

SITE -SPECIFIC SCULPTURE/NATURE -ART PLATFORM IN NIGERIA: CONFESSIONS OF A FRAGRANCE

BACKGROUND

The history of art education in Nigeria points to the fact that formal art training products have contributed immensely to the nature of art practice and patronage in Nigeria today. This art tradition preaches product and purchase: a purely gallery-sales- outlet-oriented-art-culture, and so there are no attempts at encouraging spontaneity of creative pursuit outside of marked definitions of what type of art practice should be propagated. Okpe (2000a) reiterate that "'Rightly' because the Nigerian art scene is dominated by product, patron and purchase. Machinations and politics of Patrons, Collectors and sales heavily populate the terrain." It is therefore only the non-formal form of art training, encouraged by expatriate artists; the likes of Ulli and Georgina Beier and Suzanne Wenger through the workshop experiments that could encourage and according to Beier (1968) "shock people out of their conventional attitudes, to make them understand...to see form dissociated from literary content and worn-out imagery...work in unconventional media...to treat art with a kind of healthy disrespect..." Since attempts by governments in Nigeria at promoting the arts is mainly through formal art training in institutions, sometimes, groups of artists and patrons come together to organise workshops like the example of Mbari Club in Ibadan in the early 60s and the recent Aftershave International Artists Workshop in Jos in 1999.

INTRODUCTION

The Aftershave workshop; held within the confines of an astonishing landscape; an attribute of nature and man made environment was the first of its kind in Nigeria and it had ten men and seven women artists in attendance and full participation: mind, body and soul. They had two weeks during which to produce works - temporary, site-specific sculptures, installations and performances [October 26 to November 7, 1999]. Accommodation, feeding, some conventional material supply and minimal equipment: all put together provided a set stage for artists to encounter one another in a creative pursuit, encouraging the sharing of a wide range

of experiences, networking and stimulation of friendship. So that, according to Okpe (1993a) "artists drawn from all over the world to provoke new ideas, experiment and develop new skills..." can "...have the freedom to pursue their creative vision..." (Morin, 2000). The overwhelming abundance of grass and mud together with huge replicas of traditional indigenous architecture on location, provided an impetus to motivate; to draw energy from; to create freely; to dialogue and resolve issues of concept with peers without a manifestation of preconceived ideas. Okpe (2000b) supporting art and nature said;

"The obvious link therefore, between the environment, artists, natural material, culture and sustainable development in Nigeria in particular calls for a total appreciation of our varied endowments, which can in turn give an impetus to leaning on a framework as a source of creative inspirations for artists".

In the realm of pure experimentation, devoid of the usual commercial pressures of sales and commissions: the language of the gallery space; and a totally market oriented mentality of patronage in Nigeria, the willingness to try out 'unsaleable' work are usually a task in vain and a bitter pill for artists to want to swallow, not to mention temporary site specific sculptures together with performances and installation art which some people term 'nonsense art'. While recollecting a particular work in a similar workshop held in the U.K. in 1993, Okpe (1993b) states that;

"..the willingness to try new possibilities, sometimes using completely new materials...very individualistic in nature, yet accommodating enough artistic interchange... Art does not ask to be understood, but to astonish, and when it does, it fulfills the aim to be part of the material and act. A fantasy of vision of creativity and humour was best illustrated in the work of ... Richard Reynolds in his "Burial", a site specific installation, when he dug a shallow grave and "buried" himself alive with his head sticking out. Though acting individually yet in concert with the spirit of experimentation, his work provoked thoughts as well as illustrated material diversity..."

The looming image of the famous art school of Ahmadu Bello University Zaria provided the impetus for the working group (Adele Garkida, Jerry Buhari, Jacob Jari and Tonie Okpe - all graduates of Zaria) to bear the pressure of being organizers as well as participating artists, as they gathered in an unaccustomed environment to explore and produce

art together without the usual pressures of a sense of competition or sales. They thus provided a natural platform for an encounter for artists to express themselves in installations, performances, painting and sculpture. Artists had to work within the context of an international exchange, removed from accustomed individual studio spaces to a new environment in order for experiments to occur: more like relocation/dislocation to encounter different work habits, dialogue and experiment; similar to "the occasion for artists from diverse backgrounds and continents to meet and work together, at the end of which there is an exhibit of the work produced" (Donkor, 1995). The surrounding architecture and the spirit of such a 'meeting' with a deliberate absence of a central theme for the workshop allowed artists to mediate a transitory transformation of some portions of the landscape and buildings that the workshop site presented. No other such setting in Nigeria - it seems - would have been apt enough as a site for art in nature experimentation to flourish as such.

"Traditional architecture refers to three primary deterministic cultural referents...their structural and conceptual lay out across the landscape. The built-environment thus reflects the ideals of corporate life in the visual pattern....materials drawn from the immediate environment are transformed through their skillful manipulation into three-dimensional structures". (Aniakor,1995).

Artists searched for and located suitable spaces within the outbuildings to use either as temporary studio spaces; simply a platform from which to produce site-specific art in and around the extensive grounds or to completely incorporate some parts of the buildings as integral parts of their work within the museum. Emphasis was placed more on process [work in progress] than on product; though artists were encouraged to have something 'finished' to show during the final exhibition of resulting works.

The Platform [Materials and Experimentation]

As soon as the initial romance of everyone meeting for the first time: more like getting to know one another and exchange of pleasantries cleared, there was the opportunity of introduction of background and practice by showing slides of works. Work thereafter began in earnest with the open day as target. Working hours ran from morning to late afternoon, with individual artists spreading their work over large spaces and trying too to come to terms with imaginations: more like an inward journey into ones

self. While making decisions about one's work, in isolation and not in concert with the other[s], the tendency for others' surprises do exist. Carl Trahman, Classics professor, once remarked in 1966 that "If you go somewhere to give a talk, and you sit down to dinner and see that they've put marshmallows in the salad, you know at last you've arrived in the realm of the Other." McEvilley (1992).

The evenings provided the opportunity for intellectual artistic discourse; to make comparisons, explore differences and similarities in work types and styles - a wide diversity of presentations. It is one of such evenings that saw the presentation of slides accompanied with a review of trends by painter and art historian, Dr Chike Aniakor of the university of Nigeria Nsukka, which further provided the impetus for further debate and critical reviews of issues of contemporary global art practice.

At Aftershave, there was neither creed nor code of conduct. Artists were simply left to discover and experience aspects of the grounds that best suited them: as possible sources of inspiration - more like 'Earthworkers.' Working with nature as an art trend within the confine of an art movement which first appeared in the United States of America in the late 60s when artists abandoned the too-confining setting of studios and so went 'wild' into the wild, countryside and deserts to experiment with earth, stones: probing into inaccessible places. The freedom to discover, reinvent or redirect thoughts was in abundance coupled with the site tours around plateau as a refreshing therapy. This paper deliberately focuses and discusses some works produced within the context of site specificity, Installations and performances. Artists were therefore expected to bring several ideas to fruition while noting, according to Catherine Millet that "Conceptual Art does not mean reducing the work to an idea, to a concept, but rather to an 'idea' of art, or a 'concept' of art.." Ferrier (1999).

One of the sayings of the famous German poet and playwright, Bertold Brecht to "Use what you can." became most appropriate for material utilization concern. The installation work - "*kioko's village*" - produced insitu within the natural and unfarmed grassland by the Kenyan Kioko Mwitiki sought to present an artistic panorama by a twofold approach. One was the confrontation and his working the grassland with brilliantly coloured cloth, strings and woven baskets in concert with tied up grass scattered all over, yet, in harmony reminiscent of a typical traditional African markets posing contemporary issues of contrasting nature and idea. The other, an installation of neatly wrapped up wet grass, tucked into sacks

made out of cloth in primary colours suggesting a sort of intervention of various forms of creativity akin to 'construction' of loads; [probably] a metaphor for the produce trading nature of village markets.

The experimental installation works of Okay Ikenegbu also featured the use of wet standing grass as main material, which resulted in "load bearers". Found [discarded and displaced] objects of wooden furniture parts, rags and worn out baskets formed the main rubrics of the installation in a 3-figure composition without bearing the normal dictate and or the pressure of carving, modeling or carving. The spontaneity with which the sculpture was produced transcends the familiar physicality of space, time, material sourcing and so the completion of the installation became an important diversity in experiences that ultimately questions our collective experiences associated with making sculpture outside of a studio setting. The putting together of the different materials; to improvise and create an assemblage that quietly engage the viewer through sequenced stages attests to the experience that the artists intended for his audience whose understanding of abstract [unsettling] art and realism will continue to shift from the intending theme of every day life of load bearers. The succinctness, with which the composition is structured and bound together, allows it to succumb to the dictates of mobiles and kinetic principles of movement in sculpture at the slightest wind action.

Olu Amoda's installation cum performance - *Mission impossible* - setting was large-scaled exhibiting a wide diversity of material utilization: candles, sticks, mud, dry grass, wood and concrete slaps in response to current urban built environment crisis in Nigeria and dedicated to all those who had lost their lives in collapsed sub standard buildings spread across Nigeria. The installation component of the composition with tall bamboo sticks displayed in a semi-circular formation with a center piece of discarded concrete 'rubbish' shaped like the map of Nigeria had inscriptions of locations of towns in Nigeria. Beneath this centerpiece was dried clay cleverly spread onto a mat straw on which artists as participants had made recessed footprints. The eventual performance around the installation took place at night and was both aesthetically pleasing and theatrical with fire lit [using candles sticks] all around. Participants danced in rhythm to a drum beat until the fire died down blending into the darkness of the night intimately, engaging while provoking thoughts of a significant performative metaphor of the crisis within our unlivable built environment.

Of spectacular note was the performance art rendition of Sidney Poiter's *Guess who is coming to dinner* by Jacob Jari. Participants for this performance were all dresses in different attires akin to the diversity of personalities the artists intended to portray and so went ahead to the venue of the performance amidst the probing countenance of the audience. Step by step, stage by stage the performance unfolded exhibiting the glee of unsuspecting 'actors' who clearly showed tensions of anticipation while the audience was wound up in the tendrils of a multi-layered narrative; questioning, examining and challenging imageries of stereotyping in our today's society. The climax of the performance was the theatricality that heralded the eating of roasted and 'buried' potatoes served by the artist to his 'subjects' or 'actors' on a mat-spread. Photographs of the scenes of the short-timed performance were displayed for public viewing during the open day.

Probably one of the most experimental techniques in painting during the workshop, was exhibited by Ugandan Theresa Musoke; who introduced a new dimension in material experimentation. She firstly sketched on the canvas, tied and eventual boiled it before applying adhesive unto the surface to hold-on grass as an additive material for creating high relief works which could possibly, radically, herald a transformed future for material use and expression in painting or multi-media art. After all, techniques and materials that seem to want to completely replace themes today are gradually challenging the conventional character of painting. Musoke got engulfed in a diverse application of a wide variety of earth, [clay] grass, ropes, straws, colours and tied canvas.

CONCLUSION

The introduction of a new 'vocabulary' of art practice in Nigeria by the single platform of the aftershave encounter: of installations; of site-specific sculpture and of performances has the possibility of affecting [positively] social and cultural changes in Nigeria especially within today's context of an enormous consumption of computers and imaging technology. Herbert Marcuse's *The Aesthetic Dimension* compliments this reasoning that; "The experience of this power of the image starts with the creator and radiates outward into the world from that initial encounter of artist and object in the creative process. So, yes, art can change the way people perceive, think, and act..."

The open day; a day set aside so that all works produced by international artists could be exposed to the public without the usual commercial pressure of sales attracted as much crowd as questions for the artworks and artists to answer. This is remarkably so because the Nigerian art scene/crowd, which is 'traditionally' used to 'familiar' art - where art is purely a product to be admired and purchased from gallery spaces for decorative purposes - was encountering installations, performance art and nature art (art that is a product, short-timed and cannot be bought because of its temporary and or site specific nature - grass, stalk, earth, soil) experimentation for the first time. This art form which questions rather than provide answers or solutions; that that engages the viewer in a monologue in natural but unusual material exploration; that which exposes tremendous material innovation and provides a vehicle for substitution and astonishment was the main trust of the encounter.

The platform was neither in the quality of works produced nor participation in debates but of the opportunity provided for intense interactive commune experience within an unaccustomed environment away from home. The dynamism through interaction [amongst artists] of ideas and environment helped to change the natural settings, achieving new values bearing obvious traces of the works of Marcel Duchamp: an admission of the influence of pop-art, conceptual tendencies and post-modernism. The platform was synonymous to the reasoning of Bachraty (1996) while reviewing a similar situation saying:

"The artefact created at the symposium resulted either from direct or indirect material demonstrations, or perceptions of reality within particular art projects. We witness here complexity and open character of creative play, metamorphoses, translations and merges in morphology and semantics of the purported layers and expressions of the work of art...works of art created at the symposium contain not only the mirroring image of the internal 'silent and noisy solitude' of their authors, but also an open manifestation of something present either in the artist or his work, which can be, whether apparently or in fact, in turn a non-sense and a meaningful metaphor or a symbol of overcoming the trauma of the crisis of values, and loss of confidence in the shattered value of scales of our turbulent times."

The memories of the entire volume of works produced within the retreat invokes shared concerns of unique visual and aural representations of the extent of (ir)realities of art and a transcendence of multiple shifts in the perception and the workability [constructions or de-constructions] of

one's immediate natural environment especially if the art *inter-rogare* [Latin word for interrogate] the possibility[ies] of societal change.

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