Osa Egonwa's inaugural lecture: Matters Arising

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Abstract

This article revisits Osa Egonwa's inaugural lecture titled "Writing about art and making art in Nigeria: Many legs, how much movement?" held at Delta State University, Nigeria in 2007. The article identified certain intellectual concerns raised in the lecture as those that border principally on disciplinarity. Through this lecture I examine the tensions surrounding definitions in the visual arts discipline in the Nigerian academic system and the inability of art historians in Nigeria to articulate a clear pedagogical direction regarding the scope and methods of art historical writing.

"Writing about art and making art in Nigeria: Many legs how much movement?"

On 18 September, 2007, Professor Osa Egonwa delivered the 14th Inaugural Lecture at Delta State University, Abraka. The title of the lecture is "Writing about art and making art in Nigeria: Many legs, how much movement?" The lecture started with a pronouncement of the visual art's importance to the lives of humans. Egonwa believes that "it is impossible to live in the contemporary world without art in its multi form". He claims that "art and design secure societal relevance and acceptability by dint of their manifest powers to appeal to humankind's thinking faculty" (5). These initial remarks no doubt, attempt to emphasize the inevitability of confronting art in humans' everyday life. The ubiquitous visual matrix of the contemporary city makes Egonwa's claims germane and a thesis for considerable academic inquiry. If art is the compass needed to navigate across life's difficult terrain, then Egonwa's lecture has even stressed how, more importantly, art has played an epochal role in the existence of the human society. His lecture has placed art, once more, on the discourse table thus challenging the numerous but conscious silencing of art not just in Nigeria's larger society but also in the academic institutions. Indeed, if the larger society is exculpated for their endemic naivety in recognising the role of art in humans' daily lives, the academia must not be exonerated for such inexcusable ignorance. That is why this inaugural lecture fits into the academia where it is expected to raise questions and possibly proffer solutions unable to be resolved in the larger society. More than just raising Nigerians' consciousness to the importance of art, Egonwa's lecture touched on other serious concerns. For example he argues:

> The studio disciplines straddling the humanities and environmental sciences, could not be expected to wholly adopt the scientific method. Nevertheless, the wisdom of interdisciplinary collaboration nullifies such an argument...Studio activities are intellectual and such intellectualism though evidenced in productivity, parallels that in other literary academic pursuit" (2007:5)

But he goes further to immediately underline the dilemma and dichotomy that exists between studio practice and art history. This dichotomy has largely engendered a dangerous politics of definition in the entire project of art practice in Nigeria. Egonwa claims:

> However, some of the problems with the studio discipline were self-imposed. For instance, the language of transmitting inherent significant thought in the discipline, for practitioners and the general public were neglected. Art history and theory, the arrow head of art literary practice and giver of content to studio product has been missing in the preparation of many art makers in Nigeria. It is partly for these reasons therefore, that there grew over the years, until now, a wide misunderstanding of the visual arts (2007:4)

Indeed Egonwa clearly highlights the possible problematic in the entire visual arts discipline as they were conceptualised in Nigeria: the inability to construct a strong, intellectual base, a problem which has made Buhari (2004) to conclude that "visual artists missed the opportunity to engage vibrant artistic discourse". It is possible that Egonwa would have substituted Buhari's 'artistic discourse' with 'intellectual discourse' for one can consciously surmise that this is the object of contention in Egonwa's lecture: lack of intellectual inquiry into artistic engagements in Nigeria.

There are correspondingly two parts to Egonwa's lecture—the first brings us to a larger set of issues framed in part on methodology thus offering a hindsight into visual arts' academic and intellectual background, and the second elaborates the themes and issues which have most engaged the attention of artists and art historians in contemporary Nigeria – the quest for PhD degrees in the art profession. I wish to state that Egonwa's lecture was timely, interventionist and most importantly addressed germane issue that was beginning to constitute a troubling dimension to the art discipline in Nigeria.

However, here is a theoretical contestation to Egonwa's lecture: the academic requirements of artists in Nigerian universities eventually manifested itself in an on-going debate between the illicit acquisition of PhD degrees in Nigeria and the neglect of studio practice. Indeed the tension arising from the two could be tactically framed around the politics of academic degrees and the quest for professionalism in the art discipline. Critics on both sides of this divide are persuasive in their claims, and compelling in their critique of opponents. In a sense, it is on account of his commitment to essentially x-ray the collective confusion currently plaguing the visual arts profession in Nigeria that Egonwa's lecture deserves our attention.

In my reading of this field, there is little doubt that in their current mood Nigerian academics and their art curricula principally pose a threat to the visual art profession. In their quasi attempt to reform the intellectual and epistemological exclusions of visual artists in Nigerian universities, Nigerian academics fail to exhaustively account for the meanings and consequences of contemporary encounters in their studios. Their visions of a more engaging, more robust and conceptually driven art seem beclouded by a mere PhD certificate in art history. Again not just a mere PhD certificate in art history but one in unrelated discipline and acquired under questionable circumstances. Egonwa asserts that the "art field is now seen by some as having no boundaries in terms of modus operandi and definition of purpose" (2007:14). This is where it is necessary to dwell on the methodologies of the art discipline. Egonwa asserts that:

> Nigeria's first tertiary art education was originally patterned after the middle level manpower production model. The Nigerian College of Art, Science and Technology was established to produce the new art manpower for the colonial government above what the Yaba Technical Institute was producing for the Information department and

> the West African Publicity Company. For over two decades, art training in Nigeria remained a compromised version of the British College, until 1971 when the University of Nigeria, Nsukka School of art reviewed its curriculum to include relevant theories of art.

If indeed, as Egonwa argues, "The Nigerian College of Art, Science and Technology was established to produce the new art manpower for the colonial government" it means that historically visual arts discipline in Nigeria was conceptualised by the colonialists along the studio orientation. There is a picky dimension to this submission: if the colonial government intended art programme in Nigeria to serve as man-power for colonial government's offices, it means that colonial administration never intended art programmes in the universities to develop into advanced degrees such as PhD. It means that courses taught in the institutions are only expected to launch one on the part of studio professionalism. They seemed to lack any intellectual promise. Chika Okeke-Agulu argues that NCAST colonial authorities resisted and rejected the introduction of History of African Art into the curricula; rather they suggested that art students take courses in the "proposed department of African History and Archaeology and African Studies and Anthropology" (84), a practice Okeke-Agulu argues "highlighted the fact that structural and curricula changes in the educational sector were part of a slow, contentious process, even in post-independence Nigeria" (84).

This statement is still significant in the contemporary Nigerian academic system where after about sixty years of independence many art institutions in Nigeria could not fashion a proper art historical curricula that would address the intellectual concern of African art history. Perhaps it is in response to this that the National Universities Commission introduced PhD degrees as a prerequisite for advancement in the academia for visual artists. However the inability to define the boundaries of these PhDs in the visual arts disciplines complicates the learning process in both the studio and art history researches: for example art history could not yet be separated from the departments involved with serious studio practice and both struggle for relevance within the same space. Historically, this norm literally undermined the collective drive towards studio professionalism and eventual survival of studio artists in the larger society.

However, the problem may not be located in NUC's introduction of PhD degrees but in the selfish manipulation of the system by few politically inclined art academics who could not conceptualise a studio-based PhD degree for studio artists. In effect, Professional studio artists became disinherited as majority of them were made to go back to the classroom to study art history for which they had no interest in. The consequences are legion for the conceptual and theoretical engagements of art history scholarship come with enormous intellectual baggage. The difficulty of career dislocation for the studio artist who had to roam libraries and archives to align with the huge dictates of historical methodology is unimagined.

Artistic freedom

We need to understand first of all the definition and ranges of the concept of artistic freedom especially in Nigeria where undefined academic norms have become the legitimating condition of professional and disciplinary accomplishment in the academia. We are then left with the situation whereby novel and critical inquiries into contemporary happenings in the visual arts appear threatened. Indeed, while many PhDs in Nigerian art departments fall outside the stipulated compass of the art profession, artistic and academic freedom in the visual arts are constantly under threat.

It is possible to bolster studio programmes in our universities as a principle that safeguards professional self-determination and against outsider intrusion. What Egonwa's lecture may have achieved is a constant quest by Nigerian artists to find a legitimate basis on which to argue against illegitimate political or administrative interventions on matters of professionalism in art. Butler (2009:774) has argued that "Professional norms, construed in part as disciplinary norms, legitimate academic freedom,..." What this means is that professional practice should form part of the academic ascension in the university. If this is allowed to hold then it means that professional studio artists must be part of the structuring of academic programmes in the university. It is reasonable to argue that a professional studio artist does not need a PhD degree in art history to legitimate and perhaps, prove his mettle, in the visual arts profession. In other words, what he requires is a determined and focused curriculum that constantly and consistently drags along his chosen path of the studio. In this manner the studio artist may be seen as possessing the necessary freedom needed to excel in the practice. This is where Egonwa needs commendation for spearheading the introduction of studio PhD degrees in Nigerian art institutions. This in itself breeds a lot of disciplinary controversies which I address below.

On Disciplinarity and critical scholarship.

A highly contested issue raised by Egonwa's lecture borders on disciplinarity. While he raises the tension that exists between ideas in the university and the larger society, one is compelled to support Egonwa's claims that artistic learning in certain Nigerian universities creates a problematic detachment of society. Artistic inquiry must serve as a kind of 'interrogation,' a critical reflection of what knowledge production is and how knowledge is distributed. Learning art in some Nigerian universities is a challenge. This is because students have to struggle with the reconciliation of what is improbable with what is practicable. Egonwa attempts to secure the territorial interest of studio art without necessarily jeopardising disciplinary integrity of the entire art profession. He offers a healthy critique of the academic curriculum by arguing that "art programmes in Nigeria lack learnable skills which would enable its recipients give functional art services needed by the common man". This is where the question of the visual arts community— the cultural audience for whom its theoretical disquisitions are most meaningful – must come into play.

No doubt, the audience share in the collective confusion experienced in the art profession. Egonwa advocates a holistic knowledge-based learning that marries 'theory' with practicable lessons. For example he argues "Painting and Decoration should be taught along side still-Life Painting, Scenic Design and House Painting. These are the type of services most people need". This is a disciplinary reformulation. If painting is taught as a functional, market-orientated practice then graduates of painting are conditioned to fit into the tough economy of the Nigerian state. When disciplines veer from society's needs they become dispossessed of their real essences. The feasibility of the institution of academic freedom is founded on established academic standards, set and enforced by a professional class of academics who understand the fields in question, and these standards, in turn, facilitate the kinds of research and teaching that we do.

These standards, in fact, are the legitimating proviso of our academic freedom. Egonwa has led a revolution of sorts by ensuring that this proviso is strictly pursued to accommodate studio art in the PhD programme. Supporting his thesis with instances from other parts of the world Egonwa claims:

> It may interest us to know that the practice (of obtaining PhD as a criteria for ascension in the academia) has become almost universal. Even a studio PhD is required for lectureship positions in Australia for over a decade now. The British since the last decade have started what is tagged practice-led-research for doctoral degrees in studio arts... since our system requires PhD, it only requires those in the visual arts to work out their own in the various studio specializations....Our findings show that those who want to pursue academic career in our field have parochially interpreted having a doctoral degree as having it 'anyhow' i.e. (sic) in any field of study.

The implications of the above submissions are many. Egonwa started by underlining the universality of PhD criteria in the Western academic system. He however failed to clearly map the boundaries of professional requirements still obtainable in certain institutions in the West. A typical example could be drawn from Professor Nnenna Okore who has been recently promoted to the rank of Professor in North Park University, USA with an MFA. However, this is not our yardstick for determining what Egonwa intends to highlight in his lecture. He attempts to systematically problematize the Nigerian National Universities Commission's indices for assessing academics and academic standard in Nigeria. Egonwa's treatise may have suggested that NUC's criteria for academic assessment in Nigerian universities are literally bereft of serious disciplinary formulation or professionalism. While Egonwa indirectly renders NUC's rules culpable, he fundamentally bemoans the lacunae in the Visual arts curriculum. While this lacunae call for urgent redress, Egonwa's lecture hastens to reclaim the once exalted position of the visual arts profession in Nigeria and ultimately reposition visual artists in the academia on the track of acceptability, respectability and nobility.

While Egonwa, in his pursuit of studio PhD, may have attracted the ire of conservative art historians who are trained mainly in traditional art history, one may need to answer few questions to address the supposed conundrum that Egonwa's lecture has raised. First is what is critical in art history and how does that relate to the problem of studio practice? If, for instance, a sort of critical inquiry in art history must be defended, how can we understand, and can we ever understand, the kernel of this critical inquiry in studio practice? The second question is whether what we mean by critical inquiry in art history can be determined solely by art historians? It has to be argued that the project of art history is fundamentally grounded in a critique of the studio. The question is why would studio artists not engage in a critique of their own work while at the same time developing more robust projects that would provide art historians with an object of inquiry? If Egonwa's lecture achieved anything it is re-awakening our consciousness to the illegitimate interruptions of ideas in the artists' studios by outsiders.

A controversial submission by Egonwa may require our attention: "Conversely there is a lot of misconception to the view that being in academics demands that one should engage in philosophical and theoretical issues requiring literary explication. This is irrespective of the essentially practical nature of the disciplines." This may be read as an essentialist statement that substantially reinforces academic stereotypes. For one may not be clearly certain about what Egonwa means by 'philosophical and theoretical issues... and lately 'literary explication'". For if exactly the interpretations of the three terms of 'philosophical,' 'theoretical' and 'literary' are dissected then it means that Egonwa has literally collapsed academic inquiry into a voyage in pedestrian musing. The question is what is theory? Theory, perhaps is the condiment with which academics cook and eat their works. Theory seems

marginal in the visual arts because of the inherent disciplinary resistance of artists to self-conscious theorising. While art in itself is a theoretically engaging subject both in its research scope and other methodological approaches, artists abandoned art's theoretical engagement in pursuit of a new set of ideas defined only by their putative relationship to market forces. This attitude is, perhaps, not just a Nigerian phenomenon as noted by Christopher Glazek recently:

> Many of the artists I knew enjoyed whatever years they spent under the formal tutelage of credentialed elders. Very few, though, had found their operational armature in academic theory. This wasn't just a trend among visual artists – in the age of Wikipedia, the ability to manipulate specialized vocabularies and esoteric knowledge was commanding less and less authority across the board, from Marxism to indie music. The easy diffusion of information was having ripple effects across publishing, art, and the avant-garde. This was clear to many students, but not always to their professors, who understandably continued to ply the methods and methodologies that had helped them get tenure. As a result, many art school grads were coming of age at a time when what felt most oppressive wasn't consumer capitalism: It was the institutional codes and guild vocabularies in which they had been trained.

Twerdy (2014) believes that Glazek's submission is relevant in this post-internet aesthetics era because most artists are beclouded by the vision of capitalist aesthetics. Twerdy himself notes: "for such artists, theory is unappealing because it cuts them off from a larger audience." He further argues that:

> what these artists crave is *impact*, even if that impact is mainly limited to seeing their own aesthetics distributed as widely as possible. Rather than launch an ineffectual critique of the world of representation and ideology, they want their art to make things happen in the world, which is why so many of them focus on brands and marketing, the dominant ways in which aesthetics actually affect how people behave.

Perhaps the best way to approach the issue Egonwa raised here is through critical theory. Critical Theory is the study of history, literature, art, culture, etc., from perspectives that assume that there is no "objective" academic stance possible, and that all knowledge is situated in particular circumstances. If critical theory must be applied to explain the fate of 'theory' in Nigerian art then it means that what Egonwa would have noted is that in Nigeria research and explorations on art, for example, were rapidly overshadowed by mercantile pursuits such that there is an absence of any clear theoretical agenda for art historians to engage. This led to fragmentation and diversity rather than to building of a new art theory. While Egonwa advocates for a functional art curricula, there is every need to checkmate the proliferation and replication of endless artistic ideas that do not provoke any new thinking about the structures or relationships within the discipline of art. Art historical research as it is practiced in Nigeria may have diverted the newest forms of art historical inquiry from the cutting edge of theoretical development and transformed them into building blocks of a construction without plan or clear shape. In effect, contrary to Egonwa's submission all academics should engage in theory as 'theory' could not be defined within the simplistic confines of verbalization of one's work as the purpose of theory, according to Johnson (1970:10), is "to abstract from the complexity of the real world a simplified model of the key

relationships between dependent and independent variables, and to explore the positive and normative implications of changes in the "givens" of this hypothetical system." In order words, it is the role of theory to provide key ingredients for the sustenance of intellectual inquiry. Without theory, therefore, it is assumed that all disciplines would have failed in the project of intellectual inquiry.

Art historical writing: a conclusion

While some art historians have argued that the writings on art should be devoid of extenuating circumstances, some have insisted that art writing should remain a holistic enterprise whereby, its history is a product of the complex occurrences around the economic, political and social life of the artist and the nation. This is where one expects that Egonwa's lecture would have made a significant contribution. However, it seems Egonwa's style of writing does not recognise this aspect of art writing as a vital element of art historical research.

The problem with art historical tutelage in Nigeria, for example, is that students have not been properly educated to understand the relationship between art and the society. And this is why Chika Okeke-Agulu's recent book titled "Postcolonial Modernism: Art and Decolonization in Twentieth-Century Nigeria," is an unprecedented attempt to chart the connection between art and politics in Nigeria. In Nigerian institutions there is a straightjacket, colonial influence of the study of art that has not yet undergone the necessary curricula changes that it needs to insert it into a more inclusive, global discourse. As Okeke-Agulu argues, his book's methodology is advisedly chosen to expose, not just the "visual intelligence but also how they [the works of art] relate to the world of the artist and his society" (Okeke-Agulu 15). How does one engage in art history that connects the artist and his society? Okeke-Agulu does this by recognizing certain vestiges of inter-textual dialogue in areas of art history, anti-colonial nationalism, colonial history and African political economy. And by so doing he remarkably situates modern Nigerian art within a global and broader intellectual context. The subtle exploration of the intersections of art practice and socio-political influences is necessary especially in recognition of what Nicholas Mirzoeff describes as the "political economy of creativity under late capitalism". Mirzoeff simply suggests how late capitalism could shape artistic productivity through the push and pull of multinational sponsorship. A balanced art historical text must address ways in which the materiality of the artwork is moulded in line with the economic needs of the time. For example, Elizabeth Harney's study of art, politics, and the Avant-Garde in post-independent Senegal discusses "the structure of the art market, and the relationship between formations of identity and artistic practice" (5) which, in my mind, establishes a space where "agents such as producers, consumers, patrons, critics, collectors, dealers, curators and art historians use symbolic, cultural, and economic capital to compete for resources and interests" (see Harney 54-5) thereby shaping artists' productivities. Harney's interrogations of African modernism and her detailed discussion and critique of Senghor's Negritude are surely a way to articulate the conjunction of art and the socio-economic in any society. Although Egonwa suggests how art as a discipline can be aligned with the functional dictates of the larger society, his treatise on art historical writing strangely deviates from the above prescriptions that suggest a healthy fusion of art and the socio-political in the larger society.

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