

Masquerade and “What Comes Behind Six Is More Than Seven”: Thoughts on Art History and Visual Culture Research Methods

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Abstract—In the 21st century, the disciplinary boundaries of past centuries that we often create through mainstream art historical classification, techniques and sources may have been eroded by visual culture, which seems to provide a more inclusive umbrella for the new ways artists go about the creative process and its resultant commodities. Over the past four decades, artists in Africa have resorted to new materials, techniques and themes which have affected our ways of research on these artists and their art. Frontline artists such as El Anatsui, Yinka Shonibare, Erasmus Onyishi are demonstrating that any material is just suitable for artistic expression. Most of times, these materials come with their own techniques/effects and visual syntax: a combination of materials compounds techniques, formal aesthetic indexes, halo effects, and iconography. This tends to challenge the categories and we lean on to view, think and talk about them. This renders our main stream art historical research methods inadequate, thus suggesting new discursive concepts, terms and theories. This paper proposed the Africanist eclectic methods derived from the dual framework of Masquerade Theory and What Comes Behind Six is More Than Seven. This paper shares thoughts/research on art historical methods, terminological re-alignments on classification/source data, presentational format and interpretation arising from the emergent trends in our subject. The outcome provides useful tools to mediate new thoughts and experiences in recent African art and visual culture.

Keywords—Art Historical Methods, Classifications, Concepts ,Re-alignment.

I. INTRODUCTION

THE categories for the discussion of artworks, in any epoch, derive from the prevalent art of such an era in which the works emerged. For a long time painting, sculpture, and architecture were the predominant art-forms and invariably, all the other forms were seen through the prism of qualities found in the above. With the emergence of new typologies of art-forms, it is logical that their new qualities will provoke experiences requiring other categories of discursive vocabularies, terminologies and visual syntaxes. Added to the above phenomenon, is the somehow rigid classification that mainstream art history has imposed tenaciously on sub-disciplines of the visual arts, such as painting, drawing, sculpture, textile, ceramics, photography and craft.

Perhaps, it becomes needful to explain the theoretical framework on which this study leans. This is needful in there capturing and reinterpretation of the right identity strategy, to

jettison in appropriate images which are not expressing the social realities which birth the artistic events.

The Masquerade theory is an indigenous evaluative framework which simply states that one does not fulfillingly view a masquerade performance from only one perspective. That is that multiple viewing points makes for a better spectacle. It is closely related to the popular Western concept of eclecticism. While the later seems to have been used in a derogatory sense, as it has a tint of lack of focus, the former is respected by African's as a mark of rigour in appraisal of issues, physical or ideological.

What comes behind six is more than seven [1] is actually one of the Yoruba versions of the Masquerade theory. Drewal [2] cited another one which states that "there are many roads to the market". Egonwa [3] implies that its real importance in this work, is that an event which happened in a series, is better explained by a study of several in the series and not just the one of its immediate past. The need to use a combination of strategies to provide insight on African modern visual artist cogent as many frontline artists demonstrate through their works that any material is just suitable for artistic expression, especially when such material is available in the artists environment. Amongst these artists are Bruce Onobrakpeya (b.1931), El Anatsui (b. 1944), and Onyishi Erasmus (b. 1973) as shown in Figs. 1-3.



Fig. 1 Bruce Onobrakpeya (2006) *Gala Day under the River- Series 2*
Panel 3 Plastograph

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Fig. 2 El Anatsui, (1993) *Mammoth Crowd*. Series 1

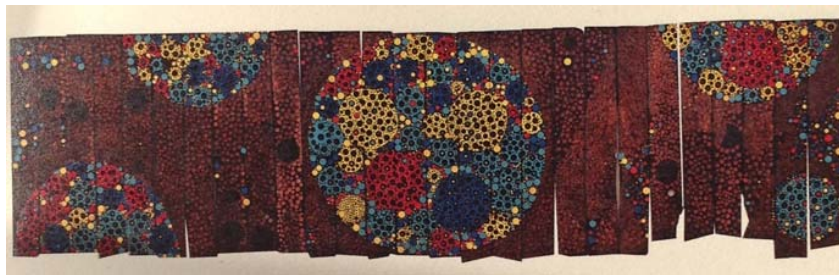


Fig. 3 Erasmus Onyishi (2018) *Celestial Realm*, Synthatic Fibre, Glue, Nails, Acrylic and Mahogany

In the words of Konate [4], "Many of these artists show concern for keeping alive the link between the society and its endogenous knowledge and knowhow". Thematically and technically, they are global in perception. However, they still keep alive the traditional spirit not by mindless copying but the application of an essential, purified and effervescent but smart expression. Ouattara Bakary (b. 1957), Abdullaye Konate (b. 1953), Wim Botha (b. 1974), and Andrew Tshabangu (b. 1966) add up to the list of those synthesizing low art and elitist art in the artistic confectionery of culturist content.

In the 21st century, looking at the interesting developments in the field of studio art, these classifications mentioned above are no longer adequate as labels for what one sees. This apparent inadequacy is very pronounced when one considers visual culture which tends to provide a more inclusive umbrella for the new ways artists go about the creative process and the resultant commodities. The expression of the culture via objects/art-forms takes wider angle lens than the conventional expression of aesthetic perception.

Many of the latter day development in the fine arts are revivals of techniques and styles originating from societies whose traditions of painting and sculpture were alien to that of Greco-Roman experience. For instance installations, site specific sculptures and accumulative painting or sculpture are

aspects of African culture expressed as or in art (visual culture). The formal appreciation of an installation at an old groove will employ many unvoiced aesthetic expressions and include an aura of fear or cloud of awe, experienced as *unvoiced invocations*.

The antique shrine furniture which has been formally altered by many layers of accumulated ritual substances like blood, mashed grain, yam or plantain is hard to describe effectively in extant-terminologies, this had been described elsewhere as accumulative aesthetics [5]. For instance, who is the author of such an art object? Is it the artist who produced the initial carving or moulding? How does Western methods account for the artists who kept adding pictorial elements? What will be the age of the work so reconfigured? This suggests that contemporary installation and performance art has a lot to learn from old African Art. Appropriate answers to these queries will lead to a difference, but better interpretation of meaning in such works. A painting by Pablo Picasso (1881-1973) covered by any accumulated stuff will require a Western restoration artist to clean it up.

When assorted media like leather, acrylic, binding wire are used in an art work that involves two or three dimensional forms, is it painting or sculpture? Is it relief painting? See Fig 5. This painting has all the features of relief sculpture yet it is not sculpture. Sometimes contemporary paintings have highly

protruding forms achieved with new unconventional paint media as indicated in Fig. 5.



Fig. 4 Outtara Bakary, *Untitled*



Fig 5 Chuku Chukzmore, *Black is Beautiful*, Acrylic

The traditional bullet proofs, e.g. the Benin or Idah *Soldier with "Coat of Mail"*, as shown in Fig. 7, is made entirely of metals or shells of resilient nuts. So either way, it could be metal or wood sculpture. This is not the case with El Anatsui's *logoligi* or *Society Woman's Cloth*.

The obvious fact is that the boundaries between painting, drawing, sculpture, textiles and ceramics have been blurred significantly and new descriptive terms or phrases like *sculpted-textiles*, *ceramics-painting*, *sculpted-painting* and *3di-painting* seem to have become relevant.

The tendency to deny the arts of Africa has led to several interpretive difficulties because value systems alien to the art of Africa have been imposed on it. In Africa, a broken pot is not completely useless; it is only deployed to other roles where it provides positive aesthetic satisfaction. Today, in Africa

Western, defined ceramic floor tiles are not rejected when broken. They are simply re-used in a stylized way even to satisfy the same preservative and decorative desires of an unbroken one.



Fig. 6 Bolaji Ogunwo, (2018) *Spill*, Acrylic, Polyhol



Fig. 7 El Anatsui, *Society Woman's Cloth*

II. SOURCE MATERIALS FOR AFRICAN ART

Hitherto, mainstream scholarship has emphasized literature by which is meant published written reports in journals, books, monographs, exhibition brochures, and reviews. Following the *Masquerade* theory cited by Drewal [2] and the Yoruba what comes behind six is more than seven [1] which emphasizes looking beyond the immediate events in a series when searching for causes and effects, the term *Review of Related Literature* or simply *Literature Review* will be found inadequate. This means that one must consider a term which will enable us to access knowledge from non-literature materials, such as orature and artistic techniques and practices not conventionally documented. For instance, an artist like Ben Osawe (1931-2007) uses air-conditioner compressor bottle to fabricate crucible for melting brass and practiced with

it for many years before we discovered the practice in an interview with him in 2005. This same artist constructed bellows from water pump for improvement of local furnace firing and used it for many years of his studio practice without formal documentation



Fig. 8 Nupe Warrior with Coat of Mail

According to Egwali [7], such knowledge and practice which an art historian is able to access outside journals and books are good sources of data. They should therefore ab initio be included on our sub-section of our background knowledge. Hence it is instructive to use the heading, "Review of Related Literature, Knowledge and Practice" as stated by Egonwa [6]. At the Delta State University Abraka, Art department, this is what we have authorized our research students to do.

The art historical paradigms provoked by the intense study of Africa's art and visual culture and the emergent constructs and terminologies being advocated by this paper are significant. Our research shows that these discoveries provide a better and more embrative platform for the study of post-modernist studio art. They close the gap of analytic language currently extant in the literature. These are additions to knowledge because they derive from the intellectualism inherent in the art of the 'other' especially African art according to Egonwa [8].

III. CONTRIBUTION TO KNOWLEDGE

- (1) This study has identified discursive terminologies which must be adopted in art history and visual culture mediation of knowledge. These include accumulative aesthetics, picture-spill and invoiced invocations.
- (2) It established that the new approaches adopted in the creative process by African artists which has blurred the boundaries between visual arts sub-disciplines derives from African cultural history.
- (3) The study presents two theoretical frameworks for effective analysis of contemporary African visual arts history and culture.
- (4) It suggests that extant sub-disciplinary classifications need to be re-aligned for more inclusive analytic rewards. One can talk about Sculpted-paintings, Sculpted-textiles, 3d-paintings, ceramic-paintings.

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