

THE NIGERIAN ARTIST AND THE CHALLENGES OF SUSTAINING PRACTICE-BASED CAREER PURSUIT IN A HOSTILE CLIME -- Nzoiwu, Azuka Abigail

The Nigerian artist and the challenges of sustaining practice-based career in a hostile clime

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Abstract

This article looks at the plight of the artist in the Nigerian society especially as it affects their practice. By critically assessing the challenges faced by Nigerian studio artists in their day-to-day interaction with members of the society the article seeks to bring the broader issue of socio-economic survival, for artists, into focus. Most importantly, factors militating against the artist's growth vis-à-vis the improvement of life all around him will be critically looked at. The article also made suggestions on how to surmount the prevailing challenges faced by artists in Nigeria as they pursue a career-based practice.

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Introduction

The Nigerian environment is a challenging one. Ranging from the fluctuating economic policies to the incessant political upheavals; from the endemic corruption to the increasing incapacity of the political class to chart a direction for the rest of the governed; from constant civil unrest to the larger diabolic violence emanating from different armed groups; from the lack of social amenities to the institutionalized instability and mediocrity that have come to define the educational institutions and the rest of national institutions, one needs to be endowed with a double charge of life to live under these circumstances. The Nigerian artist, like other professionals, faces the above-mentioned problems and struggles to make a livelihood. The capacity to survive may vary from artist to artist and sometimes may depend on the location in which the artist resides and works. In other words, what may pose a challenge to one artist in one location may not be so for another artist in another location. The challenges range from availability of affordable art materials for the artist to execute his works to the presentation and marketing technique. One can also cite the unwillingness of the artist to adapt to changes even as the world has been reduced to a global village. This article attempts, in a most simplistic manner, to revisit the more anecdotal and perhaps mundane aspect of art practice and survival in the Nigerian environment. Few challenging conditions under which Nigerian artists work are raised and suggestions made on how to surmount those challenges.

Access to affordable art materials

One of the most fundamental impediments to a viable art practice in Nigeria is the inability of an artist to acquire necessary art materials needed to pursue a purposeful practice-based career. Art materials are a pre-requisite for an artist to express himself; therefore their import cannot be over-emphasized. An artist without art materials is regrettably handicapped as these materials constitute the tools with which an artist expresses him/herself. But the high cost of good art materials in Nigeria pose a great challenge to the artist. Most art materials are imported from the Western countries and, although they may be more available in cities such as Lagos, they may not be readily available in other Nigerian locations. Even when these art materials seem ubiquitous in Lagos they are not also affordable. One of the biggest art dealers in Lagos is known as Artworld located in Ojuelegba Road in Lagos Mainland. Most professional and burgeoning artists buy their materials there at a very expensive price. Others imported from China or other Asia countries do not have the needed quality to achieve a good effect.

The high cost of art materials has its multiplier effect as this translates to the cost of the artworks. Artists find out that in most cases the product is not sold or on the other hand if sold after a long period, there is no value for money previously spent. As the artist is part of the society that the economy is weighting down on, he has to be calculative.

Adaptation to Change

Art is creativity which those who practice it must continue to improve on, it is dynamic in nature. Presently, it appears that the present day Nigerian artist has not been able to situate

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himself in the technological revolution that is all around him. The potential and innovation brought almost by the introduction of the computer and the vast possibility of the internet, is yet to be fully tapped by the Nigerian Artist. For the art practice to grow in experimentation and form also for the purpose of expressing himself in a more define style, it is a challenge for the artist to access new knowledge which unfortunately is available through the clicking of the computer mouse because the world has shrunk into a global village. But there is a school of thought that believes that the use of the computer or the internet will make the Artist lazy thereby impacting negatively as the artist's creativity.

But this assertion cannot be true for the artist who is smart. In fact, the use of the computer not only broadens the artist's horizon, but also enhances his or her speed. A job that ordinarily would take about a whole day or two to design on paper, may take just minutes with the use of this technology. The failure of the Nigerian contemporary artist to rise above his limitation is a real challenge. In support of this notion, Wayman (1987) believes that "you are the only person in the world who can use your potential and your abilities to their fullest degree. You are the only person who can climb your own personal staircase to success. No one will climb the stairs for you."

Interaction with established Artists

Established artists in the context used in this article are those artists who have successfully sustained a prolonged career of art practice and garnered national and international experience, accolades and exposures. In any aspect of life, there is hierarchy of which art is inclusive. Established artists have a lot of contributions to make in the society in general and they equally have a lot influence in the lives of the younger artists who look up to them. Sometimes the established artists are not ready to divulge information and materials that are beneficial to the younger artists. This could be due to self-centeredness. Some feel that knowledge shared with others will reduce them instead of increasing them. On the other hand, some younger artists feel inferior or too proud to approach their seniors in the field. They prefer to die in silence than asking questions.

In some of our national dailies or journals, you find some advertisement on promoting art through induction courses, exhibitions etc. A write up in the Guardian Newspaper of Tuesday August 31, 2004 titled: Activity Peaks at Lagos Museum, says:

Art exhibition opened there last Saturday bears the title 'Nigerianism'. It is an exploration of symbols and motifs drawn from several cultures in Nigeria. Adeoti Adewale, the artist hosting the on-going solo, sites his 'sources as Uli, Ona and Arewa art motifs, symbols and signs', he expressed his eclectic creative inclination through paintings as well as decorative textile designs and prints.

There are so many workshops and paper presentations being arranged by Artists of great repute both within and outside the country. The young artists should avail themselves of these opportunities.

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Presentation and Marketing Techniques

Good presentation has a role to play in the life of an artwork. By 'good presentation' I mean the beautification that accompanies a finished artwork. For example a finished painting may be enhanced by a good framing. Historically, artists have deployed this method to compete for commission from wealthy patrons. For example, during the Renaissance period competition for art commissions was not based on talent alone but on the ability of the artist to present a highly decorated, well finished job. Individual professional accomplishments are also professionally measured by the level of finishing. In fact, good presentation has been the strategy of marketing the artist and his works to the world for a positive response. This is a problem which needs serious concern and urgent attention in Nigeria. According to Ugorji (2007).

A product is anything that can be offered to a market for attention, acquisition use or consumption that might satisfy a need or want. It includes physical objects, services, persons, places, organizations and ideas.

Packaging is a means of advertising, used by manufacturers and companies to showcase their products to the public. Sometimes, the packaging looks more attractive than the actual content. This also can be associated with presentation of artworks for sale or exhibition. As Agbonifoh et al (2007) note

Packaging has a vital role to play in ultimately marketing a product. In addition to its primary function of protecting the product from the point of production to the point of consumption, packaging attracts the consumer; it also identifies and distinguishes a company's product from all other and conveys a sales story. Finally packaging enhances the convenience of the buyer/customer in the handing of the product.

Another vital issue is marketing of the artworks, in their definition of marketing, Agbonifoh, et al (2007) had this to say:

Marketing consists of individual and organizational activities designed to facilitate and expedite challenges so as to achieve the goals of the producer/seller by sensing and satisfying consumer's needs.

It is therefore obvious that marketing is not just buying and selling a product but customer satisfaction. Some contemporary artists may give serious thought to this in their works, although the marketing of art product requires some expertise, which pulls or projects the artist's potentials to the fullest. In the meantime due to technological revolution, the world has shrunk into a computer village; this has taken marketing a step further. It can now be done online in what is referred to as *Internet marketing or E-commerce*. Ugorji (2007) went further:

Web based marketing is marketing done on the internet. It is also refer to electronic commerce (or E-Commerce). E-commerce can either be business to business E-commerce (between companies) or business to consumer to E-commerce (between consumer goods manufacturing companies and consumers). Of these two the internet is an at present more suited to the business form of E-

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commerce due to the sheer size of the transactions involved. In the same vein internet based marketing solves the problem of long distance transactions which normally characterize industrial marketing.

Contemporary artists should avail themselves of this opportunity in order to face this challenge.

Undue exploitation of the artist

One may argue that the contemporary Nigerian artist seems to have been a victim of historic exploitation especially by the powers that be and this is, arguable, one of the greatest challenges facing the artist in Nigeria today. Despite huge talents exhibited by certain artists there is no avenue to reach prospective collectors. Lack of access to rich and wealthy patrons leaves the artists at the hands of desperate art dealers who exploit them.

More so, there are occasions where the artist's name or label is removed from a work of art and another fixed. This is not only wicked but morale-killing when he finally discovers. And yet another example, an artist is called to do a job. After all negotiations and execution of the said job, he is short-changed, probably because the Artist is well-known or junior to the one contracting the job, a development that may lead to altercation. But the artist is encouraged not to despair for as Wayman (1987) stated:

Discouragement steals your hope and your confidence. It replaces courage with fear. It depresses and disheartens you and can be a major setback in achieving success.

Exhibition/Gallery Facilities

An Artist showcases his/her works through art exhibition. As argued by Wangboje (1980) 'An Art Exhibition in the life of an artist is a consummation of efforts which involves personal exploration and expression'. Exhibition could be held within the artist's locality, his or her state, country or abroad. Unfortunately, exhibitions as avenue for showcasing the works of the artists are few and in between as a consequence of the prohibitive cost of facilities associated with the event. Added to the cost is the fact that the facilities are very limited in the country.

Another challenge is the high cost of imported frames for works. Due to the exorbitant rate, you find artists resorting to cheaper and locally made with poor finishing to frame their works. This reduces the value of the work and further lowers the income of the artist.

For any exhibition to succeed there must be good advertisement on television, radio, newspapers, and handbills. With poor remuneration non jobs done, the Artist is faced with a tight budget concerning advertising. Ugorji (2007) notes that

This is a paid, non personal communication by business firms, non-profit organizations and individuals who are identified in their advertising messages and who hope to inform or persuade members of particular audience.

Sponsorship which could have been a way out is not easy to get as big names or well-to-do companies want to put their monies where they think it is much more worth the while. The scare is due to the fact that the artist is yet to make a mark; they are afraid of losing out at the end.

The clash academia and self-development

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This is one of the greatest challenges an artist usually has especially when the artist is struggling to survive somewhere. Sagboje (2006) reports the psychologist Abraham Maslow as saying: “self actualization as a concept is a process not a goal. It is not something you aim at but something that you do”. But this artist cannot do by himself alone as reminded by Munroe (1992) when he said: “God who is omnipotent, created you to share His potentials. When he took you out of Himself He automatically gave you the ability to be creative and imaginative”. Creativity is the forte of the artist which he must improve on constantly so as to interpret the changing trends. Also in support for self improvement, Gilbert (1998) raised an issue, even to which he seem to provide the answer to:

Can a person become more creative? Almost certainly, if one allows oneself to be. Being creative, as we said, means making something new. It means learning to trust one’s own interests, experiences and references, and to use them to enhance life and work. Above all, it means discarding rigid notions of what has been or should be in favour of what could be.

This is a product of an insufficient intellectual base as observed by Sagboje (ibid)

The problem today is that there are too many H.N.D and first degree holders at the base of the pyramid. A majority of these may have been hurriedly graduated after an elongated but haphazardly run college sessions filled with lecturers’ strikes and collapsed academic sessions. The result is a poor C.P.A (cumulative point average) grade which cannot be accepted and is eternally useless for higher education admission purposes. A person with a limited understanding can only operate within a limited bandwidth and he cannot be counted on to be the arrow head of a new way.

In order words, no one can give what he does not have. The time to do it right is now.

Lack of Government Support

The Nigerian government has a most visible apathy to the discipline of the Humanities. Funding between the Humanities and the Sciences has always been lopsided in favour of the Sciences. Art, most especially, has no place in the governmental budget. Sponsorship of artists or art exhibitions is virtually non-existent in the government blueprint.

If one can argue that Government is a two way thing-it gives out and it expects, it would be assumed that the artist is part of the people being governed. This proves a cogent reason why the artist as a member of a league of Nigerian professional groups should receive funding from the government. It should be taken as a given that the government should a pivotal role on improving the artists' plight through the following means:

Rentage: It is possible to assume that a practicing artist has a sense of contemporaneity in terms of the formalistic relevance of art practice, while a non-practicing artist may possess a redundant knowledge, not in tune with recent happenings in the world. The importance of space to the survival of a studio-based artist cannot be overemphasized especially spaces to work and display his/her works for prospective clientele. One can call the later a gallery. However, due to the exorbitant amount demanded by landlords, owning a space becomes an impossible mission. It is

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to be noted that the artists and government are co-builders of the nation. Government is yet to make an impact in this regard.

- a. **Inaccessible Roads:-** Good roads are very important to fast development of a place or an area. But what is mostly experienced is inaccessible roads due to neglect. This hampers the free flow of traffic to Artists workshops.
- b. **Provision of Amenities:-** The need for constant water and light cannot be over emphasized. These essentials help to increase productivity and profitability.
- c. **High Import Duties:-** The materials needed by the artists are still largely imported, as a result of which their costs are still very high consequent upon high import duties. These are great challenges government need to look into.

Interaction of the Industry's Stakeholders

From historic times, groups or bodies have come together for the actualization of common goals. Some persons are selected by way of election or otherwise to lead these groups. This informed the formation of the SNA (Society of Nigerian Artist) which was officially launched in 1964. It has not lived up to expectation due to one problem or the other. According to Oshinowo (2005).

The society made significant progress at inception in fulfilling its objective, nothing that “somewhere down. The line, certain decisions were taken that worked against the progress of the society.

The truth has remained that from the National Secretariat to the state chapters the story is the same. That is, the SNA has not been able to live up to the expectation of the artist and admires in the provision of an umbrella body that will protect and represent the interest of the Nigerian artists. The leadership must be up and doing if it must march other professional bodies in this contemporary times. What may be needed could be the three Ps identified by Maurik (1997) as purpose, politics, and process-

- The ability to appreciate and handle organizational politics.
- Being able to facilitate people and situations
- Developing a sense of purpose.

Way Forward

After identifying the known problems facing the contemporary Nigerian artist it is imperative that a lot needs to be done. As in every sphere of life, “a problem known is a problem half solved”.

The followings therefore are some of the ways the challenges highlighted above can be ameliorated.

1. Art which is a bridge builder must be put in its proper perspective. Encouragement for the subject in secondary schools must be done by parents and government and this will transcend into the tertiary institutions. More graduates of Fine Arts will be produced at the end of the day.

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2. Government should sponsor scholars of Fine Arts to any level they wish to study so as to lessen the financial burdens on them. Some institutions have started and it is hoped this gesture will continue.

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