

PUBLISH OR PERISH; THE ARTIST'S EXPERIENCE: A FOCUS ON AUCHI POLYTECHNIC

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Abstract

There is a saying in academic circles that you either “write or perish”, this some may argue is detrimental to studio practice. The phrase does not only sound a warning to artists that are indolent to gear up but to also constantly keep most art lecturers on their toes. To some, ‘publish or perish’ emphasizes the importance of writing over art exhibitions, suggesting that writing has taken precedence over exposition of the work of art. Some artists are beginning to throw away their easel, spatulas, brushes, and clay to embrace publications in different journals, thereby negating the creative prowess that makes for healthy practice of the visual artist. Nevertheless, it is not debatable that as artists, we are highly practical people and our production speaks for us louder than any other means. For the above stated reasons, the views of different experts in the area of Arts, Science and Technology were sought and articulated to arrive at a final decision for artists in the academia.

Key Words: Exhibition, Studio practice, Creativity, Publish/Publication, Perish, Academia

Introduction

The phrase ‘publish or perish’ in academia according to Garfield (2010) can be traced to the expression which first appeared in an academic context in Logan Wilson's book, "The Academic Man: A Study in the Sociology of a Profession", published in 1942. The creative artistic production shows how proficient the artist is in his field. If the artist is not practicing, such is looked down on and becomes laughable among peers, when such an artist begins to publish without practical works to show or exhibit. A look at arguments put up by the likes of Egonwa who happens to be an advocate of “you either ‘write or perish’” makes it look as if artists are dullards who cannot write. It is for this reason that most artists especially in the academia want to prove a point, but in proving this point, a lot are neglecting the studio practice for paper publications.

Generally speaking, the emphasis on publishing has decreased the value resulting from scholarship. This therefore, has strongly been criticized on the grounds that most scholars spend more time scrambling to publish whatever they can get into print just to get promotions or job progression and not really spending time developing significant research programs. Similarly, humanities Scholar, Camille Paglia has described the “publish or perish” paradigm as “tyranny” and further writes that “The (academic) profession has become obsessed with quantity rather than quality stating that one brilliant article should outweigh one mediocre book.

Is writing more tasking or more intellectual?

Prior to recent times, the studio artist cum-academician were always in the studio practicing and exhibiting their works, but the ‘write or perish’ ideal has brought a death blow to such practice. As artists, our works should always be on display but as less works are being produced, less exhibitions are conducted due to the emphasis on publication. When exhibitions were formerly used as a measure of the capability of the artist much works were produced and much exhibitions showcased. To be a creative artist is most intellectual. Creativity is more intellectually tasking than writing. There used to be different scores for solo exhibitions while group exhibitions used to be the main stay. The number of such exhibitions determined the promotion of staff some fifteen years back. A group or solo Exhibition had three separate scores but the ideology of ‘publish or perish’ came to limelight in Auchi Polytechnic between

2004/2005 and things have never remained the same again. There was a time when artists would move in group to a faraway location as Ososo (a scenic town of streams and rocks located in Akoko-Edo Local Government Area of Edo State) to spend quality time together painting and such fall outs from the Art picnics or outings constituted an exhibition. To put up a serious solo-exhibition, one needs to have at least ₦300, 000 but with paper publication one needs less than ₦100, 000.

It was in a bid for artists to prove their substance and be at par with the world that they began to write and forge ahead; most do argue that it is the duty of the Art historians and Art critics to write on what the studio Artist produces and exhibits. The studio artists bring up trends in the society when they produce by the time they focus on writing, production suffers and growth is retarded. It is the Art Historians who should write about the studio artists and their productions. There used to be breakthrough in our schools from time to time but in the past fifteen years, no new style has developed because it is now 'publish or perish'. The studio is no longer a studio but study rooms (Uhunmwagho, 2015).

To be a creative artist is more intellectual, because it takes a very serious minded person to put together different ideas for visual conception. A Solo Exhibition requires more than thirty (30) paintings or art works, such take time and intellect. An artist should not be in the studio and at the same time write. The production of the art work is considered enough work for the studio artist. The way forward is for the artist to speak out and get things straightened out. Studio artists should go back to the studio; an exhibition must be held in a standard Gallery, must make a statement, have a theme and must be speaking in one direction. Such exhibition must contribute to knowledge. Exhibitions are meant to showcase ideas and not really merely for sale of the works. New trends are part of exhibitions. Exhibitions should be evaluated by their contributions to knowledge, that is, if there is nothing new then it is not really an acceptable or successful exhibition. Exhibitions are educative; a well-documented exhibition should be scoreable and must impact knowledge through what is on display or by the artist's statement.

A lot of people have shallow knowledge in the fields of Art History and Visual Culture; they are quick to jump into conclusion by saying that it is imperative to write. Why must any artist be subjected to storytelling before he or she can exhibit? The artists should at least be given the opportunity to express themselves only through the works of art that are being presented while the Art Critics and Art Historians be left to do the talking.

Must the artist publish?

The pressure to 'publish or perish' also detracts from the time and effort academics can devote to teaching allocated courses and mentoring students. The rewards for exceptional teaching rarely match the rewards for exceptional research. Many universities do not lay emphasis on the teaching ability of newly employed lecturers but rather lay more emphasis on publications. It is glaring that the quality and system of work has suffered due to publication pressures leading to regular misconduct and dubious morals. For majority of young artists in the academia; the writing is such that most people go to the web to copy and paste for publication. However, to answer the question of whether an artist must publish or not, the opinions and views of several artists are presented:

1. The view of Ikoro Emmanuel

According to Ikoro, a seasoned painter and chief lecturer, publication is good because that is the only way the artist's ideas or inspirations are made known to the world. The area he seems to disagree with is the definition being ascribed to publication. The definition of the word publication which excludes exhibition he says is very wrong. The artist adequate understanding of publication should include exhibition which means the same thing in different ways. If you have knowledge or an idea, it has to be published and when such is visually expressed, it is the same as publishing.

Explaining further, Ikoro states that an artist cannot produce a work of art this year, exhibit it and still want to present it the next year. The same goes with writing which once published cannot be republished another year. Any visual art products are in itself a publication that does not require vindication. The artwork is to the illiterate what a written work is to the literate. If you spend your time in the studio to produce works of art, what they are saying in their limited ways is that you will take time off to write about the work, about how you arrived at the

finished work or the process forgetting that the process undertaken in production is also a publication, and this means doing the work twice; the artist has done the work for people to see, therefore, let other people write the words.

The artist may not have enough words to explain everything he has done; in fact, nobody has the words to completely explain any piece of art. If it were possible to really do everything in words there wouldn't be need for art works, so the picture or artwork functions where words stop because words are not adequate enough to completely explain creative processes. Some of them are done under inspiration or trance; a situation in which the artist cannot ever explain the processes. The work is a third turner or activity so people try to use intellectual or scientific process to try to see or follow the process/method that the artist used. Asking the artist to now write is setting a different tune. Once an artist has completed a work, it is another stage for a new work. When an artist wants to now say let him first write what he has done then other inspirations running in his mind will die, that is what angers most artists.

This virus of 'publish or perish' started in the Universities and the Polytechnics by those who are not practically oriented. The artist in higher institution had not been able to progress when it comes to promotion beyond the level of senior lecturers for lack of publication.

2. The view of Dr Uhunmwagho Helen (A painter and Chief Lecturer)

According to Uhunmwagho 2015, a professional art body known as Pan Africa Circle of Artists (PACA) took a discursive forum to Abraka, Delta State, to meet with Professor Egonwa as a way of finding out and getting the artist enlightened on matters to do with the phrase 'publish or perish', so as to discuss and take a stand. This group consists of Professor Diakpariomre who was the Vice President of Pan Africa Circle of Artists (PACA), with Professor Grace Ogwu the Financial Secretary and Kent Onah the Secretary. It was after this encounter that every artist took the bull by the horn to prove a point that they are not dullards. They became determined to make a point that they can also publish but this now has taken precedence over studio practice, it has become an aberration which should not be acceptable. To publish is not bad but that it takes over studio practise is not a welcomed development. The art work should be enough to speak for the artist. As academicians, it is true that to publish will help heighten up the artist academically, but when the artists is expected to make publication take precedence over exhibition then it is an aberration.

Artists have the advantage of benefitting from both publications and exhibitions especially for those who specialise in Art History or Art criticism, they can write, for example Professor Clary Nelson Cole of the University of Benin exhibited round the world. His publications were his exhibition. Gani Odutokun of Ahmadu Bello University also excelled initially in practice, but when the idea of publish or perish came, practical intellectual artworks began to die. A well-documented solo exhibition was equivalent to a published book. Group exhibition was equivalent to a chapter contribution in a book. It simply means none is more important than the other; as such they complement one another. Writing is an attempt to illustrate intellectual reasoning. Writing is the attempt to illustrate or enlighten people, visual art is also the illumination of text. It enforces messages that ordinarily the written word cannot convey to everybody. In institutions, it is necessary to explain process and how things are done for future references, this is why it is good to document. It amounts to double work for the artist to create visually and still document literally. There are already people in the profession of writing or to analyse art works these are the art critics and art historians.

The PhD studio programme is here to encourage scholastic writing in art; those who wish to move in such direction have embraced it. There is nothing like equivalent to PhD you either have it or not. The artist is no longer anonymous. Artists previously did not have PhD holders in the studio area but today a lot has changed. Having a PhD involves a lot of writing and this needs to be encouraged. There is a kind of jealousy among the lecturers in other field, because most think art is just drawing and are of the opinion that drawing is that easy. The non-artist lecturers feel that the artist has the advantage of scoring cheap promotion points in exhibition.

On the way forward Helen (2015) explains that, we let the artist cry out real loud, to justify the downward trend of studio practise the past fifteen years. Artists read more than any other person; they are people to be feared, they take reading serious. If they don't then they cannot have anything to express. We all must encourage the young ones to read. Let artists write but

not critical writing such that it overshadows practice. Nobody can say we should not write; once we have taken interest for Art we should also have a flare for writing, we cannot divorce art from writing but we shouldn't let the artist write at the expense of the studio. In the presentation of an inaugural lecture is the theme - "artist given to write or exhibit; it is better for the art critics or historians to write than to allow journalists to write for the artist?". We have to educate those who are visually illiterate that when the artists exhibit, they publish. We need to educate the mass academia who are illiterates as far as visual works are concerned, that the art works they see are products of sequential process. Some see it that artists are making it too easily, then you as an artist needs more than one life to be a producer and also do the writing. The artists are now writing and getting promotion based on the challenge but are no longer producing, although some are rising up to the challenge, but they have taught many artists in the academia to become lazy towards studio work.

3. The view of Engineer Buraimah Jafaru

According to Engineer Buraimah, a Textile Design Engineer and former Acting Rector, Auchi Polytechnic, the artist first and foremost should not forget they are academicians; the creative ability given by nature does not preclude them from being academics. Taking it from another view, it is just like the engineers who also sit down to think, they have an idea and then also fabricate, this of course is equivalent to what the artist does. So if it has become mandatory which of course it is mandatory for now, then you have to publish. You cannot say you don't have the materials to publish. Before you start doing your practical work some thinking must have taken place or come to your mind and this thinking you document. We are in a world that is moving fast and we must move with the trend.

We are in an academic environment whereby the artists cannot isolate themselves from others. Since this is the management criteria for progression why should you isolate yourself. If you do not want to rise because of studio work, then you will look invaluable to every other person. It is when you rise that you can be at the seat of power to compete effectively. On the way forward Engineer Buraimah states thus; Exhibit as academicians by writing. This does not obliterate the creative aspect in you by devoting some time to your studio work. So you have to write and exhibit.

4. The view of Agbonghale Fred

According to Agbonghale Fred, a Chief Lecturer in the Science and Laboratory Technology Department and the Deputy Rector Administration, Auchi Polytechnic, the chemist goes to the laboratory and as well as publishes. He is first a lecturer in the quest to publish. Take a look at a moving vehicle, somebody must have sat down to imagine it, this thought must have taken several hours and then he put down his thought into materials that can be seen and the vehicle speaks for itself. The designer will have to let people see and know what he did by putting such down in writing. The same way the artist actualizes concepts and actualizes in a visual way. These ideas can also be put down in writing, so it's not only an art piece that would speak when the artist have an exhibition. Artists do take visitors round explaining what have been done. It is these ideas behind the concept that the artist puts down and calls publication. This can also be referred to as technical report which can be accepted as publication so the lecturers in Art and Industrial Design in the pursuit of documentation or publication would have a double advantage. When you write your technical report a point is scored when the works are exhibited another point is scored and at the same time the works can be sold.

5. The view of Omoruyi Gentle

In the words of Omoruyi Gentle, the former Dean of the School of Information and Communication Technology Auchi Polytechnic, Art is a practical vocation that requires a lot of time to bring out the best in it. It seems twenty-four hours is not enough for artists to bring up a work of art. The artist needs more time for practice and studio work, it amounts to doing double job when they are compelled to write and publish after a rigorous studio work and especially when compared with some of their colleagues who do not have practical works to produce. Is the artist going to exhibit the written paper or the work produced? Nobody will call for the written paper but the actual work produced. Documentation is a major reason meant for replication but the works of art are not meant to be replicated. If the engineer and chemist produce and document such are meant to be replicated, art works are not to be replicated or

duplicated and as such should not require written documentation. The writing of paper will not bring out the best in the artist but rather discourage production; if therefore, exhibition becomes less important it will only kill the zeal of the artist to be at his best. On the way forward he states that dialogue is required, for if the institution is proud of what the artists are doing then the artists should dialogue with the management, on ways to access the artist-lecturers based on the number of exhibitions they can organise.

6. The view of Professor Ononeme Efe

In the words of Professor Ononeme, a Sculptor/Art Historian at the University of Benin, a Solo exhibition is a little less than a journal publication. For one to become a professor for instance one should have some solo exhibitions and journal publications in International, National and local journals which should be reputable University based journals. The number for national based journals that are presented should be 50% of your total publication while 25% of those publications should be international and local publication. By local publication this refers to the universities that are in the catchment areas with the University in Edo, such would include Delta State, Anambra State, Ondo and Kogi states. Other journals from Universities outside these catchment areas are regarded as national publication while those outside the shores of Nigeria are regarded as international publications be it Ghana, India, America etc.

As University lecturers we don't have to rely on just exhibition. What about the documentation or the literary aspect? If we solely depend on exhibition, the people who did not come may not know about your style and by the time the exhibition is over everything ends there, those who even witnessed it may forget what they saw but the documentation or literary aspect, probably with some images published will always remain a reference point for upcoming artists. They will be able to see and read about your exhibition, your style and so on. If there was no documentation of the likes of Ben Enwonwu he would have been forgotten. Take for instance works like Ayanwu and Sango will only be seen and nothing will be said about them. The sculptural piece which is more than thirty (30) years is just there without documentation no one will know what style, concept, the message that influenced the artist. Some may see it as a block moulding machine and not an art work if there was no documentation or literary writing on the work.

In summary, for the polytechnic promotion to be worth its salt, it is recommended that studio practice should go along with literary documentation; otherwise they will continue to be looked down upon. It is easier to move while relying on paper writing. The ideals of publish or perish is been there a long time, the artist has been stagnated for a long time. The new crop of artists in the academics must be ready to come together as one just as they do in other disciplines. Before now the artists are referred to as mad people who are the never do well. This is a situation we placed ourselves and the new crops of lectures that are of like minds are ready to key into what is expected of the academics. In the area of PhDs, people are still kicking against it. What are we running away from?

7. The view of Professor Ogene John

Professor Ogene, a painter/ Art Historian at the University of Benin had this to say; If we don't encourage literary writing we will be going back to the dark age, the area of unwritten history that Africa has been suffering over. Works after they might have been buried and exhumed, people will begin to presume and speculate since there was no written documentation. They can't tell what you did so it takes you back to the pre-historic era and to move forward to the modern era which the westerners have already adopted, we must write because that is the only way we can sustain the history and culture of our people. So we should never discourage writing. That is why the new age artist has to be somebody who creates and writes well. It has gone beyond just studio work. If the said studio is suffering, yes let it suffer, it will only be for some time. Professor Ogene (2015) went on to explain what Wangboje once said "now that we are no longer human, let us see what we can do". It means that for us to move away from anonymity we have to establish that writing tradition. He also says that let us shift emphasis from making art to talking about art. He says the white man will come to Nigeria, stay for two weeks and go back and when he returns to us he comes in form of a book on what he studied in Nigeria, we then begin to reference it. Meanwhile here we are all of our life with all the information and things he is talking about the material are here with us but we never realize it.

So it is good to marry the two, we must marry both the practice and the documentation. Some will say they use to be strong in the studio but now that they have gone theoretical and literarily they abandon the studio now the studio is suffering. We will say they let the studio suffer a little. But as it is suffering other people that are producing the art are benefiting from the literary work

Most artists have the phobia for written works, they want to remain solely in the studio doing practical works. That mentality of excising themselves by not having the time for conferences, seminar etc. by so doing they exclude themselves from the limelight. You see the sociologist, anthropologist and their likes in places that matter taking decisions driving home their points and ideas for federal interest and at the end the visual artist comes around to kick against discussion taken and thereafter looked down upon. Because you are not part of the decision making and you don't contribute, the visual artists end up sitting at the corner crumbling and complaining. Writing comes with more knowledge and exposure; it is not enough to just write. If the visual artists are to write, such writing must be of quality. It's not a question of writing blindly. If the visual artists come up with poorly written articles, those in other professions will mock at them because they have this mind-set that the visual artists understanding is limited to studio practice and no matter how brilliant the artists are, they feel that the artists lack the universal theories and principle that will guide any rational reasoning in writing.

Conclusion

The way forward for the artists is to key into the now, be in the moving train by writing and practicing. Let us do the best we can to marry both. Be practice led and be theory driven.

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People Interviewed

Professor Ononeme E. - Deputy Dean Faculty of Art, University of Benin
Professor Ogene J. - HOD Fine and Applied Art Department, University of Benin
Omoruyi Gentle - Former Dean School of ICT, Auchi Polytechnic Auchi
Agbonghale Fred, - Deputy Rector Administration, Auchi Polytechnic
Ikoro, Emmanuel - Chief Lecturer and Former Deputy Rector Academics Auchi
Polytechnic.
Uhunmwagho Helen - Chief Lecturer, Director of Gender Studies Auchi
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Engineer Buraimah J. - Chief Lecturer and Former Deputy Rector Academics Auchi
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