

FABRIC APPROPRIATION IN SCULPTURES: AN ENQUIRY INTO MEDIA AUTONOMY

Onyishi, Erasmus Odoja¹ Enya Eleme Echeng³

Department of Fine and Applied Arts,
University of Calabar, Calabar, Nigeria

erasmusonyishi@unical.edu.ng

onyishierasmus@gmail.com

elemienya@unical.edu.ng

And

Onyishi, Uchechukwu Charles²

Department of Fine and Applied Arts,
University of Nigeria, Nsukka.

onyishi@hotmail.com

Abstract

Creative media, such as fabrics, bring with them some natural properties that are specific to the artist, serving as clues to their workability and behaviour. What happens when these materials are disentangled from the shackles of their stereotypical endowments? What meanings are lost or perhaps what meanings emerge, when they are displaced from their hackneyed habitats? Or does newness arise from recontextualization even when the “new” carries with it “old” properties? This study, through participant observation and content analysis, explores the overlapping tendencies of representation and reality by re-interrogating the certainty about the autonomy of the medium in terms of its properties and meanings. It examines the shifting, amplifying, or losing of meanings by this medium when used or removed from its conventional habitat. Instead of being limited to the meaning the medium is already charged with, the implanting, recharging, and supplanting of these meanings to filter in new ones are one of the objectives of this study. Primarily, the essence of attempt to extend the frontiers of creative media. Redefinition is the crux of this study. By infusing new properties into the existing properties of the media, traditional laws of materials are broken, and horizons are opened for further breaking and making of new rules, thus contributing to the inexhaustibility of creative ideals.

Keywords: Appropriation, Sculpture, Creative Media, Fabric, Ideation And Process

Introduction

The production of fabric is a craft whose origin is likely the same as that of man. Man's need for warmth, protection and privacy might be instrumental to his craving for clothing or its equivalent. Whether it was a cluster of leaves around the groin and breast or the manual extraction of more durable fibres from plants and animals to protect or cover himself, the origin of fabric or clothing dates back to the earliest humans. However, fabric production has been altered by industrialisation and the introduction of modern manufacturing techniques. Fabrics exist in assorted forms, the most common of which is in clothing. It is equally used to make containers such as bags and baskets. In the household, it is used in carpeting, upholstered furnishings, window shades, towels, and so on. It is conventionally used as a strengthening material in fibreglass. Here, the technically woven interplay of strings is softened or melted together by a combination of chemicals, such as resin, catalyst, and accelerator. The boundary of fibre has encroached into unsuspected quarters. Materials such as foil made from micro strings of metal possess similar endowments to traditional fibres. Micro strings of metal possess identical endowments to conventional fibres. Foil made from micro strings of metal, like conventional fibres, also possesses similar endowments. Foil made from micro strings of metal, like conventional fibres, also has identical endowments. This would be demonstrated under the heading "Ideation and Processes."

On the other hand, appropriation of visual culture and art has always been part of human history. Art History and art historical practice have a long tradition of borrowing and previously practised. Artists have always learned and progressed by copying and borrowing from one another. One is tempted to say that the act of making art began with appropriation; borrowing images, sounds, concepts from the surrounding world and incorporating them into art. Appropriation can be seen as in which art has progressed through borrowing.

Some might interpret Leonardo Da Vinci as an appropriation artist. Da Vinci used recombinant methods of appropriation, borrowing from sources as diverse as biology, mathematics, engineering and art, and then synthesising them into inventions and works of art. "His knowledge of anatomy was unsurpassed... and his interest in natural worlds of geology and botany was keen Cunningham & Reich (2006:19)

In the early twentieth century, Pablo Picasso and Georges Braque appropriated objects into their works. Picasso pasted pieces of cloth on the canvas. Afterwards, compositions *Guitar*, "Newspaper," "Glass and Bottle", in which Picasso used newspaper clippings to create forms, joined the Cubist category.

Marcel Duchamp also went as far as using existing art in his work, appropriating an apparent copy of the *Mona Lisa* into his piece.

Other Dada exponents, along with Duchamp, continued with the appropriation of everyday objects, a response to the oppressive intellectual rigidity in both art and everyday society.

After the Dada movement, the Surrealists also incorporated "found Objects" into their works. These objects took on new meanings when combined with other unlikely objects.

Jasper Johns incorporated found objects into his work in the 1950s. Johns also appropriated symbolic images such as the American Flag into his work. Andy Warhol and other pop artists appropriated images from commercial art and popular culture as well as the techniques of these in their works. (Appropriation Art, 2009). They saw popular culture as the main vernacular for making artistic statements. Meanwhile several other instances abound as testimonies to appropriation in every art movement, and artists working today increasingly incorporate known elements into their works.

"Some media lend themselves more naturally than others to the development of a full range of value", Cayton (2009:153). But what new meanings are unlocked if such media are appropriated or divorced from their natural contexts? Are there continuations, modifications delusions of original legacies left

by these materials, and eventual delusions of original legacies left by these materials, and eventual delusions of original legacies left by these materials, and eventual delusions of original legacies left by these materials in their newly generated state?

Why Fabric?

The nature and properties of fabric pose an interesting challenge that inspired the interest in this study. The draperies and flows are imbued with such elegance and drama that they keep the mind dancing. Since fabrics exist in varying forms and characteristics, some to negate most of the usual assumptions about what should be considered fabric. It is a likely perception that what is soft, smooth, and easy to work with. rugged Evidence abounds that shows some forms of fabric are sturdy and rugged in terms of behaviour. Between the obedient and the recalcitrant, one sees a variety of messages occasioned by the inexhaustibility of fibre language. For instance, which is common in the culinary world, could be pregnant with meanings. Although a metal fabric categorised as Lurax, it could also relate to cookery and dishing, as well as death and burial. Since foil is predominantly used in wrapping edibles, if man is wrapped in the same way, it could be an exploration of the interplay of death and birth, since the eater is also edible. Foil is the package for food before eating, while the coffin is man's package for the termites' verdict. Anyway, we are but potential meals on the dining table of time. Survey the metaphors/iconography in the following plate:



Fig. 1.1, Artist: Erasmus Onyishi, Year: 2011
Title: FOOD IS READY (Performance/ Installation)
Media: REPURPOSED FOIL, JUNKS AND HUMANS
Photo: The Artist

Interpretation

IF:

Stillbirth is FFF(FRESH FROM FARM),
The infant is PARBOILED,
The child is STEAMED,
The Youth is HALF-DONE,
The adult is BAKED,
The aged is FRIED,
The sick is ROASTED,
The healthy is FRUIT,
The casualty is CHOPPED,
The young is HOT,

The old is COLD,
Sickness is APPETIZER,
Tears are DESERT,
FOOD is LIFE,
FOOD is DEATH,
DEATH is FOOD,
Make-up is GARNISHING and
The EATER is EDIBLE,
Then,
FOOD is Ready.
(We are but potential meals on the dining table of time)

The foregoing example belies the essence of this study. That is, it does not dwell only on the visual representations but more on the philosophical implications of the viewed. For draperies could be likened to wrinkles as a metaphor for old age or ageing. "Art media, in recent times, have been radicalized to the extent that the artist rose from using non-conventional materials to being the material itself in artistic renditions" Onyishi E.O., 2023:34). There tends to be in recent times some blurring margins among conventionally distinct art professions (Onyishi E.O, Agbor NJ & Ochini EO 2024:1). The foregoing performance fuses visual and Theatre Arts.

Ideation And Processes



Fig. 1.2
Masking of persons for the "FOOD IS READY" performance

The process of generating, developing, and transforming new ideas or turning fluid thoughts into a tangible form is termed ideation. Ideas are the basic elements of thought that can be either visual, concrete, or abstract. Ideation is all stages of the thought process, from brainstorming to the development of thoughts. It is a crucial part of the creative process. Herein, ideas are propelled by the urge to reposition the thought process by placing familiar media in unfamiliar contexts. The image above reflects such media re-positioning.

The masking process with Lurax fibre (aluminum foil) involved several studio hands. Four people of similar heights were masqueraded as undertakers for the performance. Foil is a peculiar culinary medium used in wrapping edibles. The sight of it evokes the desire for or the idea of food. In this performance, the foil is a metaphor for food. Wrapping a man in foil makes the audience think of the man as edible. The eater is also edible. We are but potential meals. The casket masked with foil and filled with forms of drinks and sundry edibles gives the impression that man, tolling the biblical line,

who ate himself out of paradise, dies eating himself back to it. Inasmuch as we live to eat, we are killed by what we eat. In such a similar fate with the consumables as we are as well consumed by termites and flame (in the case of cremation) at death.

In another studio experiment, One explored the recontextualization of fabric. Here, strings of cloth are made from wider wrappers.



Fig 1.3
Slicing the wrappers
Photo: Candidus Onyishi



Fig 1.4
Masking Of The Branches
Photo: The Artist

Even the thin branches are painstakingly masked to seal the pores of the wood. Here, the inanimate is animate brought to life. The cloth assumes life as it follows the sprouting pattern of the branches, thereby creating a visual illusion of a natural, beautiful bark. Fibreglass is also used to generate sphere impressions as a visual allusion to heavenly bodies. The bi-coloured cloth



Fig 1.5 (The Finished Work), **VIRUS**, ERASMUS ONYISHI
7X19X28 FEET, 2013, WOOD AND FABRIC
Photo: the artist

Interpretation

Orderliness is an occasional episode in the general drama of chaos. The threat symbolised by the wood in its centrifugalism holds our worlds in balance, symbolised by the wood in its centrifugalism. The killer is as beautiful as the fabric that seals the pores of the branches, but its beauty camouflages its malevolence. Thus, it is a critique of our polity.

In another exploration of appropriated forms, an artist wrapped a bike with a conventional palm wine taper's apparatus in an effort to re-examine the nature of leadership in Nigeria.



Fig 1.6, ERASMUS ONYISHI, **WHERE IS THE RIDER?**, FABRIC AND PLASTIC ON BICYCLE
PHOTO: THE ARTIST

Here all the requirements for a palm wine hunt are ready, but where is the rider? The installation implies that amidst the rich natural cum human resources, the Nigerian nation still wallows on the slippery terrain of bad leadership. The beautiful outlay with its interesting and inviting colours, is my sculptural allusion to the competencies herein, left to the squandering mercy of greedy men.

The bicycle could be a metaphor for the itinerancy of most aboriginal African peoples. Constantly, they moved in search of succor. Another aspect of this is the nonchalance or indifference in terms of followership. As Willet (2002:16) puts it:

Many people of Africa lead a pastoral existence, herding cattle, sheep, and goats. They too lead a largely migratory life, seeking fresh pastures or water for themselves and their herds.

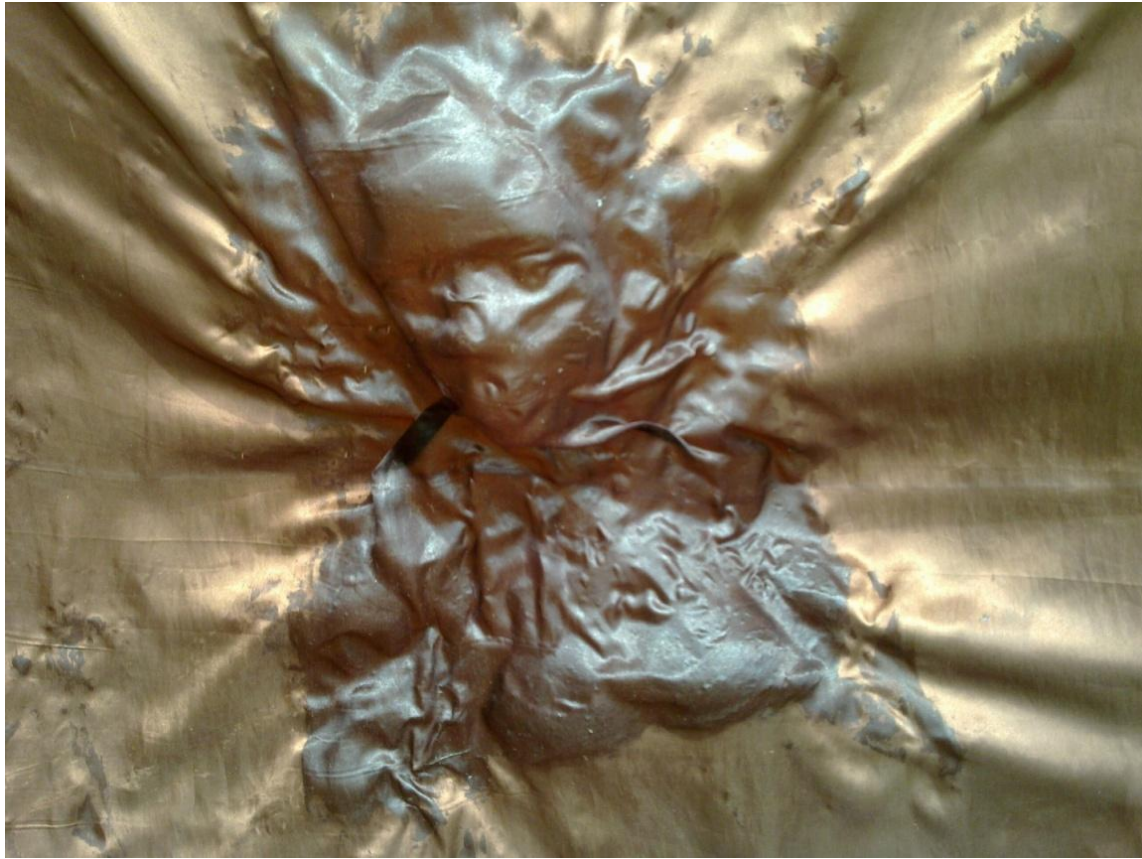
In another work, I explored the flamboyance of the umbrellas and likened them to the African mushrooms. This addresses tolerance and coexistence as spices of enduring progress. As Achebe (1998) reiterates, “artists should not stop at documenting social-cultural or religio-economic problems but also embark on a higher responsibility of proffering prescriptions.” The mushroom series is a visual whisper into the soul of the ailing nation. It further lends credence to Oloidi’s proposition that: “an artist is a surgeon who cuts through the flesh of a sick society using sympathetic instruments, thereby correcting those ills that are repugnant to human existence” (1997)



Fig. 1.7, Erasmus Onyishi, **Mushroom**, 2013
Umbrellas And Fabric, Photo: The Artist

Interpretation

“There is conscious effort on the part of the artist to have his actions culminate in beauty. Onyishi E.O. and Onyishi UC (2025:70). The beauty of life lies in peaceful co-existence. Each has its nature-endowed territory where it flourishes within its potential. Modelling and casting with fabric pose some spontaneity that is worth discussing. Below is an experiment in fabric casting.



Erasmus Onyishi, **You Can Shut Her Mouth, but not Her Eyes**, 2010
4X4.3 feet, Fabric and Stiffener, Photo: The artist

In the above example, a portrait of a lady was made with clay. Afterwards, a two-piece mould was produced in concrete. Vaseline was used both to allow easy pulling and to maintain the clean nature of the nylon. Instead of charging with fibre glass or other traditional media, a piece of nylon was spread into the mould, and fabric stiffener was applied with a bristle brush to allow the fabric to reach the contours of the mould. After being exposed to the sun, the fabric was pulled out. Due to the lightweight nature of nylon, lacking a strengthening core, some surface areas were damaged, resulting in an unintended design. There was a concentration of the stiffener around the left eye, allowing it to appear defined, whereas the mouth and the burst lost their definition, allowing them to appear less defined. In contrast, the mouth and the burst lost their definition. This piece was almost discarded as a failed, but on second thought, it reflects vividly the position of female folk in a patriarchal world. The undefined breasts and battered body could be visual allusions to genital mutilation, rape, sex-slavery, abduction and child labour. Their level of female participation in national discourse is represented here with a sealed mouth, indicating marginalisation in national discourse, which is also reflected in the sealed mouth, representing the marginalisation of freedom of speech. However, no matter how badly mutilated the female social portrait is, their eyes see.

Summary

The fabric whose origin was geared towards covering nakedness uncovers nakedness in the foregoing arguments. Thus, the recontextualization has brought about revelation through concealment. For instance, the covering of branches and sundry junk exposes the deficiencies of governance. These works often take the cue from incongruous elements, ideas and ideals. They are both personal and affective, and the artist is notably not in control of the outcome. The artist seeks an autonomy of media that does not conform and operates through absurdity. Thus:

Art is designed to be arresting, to engage our attention, to make us look and to be aware of our act of looking, and potentially to be enriched as a result. That gift of engaged vision, in contrast to our everyday inattentiveness, is one of the greatest, most excellent, and most significant benefits of art (Lazarri & Schlesier, 2008:8)

The new vistas evoke in us the same sensibilities that installations like these inspire. They reactivate our consciousness and channel our common notions to unexpected quarters. They achieve this by lifting familiar phenomena and fusing new ideals into them.

The controversy “appropriation” primarily hinges on issues of originality and authorship. Another problem is whether fabrics regarded as popular culture should be treated as works of art or as independent design units, therefore justifying the use of the term 'appropriation' in this context. Popular culture “consists of magazines, comics, television, tourist art, advertising, folk art, tattoos, customised cars, graffiti, video games, posters, websites, calendars, greeting cards, dolls, toys, etc.” Lazzari & Schlesier (2008:12). Folk art and tourist art encompass fabrics. The question is should they be called art or craft? But are they not infused with ‘style’ which Aniakor posits is “clue to authorship”?

Trained and untrained artists live, and many of them share the same collective experiences. The linkages of history and social differentiation form the warp and weft of a single fabric (Littlefield, 1999:48).

So, until the persona of the art maker is defined, it would demarcate what constitutes art and what does not. Like Onyishi E.O. & Onyishi U.C.E.O., Onyishi U.C.E.O. & Onyishi U.C.E.O. & Onyishi U.C. (2018:87) query “Who is an artist in the face of this eclectic milieu and what makes him one?” Therefore, if art can be conceived as an open-ended discipline with limitless options, this study would extend the frontiers of the visual vocabulary. Again, no ideology is definite. An end opens a beginning, and a beginning could be an end.

References

- Achebe C. (1987) *Anthills of the Savanna*: Heinemann, United Kingdom
Appropriation Art (June 14, 2019). Retrieved from Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia. <http://en.wikipedia.org/appropriation art>.
- Cayton C.A. Ed (2009) *Art Fundamentals: Theory and Practice*. Eleventh Edition. Canada: The McGraw-Hill.
- Cunningham, L. and John R. (2006). *Culture and Values: A Survey of the Humanities*. Volume Two. Sixth Edition. United States: Thomson Wadsworth.
- Littlefield, S.K. (1999). *Contemporary African Art*. London: Thames & Hudson
- Oloidi, O (June, 1997). *The Art of Black Africa: Readings in African Art*. Nsukka: Unpublished Mimeograph. Department of Fine and Applied Arts, University of Nigeria.
- Onyishi U.C (2025)E.O., & Onyishi U.C. (2025). Towards A- Local-Content Pedagogy: Economy-induced Approach to Sculpture Teaching. *The Artist Journal (TAJ)*, Volume 9, Number 1, April 2025.
- E.O., Agbor, N.J, & Ochini, E (2024). Towards A Professional . Towards A Professional Convergence: An Interrogation of Performance Art and Theatre Art. *The Artist Journal (TAJ)*, Volume 7, Number 1, April 2024.
- Onyishi E.O. (2023). Transmogrification: A Performative Interrogation of Existence and Death. *The Artist Journal (TAJ)*, Volume 6, Number 3, November 2023.
- Onyishi E. O. (2018). *Cookery as Artistry: The Nsukka Example*. Professor Bassey Andah, *Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences*. Volume 11. Bassey Andah Institute for Asian and African Studies. University of Calabar, Nigeria.
- Onyishi E. O & Onyishi U.C. (2018). *Which Craft? Re-interrogating Art and Craft*. IJRASS. Volume 11, number 1. University of Nigeria, Nsukka. Nigeria.
- Onyishi E.O. (2018) *Sculpture and Textiles Synergy: Some Studio Explorations*. *Journal of Ceramics and Environmental Design*. Vol. 5, No. 1, University of Port Harcourt, Rivers State, Nigeria.
- Willet, F (2002). *African Art*. London: Thames & Hudson