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ARTS, INNOVATIONS AND THE PANDEMIC: ART HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract

The term pandemic is a disease or epidemic that hits a wide geographical area and affects a large portion of the population. It usually spreads far beyond a country or continent. The consequences of the pandemic include, depression, lack of materials and access to studio space, loneliness, dream state, psychological trauma, and fear of death if not the end of the world. This has become a creative problem for the studio artist but at the same time a source of inspiration for others. This study investigates new media and techniques of selected artists as triggered by the consequences of the pandemic. This is to reinforce the fact that while Covid-19 was a setback for some artist, other visual artists converted it to a creative source of inspiration. The research method privileged was qualitative with reliance on primary and secondary data sources. Findings shows that some artists relied on found object such as bottle tops and copper-wires. As such, through media and technique, they connect environmental degradation in African city centers with the creative culture of hyper-constructivism and neo-imperialism. Thus, through re-use, transformation, and reconstructions of materials, works of art becomes a visual metaphor that is a cypher to life itself and the changes in Africa. Perhaps with the creative technique of mixed and recycle ethos, they transform glittering gold- coloured bottles tops and copper-wire into a new kind of luxury. Others on the other hand, simply installed compositions using media such as oxygen tank, hospital bed, surgical plates, drip-can, fumigator, masks, trash, amongst other found objects. In this sense, apart from raising the alarm on the need to rescue the vulnerable health sector in Nigeria, every object pasted, installed or assembled, has its own story to tell. This study demonstrated that, the consequences of the pandemic has triggered the discovery of new media/materials and techniques in visual arts. This has been made clear through creative improvisation, experimentation and interrogation. To the artist, to live is simply to create. The conflict amid health and passion. The creative struggle between sign and counter sign. Nothing is stable. Nothing is real.

Keywords: Arts, Covid-19, Innovations, Media and Techniques.

1.0 Introduction

The word “Pandemic” originates from two Greek words; “*pan*” meaning “*All*” and “*Demos*” means the “*people*”. The word is commonly taken to mean, a widespread epidemic of contagious disease, throughout a country or more at the same time (Honigsbaum, 2009). Pandemic is a disease or epidemic that hits a wide geographical area and affects a large portion of the population. It usually spreads far beyond a country or continent. The most recent of this kind of epidemic is the Corona virus disease also known as Covid-19 (Moren, Folkers, and Fauci, 2009). Covid-19 is an illness caused by novel virus called Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS). It was first identified amid an outbreak of respiratory illness cases in Wuhan City, Hubei Province, China around December 2019. However, on March 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared it a global pandemic (Cennimo, 2022). It belongs to the family of respiratory illness in humans. They are called “Corona” maybe, because of the crown-like spikes on the surface of the virus. Symptoms of this illness includes, fever, headache, cough, weakness, loss of taste and smell amongst others. Although the pandemic has to a point, successfully affected the arts and the cultural sector through its consequences (Earthen, 2020). Could it be that nature on its own through the pandemic has rather raised a crucial question, if not issue about the importance of arts to the society or creative production? Perhaps it has become clear that in times of crises, pandemic or possibly emergency such as this, arts would always be the key if not the reason for man’s survival. For example, by supporting social cohesion, psychological/ mental health (May, Aughterson, Fancourt, and Burton, 2021). In order words, through arts people coped during the pandemic. No wonder artists are said to be the watchdog of the society. It therefore means that, arts are integral to the society civic, social, political and economic wellbeing and vitality of our nation (Alexandra, Katey, Hei, and Daisy, 2021).

Thus, arts have become part, if not the people way of life.

In the visual arts, such as painting, graphics, textiles, ceramics and sculpture. The pandemic has not only halted or changed the studio practice but effected the media, techniques and form that are the key variable in visual arts (Earthen 2020). For example, evidence from the department of visual arts and technology, University of Cross River State (UNICROSS), shows that, common materials/ media explored in art productions in painting includes oil colour, water colour, acrylic, enamel, charcoal, rotary pen, easel, brushes, stretchers, harmer, canvas pliers, pallet, canvas, pallet knife, jute, leather, among others (Odum, 2021). While the studio techniques deployed include the Wet on Wet (Alla Prima), Sfumato, cubism, Expressionism, Impressionism, Glazing, fat over Lean, Impasto, and others (Ochigbo, 2011). Forms produced would range from daily life activities, nature, stylized figurations in their relief and flat nature. Textures spread from real to implied; smooth, rough, and even coax as the case may be. However, during the pandemic, especially in its climax, there was a complete shot-down and restriction in almost all aspects of human endeavour including the arts. This also denied even the studio artist access to his studio space, by extension, material and tools to create his desired works of arts. Thus the very need for one to rely if not explore his/her immediate environment through found and improvised objects as in the case of Ndidi Dike and El Anatsui and their creative experiences.

This apart, the consequences of the pandemic include depression, lack of materials and access to studio space, loneliness, dream state, psychological trauma, and fear of death if not the end of the world (May, Aughterson, Fancourt, and Burton, 2021). That very feelings as if what was clear before has suddenly lost its grip. The rather sad reality posed by mother-nature through the pandemic, has indirectly equipped the studio

artist with the creative audacity to contest, if not to interrogate the existing media and techniques offered by his studio space. As if one is about to take a creative walk from the known to the unknown. Thus, the artist simply embraces his personal, social and economic condition as a creative vehicle for artistic production (Elisondo, 2021).

Although the pandemic seems to inspire various visual artist across the various units, but their creative responses tends to be different. For example, Anatsui relied on found object such as bottle tops and copper-wires to create large, weighty and luminous works of art. As such. His works through media and technique, connects environmental degradation in African city centres with the creative culture of hyper-constructivism and neo-imperialism. Thus, through re-use, transformation, and reconstructions of materials, his works becomes a visual metaphor that has become a cypher to live and changes in Africa. Possibly with his technique of mixed and recycle ethos, he transforms glittering gold- coloured bottles tops and copper-wire into a new kind of luxury. In addition, we have learned that one can also install compositions rather than to paint only, with material and media such as oxygen tank, hospital bed, surgical plates, drip can, fumigator, masks, trash, scrawls, empty bottles amongst others found objects especially as exemplified by Ndidi Dike amongst others. In this sense, apart from raising the alarm on the need to resurrect, if not to rescue the rather vulnerable health sector in Nigeria, every object pasted, installed or assembled, has its own story to tell. The creative struggle between sign and counter sign. Nothing is stable. Nothing is real. The world that ruled by chance.

1.1 A Brief historiography of pandemic

There have been several pandemics that has tormented man especially when one considers it from the period even before records, to the 21st century. Some have argued that the number of pandemic disease

experienced so far, maybe around 246. This is suspected to be through recorded history from 1,200 B.C down to Covid-19. However, even till now, no one seems to know the exact number of times man has been hit with pandemic. While the total number of the pandemic disease is uncertain, the following are the most notable ones;

The Pre-Historic Epidemic (CIRCA, 3000 B.C) - Through archaeological findings, a 5000 years old house was discovered somewhere In China filled with skeletons of human such as that of juveniles, young adults and middle aged people. This area today, has become an archaeological site known as “*Hamin Mongha*”. Another, is *The Plague of Athens* (430 B.C), that happened not long after a war between Athens and Sparta. This epidemic that lasted for about five years, claimed the lives of about one thousand people, that is according to Greek Historian, *Thucydides* (460- 400BC). *Anthonine Plague/ Small Pox* (AD 165 -180). This plague is believed to have been associated with roman soldiers who were returning from war. And with them, they brought the small pox disease that would claim the lives of over five million Romans (Dudsay, 2017). Next, was *The Plague of Cyprian* (AD 250-271). This plague is estimated to have killed five thousand people in a day in Rome. *The Plague of Justinian* (AD 541-542). This happened at the Byzantine Empire. Responsible for the death of about ten percent of the world population, it marked and accelerated the decline of the Byzantine Empire. Another, was *The Black Death* (1346- 1353). This disease spread from Asia down to Europe. It is believed that, this pandemic, wiped out half of Europe’s population of which brought about the lack of labour that may have spearheaded technological innovations (Qiu, Rutherford, Mao. And Chu, 2017). The *Cocoliztli*

Epidemic (1545- 1548), disease focused on the inhabitants of Mexico and Southern America killing fifteen million people in total. Next, was *The American Plague (16th Century)*. It is believed that, the European explorers who came to the America brought along with the very disease that killed over 90 percent of the indigenous people of the western hemisphere. This was closely followed by *The Great Plague of London (1665- 1666)*. Caused by fleas from plague infected rodents, it was its wide spread and quick transmission that made it claim about 100,000 lives that happens to be over 15% of the entire population of London as at that time (Huremovic, 2019). *The Great Plague of Marseille (1720- 1723)* -The emergence of this disease is believed to have entangle with a ship that was docked in France, carrying goods from the Mediterranean. The plague still got into the city and claimed over 100, 000 lives. As if that was not enough, *The Russian plague (1770-1772)*, killed over a hundred thousand people too. *The Philadelphia Yellow Fever Epidemic (1937)*, invaded the Philadelphia city. Being the capital of America as at that time, the Americans believed that Africans were immune and then recruited them to look after the sick people. Before they could realize what was happening, over a five thousand persons were killed. *The Flu Pandemic (1889- 1890)*, took advantage of the new transportation network across the world. This made it even easier for the spread of the disease. In just five weeks, over a million persons were killed across the globe (Sampath Et al, 2021). Another was *The American Polio (1916)*. This disease only effected children in New York. For about 27,000 cases recorded, about 6,000 children died. Others includes the *Spanish flu (1918-1920)*. *Asian Flu (1957- 1958)*, that killed over a million lives, *AIDS pandemics (1981-present)*, that has claimed over 35 million

lives so far. *H1N1 Swine flu epidemic (2009-2010)*, that killed about 1.4 million people, *Ebola epidemic (2015- present)*, that has killed 16, 323 people. *The ZIKA Virus (2005-present)*, and the recent *Covid- 19 (2019-Present)*, that has claimed the lives of over 1.6 million people already (Jarus, 2023).

2. Artists and Covid-19

It is possible that the pandemic has shaped the way people think, act or do things, this includes even the studio artist. This by extension has influenced if not informed one's source of inspiration, material, techniques and perhaps form (Elisondo, 2021). This climate has made so many artists to embrace the virtual tool as a new creative strategy through the use of a computer and its possibilities offered. In contrast to this, others visual artists still prefer the manual way of creating works of art. For example, while others prefer to confront the creative problem of how and what to produce manually, some would prefer to occupy the digital/ virtual space (Zubala and Hackett, 2020). Maybe it is because, the world itself has become a global village. With this, artist may have more audiences within his/her reach. In this light, lies the deployment and reliance on digital software such as photo-shop, Affinity photo, Corel Painter 2022, Rebelle 5, Procreate, Clip Studio Paint Pro, ArtWeaver, ArtRage, Krita, Twisted Brush Pro, amongst others. These softwares, has almost everything in it from materials, tools to any preferred technique the artist would privilege to explore, but in the virtual world. In this context, the problem associated with materials and media may have been reduced if not eliminated completely.

Visual arts such as paintings and drawings produced by artists in this period reflects the losses experienced by many Nigerians during the pandemic. The loneliness felt, feelings of vulnerability, as if one is no longer safe. This especially can be seen in Dike's works. Thus, the pandemic poses the tension as if the world wants to end (Abuja, 2021). This perhaps is

to pass a message across the society about the pandemic and its deadly nature. In addition, Ndidi Dike, found her own creative interest in installing rather than to paint. her materials and media includes, oxygen tanks, hospital beds, surgical plates, drip can, fumigator, masks, found objects, trash, scrawls, empty bottles amongst others found objects. Maybe this compositional strategy is simply to

suggest to the society, the very need to improve if not to resuscitate the rather suffocating health care system especially in the Nigeria context.

3. Selected Studio Artist and their works.

Below are selected studio Artists and their works as influence by the Covid-19 pandemic as regards to media techniques and form.

3.1 Ndidi Dike



Fig. 1. Ndidi Dike. Untitled. Installation
Source; exhibition catalogue

The above installation (Figure 1), is composed of materials such as transparent white fabric, hospital bed amongst others, arranged to fit into a large surface area of the interior of a building only to be framed into a rectangular pictorial composition. What is obvious is, the vast, transparent white fabric (cotton) towering almost from the bottom to the top of the entire pictorial space. To create a sense of visual contrast and tension in the piece, the seemingly duo hospital bed are composed in such a way that even with the dominance of the white fabric, they are still visible to the audience. Maybe to reveal their vulnerability. Perhaps in this context, it is to create the optical feelings of emptiness as a hint to the case of the Nigerian health sector. To create rhythm, the cotton is allowed to

fold at random in vertical order possibly into draperies only to embrace the floor surface. By this technical handling of media and form, the artist at some point, has successfully invoked from the audiences, the visual tension that underlines hospital emergency. Through decorative manipulation and technical handling of media, the artist is able to allow one the chance effect of being into the composition, and out of it at the same time maybe through the theory of hallucination. The composition to an extent, allows one an access to, while at the same time, denying one the access to direct participation in the visual-narrative event. Suddenly, what became obvious is the two lonely hospital beds that is placed side by side as if the only option left, is to keep a close watch of themselves, if they

must survive. The emptiness of hospital beds that is hidden and revealed at the same time, invokes a visual tension only to rise a question; what is going on here? Who just left here, dead or alive? Who is the next to be admitted? How many lives have been lost already? Or is it actually the state of country's health sector? In this background, the artist through mastery of media and technique has successfully raised the creative alarm on the urgent need to save the vulnerable health

sector in Nigeria. Maybe to Ndidi Dike, the very reason she creates, may likely be the same reason why writers write. To create is therefore to make a visual commentary about our society. For Dike, art is a tool for moral, Social and political intervention to the society. This is because it is only the artist that can swim against the current. For if we keep silent before any form of operation, the man dies in all of us says Wole Shoyinka.



Fig. 2. Ndidi Dike. Installation 2020

Source; channel TV

This piece (figure 2), takes the interrogation of Nigerian health care system even further. This seem obvious by the dominance of the oxygen tank that contrast against the emptiness of the background. It may likely be, that what is of importance is the cylinder. If that is what it is, then one may ask, is that oxygen tank empty or filled? If empty, who was it used to resuscitate? Did the patient leave the hospital bed alive or dead? And if the cylinder has oxygen in it, is it functional at all? And who is the next patient? Is it you or me? Or is it Nigeria herself? Maybe it is. In this light, Dike through media such as the

hospital or health materials create a visual tension that often raises important question if not interrogating the weak Nigeria health sector. Maybe, to Dike, the medium is simply the message. The very reason why it has become urgent if not imperative to save the dying Nigeria that is on the emergency care unit.

3.2 El Anatsui

Anatsui is known worldwide for his large scale sculptures composed of thousands of folded and crumpled pieces of metals, sourced from local recycling stations and

then, bound together with copper-wire (Sayel, 2014). His technique projects his intricate works that are both weighty and luminous and the same time. He explores multiple media and techniques; chain saw, branding irons, and materials such as diver's milk-can, bottle tops, amongst others. His recent works; large textile pieces, which he often called sheets, made from discarded liquor tops often red and gold reflecting creative themes like re-use, transformation, and reconstructions of materials as a visual metaphors that has become a cypher to live and changes in Africa (James, 2008). With his technique of mixed and recycle ethos, he

transforms glittering gold- coloured bottles tops and copper-wire into a new kind of luxury, that is filled with aesthetical values through intensive manual labour suggestive of the works of many hands (Onafuwa, 2010). At the end, Anatsui's works through media and technique, connects environmental degradation in African city centres with the creative culture of hyper-constructivism and neo-imperialism. His works seem to move away from the established artistic culture of promoting the postcolonial African self, to addressing issues of immediacy that effects the contemporary (Akpang, 2018).



Fig. 3. Anatsui, Three Sightings, 2021. Aluminum and Copper-wire, 280 X 807cm, (EA223)

Source; octobergallery.co.uk

Anatsui is famous and known for the mastery of his own technical handling of media such as copper wire and bottle tops to manipulate visual organic and abstract forms that are often very large in size which is not different in the work titled “*Three Sightings*”. What is interesting in this piece, is the juxtaposition and overlapping of organic forms in their different folds, drapery and formal structure to create visual tension that seem to underscore complexity. To create a sense of visual contrast, the forms positioned side by side, appear to vary in sizes, colour, texture and formal structure, as against the wavy horizontal bands of repetitive forms that seem

to define and consume the entire picture plane. The polychromatic interplay of colours such as gold, silver, red, grey, brown, black and white, forms the negative spaces that has also found a way to breathe through, within and around only to integrate the overall complex visual composition. This technical distribution of colours create a sense of visual drama, maybe of hope and of ecstasy. The overall formal structure appears flat but altered again by the presence of intaglios and emboss surface areas that seem to be continuous if not present everywhere. In this sense, the creative strategy deployed by the artist, is simply to capture the impression and

the optical feelings of restlessness; of terror and of instability. What is noticeable here is that, even the dominant organic forms that seem to be charging at the viewers, is being held back again into the restless background very strongly by strand and stitches of copper-wires. It is as if, the troubled background has refused to let go, these contrasting forms. Possibly, what seem to be

free has suddenly lost its freedom? Perhaps a visual reflection of imperialism or modern day slavery. At the end, Anatsui through his choice of media, raised the critical contemporary issue of hyper consumerism and the glorification of western products. It is in this sense, that the medium has become the message.



Fig. 4. El Anatsui, Untitled, 2020.

Aluminum and Copper-wire, 502X 273cm (EA221).

Source; octobergallery.co.uk

Other works by the same artist such as the “*Untitled, 2020*” (fig. 4), reflects the truncation of normalcy. Possibly a visual commentary of how the brutal pandemic such as the recent Covid- 19 and its consequence, that has eaten deep like a concentrated sulphuric acid into the very fabric of the world leaving a scar of greyness which man would never forget in a hurry. What is obvious in this work is the vertical orderliness of the compositional structure

that seem to be well arranged and organized into subtle draperies that towers from the top of the picture (background) to the foreground only to be obstructed, squeezed and brutalized by the abstract-like beast that is disguised in its greyness just to truncate this vertical orderliness through the middle-ground. This visual drama created in this piece, ignites the optical feelings of terror and of pestilence. As if the only way to live is simply to get prepared if not well equipped.



Fig. 5. El Anatsui, Terra Firma, 2020.

Aluminum and Copper-wire, 360X 334 cm (EA217).

Source; octobergallery.co.uk

In harmony to other pieces analysed above such as Fig3 and fig 4 respective, this piece titled “*Terra Firma*” by Anatsui seem to reveal the complexity of the current nature of life itself, that is perhaps ignited by the pandemic, this is suggestive through the dark and complex formal structure of the pictorial composition. Maybe, the very reason why forms seem to overlap and weaved over each other in a continuous tonal density and variations. His technical mastery of media to manipulate form is evidential in this work even as he successfully created a compact zone of plastic forms that hints at the complex nature of life itself.

4. The Role of Art during the Pandemic

It is believed that Arts played an important role during and even after the pandemic by reducing stress, fear, trauma that is caused by the pandemic. It also supports human mental and social wellbeing in order to cope with the rather deadly disease called COVID -19 (Zubala and Hackett, 2020). To a point, arts goes beyond what medical practitioners would tell us about keeping ourselves safe; in

this sense, arts simply raptures one’s confidence and also assure one that there is hope to live again. (Nweke, Oluwatoyin and Ndubisi 2020).

5. Theoretical Framework

This study privileged the theory of iconography and iconology by art historian Edwin Panofsky (1822-1968). Iconography is study of icons. It is the symbolism of icon. In 1955, Panofsky defines Iconography as study of subject’s matter in the visual arts. While Iconology is an attempt to analyse the significance of the subject matter within the very culture that produced it (Taylor, 2011). These theories will be useful perhaps to understand the tellingness and the readability of the selected works from the artists under study. With this, it possible that visual or compositional elements such as form, line, texture, colour, space amongst others, may be a visual code to understanding something else.

6. Research Methodology

The research method deployed is qualitative with reliance on primary and secondary data

sources; phones calls, exhibitions held in this period that is made legible through You-Tube channel, journals, and the internet. However, in order to understand the works of art under review, such as the way they are composed, the theory of Iconography was appropriated.

7. Research Findings

The research findings have proven that the consequences of the pandemic has provided, if not equipped the visual artists with the creative potentials to discover new media/material and techniques in visual arts. This has been made legible through creative improvisation, experimentation and perhaps interrogation of available media and technique during the pandemic. To the artist, to live is simply to create. The conflict amid health and passion. The creative struggle between sign and counter sign. Nothing is stable. Nothing is real. Not even life itself.

8. Summary/Conclusion

This study highlighted the life threatening effects and consequences of Covid-19 pandemic to the society and especially in the art world. The study revealed that the consequences of the pandemic that include, depression, lack of materials and access to studio space, loneliness, dream state, psychological trauma, and fear of death if not the end of the world, has become a creative problem for the studio artist while at the same time a source of inspiration for artists such as El Anatsui, Ndid Dike amongst others. However, the study further investigated new media and techniques of the above selected artists as triggered by the consequences of the pandemic. This is to reinforce the fact that while Covid-19 was a setback for some artists, the above visual artists converted it to a creative source of inspiration through experimentation, creative contestation, and improvisation, new innovations are now made as regards to media, technique and form. The study however concludes that while the pandemic was a setback and problem to many, some visual artists saw it as a creative opportunity to experiment in order find something new as regards to media,

technique and form. To the artist, to live is to create. To create is to find something new, the conflict between human health and creative passion.

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