

## **Contemporary Visual Art in Zimbabwe: Implications for Art and Design Teacher Education Curricula**

*<sup>1</sup>Njabulo Mpofu & <sup>2</sup>Philemon Manatsa*

<sup>1</sup>Morgenster Teachers College <sup>2</sup>University of Zimbabwe

### **Abstract**

*This hermeneutic ethnographic study explored contemporary visual art in Zimbabwe with implications for the Art and Design teacher education curricula. Interviews, observations of art works from three selected galleries and document analysis of Art and Design syllabi and course outlines were used to generate data. The study involved four lecturers, four practising contemporary artists, curricula documents and several contemporary artworks. Findings indicated that contemporary artists were articulate in conceptualising the term. It emerged that contemporary visual art had broadened to include performance art, photography, installation and assemblage art, abstract painting, soft sculpture and mixed media sculpture. The study revealed that artists had initiated a new method of painting called 'kuchekacheka'. Lecturers had limited knowledge about the principles of contemporary art education. Contemporary art practices are valued as essential for art education. The study recommends the development of strong partnerships between art education and practising artists to stimulate the cross-pollination of art ideas and approaches. Lecturers need to take the initiative to write about contemporary visual art. Teacher education should review their curricula so that the study of art history involves works of living artists.*

### **Introduction**

This study explored trends in the development of contemporary visual art forms in Zimbabwe and their implications for the Art and Design teacher education curricula. Contemporary visual art practices in Zimbabwe have diversified into various forms and new media. The practices can be incorporated into the teacher education curricula. Art education today is global, in line with postmodern doctrines (Gaudelius & Speirs, 2020). Postmodern art education is open, fluid and favours diverse approaches and content like mixed media, installations and ready-mades.

The development of modern styles and practices birthed avant-garde and contemporary art practices in Zimbabwe. The National Gallery of Zimbabwe (NGZ) is the epicentre for the dynamic representation and conservation of Zimbabwe's contemporary and visual art

heritage (Chikukwa 2013). It serves to interpret artworks from the country and different parts of the world, while providing room for the interconnectedness of Zimbabwean art to the world. The gallery represents the best of respected traditions of Zimbabwean art.

The meditation of contemporary artworks (*kunstvermittlung*) in the classroom develops learners' sensitivity towards the works (Blohm, 1995:9). Art history and studio practice are of particular importance to art education. In African art history content covers, Zimbabwe stone sculpture, Stone Age and Egyptian art, Introduction to African Art, and First and Second generation Zimbabwean sculptors. In spite of the growing interest in contemporary art, few studies have explored contemporary visual art in Zimbabwe. Studies like Contemporary African artist ,the Pan-African Imaginary: Skunder Boghossian, Kwabena Ampofo-Anti and Victor Ekpuk by Okeke-Agulu (2013) , Dak'Art the Biennial Exhibition of Contemporary African Art in Dakar: A Platform for critical global views (Wictorin, 2014); Visual Expressivity in the Art of Black Diaspora: conjunctures and disjuncture (Jegede, 2013), focused on the emergence of contemporary African art in relation to western art, authentic African and hybrid aesthetics. In Zimbabwe, Abraham (2002) looked into the localisation of "O" Level Art examinations, while Mamvuto (2013) studied visual expression among contemporary artists with implications for art education.

Art education in Zimbabwean teachers' colleges has remained alienated from global trends on rethinking institutional approaches to emerging artistic practice. The interaction sets the terms of quality in visual expression generating a ripple effect across the breadth of the artists' community, education, value of artworks and interest in Zimbabwean culture. Despite such trends and values of contemporary art, teachers' colleges remain focused on teaching Stone Age and Egyptian art, Great Zimbabwe stone sculpture and pre-colonial art. Western art canon is the dominant force in the majority of the world's famous art education systems as evidenced by the predominance of instructional approaches to drawing and emphasis on creativity in syllabuses and examinations (Mason, 1995:5). To better understand the contemporary art discourse, teacher education should capture recent trends to assist pre-service teachers and lecturers become informed about contemporary art practices. How contemporary art practices can merge with art education in order to break the dichotomy between contemporary art and art education is an issue demanding attention.

## Methodology

An ethnographic hermeneutic design was appropriate to generate data from contemporary artists in contact with each other through symposiums, exhibitions at galleries and studios. The design allowed the exploration of patterns in contemporary art through subthemes like appropriation, media usage, hybridisation and semiotic styles in artworks. Ethnography allows for the capture of data in real life settings (Mason, 2002; Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Cohen *et al*, 2018).

An ethnographic design includes in-depth interviews, participant observation and document analysis as data collection tools. Ethnography was aimed at documenting perspectives and perceptions of contemporary artists and lecturers about artistic practices. To implement procedures, interviewees, institutions of art, and art events providing a wider context of contemporary art practices were identified. The investigation of a number of cases was conceivable. The schedule covered art events like ‘*Amali Malola*’ sculpture, and Zimbabwe annual exhibition ‘*Nhaka*’ and ‘*Greenshoots*,’ at NGZ. Artistic practices at Gallery Delta, Dzimbanhete Arts Interactions (DAI), Unhu Village, NGZ and two colleges, Manyame and Rembrandt were probed. Sources were chosen with respect to their relevance to the research purpose. Institutions with a track record on contemporary art practices were purposively sampled. Participation was narrowed down to four galleries and two accessible teachers colleges offering Art and Design.

## Results

**Table 1: Summary of emerging themes and categories**

Themes	Categories
Lecturer and artist perception contemporary art	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Conceptual art; happening now outside its context</li> <li>• Emergence of new media formulated contemporary art</li> </ul>
Nature of contemporary visual art	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Computer art</li> <li>• Photography</li> <li>• Abstract painting</li> <li>• Assemblage</li> <li>• Conceptual art</li> </ul>
Perceptions about the status of visual art	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Influenced by globalisation</li> <li>• Western and Egyptian art history dominate learning</li> <li>• Appropriation of western art styles and approaches</li> </ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Need for reforms in art education</li> <li>• transculturation</li> </ul>
Lecturer perception about contemporary visual art and art education	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• contemporary issues in art education</li> <li>• deliberate interaction between artists and art educators</li> <li>• attending platforms like art conversations</li> </ul>
Perceptions about exhibitions of contemporary visual art	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• artists attending the Venice Biennale, Art Fairs, symposiums</li> <li>• artistic practices fit well into the international arena of art</li> </ul>

**Table 2 Lecturer and artist perception about contemporary art**

<b>Emerging Category</b>	<b>Substantiating excerpts from data</b>
Art that is happening now	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• It is not our own making but will explain from English terminology not in Art but things that are happening now, influenced by economic, politics and religious issues. All these nuances have influence on shifting terms of how we see the world. (artist)</li> <li>• It is contemporary because it is time frozen. (teacher educator)</li> <li>• Art of nowadays; practised by current artists (teacher educator)</li> </ul>
Art outside its context	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What makes something contemporary is taking it outside its context for example Anatsui used found objects, used bottle tops to make a chair. (artist)</li> <li>• The word contemporary art in Zimbabwe means we had entered the art world. (artist)</li> </ul>
Emergence of new media formulated the contemporary	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The emergence of new media formulated contemporary art, for example welding machines for found objects in art. (artist)</li> <li>• The coming of new media changed art (artist)</li> </ul>

Participants shared similar ideas about the meaning of contemporary art. Timeliness, new media forms and conceptual thinking guided the concept; defined as artistic practices of the current era, the art of now; influenced by political, economic and social nuances. The concept was context based, between African and western art worlds. Practising artists understood contemporary art as concept based, involving mental processes. It was regarded as art of the mind communicating ideas about society and cultural experiences of its people. The emergence of new media, modern technology, canvas, acrylics and computers prompted

contemporary art. Opposing views among artists were noted. Some argued that, it was a matter of terminology.

**Table 3: Nature of contemporary art**

Emerging category	Substantiating excerpts from data
Computer art	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Computer painting. (teacher educator)</li> <li>• Motion; video art for animation. (teacher educator)</li> <li>• Digital art</li> </ul>
Photography	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• For photography there is photo-editing, working with light and shadows. (artist)</li> <li>• In photography we have Calvin Dondo</li> </ul>
Painting	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Painting which is abstract.(artist)</li> <li>• Exploring, inventing media for example Gareth Nyandoro inventing an approach called “<i>kuchekacheka</i>” cutting paper strips in painting. (artist)</li> </ul>
Assemblage, installation and soft sculpture	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Sculpture is now assemblage; now involves the idea which uses the mind. (artist)</li> </ul>
Performance art	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Performance art, expresses an idea for example “<i>Tigere muupfu</i>” a metaphor for sitting pretty. (artist)</li> <li>• Performance by feminist artists; performing naked saying this how we dress for example Nancy Mteki in a performance entitled “<i>Honai</i>”. (artist)</li> </ul>

Lecturers and practising artists identified major categories of contemporary art forms as; computer art, photography, installation and assemblage, painting and performance art. The advent of technology especially computers was identified as having led to computer painting, graphic design, digital and video art. Photography was listed as one of the current art forms. Sculpture and installation were now contemporary art forms combining mixed media like wood, plastic and metal, a concept called assemblage art. New approaches to painting like “*kuchekacheka*” also emerged. Regarding institutionalisation of these art forms, galleries had made great strides as compared to teacher education.

**Table 4: Perceptions about the status of contemporary visual art**

Emerging category	Substantiating excerpts from data
Influence of globalisation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• We have been projected well in the global art world especially in painting (artist)</li> <li>• Zimbabwean art is evolving at par with the global works of art. I am worried about the education system. (artist)</li> <li>• A lot of work and reforms are needed in art in the education sector. (artist)</li> </ul>
Art learning is influenced by western and Egyptian art history	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• In Europe we studied Art history, Egyptian art; we did not touch on African Art. What has been learnt in schools is western art. (artist)</li> <li>• When we are teaching African art we are teaching Egyptian art, which is the structure of western thinkers. For them African art was West Africa.</li> </ul>
Need for reforms in education	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Our education has to change for example the ‘how to draw tools’ for the nose, hands, fingers they kill creativity in students. (artist)</li> </ul>
Zimbabwean diaspora artists	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Yes we have Gerald Machona in South Africa, he is doing well.</li> </ul>
Appropriation of western styles	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Our artists are borrowing from western art. One artist is copying Francis Bacon right, left and centre. (artist)</li> <li>• I select the styles and use them to reinforce my art. (artist)</li> <li>• Contemporary art has lot to do with appropriation.</li> </ul>
Transculturation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• We can talk of appropriation, transculturation and enculturation of styles yes, but we have done this on the inferior side. (artist)</li> <li>• These are plug-inns that you have to drop in order to be contemporary. There are ideas you have to let go for example in globalisation you have to leave out a lot to be in the sameness in order to be classic and not classic art of Africa. This takes off our art. (artist)</li> </ul>

Artists agreed that visual art had fitted well into the global arena in terms of quality of artworks and forms of media. This confirms that contemporary visual art in Zimbabwe is contemporary by classic western standards. However, others asserted that local art forms though contemporary, were of inferior quality when compared to western art. Art history content was slanted towards western and Egyptian art. Appropriation of western art styles by Zimbabwean artists was highlighted. It was noted that contemporary art was about

appropriation from western art. In a bid to enter the art world, artists appropriated from western aesthetics.

**Table 5: Perceptions of lecturer and artist about contemporary visual art education**

Emerging category	Substantiating excerpts from data
Contemporary issues in art education	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Conceptual art and cultural issues</li> <li>• New media forms in art education</li> </ul>
Interaction between contemporary artists and art educators	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Lecturers should familiarise with contemporary art forms making them versatile with current forms and wave of thinking in art. (art educator)</li> <li>• There must be a deliberate relationship between contemporary artists and art educators (artist)</li> </ul>
Art conversations as platforms for contemporary art	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• They should engage students in art conversations with curators and artists. This person is hands on and will be able to zero down on issues for example France, Italy the Venice Biennale. They have been there and speak volumes about such art. (artist)</li> <li>• We encourage them to visit contemporary artists in order to gain skills and they borrow ideas. (art educator).</li> </ul>

Artists proposed several options for integrating contemporary art into art education ahead of lecturers. Contemporary artists offered various options that could be considered for incorporation into contemporary art forms in the teacher education curricula. Collaboration between artists and lecturers could form the basis for this strategy through attending art conversations, exhibitions and symposiums to meet curators, art critics and collectors. Art conversations were viewed as a significant arena. Art educators had a different perspective. They discouraged students from teaming up with contemporary artists for fear of them buying artefacts.

**Table 6: Perceptions about the exhibition of contemporary visual art**

<b>Emerging category</b>	<b>Substantiating excerpts from data</b>
Participating at Venice Biennale, Art Fairs and symposiums	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• We are always well known, for example we have some artists going to Venice Biennale the world cup of art. (artist)</li><li>• Participation in both local and international exhibitions helps improve our art through critics and curators. (artist)</li></ul>
Art practices at the international arena	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Painting has been promoted a lot; internationally Zimbabwean artists are doing well. (artist)</li><li>• We have been projected well in the global world you don't see any differences with international standards. (artist)</li></ul>

Artists held that engaging in art exhibitions was of great value. Students and artists interacted with curators and art critics. Having participated at Venice Biennials their art had changed the status of the Zimbabwean pavilion. Inversely, lecturers reported that visiting galleries for exhibitions was of less importance for students given the nature of their programme. One lecturer indicated that, “we are part of the art world”. In education we are aiming at producing art educators, even at UZ, time for production is limited. So these exhibitions lack essence for students because they pick up areas that make them teachers, making what is required for the course”. Lecturers viewed teaching art main study as satisfying the requirements of the course as opposed to nurturing well cultured knowledgeable art resource teachers.

### ***Lecturers’ perceptions of contemporary art education***

Analysis of the Art and Design syllabus and course outlines for Main Study and Professional Studies Syllabus B (PSB) applied the following domains as indicators of the infusion of contemporary visual art:

- Topics that reflect contemporary art practice
- Use of cultural themes in assignments
- Contemporary Zimbabwean art, art forms and artists
- Use of new media forms by students

Syllabus analysis showed that, topics like painting, construction, tie-dye, graphic design were studio based. Art theory topics included art movements, aesthetic theories, African, and Zimbabwean art. PSB covered painting, printing, graphic work colour, tools and materials, and brush techniques. Sculpture and 3 Dimensional art content included wood, stone, plaster, and wire. Art theory was taught as western art history focusing on movements with reference to artists, style and characteristics of each movement. Zimbabwean art focused on Great Zimbabwe bird, and Zimbabwean stone sculpture. Content for Zimbabwean art should be diversified to include soft, metal/wood sculpture communicating ideas about HIV, *barika*, diaspora and moral values, and social conditions.

## **Discussion**

The study arguments are from a position of experience with international exhibitions and art symposiums where issues are debated. Lecturers and artists' voices captured here revealed that their understanding of contemporary art was based on its time-less, emergence of new media and conceptual art. Answers to the question rested on personal understanding of meaning of contemporary art. The responses were that "it is art of nowadays", "it is art in existence the current art that we are producing such as graphic design, photography", "it is time frozen" and "art being practised by the current artists". However, artists gave contrasting definitions for contemporary art. This study revealed that contemporary art was a borrowed concept from the western art world which never existed in African art. The third meaning related to contemporary art as conceptual art practice and philosophical art. Artists voiced that contemporary art was characterised by the use of new media forms like ready-mades and recycled materials.

The definition of contemporary art as conceptual art contrasts with the use of the term as a chronological descriptor to define present artistic practices. Artists stated that contemporary art now involves the communication of an idea by the artist than focus on media. It is now philosophical art. They argue that conceptual art and performance art were practised long back in Zimbabwe before their re-invention as installation art by western artists.

From the study it emerged that art institutions like galleries had embraced diverse contemporary visual art forms. Art works on display were contemporary in terms of materials, techniques, and approaches. Items represent contemporary art in terms of theories, experiences and beliefs found in a number of African and western galleries and studios. The

artists incorporated aesthetic theories like the institutional theory which confers status to any object like rubber, torn shoes and brooms in a gallery as works of art. This resulted in artists using found objects as art media.

Evidence indicated that the contemporary visual art discourse had infused modern technology in its practices through the introduction of photography, computer, video and digital art and wire construction. During the interviews participants indicated that current art forms practised in Zimbabwe were now diverse. One such response was, “computer art, digital art, motion art, photography and computer painting”. In concurrence Freedman and Stuhr (2010), Smith (2002) maintain that contemporary art involves video and computer art.

Apart from new art forms in visual art, Zimbabwean artists had developed a new approach to painting. One of the artists had introduced an approach called *‘Kuchekacheka’*. Participants posited that contemporary art education involved “the philosophy of teaching and learning art”, “child centred approach” and “balancing between practical and theoretical skills”. Inversely, Lecturers did not align their content to capture contemporary works of art by local artists. Students should mediate works of art that communicate current issues from their local cultures.

The content for art education was skewed towards western art history and Egyptian art when it came to African art. According to Odiboh (2009) western art critics and art historians often apply equivocal considerations of modern and post-modern art styles to the analysis of contemporary African art. From the evidence, appropriation of styles and approaches by contemporary Zimbabwean artists was from western art. Painting was the most common genre where artists appropriated artistic approaches. Whilst artists had appropriated at individual level, observations revealed that certain galleries promoted the westernisation of artistic styles among local contemporary artists.

Katchka (2013) concurs, maintaining that the Venice Biennale is an international and iconic benchmark that provides a lens through which contemporary art is known to the public and art world. A permanent pavilion held at the Venice Biennale signposts a turn in the visibility of contemporary art from Zimbabwe. Lack of collaboration between practising contemporary artists in galleries and art educators was confirmed despite the existence of facilities such as weekend art lessons, mentorship programmes and mounting of several exhibitions. Teacher education had not tapped anything from such institutions.

Confronting views were offered by contemporary artists who viewed galleries as sites for rich artistic heritage and resources for vibrant art education. This confirms that galleries are viewed as laboratories for all forms of artistic innovation. There should be deliberate relationship between colleges and institutions of modern art to enable art educators and students to get acquainted with different art forms and recent developments in art world.

### **Summary of findings**

- Contemporary art was well defined using literature outside the art genre English terminology;
- visual art forms now included photography, installation and assemblage art, mixed media sculpture, performance and digital art and abstract painting.
- Contemporary art forms existed in traditional Zimbabwe without authorship by art educators and researchers until western artists explored forms like installation art.
- There were divergent views between practising artists and art educators on the role of galleries and contemporary art forms in teacher education curricula.

### **Recommendations**

The following recommendations were made;

- Partnerships with practising artists, galleries and studio sites can be rich sources for contemporary art practices.
- Art educators should take leadership in authorship and research on contemporary visual art in Zimbabwe.
- The curriculum review process must be reflective to include emerging contemporary trends and art forms in the teacher education curricula.
- Collaboration between art galleries and teacher education institutions to strengthen the art education curricula.
- Teacher education institutions should attend exhibitions to learn current trends in art practices.
- Lecturers to retool with knowledge on contemporary art, and contemporary art education with direct bearing on the information that cascades to student teachers.

### **Conclusion**

The contemporary art discourse has embraced a variety of visual art forms, abstraction of subject matter and use of recycled materials as new art media. Various art forms like installation, assemblage, mixed media sculpture, abstract painting, and computer art had been

incorporated as evident from art works exhibited in galleries. Interviews with artists revealed that they were into various forms of art.

The study found that colleges had not infused contemporary art practices into the teacher education curricula. The curricula did not reflect sentiments made during interviews. The Art and Design teacher education curriculum needs to incorporate contemporary art practices. It is assumed that attendance to galleries and participating in art conversations will augment skills and knowledge deficiencies by art educators.

## References

- Abraham, R.(2003) The localisation of “O” level Art examinations in Zimbabwe, *Studies in Art Education* ,45(1), 73-87.
- Atkinson, D. (2002). *Art in education: Identity and practice*. Boston: Kluwer Academic.
- Blohm, M.(1995). *Vermittlung zeitgenössischer Kunst in Kunstunterricht: Probleme Fragen und Denkalternativen*. Heidelberg: RAAbis Kunst.
- Chikukwa, R. (2013). *Contemporary and platform for international art from African perspectives*. 55<sup>th</sup> International Exhibition La Biennale di Venezia.
- Cohen, L; Manion, L and Morrison, K. (2018). *Research methods in education* (8<sup>th</sup> edn.). London: Routledge.
- Creswell, J.W and Creswell, J.D. (2018). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative and mixed methods approaches* (5<sup>th</sup> edn). New Dehli.
- Freedman, K. and Stuhr, P.(2010). Curriculum change for the 21<sup>st</sup> century: Visual culture in art education. *Studies in Studies Art Education*, 2(40) , 815-828.
- Gaudelius, Y & Speirs, P. (2020). *Contemporary issues in art education*. New York: Pearson.
- Jegede, D. (2013). Visual expressivity in the art of the Black Diaspora: Conjunctures and Disjunctures. In G Salami and M.B Visona (Eds) *A companion to modern African art*. Sussex: Wiley Blackwell.
- Katchka, K. (2013) Creative diffusion: African intersections in the biennale network. In G Salami and M B Visona (Eds) *A companion to modern African art* (1<sup>st</sup> Ed). Sussex: John Wiley.
- Mamvuto, A (2013) *Visual expression among contemporary artists: Implications for art education* (Unpublished PhD Thesis) University of Zimbabwe.
- Mason, R.(1995). *Art education and multiculturalism* (2<sup>nd</sup> edn). Corshan: NSEA.

- Odiboh, F.O (2009). Creative reformation of African art traditions: The iconography of Abayoni Barber Art school, *African Arts*, 42 (2), 76-83.
- Okeke-Agulu, C. (2013). Contemporary African artists and the Pan-African imagery, *Journal of Contemporary African Art*, 133(1), 56-69.
- Smith, T.(2002). What is contemporary art? Contemporaneity and art to come. *Journal of Art History*, 71(1), 3-15.
- Wictorin, W.M.(2014). Dak'Árt, the Biennial Exhibition of Contemporary African Art in Dakar: A Platform for critical Global Views, *Third Text*, 28(6), 563-574.
-