

## LEAD PAPER

### Art Purpose and Function: Understanding Sustainable Development Goals Through Selected Art Works

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#### Abstract

*There are little reflective points of agreement on what the content, concept and meaning of art is universally. This is because of its widely divergent meanings and interpretations that shifts and changes constantly. Art continues to grow and evolve with the times. It envelopes itself in all aspects of life and has and will continue to be used to initiate, develop and sustain a varied nature of concepts, ideologies, and philosophies. This paper summarily explores the functions/purpose of art in relation to the human condition and how it can be used through selected artworks to better understand the 17 United Nations sustainable development goals.*

**Keywords:** Art, Sustainable, Purpose, Function

#### Introduction

Arts ability to reach and influence diverse forms of human endeavour is both laudable and diverse. Being a very high and enigmatic form of human activity, art could entail simply the creation of visual, auditory and performed artifacts and artworks that succinctly express the creative imaginations as well as technical skill. All of these are intended to elicit either an outright or under stated outburst of appreciation for the display of creative dexterity, beauty (aesthetics) in the finished work or the emotional connotations the work embodies or projects. Art is essential to mankind's lifestyle as posited by Ubani (2008) who infers that, "art affects and effects both the physical and spiritual aspect of life". Individuals often experience a unique form of stimulation which presents as enthusiasm when encountering diverse forms of art. What is apparent as stated by Ubani is that art projects factors that include the psychological and philosophical trends of modern assumptions and superstitious belief that affect the perceived standards of life.

Art has and continues to affect a great number of activities and functions throughout history making its purpose difficult to abstract or quantify in any single discourse. Art is for the most part employed in many complex and simple contexts yet it oddly remains fundamentally obscure in nature. It is not that understanding, contemplating, reflecting and applying it is difficult or unreachable; it is simply due to the fact that, there is little reflective points of agreement on what the content, concept and meaning of art is universally. This is chiefly because of its widely divergent meanings and interpretations which shift and change constantly. It is an endeavour that defies the use of a single and sufficient point of departure since its inception till date. What is certain and bankable about art is that it continues to grow and evolve with the times. It envelopes itself in all aspects of life and has and will continue to be used to initiate, develop and sustain a varied nature of concepts, ideologies, and philosophies that encompasses religion, economics, society, politics, aesthetics as well as sustainable developmental goals/issues/ideals.

This discourse brings forth a tentative overview of how art is applicable in crucial aspects of life's development and growth. It looks summarily at the functions/purpose of art in relation to the human

condition and how it can be used through selected artworks to better understand the 17 universally established sustainable development goals. Ultimately, the central purpose of this article is to securely situate a clear understanding of how art and its many forms are/is and will continue to be indispensable to human growth and all forms of sustainable development.

### **Function/Purpose of Art**

Awogbade (2012) is of the opinion that “Art is one of those things which, like air is everywhere about us but which we rarely stop to consider. Art is present in everything we do to please our senses. Art is a tool subject because there is no subject that can do without some aspects of art. Art helps to develop the ability to accommodate each other and respect as well as adopt other people’s view” (p.I). Awogbade’s exposition on the subject of art exemplifies the proceeding argument that art is far reaching in nature. Mitchell (2011) posits that “art has the potential to give viewers a new experience of reality, when it is well done, art can re-order and reform the world for us in a way that words alone cannot do” (p.329). A work of art by a gifted artist has the same potential as that of a skilled philosopher, both of which can lend to the questioning of one’s common sense version of reality and provide an alternative view of the world.

Art is a global activity which encompasses a host of disciplines as historically evident by the range of words, and phrases which have been invented solely to describe the various forms in which art exists. Examples of such invented phrases include; Fine Arts, Liberal Arts, Visual Arts, Decorative Arts, Applied Arts, Design, Crafts, Performing Arts, and much more. The world of art is highly complex in its entirety, yet not in its multiplicity of forms and types, but mainly in terms of its historical, cultural and sustainable roots. Again, what this serves to enhance is the fact that attaining and “even broad consensus as to what can be labelled art is likely to prove elusive” (Encyclopaedia of Art). However, when it comes to establishing the specific functions and purposes that art serves; the options are endless and just as dynamic in nature. Against this view, one discerns that art is capable of accomplishing much more than other disciplines can; mainly because it provides a finite rendition of an infinite reality. The purpose/function of art cannot be approached as suggested by the mystics, logically or rationally. They infer that art’s purpose is not “knowable through a singular means”. It can however, be successfully determined through intuition. The kind of intuition considered suitable for determining the purpose and function of art as described by Schelling is “aesthetic intuition”, which he defined as “intellectual intuition” becoming “objective and universally valid” (Mitchell, 2011: 322). Artistic creative processes can apprehend and reinterpret the truth about reality in a broken-down form that enables clearer engagement and understanding by an audience/viewer. Whether this reality is simple or digestible enough is not an available concern of art rather it is its purview to attain a fusion between subject and object, then; through “aesthetic intuition” or contemplation, share the discovered knowledge.

Art has had a great number of functions throughout history; this makes identifying and outlining a concrete set of purpose and functions abstract or difficult to qualify. This is also compounded by the availability of multiple concepts with regards to art’s purpose and functions. Beginning this line of ambiguity is the use of the words purpose and function when discussing what art is about. While grammatically, *purpose* means “an object to be reached, a target; an action; or a goal, *function* entails “what something does or is used for” (wikipedi.com). The interchanging or juxta-positioning of both words in understanding the core of art enhances its complexity as well as its applicability. This however, does not communicate that, the purpose or function of art is vague, rather it establishes to the reader that art is in fact multifaceted, unique and having of a plethora of reasons for being created. Art purpose and function is generally grouped into two; motivated and non-motivated functions/purpose. Motivated functions/purposes of art refer to intentional conscious actions of the artist or creator. Such motivated functions may bring about change in the society in terms of politics, religion, justice and so on. Motivated functions of art address and comment on society, convey a specific emotion or mood, address personal or group psychology, illustrate occurrences, experiences

or simply exist as an outlet or source of communication. Examples of motivated function of art include but are not limited to the following; communication, entertainment, Avant-Garde: Art for political change; Art as free-zone, Art as social; Art inquiry, subversion and or anarchy, Art for social cause, Art for psychological and healing purpose, Art as propaganda or commercialization, Art as fitness indicator as well as art as therapy. The enumerated motivated functions of art are not mutually exclusive as each may overlap with another. What is important to note here is that the purpose and or function of art is very wide and capable of affecting many facets of life.

### **Art for Social Cause/Sustainable Development Goals**

Arts purpose and or function for social cause is considered to be crucial to this discourse because it allows for the situating of sustainability within its confines. Art for social cause's main objective is to create, raise and sustain awareness for a variety of causes; which may include but not limited to social injustice, social issues/problems such as climate change, human trafficking, race and gender issues, pollution, under-development and many others. Art for social causes can be and has been appropriated to fit a variety of human causes. One of such causes and or initiatives is the concept of sustainable development.

The sustainable development goals are identified as a collection of 17 interlinked global goals designed to be a "blueprint to achieve a better and more sustainable future for all (UN, 2017). The SDGs as they are called; are designed to be achieved by the year 2030. The 17 SDGs are; (1) No poverty (2) Zero Hunger (3) Good health and well-being (4) Quality Education (5) Gender Equality (6) Clean Water and Sanitation (7) Affordable and Clean Energy (8) Decent Work and Economic Growth (9) Industry Innovation And Infrastructure, (10) Reducing Inequality (11) Sustainable Cities and Communities (12) Responsible Consumption and Production (13) Climate Action (14) Life Below Water (15) Life on Land (16) Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions (17) Partnership for the Goals. The above listed goals have been designed to address and pay attention to multiple and multicultural issues such as gender equality, education, justice, peace all of which are considered to be adequately ethical and cultural issues that, cut across the globe thus, affecting the whole of humanity.

Like art; the SDGs affect every aspect of life in one or multiple ways. SDGs seek to attain a broad base set of ideals that are determined or projected to ensure an elevated and sustainable standard of living for all mankind. This aspect of the SDGs aligns with the variously enumerated motivated and non-motivated purposes and functions of art. Like art, the SDGs use all or every available resource in propagating their crisis. Therefore, SDGs and art can be said to be in synergy in their quest to better humanity.

Following the preceding arguments; it then becomes congruent for both concepts to align with each other to attain their set goals purpose and other functions. The individual goals of the SDGs can be interpreted in various ways which can enhance their productivity; one of the many ways SDGs can be better understood is through art. Every SDG as enumerated above has been visually interpreted in art for clarity and better engagement by society. This article identifies these artworks and critically analyses them in an attempt to highlight the link between art and SDGs. It also attempts to establish the position of art with respect to the productivity and functionality of the said SDGs. It examines through a critique of the SDGs artistic representations, how effective they are, will be or have been so far. It outlines, however, subtly, the artists and arts position on how necessary the SDGs are to the human condition and overall experience. It also questions thus, are the SDGs really necessary and are they attaining or achieving what they are designed to achieve?

### **Artistic Representations of The SDGs.**

Over the year's art has proven to be innovative and at times capable of predicting the future. From the renaissance to contemporary (modern) times/art; artists across the globe have selectively spoken through their arts to the challenges of the contemporary world. They have used the talents, materials, experiences, intellect, observations and their innate powers of deduction and creativity to offer visual representations of highly personal view points. These opinions, are most times immersed

in bouts and splashes of lyrical poetry, violence, sarcasm, metaphors, satires and other times doses of irony. Beyond the usual array of confusing statistics and gloomy critical analysis that accompany the assessments of the current human condition; art offers an alternative that can be described to be pleasing to the eye yet most certainly true to the human conditions.

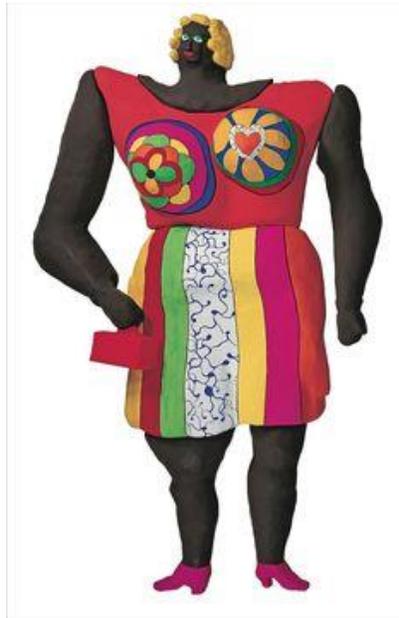
The works presented in this section illustrate aptly the concerns, emotions issues and contradictions underlying the SDGs. The works invite the viewer to critically examine the correctness and effectiveness of the goals set by UN. By the existence of these works one is even more convinced of the fact that Art and its numerous forms is a most valuable resource in/for achieving the set SDGs. Despite the fact that 17 SDGs have been enumerated both by the UN and subsequently highlighted in this discussion; with each SDG aptly connected to at least one artwork, this paper will select artworks that illustrate SDGs that are considered to be relevant to the current global climate. SDGs though set to cater for the entirety of humanity have the tendency to shift relevance as the times and occurrences happen, this is to say that while Hunger may have been a prevalent issue in 1990; new researches show that it has not worsened so much since then and can, therefore, be relegated to lower ranks on the hierarchy of issues that need to be addressed. Another instance is that of gender equality (SDG 5), though initially not regarded as a crucial element in the development of society, gender equality has risen to also be considered as a “fundamental human right and a necessary foundation for a peaceful, prosperous and sustainable world” (un.org). Following the above stated logic, only SDGs considered to be crucial to contemporary times will be analysed.



**Fig. 1:** Bartolome Esteban Murillo (Seville, 1618- Seville, 1682) *“The Young Beggar”*, 1645-1650, Oil on Canvas, 134 x 110cm, Louvre Museum, Paris. Source: [www.geneve-int.ch](http://www.geneve-int.ch)

SDG 1 indicates “No poverty”. The painting by Murillo “The Young Beggar” illustrates the physical manifestation of poverty through a hyper realistic rendition of the boy’s surroundings. Poverty is embodied by the wretched clothes worn by the young boy, the collection of partially rotten fruits, dried and chipped shrimps on the floor; the molten bread peeping out of the weaker basket is also a sign of how dire the condition of the young boy is. This illustration is further enhanced by the deep sad look on the boy’s face who seems on the verge of fears or in deep despair of his condition. However, in sharp contrast to the elements of impoverishment aforementioned above, is the child’s poise, grace and innocence; that, and the clever flow of light on child’s frame succeeds in drawing the attention of the viewer away from the misery and squalor of the boy’s surroundings.

Art here aptly illustrates the SDGs “No poverty” mantra devoid of any complex words or statistics. The image by its clever use of light, shade and composition also succeeds in providing the viewer with hope; a feat considered to be herculean in modern times.



**Fig II:** Niki de Saint Phalle (Newilly sur-Seine, 1930 La Joila, 2002). 'Dolores', Circa 1968-1995), sculpture, Sprengel Museum, Hannover, Germany Painted Resin/Mesh 216 217/550cm. Source: [www.geneve-int.ch](http://www.geneve-int.ch)

*Dolores* is monumental outdoor sculpture of a voluptuous and extravagantly dressed female figure. The figure which is made out of painted resin/mesh shows a very dark skinned oversized female figure in a brightly coloured dress, holding matching red purse with brilliant purple shoes. The dress which is multi coloured with wide stripes of brilliant shades of red, green, purple, red, blue and white has large floral patterns in the breast area thus, further enhancing the voluptuousness of the figure. The positioning of the figure's feet is in profile perhaps an ode to Egypt's style of art. The positioning of the feet either serve to assert women's power in society or it is simply balance issue with regards to the top-heavy nature of the figure in proportion to the size of the feet themselves. Niki's work is a form of protest against patriarchy and all forms of rigidity. The oversized nature of the sculpture recontemplate women's allotted roles in society. The enormity of the work is also a metaphor to the capability of women in society. This metaphorical statement is further enhanced by the muscular representation of the figure's hands and legs perhaps a statement to the hidden strength of women brought to life. Art works such as "Dolores" show that there has been progress over the last few decades in terms of "achieving gender equality and empowering all women and girls". More girls go to school worldwide, there is a significant reduction in forced and early marriages, increased awareness on the protection of women, more women in government positions and the continuous reforms ongoing around laws that advance gender equality. All these have been pushed further by the protesting nature of artworks such as this.

Art and artists especially of the female gender have contributed significantly to the progress rates of gender equality more than statistics and propaganda. The stark reality of inequality is usually succinctly captured in artforms in a manner that forces a face to face interaction with the issue. Art presents issues in a realistic form that most likely pushes action forward rather than stagnate it. Works such as *Dolores* ensure that, action is taken in line with the changes that are needed. Again here, the functionality and purposeful nature of art is effectively evident.



**Fig III:** Romuald Hazoume (Porto-Novo, 1962) *'Petrol Cargo'* (2012), Mixed Media installation, 120 x 450 x 180cm, Source: [www.geneve-int.ch](http://www.geneve-int.ch)

SGD 7 “Ensure access to affordable, reliable, sustainable and modern energy”, although seemingly on the road to success especially in wealthy, western nations. SDG 7 is far from making significant progress in the African continent. Works, such as *'Petrol Cargo'* by Romuald Hazoume brings to bear the inadequacies of goal 7. The work illustrates the illegal trade and transport of gasoline by Beninois from neighbouring Nigeria. The commentary provided by the October Gallery states that,

“in this work, the artist presents us with the dangers of unaffordable and un-reliable energy. In his native country (Benin) gasoline is smuggled in from abroad in extremely dangerous ways, including on motorcycles. The artist has laden the bike with precariously balanced glass jars that look ready to fall off and explode at any moment, as they really do in Benin, where the illegal petrol trade claims countless lives every year” (October Gallery, 2012).

The precarious positioning of the glass jars on the weather beaten and perhaps fabricated bike allude to the direct consequences of the corruption ingrained in the African continent where indigenous political leaders heavily influenced by the west monopolise the natural resources of their country thus, hindering the accessibility and subsequent enrichment of the masses. This assertion and evidence carrying installation and other relevant bodies of works discredit the UN’s assertion that,

“the world is making progress towards goal 7, with encouraging signs that energy is becoming more sustainable and widely available. Access to electricity in poorer countries has begins to accelerate, energy efficiency continues to improve, and renewable energy is making impressive gaining in the electricity sector” (un.org).

Works such as *"Petrol Cargo"* serve to puncture holes in assertions such as the above. The so called “electricity acceleration and energy efficiency” appears to be invisible in countries such as Gabon and Benin, while in Nigeria, it seems to be worsening with states experiencing months of total blackouts while other states are subject to electricity rationing that are sometimes as low as an hour or electricity per day. This then means that availability of electricity and other sources of energy is far from gaining any recognisable progress as far as the common is concerned. Arts ability to paint a realistic picture of the true nature of humanity is once again applauded in this instance. The success of the SDGs should be put to test by the consistent artistic representations that illustrate each goal with icy precision. Where the artistic interpretation is positive that goal can be adjudged to be progressive and vice versa.



**Fig IV:** Adel Abdessemed (Constantine, 1971) 'Hope' (2011-2012) Boat, Resin, 205.7x599.1x243.8cm, Source: [www.geneve-int.ch](http://www.geneve-int.ch)

Reducing inequality within and among countries is goal 10. It is designed to ensure that no country is left behind as an integral part of attaining the SDGs. The work by Adel Abdessemed titled "Hope" again contradicts the progress of goal 10. The work consisting of an old boat found abandoned on a beach; typically used to illegally smuggle and transport immigrants in pursuit of a good life in western countries. The boat used as it was discovered has been filled to the brim with black bags cast in resin from stuffed garbage sacks. The analogy is between the trash bags and the boats former occupants is at one point harsh, derogatory and crude. While on the other hand the image is both provocative, explicit and a stark representation of the inequality that goal 10 envisions itself to be progressively filling. The increasing occurrences of such perilous voyages by migrants egged on by conflict and unsavoury chaotic conditions is weightily represented. It alludes to the fluidity of situation and the urgency with which favourable change is needed especially in third world countries.

The inequality gap within and between countries is widening consistently and of growing anxiety. Art's concern is the drawing up from reality to furnish relevant commentary that can cause changes that benefit humanity at large. The expertise that abounds in the arts is limitless in its functionality and adaptable nature. Art positions itself consistently to the productive service of humanity.



**Fig V:** Francisco Jose the Goya if Lucientes also called Francisco de Goya (Fuendetodos, 1746, Bordeaux, 1828) fight to the Death with clubs (1820-1823) mixed Method on mural transferred to canvas, 125 x 261cm, Prado Museum, Source: [www.geneve-int.ch](http://www.geneve-int.ch)

SDG 16: promotes just, peaceful and inclusive societies. It is one of the most challenging goals. This is because of the alarming rate at which conflict, insecurity, weak institutions, corrupt leaders (ships) and limited or non-existent access to justice continue to grow. Fig. v titled "Duel with Cudgels, or Fight to the Death with Clubs" by Goya is a disturbing representation of contemporary humanity's proclivity towards violence and mayhem. The painting by Goya is a part of a group of works by the artist known

as “Black Paintings”; as a result of the heavy use of dark pigments and blacks; also, so called as a result of the sombre subject matter. Through historical investigations it is documented that duels that allowed opponents to club each other to death were allowed in Aragon (Autonomous community in Spain) and Catalonia (Also in Spain). The painting bears witness to the age long inclination of humanity towards violence even as a sport. The painting though set in earlier periods, captures the baseless, useless and brutal violence that permeates today’s contemporary societies. The work despite how old it is; continues the mysterious and enigmatic problems of contemporary culture and its moral considerations or lack thereof.

Dewey (1958) asserts that, “art is neither an outer product nor an outer behaviour. It is an attitude of spirit, a state of mind, one which demands for its own satisfaction and fulfilment, adapting of matter to new and more significant form”. The above assertion by Dewey lays further credibility to this article’s line of discussion that art’s functionality and purpose is limitless. This is further evidenced by the line-up of works that have been discussed. No other human endeavour is able to transcend time and its limitations as art is capable of. The suitability of art as a capable tool for the attainment of the SDGs has been effectively established.

### **Conclusion**

The effectiveness of art as a functional and purposeful tool for the attainment and understanding of set SDGs is largely an issue of expertise of which this article shows is not lacking. Art is a language of expression and should thus, be channelled towards communicating the laudable and grandiose goals of sustainability. Using the lived experiences of individuals, art is able to enrich the entirety of humanity through the satisfaction of instincts, re-education of the status quo as well as the transmission of cultural heritage and the extension of social consciousness. Art ensures human development in a unique way that, is both philosophical, simplified, complex and logically organized but never failing to influence society.

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