

The Innovative Potential of Waste as a Medium in Creating Art.

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Abstract

Since the emergence of contemporary art in Nigeria, art schools within the country have graduated individuals resulting in the gradual increase in number of practicing and professional artists over the years. Due to the traditional training received in the art schools, it is usual to find visual artists (most especially, sculptors and painters), commencing their practice with conventional materials and techniques. As these artists delve further into private practice, some began to diversify into experimenting with new ideas, media, and techniques and modes of expression. These explorations, that are at times a departure from traditional trends, consequently translate into innovations, which amount to new contributions for the art field. The use of improvised and recycled waste materials is a global trend and should be seen as a vehicle for development in the visual arts. It also encourages waste to wealth in the country. The paper made an overview of innovative practice by three academically trained professional visual artists namely; El Anatsui, Bruce Onobrakpeya, and Jacob Jari. A general background, the media, techniques and styles of these artists formed the focus of the appraisal. It was discovered that, each of these artists has contributed innovative means of producing art forms. And in conclusion, finds the use of unconventional media as employed by these three, to be a significant inspiration for development and training in the visual arts.

Key Words: Innovation, Waste Material, Recycle.

Introduction

Nigerian artists are quite rich in ideas, techniques and styles which can be seen in their works. Nigeria is blessed with an impressive number of creative, talented, hardworking and prolific artists in both the traditional and contemporary genre. Modern Nigerian art started many years ago, and the number of artists have continued to increase over the years as a result of the establishment of art schools, art movements and departments in the Nigerian Universities, Polytechnics and Colleges of Education all over the country, hence graduating hard working and prolific artists. Nigerian visual arts has witnessed progression, gained international attention and recognition in the world of art scene. A number of artistic styles flourished coupled with the high level of creative consciousness among practicing artists and art enthusiast.

Samuel and Agada (2010) observed that, some of these artists attended series of training in the studios, art workshops, art conferences, seminars, symposiums, art organizations in the country and abroad. Some of their works adorn leading museums, galleries and many private and public institutions in Nigeria and abroad. Since the development of contemporary Nigerian art a lot of artists have stick to conventional use of materials as a medium of expression. They produced works in different themes, media, technique and styles as a medium of expression. Gushem (2006) averred that, traditionally, painting was done with oil colour, water colour, gouache, tempera on exterior surface. This declaration proposes that two components were essential to traditional modes of painting, wet colours of different pigment base, and the support or plane where they are applied. For sculptures, clay, stone, wood, bronze, copper, gold, marble, and later cement were the recognized modeling media. These methods were for a long time the accepted norm, and art forms were assessed on the basis of conformity to application of set down principles in solving use of conventional art materials. But today the trend of event have continued to change over the years where alot of artist, especially painters and sculptors have resort to the use of unconventional materials as a new trend and innovation in the art industry. A few artist among those notable for such include Bruce Onobrakpeya, Jerry Buhari, Jacob Jari, Tonie Okpe, Deborah Maikafi, Ayo Aina and a host of others that the writer is not aware of them.

Samuel (2006) also supported this view saying many artists in Zaria Art School started to diversify their approaches using unconventional, cheap and available materials for art expression, they influenced other artists. Jari (2006) also admits that, artists share common approaches and sources of inspiration despite their varying styles and media. They also drew from the different traditional forms such as architecture, wall and calabash decoration, body tattoos, beliefs, applique and textiles. All these brought innovations into the main streams of contemporary Nigerian art scene. It guarantees

every artist the opportunity to explore his or her creative ability in a world replete with creativity according to Samuel (2006). Artists now create gorgeous and unique products by using discarded materials founded in their environment. They produced those pre-existing materials, reinterpret them, then offer them a new form with new purpose, thus forming never seen before recycled art. This they try to improvise these materials or found objects which the society considered something put aside or thrown away, as not good enough to be kept. Recycling provides inexpensive materials for the production of art, therefore, many artists in Nigeria have taken interest in it. Dogo in Obeagu (2007) opined that, to transform a waste object in order to give it a new dimension is like giving birth to it all over again. He believes that art should not be restricted to any stereotyped convention. Since material has just one value it has changed people's perception of rubbish.

Artists all over the world before the advent of the 21st century have been exploring improvised and recycled materials for visual expression, through a process called conversion and the resulting art works are significantly expressive and aesthetically appealing (Lasisi et al, 2014). Conversion as stated by Filam in Ademuleya (1999) further refers to the used of items or materials for another purpose different from its original functional status or practicing artists, who have consistently engaged in experimenting and devising new medium, ideas, new materials to confront their ever changing artistic demand, thus; breaking bar view in the transformation of visual ideas and forms. Expression of form using recycled waste materials has led to innovative techniques of improvisation based on resource fullness, through exploration in the visual arts. Painter and sculptors alike have boldly conceptualized their thought process, to accommodate various ideas in their environment. David Kolaene a South African artist posit that, nothing should be lost, nothing should be wasted, life must recreate itself; life is a cycle. No material has just one value. Anything can be manipulated.

Anything can be manipulated to become an art material but it takes artistic insight to be able to recognize the value inherent in any object. Understanding this has changed people's perception of rubbish. This paper therefore discusses the use of unconventional material (waste or Junk) as a new trend in studio art practice which initiate innovative ideas. In view of this, the writer define terms/concepts that relate specifically with main issues contained in the paper. The paper also highlights the novel and creative use of unconventional materials in the works of renowned and prolific artists like El Anatsui, Bruce Onobrakpeya and Jacob Jari.

Innovation, Waste Materials and Recycling In the Visual Arts.

The word innovation as used within the context of this paper, means an invention or new method of doing something (Encarta Dictionary, 2009). Two things are signified here; the production of something that is entirely first hand, and from original idea of the maker. The second is discovering and making use of a fresh technique of creating an art work. Innovation could therefore be taken as the process of translating an idea into a useful product that involves deliberate application of imagination, and initiative in deriving greater value from available resources. Waste material in particular, has been found to form a significant source for art born out of innovation. The term waste simply connotes something, which the owner no longer want at a given time and space and which has no tangible or perceived market value. However, what one regards as waste may not be totally useless as it can be recycled to produce new products. Waste materials are either solid or liquid remains or by products of materials that are produced out of human activities that are no longer useful to the initial producer. Some of these materials have detrimental effect on human health, the ecosystem and the environment (Boyi and Barwa, 2015). Gushem (2005) also supports this view saying waste simply means what the society consideres as something put aside, or thrown away as not good enough to be kept. Waste materials include spare parts of electronics, cars, motor bike, saw dust and organic matter like vegetable.

Recycling is a process that converts waste materials into new products. It identifies the usefulness of waste materials, reduce the consumption of fresh raw materials, reduce energy usage, reduce air pollution and water pollution. Recycling is a key component of the Reduce reuse and recycle waste hierarchy. Aside the aforementioned, recycling materials include any kinds of metal, Saw dust, plastic, grass, paper, leather, bottle tops, discarded cans from beverages and many more. Materials to be recycled are either brought to a collection centre or picked up from the curb side, then sorted, cleaned and reprocessed into materials bound for manufacturing according to Lamidi et al (2014).

The Use of Unconventional Materials in Art Practice

The writer in the beginning of this paper examined how artists have faired over the years using conventional materials as a medium of expression in studio art practice. However, recent trends in

paintings and sculpture shows that most of these artists have now engaged in the use of unconventional materials in art (termed as waste or junk) as a new trend and innovation in art. They have explored and experimented with these materials in art using different styles and techniques. The quest for something new and knowledge in art leads to this development, which enables the painters and sculptors to discover, explore and experiment with unconventional materials that the society considered as waste, junk or rubbish.

Jari (2006) averred that some artists were concerned with elevating rubbish to the position of prominence. Anything could pass for art and so their media included unimaginable objects especially if thrown in the bin; such objects include worn out slipper broken bottles, towels, tires, discarded bicycle parts and so on. Samuel (2006) also submitted that, the issue of recycling materials became the order of the day in the art scene, where many artists experimented with it. However, as far back as 1990, the Zaria Art School has influenced the use of unconventional materials in art in Nigeria, and it has been a thing of acceptance in the new directions. He went further to say that these artists desire to create new forms in art as well as adopt unconventional approaches to art. These artists have gone beyond the realm of creativity into the form of representation. This they do to encourage individual styles of expression. Their artworks address some vital ills done by persons in the society as well as caution people from retroactive behaviour.

Presently, artists especially painters and sculptors from different Art Schools, Art Movement and Art Organizations are doing things with unconventional materials to create decorative arts, installation art and craft. In the quest for innovation, there is a rigorous manipulation of media thus bringing about the expressive potentials of the artists. This leads to creative consciousness among practicing artists and art became something to marvel upon. This is because there was exploration of a wide range of materials which were improvised for the purpose of making art. Their themes were derived from the traditional sources such as myths, religious activities and philosophical views as manifested in their works. Egonwa (2001) posits that there is no doubt that the Zarianists hold an important position in the evolution of style trends in Contemporary Nigerian art. The creative ideology which they popularized paved the way for the growth of artistic styles at regional, national and continental levels. This paper seeks to look into the works of some selected artists who have used unconventional materials for artistic expression.

El Anatsui

Anatsui (b. 1944) is a Ghanaian sculptor residing and practicing his art in Nigeria. He has been identified as a paradigm of artists whose innovations in arts reflects much upon and about the Nigerian Art scene in which he has lived for a long time. Born in Anyanko within the Volta Region of Ghana, Anatsui trained as a sculptor at the College of Art, Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology, Kumasi in Central Ghana between 1965 and 1968. Afterwards, Anatsui moved to Nigeria and started teaching at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka where he later attained the position of a Professor of Sculpture. The October Gallery (2010) describes El Anatsui as one of the most exciting contemporary visual artists of our time. According to Boyi and Barwa (2015) emerging from the vibrant post-independence art movements of 1960s and '70s West Africa, he has gone on to receive widespread international acclaim for his sculptural experiments with media, form and tradition.

Anatsui's experimentation involves waste materials including metals, aluminum strips, bottle tops, rusty metal like cassava graters, evaporated milk cans, railway sleepers, driftwood, iron nails, old offset printing plates (including those used for obituaries), aluminum bottle-tops, etc. He has ingeniously utilized tools and equipment such as chainsaws, welding torches, and has employed techniques as welding, beating, and even carrying out unorthodox processes of sewing metals. The October Gallery states:

...he has shaped found materials that range from...iconic bottle-top installations which have provoked a frenzy of international attention between 2002 and the present, with institutions queuing to acquire these mesmerizing works. Created from many thousands of aluminum bottle-tops wired together with copper, these magnificent wall sculptures continue to excite and amaze audiences wherever they are exhibited.

The preceding suggests that, Anatsui only delved into this kind of innovation after a long period of studio practice. It is equally obvious that, some of Anatsui's remarkable innovative works include his iconic bottle top installations which are assemblages produced on a large scale, comprising of

thousands of aluminum pieces salvaged from alcohol recycling stations. They are converted into forms by sewing them together with copper wire, transforming them into metallic cloth-like sculpture. Anatsui has used waste materials to create a wide variety of novel sculptural forms including large scale wall bound and free standing installations. The artists had prior to this, been prolific in the production of sculptural forms. His preferred media then, were clay and wood which he combined with traditional Ghanaian motifs to create images and objects.

In the World, but don't know the World (2009) is a metaphoric sculpture in which Anatsui explores abstract forms in a horizontal orientation. Multiple colours are made to interact in rhythmic waves evoking a visual sensation of movement. The composition bespeaks gently stirred drapery, or the swirl of an African masquerade which seems to grow and diminish while in motion.

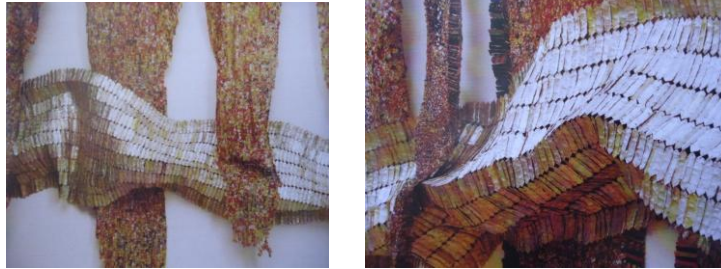


Plate I. *In the world, but don't know the World* (2009), El Anatsui. Aluminum and Copper wire. 560 x 1000 cm.
Source: Mojo gallery.com

Bruce Onobrakpeya

Bruce Onobrakpeya is a sculptor's son. He was born on August, 30th in 1932 at AgbarharOtor near Ughelli in Delta State, Nigeria. Onobrakpeya happens to be one of the pioneer graduates of the Zaria Art School in 1982. He specialized in painting and art history. Since graduation, Onobrakpeya has worked tirelessly as a studio artist. He has participated in numerous exhibitions both within and outside the country including Ghana, Kenya, Britain, and the United States (Babalola, 2004). Like Anatsui, Onobrakpeya has contributed greatly in the field of art. Scholars have ranked him among the most successful artists to have emerged during the 20th century. He is also believed to have maintained a convincingly commanding influence on generations of Nigerian artists.

Babalola further discloses that, it all started after Onobrakpeya purchased his own printing press. The first of these innovation recorded around 1966, involved putting together line blocks meant to be thrown away after use, to create collage in relief form. When bronzed up and painted, the outcome looked like an old art work. This novel creation came to be known as bronzed line relief. The second invention came closely after that, around 1968. This time, it was a peculiar deep etching technique as engraving on epoxy. Babalola observes that he became famous for this discovery. Onobrakpeya's third identified invention was a technique of reproducing his sought after patinated plates by casting them in plaster of Paris. It was named the plastocast. The fourth was a technique involving using the lino block to print on rice paper. It must have been in recognition of these exceptional contributions that, art historian, Kojo Fosu, pronounced Onobrakpeya as probably the most internationally acclaimed Nigerian master print maker (Fosu, 1986).

Onobrakpeya diversifies into installations arts from the mid-90s up to 2005. In these installations art, the artist gathered discarded objects including jute bags, animal bones, hides and skins, bits of metal, foil paper, plastic, assorted beads, used spark plugs, disfunctional computer parts, pipes, bottle corks, compact discs, chains, twines, and cowries to name just a few. The artist had at the back of his mind, spur others towards appropriation of found materials in solving the needs of artists. The installation geared at engaging a dialogue about safeguarding the environment. His work *Aerial Landscape* (fig. 2) exemplifies some of Onobrakpeya numerous comments about environmental waste. The piece is a composition made up of discarded computer components and accessories. The work appeared to have been inspired by a view of land from an airplane far above the ground. Onobrakpeya at the same time, tries to connect the beauty that could be detectable in machine parts, particularly those which are not too conspicuous. As an intellectual, and arranging his objects with a sophisticated precision, but not quite unlike those naïve airport artists of the early independent era, the artist also chooses this media to advertise the new information technology. The message is poignant: energy is available which can be harnessed for good, but is equally dangerous if out to bad use. Onobrakpeya seems to be not done yet, as the picture illustrates another possibility; that of a future life for man in the galaxies.



Plate II. Aerial Landscape Bruce Onobrakpeya, 2002



Plate III. Bridge Across the time. Bruce Onobrakpeya, 2002
Source: Locke ed. (2003):110.

This is an installation of old and new art materials, bone fossils, beads, and discarded mechanical and electronic parts including computer parts and jute fiber. The object in the composition leads from the fossils and the ancient art works of the past to the present computer age, and suggest a future of limitless possibilities. These two samples of Onobrakpeya's works embody the creativity involved in channeling unwanted resources into useful products.

Jacob Jari

Jacob Jari, was born in April, 1960 in Kabwir, Plateau State, Nigeria. He was trained at the Department of Fine Arts, Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria and holds Masters Degrees in art history and painting, as well as a Ph.D in art history. He has been teaching at his alma mater. Jacob has participated in many exhibitions and workshops at home and abroad. His current interest in art relates to reclaiming rejects and empowering them. Like the previous artists, Jari started as a painter in a more or less conventional fashion. He however began to diversify into exploring with unusual media and forms. His current interest relates with reclaiming objects and manipulating them to create images that impact new meanings about issues. Jari has consequently employed discarded objects such as pages from magazines, fabric off cuts, straw, bottle tops and corn stalk. When using magazines papers, Jari rolls them into capsules, before gluing them unto the surface or ground he is working on.

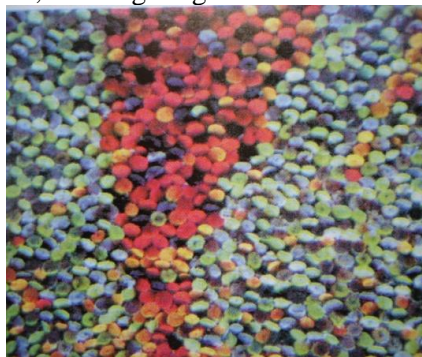


Plate IV. Title: Reading out, Medium: Corn stalk on Board, Dimension: 53 x 50cm, Year: 2013

The work can be viewed from two perspectives. The first is the impression of dense forest, within the composition, three trees are depicted each struggling to get its own share of the sunlight which is enjoyed only by the message behind this work. Usually Jari harvested the cornstalks, peeled and sliced them before dyeing them, using different hues of artists' oil colour. His forms are created unconsciously by pouring water onto the surface. It is from the water poured that images or patterns are marked out using pencil before the application of tesser. Jari (2002) says, the nomadic life of groups on the plateau, to a certain extent, is an influencing factor for his choice or use of cornstalk as

media. This differentiates him from other artists, though they be working with inspiration from their traditional forms. His inspiration for using cornstalk to express himself is drawn from his own background. The overall concept of using cornstalk is the idea of second harvest where he goes to harvest the waste or reject of the farm. He elevates waste to a position of prominence by working on them, cleaning, shaping and composing them into a surface. Nwankon (2000), states that Jari's exploration, oscillate from one reject to another; from using cornstalk to using left over fabric from the tailors. However, the fundamental message has remained the same.



Plate V. Jacob Jari. *Without colour II*, 2010 fabric, Measurement; 50 x 50cm Catalogue of an exhibition; Sani, 2012.

Plate V, titled *Without Colour II* is another work in the bullet-hole style, that he used fabric. In this abstract composition, the artist felt it should be monochromatic, yet with interactive patterns, which create a rapid rhythmic movement of lines and bluish colours. One fascinating thing with this painting is in the concept of imagining there should be an image, or an illusion of an image that is not non-existence, yet one feels not convinced that there are no images within the paintings. The artist learnt this technique which creates bullet hole like capsules during a trip to Uganda.

Summary and Conclusions

From the foregoing, there is no doubt that there are new developments in the growth of contemporary Nigerian art from its inception to date. There is a shift from the use of conventional to unconventional materials in art, all with a view to explore and experiment with something new. Many artists presently have diversify their approaches using unconventional, cheap and available materials for their art expression. They have also turned what would have been considered waste/ rubbish into objects of usefulness. This trend is now common among painters and sculptors. It comes with a lot of innovations in the main streams of contemporary Nigeria art scene. It largely depends on experiments in the use of media and techniques that artists create. This is so because some of the materials have probably never been used before diverse forms and new mode of expression. Based on these, it can safety be observed that, artists should look into the viability, potentials and prospects of using conventional materials in art as a medium of expression. These materials, as observed by the writer, broaden the thought process of the artists and help direct a personal code of expression. It is, also the submission of this paper that Nigerian artists are blessed with abundant working materials if only they are innovative and can open up their minds to accommodate waste. The paper recommends that unharnessed potentials exist in the exploration of unconventional media, and artists in training stand to benefit from embarking upon exercises involving discarded materials. This is simply because waste or discarded materials are available everywhere in abundance, and at little or no cost at all.

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