


CULTURAL RAMIFICATIONS OF THE FOUND OBJECT IN CONTEMPORARY AFRICAN ART

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ABSTRACT

Arguably Found Object genre represents the most dominant form of contemporary artistic expression with unlimited possibilities of material exploration and conceptual ideation. However, Found Object discourse institutionalized in European art history is exclusively western and dismisses those of other cultures as mimesis and time-lag. This paper aims to prove that the dominant contemporary discourse of „Ræyla Art‘ which many African sculptors have been absorbed into, problematically blurs the conceptual and ideological differences in European and African exploration of discarded objects in art creation. Using a triangulation of Formalism, Iconography and Interviews as methodologies, this paper subjects the works of El Anatsui, Delumprizulike, Nnena Okore, Bright Eke, Olu Amonda and others to formalistic and interpretative analysis to establish the postcolonial context of the found object in contemporary African art. Findings demonstrate that European and African appropriation of discarded objects in art differs according to societal context in form and content. The paper therefore concludes that found object art is culture-specific and defined by unique cultural ramifications, thus, to fully understand the dynamism of this art genre, a culture-specific or localized reading is required because the context of its emergence in Europe stands in contradiction to its conceptualism in contemporary African art-space.

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Introduction

The concept of the found object has deep rooted origins and theoretical institutionalisation in European Modernism. As a radical art genre, the Found Object emerged in 1912 with Avant-gardes' search for alternative realisms (that is, new stylistic expressions and notions/philosophies of modern art opposed to established Renaissance convention of mimesis, and as subjective interpretations of fragmented reality, culture and information overload in modern society) and their questioning of classical philosophies and historical notions of art through radical experimentation. Found Object refers to the genre of modern art created from the dislocation and manipulation of mundane objects from popular culture into works of art. This avant-garde genre originated from the *Construction Sculptures* of Pablo Picasso and Georges Braque's *Cubism* philosophy of appropriating primitive visual idioms as a form of anti-aesthetics to subvert classical European artistic conventions. The invention of the Found Object in Europe by Picasso was inspired by the inorganic structures, abrupt transitions, and non-mimetic / representational formal structures and technique of construction/assemblage in traditional African Kru Mask, which seemed to Picasso to subvert Western notions of authenticity/purity in painting and sculpture (Poggi, 2012, Bois 1987, 1999).

Picasso's exploration of the unconventionality, non-mimetic and relational structures of traditional African sculptures led to the creation of *Guitar 1912* one of the most revolutionary Twentieth Century art forms in concept, materials and execution (Smith 1971). Informed by the anti-conventional avant-garde ideology of „Artfor Arts' Sake,¹ modernist movements such as *Dadaism*, *Futurism*, *Russian Avant-garde*, *Surrealism*, *Fauvism*, *Impressionism*, *Russian Cubo-Futurism*, *Suprematism*, *Abstract Expressionism*, *Minimalism* etc., employed the radicalism of object assemblage to foster anti-art and anti-order advocacies. The Found Object in European Modernism thus had revolutionary ramifications as it altered European art, culture and aesthetics in two main ways. Firstly by, *Jettisoning European Aesthetic Conventionality*, *Art Salons and the Art-world*. The appropriation of Found Object in European Modernism jettisoned the conventionality of bourgeois culture, classical traditions and Victorian moralism. The incorporation of objects from the decadent mass culture and the appropriation of the unconventional formalism of so-called 'primitive' African culture was antithetical to European creative philosophies and thus, de-stabilizing to European conventions and notions of high art in bourgeois

¹ 'Art for Art's Sake' was a call for release from the tyranny of meaning and purpose. It was a further exercise of freedom. It was also a ploy, another deliberate affront to bourgeois sensibility which demanded art with meaning or that had some purpose such as to instruct, or delight, or to moralize, and generally to reflect in some way their own purposeful and purpose-filled world. (Witcombe, C. L.C. E (2000).

culture. Waldman in the essay *„Collage Assemblage and the Found Object’* observes that, by appropriating flimsy materials in modern art, Found Object genre subverted European art/culture and “jettisoned the hierarchical form and content of conventional painting and sculpture” (1992 p.16). By appropriating mundane objects in modern art, modernists such as Picasso and Braque dismantled the one-point perspective enshrined in European creative convention since its invention in European Renaissance and initiated a radical departure from established creative order. Avant-gardes used the abruptness, inartistic, flimsy and subversive bohemian forms of objects from mass culture to interrogate the fragmentation of reality in modern society, and reject its bourgeois hierarchical values, defiling and challenging the supposed sanctities of established European cherished conventions and artistic processes such as unity, purity, beauty, mimesis, authenticity and nobility (Krammer 1973, Waldman 1992, Poggi 2012).

Secondly it led to the *Subversion of Established Authority by Protesting Political/Social Values and Order*. The appropriation of mundane objects from popular mass culture also advanced avant-garde’s battle against bourgeois authority and socio-political order. The radical formalism of the Found Object and Readymade constituted a visual protest against bourgeois excesses, capitalism, the displacement of man in modern society, and especially the role of the ruling class in the destruction caused by World War I. Dadaists in particular used Found Objects to protest state sponsored violence; the conceptualism of their works was anti-authority and according to Ernst the anti-authority ideologies of their works, derived from;

A rebellious upsurge of vital energy and rage resulting from the absurdity of the war...we came back from the war in a state of stupefaction and our rage had to find expression on the foundations of the civilization responsible for the war... (Ernst quoted Waldman 1975, p.21)

Dadaist rage against the actions of the ruling class in the war and state sponsored violence, found expression in the subversive form of the Found Object, which they appropriated to express anti-social, anti-political, anti-authority propaganda. They fragmented and destroyed all artistic forms, reconfigured it in anti-aesthetic compositions as a political propaganda designed to alter social order, bourgeois authority and political structures. Dadaism was a tool of protest used to criticise the time the artists lived in, and the Found Object provided the visual platform for that protest (Ball 1916, Richter 1965).

The Czech born Dadaist Raoul Hausmann, used object construction and collage for political protest, contesting the excessive control of German capitalist forces, and the loss of the self to machines as evident in his *Mechanical Head* 1918 (Figure.1).



Figure. 1.: Raoul Hausmann *Mechanical Head* 1918
(*The Spirit of Our Time*), assemblage circa.
(Source: Patrick Bade, Joseph Manca, Sarah Costello).

Vladimir Tatlin of the Russian avant-garde believed in the use of Found Object for socio-political protest against social power in order to transform modern society. His *Model for the Monument to the Third International 1920*, etc., (fig.2) reflect his use of inartistic, unconventional materials to challenge and subvert the political hierarchy, by producing anti-art forms opposed to the artistic and culturally accepted conventions determined by the ruling class.



Figure 1.6: Vladimir Tatlin's *Model for the Monument to the Third International 1920*. (Source: CCA Architecture).

Eurocentrism and Found Object Art Discourse

Like Modernism, discourse on Found Object appropriation in art has been essentially Eurocentric.

The modern scholarly context of the found object is strictly tied to modernist artistic creation tailored as radical subversive artistic forms deployed to enforce change. Found Object genre is seldom described as a creative product of European avant-garde art, placing Europe at the centre, while dismissing similar genres outside European mainstream as mimesis. This Eurocentric approach is both narrow and problematic and impedes understanding of the ramifications of the Found Object beyond European Modernism context, and this constitutes a grey area investigated in this paper. Guasp has muted the idea that Found Object extends beyond and predates its institutionalisation in European art history but maintains that it was avant-gardes such as Duchamp and the Dadaist that deployed its formalism in modern art as a tool to subvert art salons (Guasp 2013, p.1).

Guasp's assertion hints at the possibility of cultural differences regarding the genre of Found Object which Western art history continues to ignore and manipulate. This paper explores this possibility and establishes the conceptual reality of this hypothesis. The main objective of this research is to establish the cultural ramifications or peculiarities of the Found Object as the genre's universality and as another original contribution to African art history and contemporary art discourse/knowledge. It will draw upon comparative analysis and localised stylistic/contextual reading of forms to prove that the appropriation of mundane objects in art creation, is distinguished by cultural context and ideologies, which will then address the problematic dismissal of this genre of African art in European mainstream discourse as mimesis. The paper questions the problematic Eurocentric construction of the Found Object Art discourse in Western art history, by employing a rather localised cultural reading of Found Object appropriation in Nigerian context.

The appropriation of objects from popular culture in art production, dominates postcolonial Nigerian art-space as many contemporary artists turn to discarded forms as their preferred visual idiom for artistic expression driven by specific and subjective artistic ideologies. This genre of contemporary Nigerian/African art is continually problematically theorized as time-lag manifestation of European avant-garde art in African art today (Akpang 2013).

This is done by the construed theorisation of the works of selected African artists such as El Anatsui, Romauld Hazoume, Delumprizulika and others, at the

forefront of found object exploration into global context of *Recyla Art or Materialist Art* as mere extension of Twentieth Century avant-garde art in contemporary Africa. This problematic theorisation of postcolonial Nigerian Found Object genre as mimesis or time-lag of Western avant-garde art reveals the ambiguity in Found Object discourse, because the invention of this postcolonial art genre in Nigeria happened on an independent level without encounter with European modernists. This attempted absorption of some postcolonial Nigerian/African artists who transform found object into art, into European mainstream indicates a selective system of acceptance that is misleading and stifles understanding of the dynamism of this genre of art.

Sanyal (2014) questions this selective acclaim of some African artists by the West as a reflection of the politics of inclusion in European hegemonic framework of multiculturalism designed to disregard the cultural peculiarities and complexities of this genre.² This selective inclusion and exclusion in Found Object discourse is aimed at blurring out cultural differences in order to maintain European aesthetic and cultural hegemony. This paper contests the framing of Found Object genres from all cultures into a unified mainstream discourse as it impedes understanding of the cultural ramifications, contexts and peculiarities of this art genre. Employing Comparative Analysis, Formalism, Iconography and Interviews as analytical tools, this paper analyses Found Object in contemporary Nigerian/African art to argue and establish fervently that Found Object in European and African art creative context differ considerably.

Methodology

This paper uses a triangulation of Interview, Formalism and Iconography to subject the works of a select number of African artists to in-depth analysis to explore their style and conceptualism. As propounded by the British art critic Roger Fry, formalism or formal analysis is a unique form of artistic evaluation focused on the interrogation of physical or tactile qualities of artworks without any reference to innate or underlying meanings. Formal analysis is tailored to explain and describe visual structures of the ways in which certain elements have been arranged and how such elements function within a composition both as individual complex parts and their relationship to the whole. It is deployed herein to examine sculptural

² The selective reception of Anatsui as a „global’ artist has a hegemonic agenda. It is grounded in the politics of inclusion, which uses multiculturalism as an excuse to uncritically include Anatsui in the genealogy of modern Western art. By equating the notion of „global’ with the older rhetoric of „universal’, the critics ignore the unevenness of global exchanges; and by treating „local’ as largely irrelevant, they trivialize the question of difference, which is crucial to gaining insight into the complexities of temporality and spatiality in the discourse of contemporary art. see Sanyal, S. K. (2014) „Critiquing the Critique: El Anatsui and the Politics of Inclusion’, *World Art*, 4 (1), 89-108. Pp 89.

compositions that comprises of invention and disposition or design, drawing, forms, and expression of the works of African sculptors to define their form and content. Iconography propounded by the philosopher Panofsky in 1955 is critical to understanding and exploring the ideas surrounding the layering of meanings in art, by unravelling the layer of connotation to expose what ideas and values are expressed through what is represented, and how it is represented is also used in this study. This is achieved through analysis of several found object art forms to reveal the works primary and natural subject matter, object's signs to reveal the ideas and concepts attached to it as a secondary or conventional subject matter and the ideological meaning of each artwork under review. These two analytical frameworks are complemented by the qualitative methodology of interview for the extraction of information from a biographical standpoint in this context. The combination of these three methodologies are drawn upon to subject a select number of works to formalistic and interpretative analysis to reveal their conceptualism especially the Africanesque approach to found object appropriation as a form of critical expressionism.

Found Object in Postcolonial Nigerian Art: Context, Origin and Framework

The postcolonial emergence of the found object in contemporary African art is credited to El Anatsui who through his conceptual/material exploration developed a technique of assemblage working with shattered clay, discarded wood and liquor bottle caps, hence giving rise to this genre in postcolonial Nigeria. Anatsui encountered piles of discarded liquor bottle-caps on his material scavenging at Nnsukka, and using his newfound creative methodology of assemblage, experimented with them in his works to express his views on modern African conditions, thus sparking radical material experimentation in Nigeria (Cotter 2013, Binder 2010). Anatsui's appropriation of waste and found object, inspired by the ideology of *Ulism* and cultural revivalism ideologies of the Nnsukka school established by Uche Okeke, informed the conceptual/contextual framework that defined the conceptualism of the Found Object genre in postcolonial Nigeria; Anatsui is thus, the founder of this art convention in postcolonial/contemporary Africa at large (Reintjes 2009).

Anatsui's invention of this art genre was inspired by the issue of rising waste in Nigerian cities and this problem energised and inspired the artist's appropriation of discarded objects to interrogate the destruction of Nigeria/Africa by waste generated from the West, thereby informing the new context of this genre in

postcolonial Nigeria. Found Object appropriation for art expressionism by many Nigerian and African artists now derives from this identified context, with discarded objects constituting visual metaphors drawn upon by artists to induce art of the highest order in their interrogation of contemporary societal conditions (Binder 2006, Swigert-Gacheru 2011). Discarded objects are manipulated with preconceived themes and subject matter influenced by the adverse conditions of their societies and directed to convey the artists' reactions to such societal problems. Unlike in European modernist context where avant-gardes re-contextualised manufactured objects as art often un-manipulated or without any artistic intervention, for postcolonial African artists, discarded objects are not passed as art but employed as materials that lead to the actualisation of preconceived ideas/concepts in visual form. Indiscriminate dumping of waste in Nigeria as a result of globalisation and its adversities, furnishes postcolonial Nigerian artists with ideal forms to interrogate socio-political issues in order to instigate societal transformation. European global influences on third world countries, the problematic legacies of colonialism especially materialism, hyper consumerism which accounts for the rapid proliferation of waste in Nigerian/African cities, as well as its impact on contemporary society, constitutes the problematic which informs and defines the appropriation of the Found Object in contemporary African art.

This postcolonial context of the Found Object instigated by Anatsui's practice, can thus be defined as one in which objects from popular culture are appropriated and manipulated in art, driven by cultural sentiments and societal concerns to critique and comment on Western neo-imperialist domination of Africa, the plight of Africans in modern society and the socio-political adversities instigated by colonial ideologies upon which governance in most African nations are structured. This indicates a culture-specific context of found object appropriation in postcolonial art, which is completely ignored in Western Eurocentric art history.

This invention of found object art genre in the late 90s indicates an Africa-specific cultural context and political imperatives/ramifications of Found Object appropriation in postcolonial artistic expressionism that is particular to the continent and stands in position of contradiction to European modernist avant-garde invention of the genre during the period of modernism.

Political Imperatives/Cultural Ramifications of the Found Object in Contemporary Nigerian Art

The postcolonial invention of the Found Object in Nigerian art draws upon the subversive power of art to interrogate societal problems and challenge the legacies of colonialism through radical formalism. Different artists address different issues of preference pertinent to the Nigerian state using discarded objects and driven by specific artistic/ideological reasons. This study identifies two political imperatives fostered through object appropriation and manipulation in postcolonial Nigerian/African art: a) To challenge Colonial Legacies / Neo-colonialism and b) For socio-political commentary on adversities in contemporary Africa.

a) Interrogation of Colonial Legacies and Neo-colonialism

In the detritus forms of discarded objects, postcolonial Nigerian artists from the 1990s found the appropriate visual metaphors with which to interrogate the legacies of colonialism and neo-colonialism. Although colonialism ended in the 1960s, its adverse effects still manifest in contemporary Nigeria/Africa and artists through the manipulation of discarded objects, interrogate the social, economic, political, and cultural problematic it has given rise to (Okore 2013). Colonialism left Nigeria in a state of confusion, fragmentation, and uncertainty with its destruction of traditional structures, and forceful amalgamation of northern and southern Nigeria, which stirred ethnic distrust, hate, sentimentalism and discrimination that resulted in the Nigerian civil war of 1967 (Atofarati 1992). The most adverse effect of colonialism was the transformation of the colonized into dependent beings with total reliance on the West - a problematic orientation that still manifest in contemporary Nigeria/Africa. Various artists have thus dedicated their practices to interrogating these legacies of colonialism and impact of neo-colonialism using discarded objects the physical products of Western overbearing economic and political influence on Third World countries as suitable visual metaphors.

El Anatsui's early appropriation of Found Object in art was inspired by the conditions of fragmentation, uncertainty, confusion, cultural clash etc., of post-independence West Africa deformed by colonial brutality. Subsequently, Anatsui's works became fierce, agitated responses to his displacement, the fragmentation of African societies/culture and reflection of disillusioning times in post-colonial Africa (Cotter 2013). His works as he comments emerged from these particular African situations, which defined its formalism; he therefore tailored his works to "engage the cultural, social and economic histories of West Africa, to provide commentary on

globalization, consumerism, waste and the transience of people's lives in West Africa and beyond" (Binder 2010, p.59). He interrogates colonial legacies in modern Africa and makes connections between waste, consumerism and neo-colonialism, which are the fastest growing problems of the African continent. Imperial conditioning of former colonies to depend on the West is responsible for the new culture of hyper-consumerism of Western products, which has resulted in Africa becoming the dumping ground of European and American waste,³ hence, Anatsui for the past two decades through appropriation of discarded objects, has dedicated efforts calling for redress of this rising environmental pandemic in contemporary Africa.

His works such as *Earth's Skin* 2007 (Figure.3) are installations of appropriated aluminum, copper wires, liquor bottle tops, discarded metal sheets etc., which besides their visual appeal, are coded with deep political statements on the social/political conditions/adversities of Africa. Through these works, Anatsui draws attention to the damaging impact of hyper-consumerism on Nigerian society, culture and development. Anatsui challenges Africa's dependence on the West and how over consumerism has and is transforming the continent into a pile of waste, thus, questioning this colonial induced culture in Nigeria and its adverse physical landmark. This he achieves through assemblage of desperate discarded forms and using the visual language of exaggerated proportions.

One of Anatsui's iconic piece *Crumbling Wall* 2000 (Figure.5), comments on the destruction of Africa, the fragmentation of its culture, customs and traditions as well as Africa's futile struggles to reconstruct its society long after the attainment of independence as a result of Europe's continuous neo-imperialist domination. As Ogbechie observes, the work serves as a metaphor for the destruction evident in modern African society and politics and the decay of the once-beautiful structures that decorated and pride Africa's cultural landscape (Ogbechie 2012).

³ "The UK generates almost two million tons of electronic waste. Disposing of this in America and Europe costs money, so many companies sell it to middle merchants, who promise the computers can be reused in Africa, China and India. Each month about 500 container loads, containing about 400,000 unwanted computers, arrive in Nigeria to be processed. But 75 per cent of units shipped to Nigeria cannot be resold. So they sit on landfills, and children scabble barefoot, looking for scraps of copper wire or nails. And every so often, the plastics are burnt, sending fumes up into the air" (Selva 2006).



Figure.3: El Anatsui *Earth's Skin* 2007 – found object aluminium bottle caps (Source: Brooklyn Museum).

Anatsui's use of flimsy ephemeral and discarded objects makes visual references to the frailty, uncertainty and fragmented state of postcolonial Nigeria/ Africa damaged by colonialism and colonial thinking on which modern politics/ governance in Africa are based. This appropriation of discarded objects to proselytize political and socio-environmental views, defines the political inclination and imperatives of his art and his overwhelming influence at the University of Nigeria Nsukka, inspired many Nigerian/ African artists to pursue same revolutionary ideologies and creative ethos which manifest in their art practices till date.

Bright Ugochukwu Eke's works are framed in this politically inclined context as it questions neo-colonialism and continued Western dominance in Africa. His works particularly questions the destruction of the Niger Delta region of Nigeria by industrial waste generated from multinational companies who continue to exploit Nigerian resources whilst impoverishing indigenous peoples, and destroying numerous communities. The operations of European multinational companies such as Chevron, Shell, ExxonMobil, Addax etc., has led to the destruction of the Niger Delta region, and forced indigenes to flee their homes as a result of widespread pollution occasioned by oil spillage and gas flaring (Eweje 2006, Aluko 2004, Okwuosa 2013).



Figure.4: El Anatsui *Crumbling Wall* 2000 – found objects, copper wire.
(Source: October Gallery).

This adverse impact of Western influence on developing countries through economic oppression and exploitation constitute the main themes of Eke's works. Having experienced what, he described as acid rain working in Port Harcourt Nigeria, it instigated his questioning of Western exploitation in contemporary Nigeria by European companies. Eke uses water, strings, plastic bottles, old metal plates, discarded cellophane bags etc., as his preferred medium, to question environmental destruction, negligence, domination and ecological devastation (Matthews 2009). On the inspiration behind his appropriation of mundane objects for contemporary art expressionism, Eke recounts that,

I was working outside the rain...I discovered skin irritation from toxic chemicals that go into the atmosphere from the industries. The emissions from especially the manufacturing and the oil production industries come down when it rains. Then I came to think about not just myself but the people who live around the area. What about the aquatic life? What about the vegetation?" (Eke cited in Weintraub 2012, p.161).

This experienced resulted in the creation of his installation *Acid Rain 2005* (fig.5), a conceptual installation of acidified water, in discarded plastic bags, installed hanging from tree branches and gallery roofs as a metaphoric visualization of the problematized living condition of the inhabitants of the Niger Delta region (Okwuosa 2013).



Figure.5: Bright Ugochukwu Eke *Acid Rain 2005* (Source: Okwuosa, Tobenna 2013).

For the Ijo people, water is significantly “synonymous with life, spiritual sustenance, wealth and prosperity, and especially with communication and identity” (Berns & Roberts 2002: 10); thus, the consequences of the contamination of Niger Delta Rivers and environment extend to cultural destruction of the life of the people. Eke interrogates this destruction in his installations, challenging the adversity of industrialisation, which defy the sanctity of water and society at large. His *Acid Rain 2005* comments on Western oppression, contemporary exploitation and manoeuvring of Third World countries and how indigenous peoples are rendered helpless and faceless through such actions, supported by corrupt African leaders.

b) Socio-Political Commentary on Societal Conditions

Most postcolonial artists in their appropriation of discarded objects in art, do not directly interrogate colonial legacies and neo-colonialism, but rather, draw upon the subversive power of art for socio-political commentary on the state of contemporary society. They employ the detritus forms of discarded materials as metaphors to question authorities, political corruption and environmental degradation. As Aronson (2012) observes, “these artists incorporate found objects into their work, to create provocative works that address ecological, political and economic conditions...offering a broader view of contemporary African conditions, rejecting the romanticized perceptions of Africa” (p.1). Olu Amoda for instance has long engaged in the manipulation of discarded objects as visual metaphors for social commentary. He interrogates societal issues occasioned by technological advancement, political corruption, obsession with self-image and the rapid loss of African cultural identity through the pursuit of idealised western imagery. Through his appropriation of mundane objects, Amoda creates compositions that provide commentaries and observations on the social, economic and political realities and problems of modern Africa. Amoda’s work *Attachment 2006*’ (Figure.6) for example captures/comments on the obsession with the self and the overzealous copying of Western cultural values in the quest for recognition, which results in the loss of the African self.

Attachment 2006 is a female bust constructed with found/discarded metal sheets, rods, and car engine parts. The facial features are rendered in minimalist geometric style. The hair is the dominant feature of the piece – it is extensive and elaborate. Through skilful manipulation of metal rods and sheets, the hair is constructed to mimic the new culture of hair extension/artificiality now dominant in contemporary African female fashion. It comments on the trenchant attempts by African ladies to look like whites by attaching synthetic hair to mimic the appearance of Europeans. This new Western inspired fashion appeal has replaced the skilfully braided natural hairdo that defined feminine beauty/identity in traditional African context. The figure is also adorned with multiple/elaborate earrings, necklaces and shoulder accessories fashioned out of scrap metal. Amoda’s exaggeration of the hair, necklaces, earrings and shoulder adornments in this piece is symbolic – it captures the loss of African ideals/cultural identity as a result of excessive self-imposed cultural imperialism, which attaches a false westernized identity on Nigerians.



Figure.6: Olu Amoda *Attachment* 2006 – welded steel, scrap metal
(Source: Skoto Gallery).

Taiye Idahor explores the fleeting nature of African culture continually disrupted by Western influences and the effects of the new materialism culture on Nigeria. Her appropriation of the Found Object draws attention to the loss of self, cultural values, pride and identity in contemporary Nigerian society and the enslavement of Nigerians by their constant craving for westernization. She opines that, “with these mundane waste objects, I am examining the relationship between women, beauty, tradition, waste materials and modernity...as the line that differentiates them in Nigeria is gradually fading, creating new cultures...” (Idahor 2012, p.1). Her work *Change of Name* 2012 (Figure.7), questions the alteration of perceptions, aesthetic appeal, norms and customs by such materialistic culture and the constant copying of Westernised standards in contemporary Nigeria/ Africa.

The piece, which shows women’s obsession with materiality created through the appropriation of discarded objects, captures the artist’s use of found objects to challenge and question the reasons behind the loss of cultural values and identity in her society.



Figure.7: Taiye Idahor *Change of Name* 2012.

(Source: Africana.org 2014).

Dilomprizulike's found object appropriation in art is radically political as he transforms waste into visual metaphors for political protest and commentary on the travails of modern Africa highlighting issues of corruption, miss-management and political impositions. For Dilomprizulike (Junkman of Africa), these discarded objects - the bye-product of modernity and corruption, symbolises the problematic conditions of contemporary Africa. He opines that his appropriation of waste into art derives from such societal problems, which also defines its formalism.

I make statements and talk about things, about the city...I talk about the uncertainties, the frustrations, agitation, the overflowing and overwhelming chaos faced in Nigerian cities...these works are a political protest match, a reaction to societal problems, oppression of the masses by leaders the drivers driving the nation on the journey of uncertainties (Dilonpriizulike 2007, p.2)

Driven by these socio-political concerns, Dilonpriizulike's transformation of discarded objects into postcolonial art is characterised by radical formalism that captures the chaos of modern Nigeria and Africa and the suffering of its masses. His works interrogates the expansion of postcolonial African cities, excessive consumerism, and decline in morality, environmental degradation and oppression by political caucuses. His installation „*The Face of the City* 2005' expresses the rot in contemporary Nigeria, which has become the dumping ground for European waste. The installation captures a busy city scene with all the figures engaged in one

activity or the other typical of everyday hustling that defines Nigerian cities like Lagos. But significantly, all the figures are created through the assemblage of varieties of discarded objects – old jute bags, clothes, plates, tires, metal sheets/rods, plastic bottles, and paper bags etc., generated from the city. By constructing his many subjects and the city with discarded objects in this installation, the artist questions the degradation of postcolonial cities by the rising problem of indiscriminate waste generation and dumping in Africa (Figure.8).



Figure.8: Dilomprizulike *The Face of the City* (Source: ArtCo 2010).

In *„Waiting for the Bus 2010’*, Dilomprizulike interrogates the poor state of transportation in Nigeria which hampers mobility and by extension the economy, a problem occasioned by urbanisation and corruption - financial siphoning by corrupt politicians. Through the configuration of this installation made with discarded metal, cloth, plastic plates etc., he captures the chaos in Nigerian bus stops, and the daily travails of the common man in commuting from one place to the other in Lagos and other cities in Nigeria. One of Delumprizulike’s iconic piece *„Journey Out of*

Africa 2005' is radically political and impactful. The extensive installation comprises of an old car filled with a plethora of discarded objects – old metal, plates, cloth, wood, cans etc., to the point of overflow. The car is then driven down town with the boot open, and garbage strapped to the its roof, allowing some waste objects to drop along the way; this performance installation captures the effect of Africa's materialistic culture and Western economic domination. The piece comments on the saturation of Africa with Western waste and how the transformation of Africa into a dumping ground has resulted in the displacement of indigenous peoples alienating them from their communities and forcing them away from the continent into foreign lands as refugees as a result of neo-imperialism (Figure.9).



Figure. 9: Dilomprizulike. *Journey Out of Africa 2005*
(Source: Henry Moore Institute 2015).

Nnenna Okore's works are equally tailored to address societal issues especially hyper-consumerism, materiality and waste in Africa. She is dedicated in her transformation of detritus waste into art to instigate a recycling culture in modern Africa in order to abate the effect of waste generation on society. In an interview with OKore, she commented that her appropriation of discarded objects in contemporary art expression is inspired by the clamour for societal preservation and environmental sustainability which waste destroys (Okore 2013). She critically

interrogates the consumerism culture and lack of recycling in Nigeria/Africa and uses her works to enlighten the public on the adversities of uncontrolled generation and dumping of waste. Beyond this cultural concern of her immediate society, her recent works as a diaspora artist, explores materiality of objects. Works such as *No Condition is Permanent* 2013, *Age Lessons* 2011, *Dry Season* 2009 etc., (Figure. 10) captures Okore's appropriation of discarded objects and waste in unique creative formalism for social commentary on Africa, to promote urban societal sustainability.



Figure.10: Nnenna Okore *No Condition is Permanent* 2013
(Source: Nnenna Okore).

The aforementioned artists share a common conceptual framework that defines the postcolonial conceptualism of found object appropriation in contemporary African art-space – namely manipulating discarded objects to interrogate the problematics of colonial legacies and to comment on political, social, economic and cultural adversities in contemporary Africa. This context of the found object stands in sharp contrast to the modernist invention of found object and readymade genres by Picasso, Duchamp, Breton and other avant-gardes.

Differences between European and African Genres of Found Object Art

The status of a work of art results from the ideas a culture applies to it...cultural interpretation is therefore constitutive of an object's arthood (Danto 1988, p.26)

Art historians must resist the temptation to lump together all those from Africa who work with objects that are found under the rubric of recycling in contemporary art (Binder 2008, p.27)

Binder writing on El Anatsui's works touches upon the problematic generalisation in contemporary scholarship regarding this genre of art in postcolonial Africa hence the call to refrain from imposed western categorisation and employ specific cultural reading of artists and their societal milieu in order to determine the context in which their practices are based. This viewpoint is elaborated in 'Found Object, Recycled Art, Readymade or Junk Art? Ambiguity in Modern African Art 2013', which contends that lack of contextual and cultural understanding of found object appropriation in the arts of cultures outside European mainstream, is responsible for the problematic dismissal of this genre in Africa as time-lag manifestation of Western avant-garde art and that such dismissal and attempt at submerging this postcolonial African genre in European mainstream, impedes understanding of its cultural ramifications and peculiarities (Akpang 2013). Furthermore, as Arthur Danto opines, the true value and status of art can only be attained by situating such objects within their cultural context and interrogating the cultural ideologies, philosophies and conditions that informed their creation; this has been the conceptual/analytical framework employed in this study which has engaged a localized cultural reading of Twentieth Century modern Nigerian art and the Found Object focusing on the works of a select number of artists.

It is my contention that the dismissal of Found Object appropriation in African art in Western art history as mimesis, is misleading - detailed contextual/content/formal analysis so far has proven that the genre is differentiated by cultural peculiarities, ramifications, philosophies and ideology. Firstly, found object in Nigerian art predates its invention in European Modernism thus invalidating its dismissal as time-lag manifestation of avant-garde art. This submission is premised on the fact that the appropriation of discarded objects in pre-modern Nigerian art, was influenced by traditional philosophies, cosmology and religion, thus the Found Object in pre-modern Nigeria was infused with cultural, philosophical, religious meanings and significance. Heterogeneous objects were incorporation in the creation or re-contextualisation of ancestral figures, masks, accumulative sculptures etc., to add depth, layers, content and context, which

extended the form, religious symbolism and cultural associations of pre-existing sculptures.

The appropriation of Found Objects in traditional creativity, served religious purposes - facilitating traditional religion as focal points for resident placated spirits and secondly, served cultural purposes to define the clan, community, kingdom or society by documenting its genealogy through the stacking of Found Objects in installations as visual records of unfolding generations. This pre-modern context of the found object in Nigerian art differs remarkably from European Found Object and Readymade; even though Africa's traditional constructivism inspired the emergence of this genre in Euro-American Modernism, Found Object in Euro-American avant-garde art, did not serve religious purpose neither did it derive from traditional philosophies as was the case in pre-modern Nigeria. On the contrary, European invention of the Found Object and Readymade emerged out of the radical quest to transgress and subvert established artistic traditions, modernity and project into the future. The contrasting traditional pre-modern context from those of Euro-modernism which the Found Object exist in Nigeria and Africa, establishes the first differentia element marking the separateness and cultural ramifications of the Found Object in European and African arts respectively.

From 1900 – 1960 the period of Nigerian Modernism there is a curious gap - a period when Found Object did not surface in Nigerian art as elucidated. This clearly indicates that the modernist context, in which European avant-garde genres of Found Object and Readymade were framed, did not manifest in Nigeria hence establishing the second perspective of differentiation. The emergence of the Found Object in Euro-American Modernism was rooted in avant-gardes radical interrogation of modernity and bourgeois culture/authority through the creation of a bohemian counter-culture. Thus, anti-aestheticism, anti-art, anti-order, anti-institution and anti-authority ideologies/formalism promulgated by different avant-garde movements, defined the context of the Found Object in Euro-American Modernist art. The absence of this Euro-American context and ramification of the Found Object during Nigerian Modernism valorizes the argument that the dismissal of Found Object in postcolonial Nigeria and Africa as mimesis of Western avant-garde art is misleading and faulty. This is because scholars make such submissions oblivious of the pre-modern occurrence of the Found Object in Nigerian art and unaware of its total absence during the period of Modernism in Nigeria. The fact that Nigerian modernist did not experiment with found object in their modernist practices as well as the unique postcolonial context it resurfaced clearly indicates the existence of differences impelled by cultural/creative philosophies and socio-political conditions traditional to their particular societies at given times.

The postcolonial context Found Object re-emerged in Nigeria characterized by intense interrogation of colonial legacies, neo-colonialism, political corruption and exploitation, as well as environmental degradation, differs considerably from that of European Modernism. The political imperatives of the appropriation of Found Object in postcolonial Nigerian art from the early 1990s till date, is given rise to by peculiar societal adversities and the resultant art works are structured to interrogate such postcolonial problems. Findings from several artist's case studies and interviews proves that the postcolonial context of the Found Object in Nigerian art is specifically tailored to a) challenge colonial Legacies and neo-colonialism, and b) comment on political and social travails caused by corruption and hyper-consumerism. This postcolonial context of appropriating and manipulating Found Object in art to battle against neo-imperialism, neo-colonialism and neo-capitalism in Africa, further differentiates it from that of European avant-gardes. While Dadaist subverted bourgeois culture by protesting against policies/order and challenged the role of the ruling class in the destruction caused during WW1 using the detritus flimsy forms of discarded manufactured objects, their avant-gardism stand in position of contradiction to that which transpires in postcolonial/contemporary African art. This study thus advances the argument that the Found Object in Western art (its formalism and ideology) is unique to that historic cultural context, thus cannot and should not be employed to theorize Found Object in 'Other' cultures as has been problematically attempted.

This comparative analysis of the peculiarities of European Readymade/Found Object and Found Object in Nigerian/African art, proves the existence of differences impelled by culturally specific art-political-social conditions traditional to both cultures but different in contexts, thus highlighting and subverting the misleading falsity in studies framed to blur such cultural ramifications and peculiarities by employing discourses inspired by Eurocentric philosophies. This paper demonstrates from its analysis of the pre-modern, modern and postcolonial contexts of the Found Object in Nigerian and African art, contrasted from those of Euro-American avant-garde genres, that the Found Object in art is distinguished by cultural context, formalism and philosophies particular to the culture where it is created. It further contends that, though African art history borrows European terminologies, the use of the phrase Found Object in the discourse of discarded objects appropriation in fine art, should not be deployed to cross out important cultural peculiarities necessary for understanding the cultural ramifications and dynamism of this genre in cultures beyond Europe.

This is because cultures such as Africa have long engaged in the appropriation of mundane objects in art creation driven by specific cultural circumstances/ideologies long before the institutionalisation of the term in Western art history. Thus, in discussing this genre of art, it will suffice to employ localised reading/narratives as demonstrated in this paper to analyse the formalism, philosophies, and contexts of Found Object genres in order to establish their cultural distinctiveness and ramifications.

Conclusion

This paper examined the cultural contexts and ramifications of the Found Object in art, exploring this genre in Europe and Africa especially Nigeria. Findings from the analysis of the postcolonial context of the Found Object in Nigerian art synthesised with its pre-modern and modern contexts, led to the submission that the appropriation of mundane objects in art expressionism in Nigeria/Africa, predates the emergence of the genre in European Modernism. The conclusion drawn from comparative analysis of European Found Object and Readymade and those of Nigeria/Africa is that, this genre of art is context-specific and differentiated by peculiar cultural ramifications and ideologies. It is further contested in this research that the dismissal of this genre in contemporary Africa as mimesis of European avant-garde art is misleading. The falsity of such claim is debunked by employing a localised reading to analyse the formalism, philosophies, and context of the Found Object in art, which resulted in a broader appreciation of the ramifications and distinctiveness of this genre in Africa beyond Euro-American discourse and art history.

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