistic practices in oracular consultations through the casting of cowry shell into past or future mysteries. The poem laments the short-sightedness of the African people that has made it possible to discontinue this meta-scientific process of going beyond time and space to access hidden information from elemental forces of nature. It decries the senseless abandonment of a cultural heritage by Africans who in a bid to be western look away from age-long traditions even when there are obvious lessons to be learnt and sees these traditional practices by different African cultures as archetypal pointer to recent information technology manifestations. The essence of the present-day computer having been domesticated by the West updated and repackaged finds its way back to the same place where it was earlier rejected and demonized. Thus repackaged, the African pseudo-western society re-connects back to its rejected past with awe and pride. This is similar in the way the creative product from scrounged discards of radio and computer mother-boards adorns the same spaces where they have been formerly rejected. The written poem and painted poem share kinship in the themes of resurrection, recuperation and reconnection. The poem attacks afro-inferiority complex that has effect on the global status of the continent and continues to induce the *niga* mentality of many Africans in the global stage. Between lines 10 – 13, 28 -31 and 36 – 40 are seminal lines that catalyzed a plastic expression of the mixed media work from the written poem that has an ongoing plastic expression that appears inexhaustible in context and content.

The Netizen as metaphor for socio-political issues.

I hereby present contextual interpretations to some of my earlier works within the above milieu. The choice of the selected works follows no order of importance or year of productions neither are they highpoints of my studio engagements within my creative oeuvre however, they were randomly selected as their will be a more proper platform to document my transition in the

studio works. The series *interconnecting Metaphors* 1 to 4 are thematically connected but can be read autonomously.

Interconnecting Metaphors #1

This is an installation piece consisting of sixteen panels of 46cm x 46cm each and to be arranged in a row of four columns thereby forming a square of 183cm length by 183cm width. The materials used for this piece are cut-out of bar-codes from G.S.M. recharge cards and also some from airfare tickets. The different hands that have touched the cards leave in them their various intentions hence the spirit of time, space and matter. The bar codes on the cards are generally a complex coding system used in identifying products, its pattern can be read rapidly by a computer scanner but beyond this emphasis on encoding identities it is also beautiful. The prevalence of bar-codes in this piece refers to the unique identities of makers and users of the I.C.T. products which contributes their individuality in the making of intricate and cryptic beauty that is an emerging new world culture.

Interconnecting Metaphors #2

Interconnecting metaphors #2 derives its thematic frame from exploring flags of many countries alongside towns that may or may not be geographically, politically or culturally connected. The desire to locate sameness in aspirations or historic/cultural affinity and also identifying ranks and flaunting them may have informed the development of flags from its early stages. They have not lost their meaning from its pristine origin. It is from the above understanding that I use flag as contributing colour while also reaffirming common identities. The random selection of names of cities placed alongside each other reflects the manner and ease by which cities are connected to one another in the virtual space. While the flag holds the eye and directs reading; the names of cities draw a viewer nearer as he/she would want to relate or locate places he/she is conversant with and the bar-codes relate to individual identities energizing collective relevance. The bar-codes and letters tend to melt into each other at the same time as the flag and colour strengthen the picture plane.

Interconnecting Metaphors #3

This is a variable installation of 24 panels of 26cm x 26cm each. Names of cities are printed and daubed on panels alongside an assemblage of circuit panels from radio/computer motherboards. The combination of these two materials refers to inter-cultural influences from regions that were hitherto insular. The daubing/printing of texts and design from the circuit panels creates a pulsation of light and dark that enhance the picture plane as well as creating balance of good and bad experienced in the virtual world. While some regions are enriched through virtual interactions and negotiations many are impoverished morally and even materially through such interfacing hence the need for careful assessment of our involvement into the virtual world.

Interconnecting Metaphors #4

This is a globe constructed with mild steel, bar-codes from consumable products like groceries, confectioneries, can drinks, and other products. These items are mostly imported and consumed locally in my area. The materials are combined with discards of radio/computer motherboards to create a globe of bar-codes and circuit panels. The earth areas or maps were made from circuit panels depicting continents while bar-codes from packages of consumable

products depict the sea/ocean spaces. From a distance they create glittering, crystal-like speckles with myriads of colours that charge and melt into each other. This installation becomes a statement on interconnectedness of our earth regions as it relates to consumption of product as items and cultural influences.

Virtual Parcels (2011)

This is a mobile installation of different sizes, colours, textures and shapes of boxes constructed with different materials like; textile, charcoal, burlap, newspaper-print, radio/computer interiors and textured surfaces from other painted and applied sources. The boxes are hung from the ceiling of either an interior or external space by almost invisible strings, while also the wall behind the ceiling is changed with different countries' flag. Our experience of internet as Netizens and manner of navigation and appropriation of influences can only be compared to the Pandora box of the ancient Greek mythology. Though there are beautiful packages in the internet, they should be encountered with caution or else we endanger not only our immediate environment but also the whole world. Most youths in African cities today spend less time in real-time hard work because of an unbridled obsession to the different social networks. This is akin to addiction to alcohol, drugs and other substance abuse by unsuspecting young people. The consequence of the above narrative is utter misdirection of the future of our societies and utter destruction of same. Virtual Parcels become a metaphor for tantalizing promises one sees from the internet.

Critical takes on my work

The grotesque look of faces in my work has been identified as being apoplectic faces of anxiety reflecting our common psyche, "the growing fearsomeness of the symbols reflects the now prevailing ethereal anxiety. His line and forms too agitated; the colours may be a shade violent and acidic" (Ochigbo 2009. 158). Stuart identifies flux and lopsidedness of participating regions of the world in the global enterprise as increasing digital divide with Nigeria being at the receiving end. Implicated also is the country's participation in recent global enterprise as dumpsite for disused electronic wastes, ideologies and tastes. To this end Stuart observes further that; "By reminding us of the ethical imperative that we have to maintain our virtual community as citizens of the net, Francis reminds us of our responsibility to our physical environment as well. His works force us to reconsider our fixation with obsolescence in light of the destruction it causes" (Stuart, 2010). Best Ochigbo observes similarly concerning the netizen series that "His (Ike Francis) work mostly captures as well as mirrors the African continent as a people ever trapped in contraption of servitude to multinational capitalism in epochal period where freedom price has been paid" (Ochigbo 2009.158). Furthermore, Stuart identifies a two-faceted aspect of my work to connecting with used items both from real life and on-line society:

These two situations, web browsing in the internet café and the scavenging artist searching for inspiration, are conjoined by Francis as part of a similar process of collecting and information gathering. Furthermore, the ephemeral and transitory act of "mouse clicking" is here linked with an insistent materiality that comes from his combination of discarded technology with older, more traditional forms of art-making. (Stuart 2010)/

The human as bipeds since the epochal anatomical and physiological adjustments have enjoyed freed hands that allowed it to fashion and manipulate tools. Humans in its dynamic engagement with culture adapts their needs to nature's scarce resources while also attempting to fashion tools and ways for easier navigations of its vagaries. This no doubt led to the development of larger brain for more sophisticated reasoning. Similarly, it becomes plausible to say that with the advent of information technology with its overwhelming effect on societies, human citizen as netizen adjust psychologically if not physically by this insertion of information technology to our daily lives which may bring about changes in physiognomy. The above reality in my work comes as artistic intervention on the issues of cultural pluralogue through eclecticism, hybridization and cultural interfaces. Salvaging immanent problems in this scheme, is the understanding that the condensation of spaces, ideologies, cultural practices rest on human apprehension of its potency to develop healthier global culture and this can only be effective if all other zones are well represented. Anything short of this is bound to problematize the whole process of globalization that the internet fast tracks.

Extending the discourse: rethinking Locality and Globality in studio art

Hauben captures succinctly the essence of a changing attitudes and forms of humans occasioned by recent developments through cutting edge information technological breakthrough. He comments thus:

Welcome to the 21st Century. You are a Netizen (a Net Citizen), and you exist as a citizen of the world thanks to the global connectivity that the Net makes possible. You consider everyone as your compatriot. You physically live in one country but you are in contact with much of the world via the global computer network. Virtually you live next door to every other single Netizen in the world. Geographical separation is replaced by existence in the same virtual space. (Hauben 1997)

By the above, Hauben restates the global nature of human coexistence in the world today in spite of an apparent real distance that separates human communities. This reality underscores the idea of Netizens and drives my studio engagements with materials. In my work presented previously, I explore different issues connected to our relationship with the internet; "the hook" contextualizes Africa as a continent that depends so much on foreign dictates which the internet provides while the "interconnected metaphors" explores the different aspects of our encounter with the internet. In the above series, various human devices that stand for the reality of global identities are utilized as pointers to this global mix of identities and ideas. For example bar-codes expectedly define peculiar identities and values. The second of the series explores collective identities in flags.

Conclusion

Culture remains dynamic and is retooled by intercultural dialogues and negotiations. This is what the internet or the world-wide-web in our age facilitates such that the world today is taken as a global village. The net as a space remains open for interrogation of real life activities that could spur creative engagements. Both the real-life and on-line experiences are now seamless and have their merits and demerits. In Nigeria, for instance, the lack of adequate plans

by government have ironically seemed to have instigated the urge to use the alternative space of the internet for self development and growth in positive and negative ventures thereby extending civic status of citizens and enhance the transition from “nationalism” to “postnationalism” (Pieterse 2000: 4). The emergence of ‘virtual superstars’ is a typical example of extending democracy which is as a result of the internet encounter; personages who hitherto the technology advancement would have remained oblivion now have their opinions heard and considered. Recent issues in the Arab world may not have occurred if not for on-line participations of its citizens. It is true that with the virtual space of internet *you needn't be somebody to be somebody here*. The internet is providing new spaces for alternative and functional democracy. Furthermore, it is to be noted that many people acquire skills which improves their disciplines from the on-line encounters; new degrees in learning, new opportunities for improved living are acquired from virtual sites and to add to this many professionals are now global players via the opportunities provided by internet and the fluid transition from citizens to netizens. Facts are unending that experiences of good and bad as experienced from real-time geophysical experiences are carried over but this has increased exponentially in the virtual space of the internet due to possibilities presented by the virtual experiences.

The principal value that resides in art from a Kantian point of view is that it confirms the sociability of man because its foundations reside in taste. Taste binds an “I” necessarily to fellows, to others, to a community (Ugiomoh 94). What the above statement confirms is that the work of art facilitates inter-cultural dialogue and negotiations that are central to the notion of cultural change. This paper began with the central thesis that revolves around change as a central phenomenon of human experience and how a particular change in information technology has inspired my studio engagements to bring about a plastic expression of its essences. I realize that my bodies of work that depend on electronic discards respond to the reality that metaphors inhabit erstwhile cultural products of human industry. They only require intuitive insights for their conversion. My studio practice using info-tech discards and other used material through an artist’s re-purpose approach anchor on topical issues raised in this paper as a starting point and the direction will be manifest as my encounters in the community and studio evolves.

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