

## **Conceptual Art: Perceptions And Appearances**

by

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### **Abstract**

Fine Art does not have an agreement on a single definition of good interactivity, rather, it entertains a number of significance disagreements and discorts concerning the type, amount, conceptual models and ethics of interactivity. This can be related to different emphasis on the contextualization of interactive art, which does not exist as one specific genre. What the viewer interacts with here is neither beauty nor information but ideas the work acting as a catalyst for recreation of experiences and generation of ideas. Conceptual art is likely seen as an aspect of modern art in which ideas are paramount and the form that realizes this ideas is secondary. Also, it is art in which the concept(s) or ideas involved in the work take precedence over traditional aesthetic materials concerns. This paper aimed at creating awareness on the perception and appearances of conceptual art.

### **Introduction**

Conceptual art is largely seen as an aspect of modern art in which ideas are paramount, and the form that realizes these ideas is secondary (often ephemeral, ordinary and unremarkable). It is all about free-thinking and creative artistic thoughts. There exists a belief that the power of art is necessarily behind any finished article. This belief evolved into a way of thinking that emphasizes the freedom of the artists to look everywhere and anywhere for ideas (which naturally portends the possibility of wide ranging and free ranging coordinates that appear to make little or no sense at all). In conceptual art, therefore, any idea may be a good idea, since the concept is subjective.

Conceptual art is especially indebted to French American artist Marcel Duchamp (1887-1968). It became a major modern/contemporary art movement in the 1960s, as yet another echo of Dada. Minimal art, a movement that developed in the late 1950s and early 1960s is also a precedent to conceptual art. Conceptualism is not a style but a way of thinking about art, an inquiry into the nature of arts itself [as noted by Kosuth in Princenthal (2009)]. Artists have therefore put it into many different uses. This idealism leads artists into creating masterpieces that may not look pretty and may not look like experienced technical works but have a quality and creative thought process. This implies that philosophy authenticates and validates the article that creates the masterpiece through idea and theory as opposed to visual splendor. It is a form of art that may spur up controversy at anytime and anywhere. For instance, in the United Kingdom, on July 25<sup>th</sup> 2002, a group of young British Artists, who were anti-conceptual art, saw such works as works that lack “concepts”, and

deposited a coffin outside the Whitecube Gallery, to mark “The Death of Conceptual Art”.

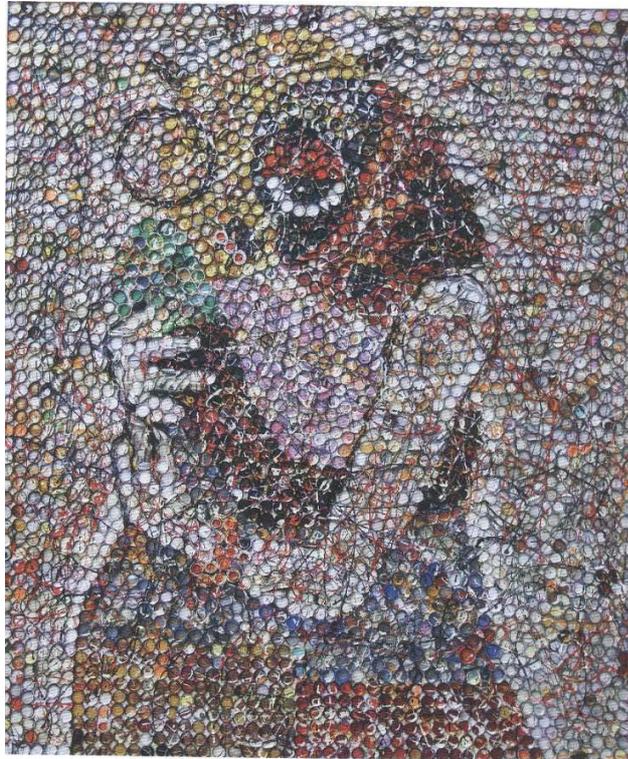
### **What is Conceptual Art?**

Conceptual art is art in which the concept(s) or idea(s) involved in the work take precedence over traditional aesthetic and material concerns. Executing works in this form invariably portend a subjective and intra-psychic thought process; consequently, meanings and import of the resultant art work are firmly lodged within the executor’s mind (the artist), thereby serving the purpose of presenting to the viewer, the artist’s conceptions and perceptions of art (as a broad term).

Among elements that have come to be associated with conceptual arts as observed by Gushem (2006), is firstly, its disdain for objectiveness as sine qua non for its art object. In this regard, art ceases to be defined merely along the predictable lines of the tangible categorization, as either painting or sculpture. Hence the variety of intervening art forms and thematic focal points, multiplicity of execution approaches, and absence of distinctive style. For instance, the re-used bottle corks and mixed media in the piece titled “Embrace” (2009) by Rom Isichei, places this work within the border of broad-ranging conceptual art works, more so as it challenges the boundaries of definition of what constitutes painting, installation and sculpture, and what differentiates one from the other. Similarly, the figures in this work hold unto one another in tight embrace, so much so that their faces, still bearing their differentiating individualities adjoin as one, thereby forming a new face which is different from each of the two different faces, but bearing features of both. The re-use of ordinary objects for a redefined purpose is a pervasive feature of most conceptual art works. Lewitts

asserts that the execution of conceptual art works are perfunctory, however, the process of

execution can best be described as exploratory/definitive.



ROM ISICHEI, 2009, *Embrace*, Mixed Media with Bottle Cork 165.1 x 139.7cm

A second crucial element in conceptual art is the pre-eminence of framing, whereby the placement of a work of art and the consequent context become more important to its meaning and significance than its form or aesthetic qualities. In other words, whereas traditional meaning was dependent on the narrative, evident in the image and on the manipulation of elements of design to achieve this narrative or coherent image; in conceptual art these become secondary to the careful location of the work in relation to its surroundings and their relevant association.

Kainebi Osahenye's untitled (2004) conceptual painting perfectly illustrates this point. This painting emphatically points out a paradox; the distinctiveness and interrelatedness of colour and form. The plain, bright, but thickly applied red hue gives way to the receding blue hue. The blue connotes heaviness and despite the smaller amount of space given to the red as against much occupied by the blue, both achieve cognitive relevance in balanced proportions. This balance

is further enhanced in the placing of a barely identifiable form against the center of demarcation, where advancing colour meets with receding colour. Interestingly, the form appears to be the lower half of a female form, reclined on a flat surface with the left leg lifted up and bent at the knee, and the right leg bent also at the knee but dangling downwards. The profusion of red lines against the predominant yellow of the form suggests a deliberate attempt at either distortion or elucidation of a sketch; white highlights, however, indicates the plausibility of the former. The curious fact about this form is that the artist may have attempted to portray it severed from the upper body, hence the ominous red and gloomy blue, but there still exists the question of the relaxed posture of the form against such disaster and gloom. Jegede's (2010) value judgment is probably best suited in the evaluation of this painting, thus, "...you may wonder all you want as to what the central shape connotes and you still leave the piece without resolving the dilemma. This is a piece of work

that has fully earned its title. It is an unknown creation that is pleading for your attention. That is

why it is art: untitled.”



KAINEBI OSAHENYE, 2004, Untitled, Oil on paper, 73.6 X 53.3cm

In another view, many conceptual art works, sometimes called installations may simply be it suggests a stretching of the frontiers of impressions, perceptions, and ultimately, the definition of what art is. This point is further buttressed by Lewitt’s views on conceptual art, which goes thus: “In conceptual art, the idea or concept is the most important aspect of the work. When an artist uses conceptual form of art, it means that all of the planning and decisions are made beforehand and the execution is a perfunctory affair. The idea becomes a machine that makes the art.” This quotation highlights the key difference between a traditional work of art and a conceptual installation: In one instance, the hands-on skills of the artist are paramount, while in the other, they are not. This is best described as revolutionary for the conceptual artist is seen as one who questions the nature of what is understood as art through artistic presentations.

constructed by any one, by following a set of written instructions. This is significant as A notable feature of a good number of conceptual art works is the act/practice of transposition. Transposition here refers to the recasting of an object with a view to redefine the manner in which it is being perceived, and to ultimately redefine its usage. The first notable piece of installation that was exhibited by Duchamp in 1913, the “Bicycle Wheel”, is a perfect example of the object-subject transposition, which is the focal process of turning ordinary ready-made objects into works of art. Barnes (2009) explains that these art objects may even be indistinguishable from consumer products. The “Bicycle Wheel”, for instance, was not altered from its original state (it still was in its material form, a bicycle wheel) albeit the altered context, usage and import in the installation.



MARCEL DUCHAMP, Bicycle Wheel, mixed media

The wheel is turned upside down on a tall kitchen stool that appears to serve as both support and as a perfect continuum that extends to the box-like stand. Barnes (2009) remarks that conceptual art objects (explicitly installations) may lack the qualities long associated with art, such as beauty, skilled craftsmanship, and clear organization. "Bicycle Wheel", however, reflects a distinct organization of ordinary objects such that the geometrical shapes (circle, square, and rectangle, quadrilateral) that come together in the formation of each object (bicycle wheel, stool, and stand) contribute to the unification of the whole piece. The geometric shapes are therefore distinct despite the apparent unification of the whole piece. This is ensured by the sheer essentialness of the shapes that actuate installation, and further underscored by the values of the black rim against white supports. It is obvious that the artist himself did not make these objects, yet the ingenuity of the installation lies in the idea, the concept, the putting together of distinct, unrelated objects whose combination would ordinarily make no meaning, and making meaning out of it. "Bicycle Wheel" is

reminiscent of minimal art, which is precedent to conceptual art.

Princenthal (2009) observes that "conceptual artists originally attempted to rid the object of all so-called objecthood and thus its commercial value as well and their endeavor survived for only a few years in its purest form." This accounts for the loss/disaggregation of the original "Bicycle Wheel". Only the replica (reproduced in 1964) survives. Within this frame of reference, Enwezor (1999) sees conceptual art as a process of restructuring of the viewer's relationship to art object. Firstly, its critique of systems of representation pitched art making towards dematerialization of the object, thereby placing less value on the perceptual code: through which is traditionally received. Hassan and Oguibe (1999) posit that the emergence of such works that are conceptual in nature date back to the last century, from a long series of often unconnected and not all together international acts and interventions in which artists elected or rejected certain forms or strategies in art making, and the process revised

received understanding of the nature and essence of art.

Conceptual art means an expanded critique of the cohesiveness and material quality of the art object; a growing wariness towards definitions of artistic practice as purely visual; a fusion of the work with its site and context of display; and its increased emphasis on the possibility of publicness and distribution. Conceptual art has never been a monolithic practice or unified artistic discourse, but a contested field of multiple theoretical and practical positions (this is seen by Hassan and Oguibe).

### **Controversy in Conceptual Art Works**

Conceptual art reacted against the commoditization of art; it attempted a subversion of the gallery or museum as the location and determiner of art, and the art market as the owner and distributor of art. Lawrence Weiner (in <http://en.wikipedorg/wiki/conceptualart>) states "...once you know about a work of mine, you own it. There is no way I can climb inside somebody's head and remove it". This statement alone can be an issue for discourse. Many conceptual artist's work can therefore only be known about through documentation, which is manifested by its objects, which one might argue, are not themselves the art.

In Britain, the rise to prominence of the Young British Artists (Y.B.As) after the 1988 Freeze show that was curated by Damien Hirst, and subsequent promotion of the group by the Saatchi Gallery during the 1990s generated a media backlash, where the phrase "Conceptual Art" came to be a term of derision. This was amplified by the Turner Prize, whose more extreme nominees (most notably Hirst and Emin) caused a controversy annually.

The stuckist group of artists founded in 1990, who proclaimed themselves, "pro-contemporary figurative painting, with ideas and anti-conceptual art, mainly because of its lack of concepts". They also labeled conceptual art as "pretentious, unremarkable, and boring". On July 25, 2002, they deposited a coffin outside the Whitecube Gallery, marked "The Death of Conceptual Art". They also staged yearly demonstrations outside the Turner Prize. A culture minister, Kim Howells (an art school graduate) condemned the Turner Prize as "cold, mechanical, conceptual bullshit". In the same

year (2002), Ivan Massow, the chairman of the Institute of Contemporary Arts branded conceptual art, "pretentious, self-indulgent, crafty, and in danger of disappearing up its own arse." Massow was consequently forced to resign. In October 2004, the Saatchi Gallery told the media that "painting continues to be the most relevant and vital way that artists choose to communicate.

On the 1<sup>st</sup> of December 2009, in Lagos, at the symposium organized by the National Gallery of Arts, on the development of modern Nigerian art, Kolade Oshinowo, a prominent Nigerian artist, vehemently objected to such art practice that relates to conceptualization. In another development, a conceptual art work that was created by Mu'azu Sani entitled "In the Grave" (1993) generated violent reaction and unrest at the Kashim Ibrahim Library, Ahmadu Bello University, where it was exhibited. The painting was executed in mixed media, and had a dimension of about 90cm × 60cm. This art work portrays a cross and a minaret. On the cross hangs a banner in which it is written "I love Prophet Mohammed", while the minaret's banner reads "I love Jesus". Jari (1996) reports that a Muslim fanatic who was studying physics at that time destroyed the work because he was irked by the notion that Mohammed could love Christ. The scuffle that ensued between those in favour and those against his action led to the closure of the library for three days. Going by the comments/developments by artists and art galleries sited above, one is disturbed about the state of art in Nigeria and other places where the traditionally critical and unsympathetic views of many towards art is a problem.

Gushem (2006:58) reports that one day on September 2001, Jerry Buhari, exposed his students to contemporary art works that were conceptual and controversial in nature. These art works, which really were award-winning works were perceived by these students as "non-meaningful", and interpreted by them as "making no sense". This experience, however, provided the students an opportunity to be aware of the humanity of making art, and the role of art in society. Furthermore, a set of students of the painting section, Department of Fine Arts, Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria, saw the need for adventure into experiencing the contemporary consciousness and trend of art, which now aims at completely creating "new", temporary, unusual settings and unfamiliar

contexts. The conceptual works produced by these students as examination pieces, became an issue when the traditional method of assessing students' works in team took place. The works raised a number of questions, for which answers might not be adequately provided.

Conceptual works created by African artists are seen by the West as a deliberate misconception that the art of academic-trained African artists... "is a distorted copy, a mere imitation, of Western culture, and therefore lacks authenticity". Such assumption by the West should know of the fact that African art re-invigorated Western modernism art at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

### **Observation/Conclusion**

The creations of conceptual art works are at a strict and radical extreme. The art works that considered being conceptual are based on inquiring into the nature of art. The works are not just activity of constructing artistic propositions, but a working out, thinking out of all implication of all aspects of the concept of "art". In a sense; then conceptual art works created become "serious" as science or philosophy, which does not have "audiences" either. Conceptual art then is an inquiry by artists that understand that artistic activity is not solely limited to the framing of art propositions, but further, the investigation of the functioning, meaning, and use of any and all (art) propositions, and their consideration within the concept of the general term "art". The creation of conceptual art works can generate sensation, for they are works not commonly practiced in an African society using "haste". They are works that may not be accepted by all as "art", depending on our understanding of "art".

One may see conceptual art works as "fiction" materialized by presence alone, a validation of direct experience, and understanding of artistic license. Conceptual art works may be seen as contributions towards artistic development of modern art within the society and globally. The creator of such works that are conceptualized aim at commenting on the socio-political and environmental state of the society. The creation of such works in Nigeria can be seen as a part of exhibits of wide ranging art activities in the country. The success of conceptual art works is firstly, the unity that appears in the works, which

is noticeable, more obvious and more stimulating; secondly, the relevance of themes to compositional settings and the originality of the compositions. These artistic productions should be a way of presenting meanings and expand in relation to its forms. The relevance of conceptual art in modern art in Nigeria does not seek to supplant existing modes of existing production and presentation, it rather simply responds impulsively to the changing attitudes that characterize contemporary art around the world. Onuzulike (2002: 19-20) posits that in doing this, it renegotiates existing boundaries of artistic discourse in Nigeria, broadens creative options and adds to the cultural menu available in the country.

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