

VISUAL ARTISTS' EXCHANGE WITHOUT BORDERS: FURTHERING ACADEMIC INTERACTION VIA SOCIAL MEDIA

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Abstract

Advances in information and communications technologies (ICT) have impacted on most facets of human endeavours. Education is one of such fields that has benefited from the developments in ICT. This has brought about a change in the traditional methodologies of information sourcing and sharing. Taking advantage of the ubiquity of mobile devices as well as the popularity of the WhatsApp medium, Rom Kalilu set up a mobile academic platform, where exchanges on visual art are explored. The main aim of the exchanges was to connect visual artists as a collaborative group which projects visual arts as an academic discipline that is dynamic and transcends borders. Drawing on from this paradigm shift in knowledge sourcing and sharing the model devised for visual artists has contributed immensely to breaking academic frontiers in the visual arts, in a most collaborative manner.

Key Words: Visual artists, Artists, Academic exchanges without borders, Mobile
Technology/devices, WhatsApp

Introduction

The use of mobile devices in seeking knowledge is widespread and fast gaining ground. Undoubtedly, this is a direct consequence of technological advances in information and communications technologies (ICT). The impact of digital technology is quite visible in most facets of humanity. For instance, in the field of educational, traditional teaching and learning protocols are been transformed. Interestingly, a teacher can deliver his other lecture from any part of the globe with students receiving such lectures in real time. These technological advances have led to new platforms like electronic learning (E-learning), electronic classroom (E-classroom), mobile classroom (M-classroom), mobile technology, and even learning via social media.

Furthermore, in tracking developments in academic interactions, the introduction and use of computers and other educational mobile tools are noteworthy. As noted by Goundar (2011) "we have used computers for some time to do almost everything possible and came up with many innovative ways to use computers for teaching and learning". In other words, computers and other mobile devices have afforded individuals and groups increased choices and opportunities to source for information, as well as share knowledge. This brings to fore Pence's (2007) argument that the emergence of educational mobile tools shows great potentials in helping students share and construct information and knowledge for learning. Globally, institutions and individuals are exploring the possibilities offered by mobile devices and other such technologies in advancing and sharing knowledge.

Judging from the foregoing, the idea of visual artists collaborating to brainstorm, critique and exchange ideas on an academic platform using WhatsApp is a novel idea. Specifically, visual arts include the traditional fine arts such as drawing, painting, printmaking, photography and sculpture. Also, media arts include film, graphic communication, animation and emerging technologies. Others are architecture, environmental and industrial landscape design, folk arts and works of art such as ceramics, fibers and jewellery works. Basically, visual artists are specialists in these areas.

Visual Artists without Borders: The Rom Kalilu Model

In 2013, Rasaq Olatunde Rom Kalilu, a Professor of art and art history at Ladoke Akintola University of technology, first mooted the idea of academic interactions with his Postgraduate students. In line with this, he created an educational website, the Rom Kalilu's website

(www.romkalilu.net). Today, this has manifested into a more diverse academic exchange platform of visual artists.

In creating this exchange platform, Kalilu explored the popularity of mobile technology. Specifically, WhatsApp instant messaging channel was employed. According to Alsaleem (2014); Shuaibu and Bala (2016), WhatsApp is a propriety cross-platform, encrypted, instant messaging client for Smartphones as well as laptops.

WhatsApp instant messaging channel provides for text messaging as well as sharing images, video and audio messages. In addition, the platform allows for group chatting, a feature that allows for instant chatting with up to two hundred and fifty-six people at the same time and in real time (WhatsApp Support Team, n.d.). Moreover, WhatsApp uses the internet to send text messages, documents, images, video, and audio messages to others (individually or in a group) using standard mobile cellular numbers.

Thus the basic requirement of members in a WhatsApp group is a mobile device with world mobile communication network. Following from this, the location of members does not really matter, in so far as there is mobile communication network from such locations. This is characteristic of Rom Kalilu's ideal of the visual artists' exchange without borders. However, even though the group is informal, discussions and exchanges are quite scholarly. Indeed, the platform is an exploration of man's hunger for inquiry into the world of visual arts.

In keeping with the major goals of setting up the platform for exchanges in visual arts, Kalilu (personal communication, February 2, 2016) specifically noted that engagements in the school will revolve around pertinent questions and critical issues of creativity, techniques, technology, the artist, architects, styles, provenance, policies, etc. in fine art, applied art, architecture and art history. In order not to deviate from the major objectives, some canons were made to regulate exchanges on the platform. These are:

1. Visual postings should not just be seen but should also generate constructive discussions and critique.
2. Members of the group who have challenges in the practice or scholarly issues may seek technical assistance and direction on the platform.
3. Innovations findings and also new directions by members may be broadcast on the platform.
4. Local, national and global new developments on issues and in disciplines that concern the platform may also be posted.
5. Research, professional and career opportunities in the issues and disciplines that concern this platform may also be posted.
6. Postings may be overt or covert, straight forward or witty.
7. Engagements on all the issues that concern the platform should be appropriately rigorous, scientific, creative and scholarly.

In summary, artists' exchanges on this platform should aim to enrich knowledge on art, foster dialogue on shared views, share and talk about personal artworks, deepen issues on the visual arts, and above all, connect visual artists.

Interactions on Visual Artists Exchange without Borders

The exchanges expounded in this platform were selected in no particular order. Even at that, deliberate attempt is made to pick and summarise discussions on interactions from diverse postings on sundry issues bothering on art and architecture. Where necessary, photographs and screenshots are also presented to illuminate some of the posts.

The nude installation (figures 1 & 2) posted by Rom Kalilu (June 8, 2016, was quite topical and engaged members in brainstorming on how life experiences, culture and environment could influence the way we relate to art and art works.



Fig 1: A screenshot of photograph of nude installation by Spencer Tunick as well as discussion thread on the nude picture. Posted by Rom Kalilu.



Fig 2: A view of nude installation by Spencer Tunick. Posted by Rom Kalilu.

Specifically, some members of this group interpreted the work from social-cultural and religious inclinations, while some others responded to the post professionally. The latter view stems from the understanding that all arts convey meaning, irrespective of what it is. Moreover, the individual's aesthetic choices are also influenced by culture and environments, and this impact the visual image that one conveys to another. This may be the posture Spencer Tunick took in his nude installation. On the part of Mufu Onifade and others, they hold that a nude installation is bad art. Their argument is based on nudity as promoting immorality, thus, negative. Kingsley Emeriewen (personal communication, June 8, 2016) did not see anything wrong with the Tunick's nude installation but curiously asked some questions. Who defines boundaries for artists? "Do other artists have the right to dictate to professional colleagues what moral art is and what art offends sensibilities? Having followed the trend of discussions and arguments on the post, Rom Kalilu (personal communication, June 8, 2016) sums it all when he asserts thus: "the installation is art. But it is not culturally and aesthetically relevant to Nigeria. It is of no intrinsic and extrinsic significance other than defiance..." What can be deduced in all of these is that a forum was created to evaluate, create and share understanding on how arts convey meaning. Importantly too, how individual aesthetics and empathetic awareness are implicit in an engagement with artworks. This could manifest in personal understanding and appreciation of art.

In a disclosure on sculptural developments in agriculture in Thailand, Ladimeji Ayanda (personal communication, May 14, 2016) sent a post to the group. The post as seen in figure 3 posed questions as to how sculptural fruits were achieved.

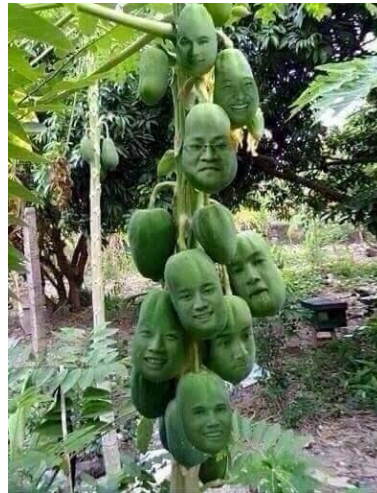


Fig. 3: Paw-paw with human faces, Posted by Ladimeji Ayanda



Fig. 4: Screen shot of video on the use of plastic moulds in encasing. Posted by Rom Kalilu.

From the exchanges that followed, some members were of the view that in this age of technology, photographs are oftentimes edited with Photoshop software. Others affirmed that it is common practice that plastic moulds are used to encase fruits at their budding stage. The latter argument was articulated with a video, as expressed in a screen shot (figure 4).

Art is dynamic and transcends confinements in its expressions. This comes from creativity and innovative thinking which should be a skill of the artist. Artists and designers can shape artistic investigations by breaking traditions and coming up with novel ideas and works. Such was the case when a male face with a variety of fabrics (figure 5) was posted for all members to appraise. All agreed that the artwork was indeed a new form of contemporary arts without distinct nomenclatures.



Fig. 5: Human face produced with fabrics (Posted by Rom Kalilu).

Attempts to situate this type of art saw members of the group base their arguments on it as an installation, assemblages and painting. Findings revealed that it was a textile art installation and can technically be grouped under ephemeral arts. The knowledge derived here is that the work of art posted was explored; issues raised included how artists determine what criteria are needed to assess art works. It is common place for artists to experiment with forms, structures, materials and concepts. Such is the kind of innovative ideas shared on this platform.

The role of materials employed in the production of artefacts was the basis of the posts expressed in figures 8 and 9.



Fig. 8, the use of reflective materials in a building, Posted by Kingsley Emeriewen



Fig. 9, Screenshot of strength test on Glass Bridge in China, Posted by Rom Kalilu.

Figures 8 and 9 above were basically posts on architectural expressions. While appreciating the aesthetics in the figure 8, the issue of their production materials as well as preservation of artefacts generally were also discussed. Responses to this bothered on the following:

1. How are artworks cared for, and by whom?
2. What criteria, methods and processes are considered when preparing artworks for presentation or preservation?

Still on innovation in art materials, techniques and forms, figure 10 posted by Shola Kukoyi was particularly interesting.



**Fig. 10, The use of nuts and used motorcycle chains in creating
A female bust, Posted by Shola Kukoyi.**

The bust in figure 10 was the outcome of experimentation with nuts and used motorcycle chains. From the perspective of the artist, it may be a satisfying artwork, especially as it is a breakaway from the usual tradition of materials employed in sculptures. The artefact was looked at collaboratively on the platform. This is against the background that the group is concerned that artists develop excellence through constructive critique. A forum like this helps artists grow and become accomplished in art forms as well as choice of materials.

At times, posts are shared just for information of members of the group as well as to broaden knowledge. For instance, Oghale Olokor (personal communication, July 9, 2016) posted two photographs (figures 11 & 12) representing the role of art in conflict situations. The posts are wall drawings made with charcoal and believed to be teaching aids.



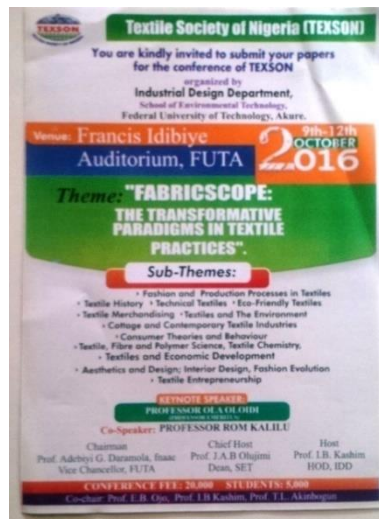
Fig. 11: Wall drawing showing a typical land to air attack tactics



Fig. 12: Wall drawing showing a rocket propelled-grenade mounted on an open truck attacking an aircraft

As previously mentioned, the Visual Artists' exchange without borders collaborate on scholarly research, where exchanges are expected to deepen issues on visual arts and architecture. Such was the debate on the definition of 'Nigerian Art'. Several questions were raised as to whether Nigerian art is strictly art made within Nigerian boundaries by any artist, irrespective of his or her citizenship? Again, is Nigerian art that art made by Nigerians within Nigeria? More still is Nigerian art that art which displays characteristics peculiar to Nigeria? Reactions to these questions were varied. Some members of the group attempted a definition of Nigerian art from the perspective of its content while some others defined the concept from the context of citizenship (Nigerian). However, like every other topical issue and research, the argument on the definition of Nigerian art is still ongoing.

It is also important to mention that besides exchange of ideas, debates and artefacts, members are also encouraged to share sources of academic materials. Thus, sources from websites, personal books and researches are posted. In the same way, themes and invitations to seminars, workshop and conferences are made available to all members of the group as expressed in figure 13 below. Members are encouraged through this medium to develop their skills and broaden their knowledge on visual arts by attending and participating in local and international trends in this professional field



**Fig. 13. TEXSON 2016 Conference Announcement
(posted by Margret Areo).**

Conclusion

There is no gainsaying the fact that advances in information and communications technologies (ICT) are changing the traditional trajectory of most human endeavours. Rom Kalilu's model of visual artists' exchange without borders is a manifestation of this. It has created an academic platform that affords visual artists collaboration on scholarly issues pertaining to their field of study, thus, projecting visual arts as an academic discipline. Evidently, in a group of this nature, members are opportune to gain deeper insights into the meaning, content and scope of visual arts. For instance, in the process of debates, discussions and criticisms, members derive value in the form, structure, materials and techniques employed in visual arts. Also, having engaged in constructive criticism with peers, an artist can then reflect on, re-engage, revise and refine his artwork or design in response to a collaborative view. On the whole, an analysis of different interpretations of an artefact is quite crucial to selecting and defending a plausible critical analysis for the individual as well as the group.

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