



Hunting & Gathering with

Humphrey Umezulike

IN their attempt to make an art audience in Germany acquainted with African Art, *art arc*, Agency for Contemporary African Art, introduced a residency programme. While it was primarily designed to offer a period of retreat and withdrawal giving an opportunity for the creation of new works, it is also a chance for the Agency to present the artist as a spokesperson for his or her work as well. From experience we know that encounter with the person facilitates appreciation of her or his art. Representing an artist, on the other hand, can only be convincingly done by any gallerist if he knows the works as well as the person.

Robert
Aas

O.H.
Umezulike
collecting
materials for
his work
(above
picture)

Photo: N. Aas

By a combination of fortunate circumstances, Nigerian sculptor and painter Dil Humphrey Umezulike became 'artist at art arc', our first artist in residence in the autumn of 1994. In 1993, a wider audience had got to know Umezulike when he provoked controversial discussions on the meaning of art with a major exhibition of his sculptures entitled 'Wasted Thoughts on Waste'. The show (which also included works by Olu Amoda) took place at Goethe Institute, the German Cultural Centre, in Lagos. For a period of three months in the autumn of 1994, he lived and worked at the premises of *art arc* in the southern German city of Bayreuth. The experience turned out to be a very productive and stimulating one, for both the artist and the gallerists.

In addition to an opportunity to work in various media, Umezulike was able to meet people from the local art scene, get in touch with scholars from the University of Bayreuth (which runs a special research project on Africa) and get a good idea of similarities and differences of life in Germany as compared with his own country Nigeria.

During his stay, Umezulike presented

himself as *Diloprizulike, the Junkman from Africa*. For years, he has been creating works of art from junk and waste which he picks wherever he goes. He sees his working process as a re-creating or even as giving a new, superior life to discarded objects by arranging them in an aesthetic way. For this purpose he hoards anything out of other people's use that he feels might be of use to him sometime. Visiting the artist's studio, one inevitably finds him sifting through the various layers of his collected treasures.

From my own observation it seems I have an affinity to him by being a collector myself. I cannot throw away anything that is still in working order. Those things are valuable objects to me, and they may be of use at some later point in time. In this way, I am, very much like Dil Humphrey, surrounded by things other people see as junk, things whose history I know and of which I still see lots of functional possibilities.

During the early days of his visit, Umezulike did a lot of drawing and some painting, all on paper. But at the same time he started collecting objects. Much to his disappointment, he was notable to find things by the roadside, as he is used to in Nigeria. I then promised to take him to the collecting points of our highly centralised system of refuse disposal: the garbage dump (where the waste is dumped by the lorries and transferred onto train to be carried off to the incinerator) and the only scrapyards of our city as well, a place I love to go to myself.

The Material

When we got to the scrapyard, Umezulike started to climb to the top of one of the scrapheaps as soon as possible in order to declare himself *Master of All Scraps*. He added that he had done it in Nigeria before.

Why should the artist want to own all the junk here and there? Of course, it is quite naive to assume that what other

people see as junk Umezulike is interested in. Junk is not just junk to him. Objects take on a second appearance and character. Sifting through junk, he either discovers images that fit the ideas forming in his mind or he comes across bits and pieces that he feels 'have a potential' (in his terms). So the *Master of All Scraps* does not really sit on his imagined wealth like a madman, but hoards all the things he will eventually turn into his creatures.

It is not everything that suits his purposes, and in no way does he collect indiscriminately, as the term *scrapyard* for his studio might suggest. When he goes through wastes, he carefully selects from the 'Discarded Property' (the title of one of his earlier works) those things he reacts to. Wherever he goes, he hunts for new meat. But he also sets out in search for specific things to fit into a specific place in one of his assemblages he is working on.

We went on a number of trips to the scrapyard, each time returning home with a trailer full of rusty and torn metal: break discs, pieces of bent steel beams, smashed typewriters, screws, nuts and bolts of all sizes, worn out lorry parts that had to be replaced. Dil Umezulike turned our empty garage into his artistic scrapyard (or studio), and only where he had furnished it with a wall to wall carpet of materials did he feel comfortable at work.

With the habit of being ready to collect at any time and at any place, the components for Umezulike's sculptures came from a variety of sources. Apart from visiting the scrapyard in town, we collected roots from a nature reserve during a family outing one Sunday afternoon. When we bought tools at a shop, Dil asked a customer whether he could have the elbow of a stovepipe which the man had just bought a replacement for. At a friend's country place, he looted the lady's firewood. We drove home not

only with ordinary billets in the boot, but with the broken hubs of wooden wheels and other beautiful objects as well. The hubs were to feature prominently in a sculpture titled 'Broken Hive of the Aggrieved Spirits' (metal and wood, 78 cm), for example. From a demolition site, we returned with a tangle of bent steel rods which had originally been used to reinforce concrete.

The Themes

It is certainly difficult - or more likely impossible - to identify an overriding idea behind Dilomprizulike's work. The works Umezulike produced during his time as an artist in residence in Bayreuth seem to fall into four categories: calculated comments on the state of Nigerian society, instant reactions to emotional challenges from the outside world, attempts to express purely subjective impulses and depictions of so-called folk scenes.

It is relatively easy to appreciate works that deal with aspects of social life in Nigeria in a very general sense. 'Public Toileting', one of the larger outdoor sculptures (metal, 167 cm), is a sculptural version of the ubiquitous signposts reminding people to keep their countryside clean: 'Do not urinate here'. One must, quite obviously, understand it first of all in political terms: Some people shamelessly soil. 'Strangled by His Own People' (metal and wood, 40cm) comments on the treatment certain individuals experience from others of their own group. It is interesting to note that most works of this category are sculptures.

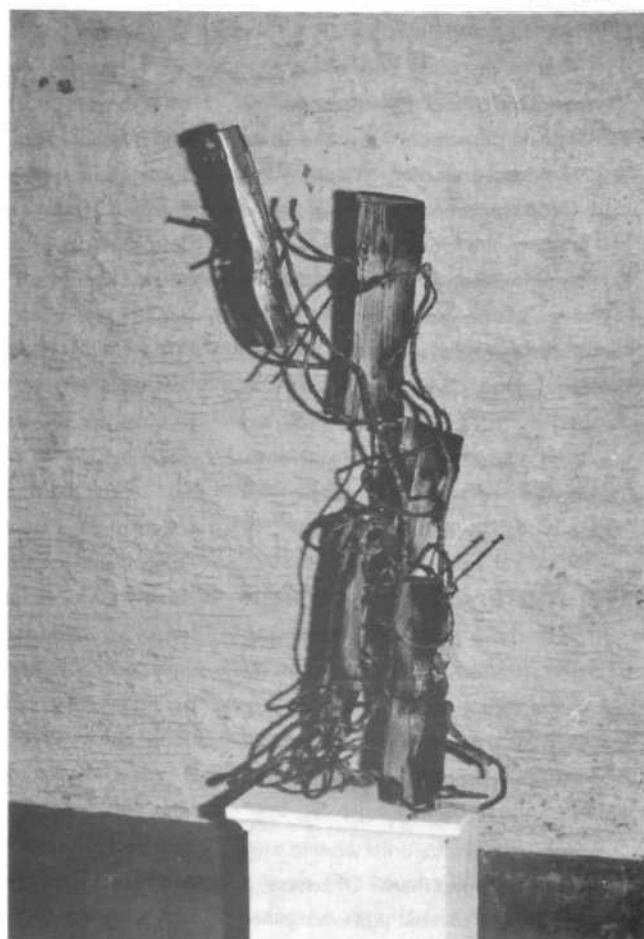
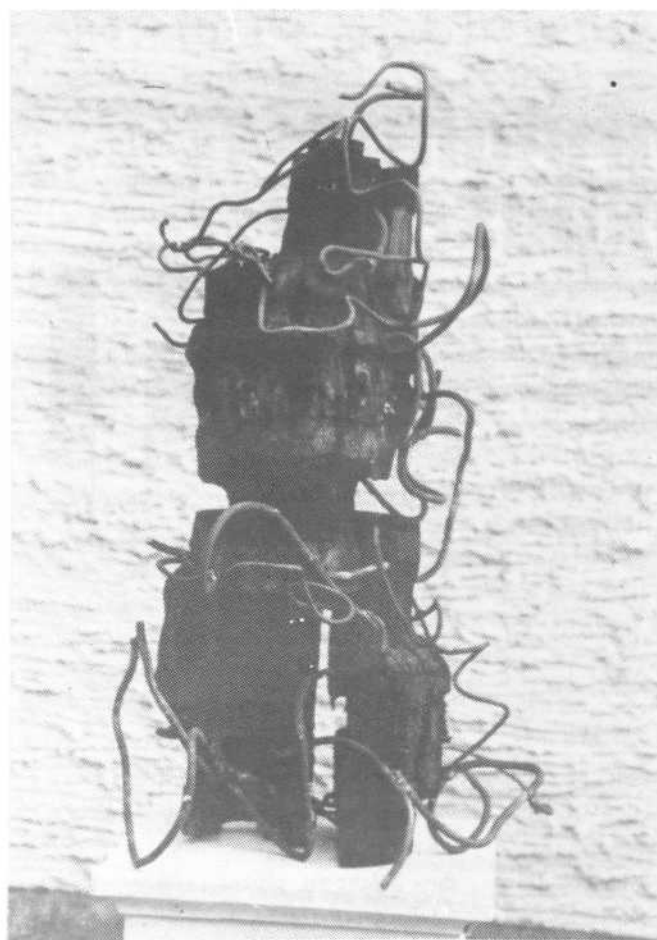
There is one interesting exception, however, which belongs to the second type of works. The sculpture 'Neighbour' (metal, 218cm) is, I am convinced, an observation the artist made while working in his scrapyard. Some features of the work strikingly resemble our next door neighbour, an elegant lady who, from across the fence, was curiously and

**D.H.
Umezulikein
his studio at
'art arc',
Bayreuth
1994 (right).**

**'The Broken
Hive of the
Aggired
spirits' (below
left).**

**The
Moonman'
(below right)**

Photo: N. Aas



carefully monitoring what that strange black man was doing in our yard.

Most works from this group, however, are on paper. One of them, 'All International Trunks Are Busy' was done immediately after Dilomprizulike had unsuccessfully made numerous attempts to call friends in Nigeria. A voice on the phone had given that information (which now is the title of the work) and advised him to try again at a later hour. The drawing shows the artist's view/caller's perspective of the phone and his collection of complimentary cards scattered on the floor. In another work he tries to express on paper the impressions he had when he looked at a bookshelf through an opaque pane of glass: nothing but blurred dots and areas of intermixing colours.

There are also works that result from other, more private challenges. When Umezulike returned from an exhibition in another city, he was full of anger and frustration at the lack of hospitality he had met there. He then sat down to express the barely suppressed emotions which had been triggered off by this experience.

It is very difficult to describe the characteristics of the third category of works by this artist. At times, he would just sit down with some materials in order 'to allow things to happen.' He would then try to 'let the ideas flow.' The result may be a more or less figurative drawing or an entirely abstract one which one might categorize an expression of an emotion. To these, the artist later on attaches titles very much to the

way of labels. In my view however, they might also arguably have been left untitled.

There is, eventually, a fourth group of works depicting what is usually called 'folk scenes.' One has become very disparaging of them, because they have been done to death as tourist art. But Umezulike's latest variants of the *Milkmaid-top*^h, for example, which he has tried many times before, prove to be fascinating images. Out of his drawings I have seen, they seem to be the most mature ones.

One day, Dil Humphrey sat down to find out what the effects would be if he violated the conventions of watercolour painting. On many occasions he did things that run counter to the established practices. Even if the results may not always be absolutely convincing, they proved to be stimulating and exciting in many cases. One hopes the artist will go on turning things upside down in order to find out what their possibilities are, far off the beaten track and way out there in his 'jungles' where new discoveries can be made. GR

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