We now need specific detailed studies of groups of artists

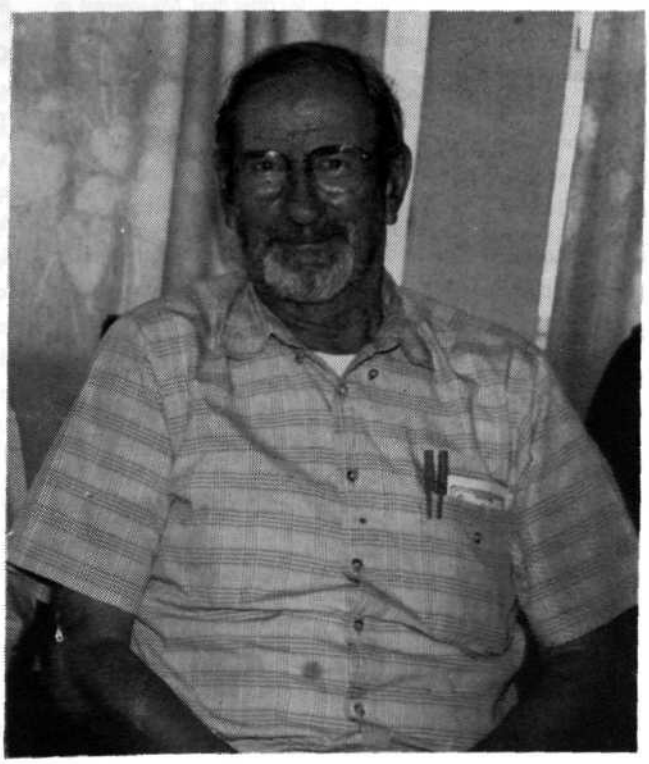
Interview recorded during Ottenberg's most recent visit to Nsukka in 1994 anticipated the exhibition of Seven Artists of the Nsukka School, *The Poetics of Line* which is now running (between October 22, 1997 and April 26, 1998) at the National Museum of African Art, the Smithsonian Institute, Washington D.C.

Interview by
Chika Okeke

GR: How does your experience as an anthropologist differ from your current work in history?

Ottenberg: Well, I seem to be turning into a pseudo-art historian who is trying to learn about style and technique and so on. When I was an anthropologist in Afikpo in the 1950s and early 60s, most of the people I was working with were not literate. It was a very traditional society and I knew I was writing more or less for a Western audience. I thought my stuff wouldn't be read by people here but over the years this has turned out to be very incorrect because the literacy level went up and many have read my books and articles at the University of Nigeria and other places. There was a sense of greater distance with my subject. Here I am trying to do a study of Nsukka artists, a highly literate group who themselves write a great deal including poetry. They also can offer criticism to any article I write such as my paper at the Second International Symposium on Contemporary Nigerian Art in Lagos in 1993. The dialogue is very different, most of it is in English while before most of the dialogue was either in Igbo or pidgin English and that's a different experience.

I was never trained in European art and I was never trained in aesthetics. I think I have a pretty good eye for traditional art but I am trying to retrain myself to get an understanding on how to see contemporary art; I don't always succeed. I remember looking at a watercolour by Tayo Adenaike. After a long time I couldn't help but ask what it was about. He said, 'can't you see it is the face of a man with his glasses on?' As soon as he said that I saw it. So in a sense I am still learning to see. That's a handicap. The strength that I may be bringing to my work with Nsukka artists is a knowledge of traditional Igbo Culture.



Simon Ottenberg

GR: How did you become interested in Afikpo as an anthropologist.

Ottenberg: Originally I was a very rebellious student. So too was Phoebe, my wife at the time. We were students at the North-Western studying with the man who started the first African studies programme in the United States, Melville J.

Herskovits, who had worked in Abomey in Dahomey. There was also William Bascom who was a well known Yoruba scholar - he worked in Ife on Ifa divination. Phoebe and I decided that since Herskovits had done his studies in the 1930s we could do a restudy at Abomey. But Professor Herskovits didn't think that was a good idea. He was wise. Because he was very much involved in that study it would have been difficult to write anything that would be critical of his earlier work. William Bascom suggested we should work on the Igbo. So we decided to work on an Igbo area that had never been studied before. We chose the Ohafia area in December 1951. However, the Provincial Officer and the District Officer in the Ohafia area politely told us we could not go to Ohafia because of land wars, bad roads, and that the area was isolated. I then wired the D.O. in Afikpo, J. D. Livingston-Booth who studied anthropology in Cambridge in a postgraduate colonial service course. Afikpo was in the northern part of that same sub-culture, although at the time it was in Ogoja Province. The D.O. wired back saying he would be glad to have us. He found us a place to live, and some field assistants.

GR: At what point did you decide to go into contemporary Nigerian Art considering the fact that you have had a very successful and distinguished career as an anthropologist?

Ottenberg: I must tell you first that at Northwestern, Herskovits and Bascom were very much interested in traditional African Art so I had interest too. In 1975 I published a book on Afikpo masquerade, and some related articles after that. My interest in contemporary art goes back to 1952 when I bought two little watercolours by a man called Okiki who was painting in the dominant 'naive' style of the period. Then in the early 1960s in Lagos I bought things from Osogbo. When I came back in 1966 I bought some other things from the Gong Gallery and from the Bronze Gallery, some sculptures of Idehen and Idubor.

GR: But how and why did you decide to begin serious research in contemporary Nigerian art, away from anthropology?

Ottenberg: A few years ago Roy Sieber, the doyen of African art history in Indiana University called me up from the National Museum of African Art in Washington D. C. He asked to know if I was interested in a one year fellowship at the Smithsonian Institution. I was retiring from the University so it didn't seem like a bad idea. He suggested I should consider a research on an aspect of contemporary African art. I was overwhelmed and very surprised because I didn't realise Roy was interested in contemporary art, although the Museum had had one exhibit of Sokari Douglas-Camp and one other very small exhibit. I thought about the prospect and then I sent in a very general proposal. Roy didn't like some of the authors I cited because he didn't like their work, but it went through and I was lucky to get what is referred to as Regent Fellowship which is an all-Smithsonian Fellowship. It is not given by any specific museum. So everything was set but I hadn't decided on where I wanted to work since I didn't commit myself to any particular area in the proposal.

I came to Nsukka to receive an honorary degree - Doctor of Letters, in 1992. After the official ceremonies there was a private party in my honour and it was there that I met Obiora Udechukwu. I told him about my interest and he invited me to a meeting of the AKA Circle of Artists the very next day. The meeting was at Nsikak Essien's house and most of the members were in attendance. After our initial discussions I thought that was what I was looking for. I later talked with Udechukwu a bit, suggesting to him the possibility of drawing from the things I already knew rather than going to another part of Africa where I would be starting out afresh.

GR: So you thought there was some kind of familiarity with your Afikpo experience considering that this too was somewhere East of the Niger?

Ottenberg: I felt very much at home, and I still do.

GR: Do you then think that your earlier work on Afikpo influenced your interest in Nsukka/Enugu artists while the coincidence of meeting Udechukwu, or even your coming to Nsukka for the honorary degree were a catalyst that heightened the deep interest in the area? You still could have done your research elsewhere in Africa in spite of the initial contacts with the Circle.

Ottenberg: I was thinking of Zambia as one of the areas I could do my research. One of my former students, Karen Tranberg-Hansen who has been working in urban Zambia for some years, had given me names of some artists and some catalogues. I thought Zambia was a possibility too, but maybe I just got lazy. Maybe I decided on an area where I had some background information; where I knew the country pretty well, although I wasn't as intensely familiar with the Anambra State area as I am now. It made sense and when I came back the next fall, when I received a chieftaincy title from Afikpo, I spent some time here in Nsukka where I started to talk to some artists. Then I came in the spring of 1993 for the International Symposium in Lagos, and again in the Fall, this year (1994). The thing is sort of intensified and I am very content. I have had wonderful co-operation from everybody in terms of willingness to show their stuff; photographs, catalogues, xeroxed materials and original works. It's just been wonderful.

GR: How similar is the research methodology of anthropology and that of art history from your experience?

Ottenberg: They are basically the same in the way I take notes and conduct interviews. The subject is different but granted that

I don't need interpreters now, I still have to take notes. What's different is the voluminous amount of publications available, including some very fine theses by students of the University of Nigeria. Now there is a lot more literature to cover. I am doing more history this time, although when I worked at Afikpo, I tried to trace things such as the very complicated kinship system and the matrilineal as well as patrilineal groupings. I tried to trace where some of the masquerades came from, but I was basically doing a study at one point in time. Here I feel you have to go back to Uche Okeke, the Zaria group. In fact I have to go back to the beginning of contemporary art in Nigeria. I am planning to write a largely historical thing that may be divided into periods in which the Nsukka artists have gone through certain development and changes. These changes will be put into the given social contexts. What did the artists do during the war period and what effect did the war have on the art before and after cessation of hostilities? Another important social landmark is the oil boom and one would want to find out the effect of its rise and decline on artists down in Nsukka, and to a large extent, Nigeria.

GR: Have you seen what artists are producing elsewhere beyond the Nsukka-Enugu axis?

Ottenberg: I haven't done too much of that. What I have been basically doing is whenever I come to Nigeria, I try to spend sometime in Lagos. For instance after the International Symposium I spent over a week there and during that time I saw the Uche Okeke and Obiora Udechukwu retrospectives and I also saw an Ife art school exhibit, and a number of others. I later went up to Ife. I haven't been elsewhere in the country other than Enugu where I have talked to a number of artists, some of whom trained at Nsukka while some others who didn't, share some of the interest in Uli and Igbo designs. And then of course I have been reading catalogues and articles on art in other areas. I have some familiarity with Osogbo art because I have collected it. Nike Davies comes to the United States and I have bought things from her. I have some early Twins Seven-Seven. I have also talked to some artists at the Yaba College of Technology.

GR: Let us talk about Osogbo, you said you collected some art from there in the early 1960s?

Ottenberg: Yes, for example some Ogundele and some Afolabi and a couple of early Twins Seven-Seven, before he even started numbering his prints.

GR: At the time you collected those prints what was your interest? For what reasons did you collect them?

Ottenberg: Well, I thought they were exciting. I didn't know what to do with them. As an anthropologist I was simply aware there was something new going on and it was visually attractive and suggested to me that creativity was taking some new forms. You've got to know that I am a collector too. I am a very

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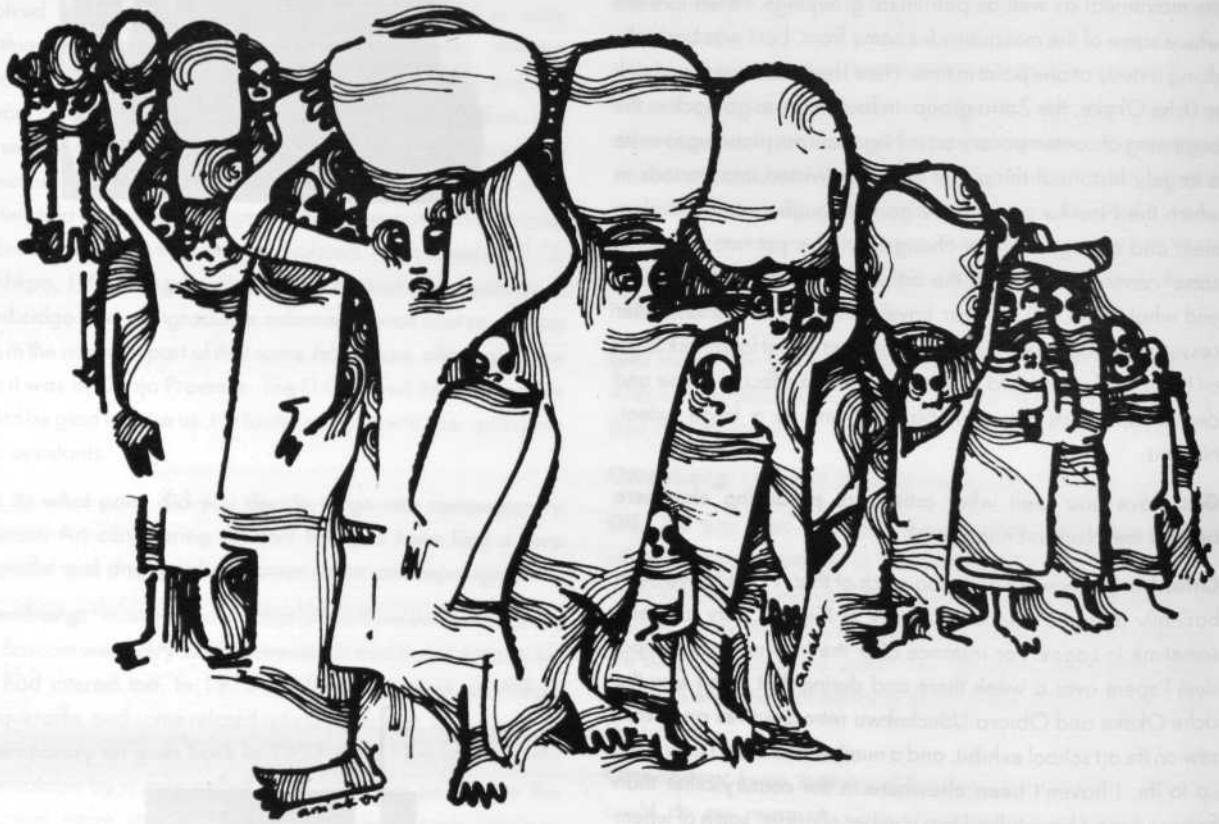


Exodus I (The Refugees), 1977 by Chike Aniakor,
Ink on paper, 32.7 x 27.9 cm.

possessive person about material things. I have a lot of African masks. I have collected American-Indian art from around the Seattle area where I live, but that's more recent. The year my wife and I were in Ghana, 1970-71, there was one contemporary Gallery in Accra where I bought things.

I think there is a kind of curiosity coupled with the fact that my wife and I have no children so we have a little more to put into art. The 1960s, I think, was the best period for Osogbo. A lot of it degenerated afterwards. I saw an exhibit last November at the National Museum, Lagos that was absolutely awful.

GR: It's interesting that beyond Nigeria, Osogbo is the basis for any discussion of contemporary Nigerian art. One begins to wonder whether it is because of that element of the quaint, the exotic, that captures the interest of Western scholarship and patronage.

Ottenberg: Much of Osogbo art has a fantasy quality to it and also has, I have to use the word because I am an anthropologist, a kind of 'primitivist' quality that fits into Western conceptions of what African art should be. This kind of art is attractive. There is an artist who does decorative coffins in the shape of Mercedes or aeroplane. Americans go gaga about him. *The Africa Explores* exhibit has these things. They are a kind of kitsch art which is attractive and fit Western conceptions of what art should be like.

GR: Is it what art should be specifically for Africa or for the West and elsewhere?

Ottenberg: I don't object to Osogbo. I am very ecumenical about art much more so than most people, perhaps because I am not an artist. For example there is a kind of genre of art in Nigeria which is sort of fairly naturalistic, fairly romanticised with beach scenes, *durbars*, drummers, masquerade, and all. A lot of it may not be technically superb but it appeals to a certain group of people. There is an American artist, Norman Rockwell who does that kind of thing. He has been very popular and he's done magazine covers for years for example. I call such art as I find here, 'the Norman Rockwell art of Nigeria.' It isn't great but that doesn't mean that you cannot do very fine scenes of a masquerade or *durbar* and so on, but much of this does not appeal to me. I can understand that it appeals to a certain kind of a people but with my own work which will culminate in an exhibit of about seven of the Nsukka artists, at the National Museum of African Art, Washington. D.C., in 1997, I am hoping to bring a different view of one aspect of Nigerian art.

GR: Is it the aspect that appeals to you then?

Ottenberg: I like the Nsukka style very much. I like the emphasis on *uli*. I am fascinated by *nsibidi* and other design systems. I am fascinated by the process of drawing from traditional Igbo design system but yet making very modern statements about political and social conditions in this country. I think it is a beautiful blend. In a sense, the Nsukka group is not a kind of nostalgic group that is just looking at the past, romanticising about it, and having some unconscious wish to return to the past as has occurred for example in early writing from South Africa when writers wrote novels about Chaka Zulu and the rest. Those were great stories but is as if there were some attempts to return to the past. I think the artists in the Nsukka area are very realistic, they are very grounded in the present and yet realistically they are saying 'we have this heritage and it's a rich one, let's draw from it.'

GR: Edwin Debebs and others have argued that the world is tending toward a 'global community' and as such that art should be moving toward a post-modernist globalism. In this projected world art arena, any attempt by the African artist to draw from the past would be a kind of retrogressive atavism. Is there anything worthwhile about this nascent internationalism anyway?

Ottenberg: I was at a conference in April (1994) on New International Art at the Tate Gallery. Olu Oguibe was there and he gave a paper. Bruce Onobrakpeya came from Nigeria. My impression from that conference is that the problems of artists living in Africa and those living in the West are somewhat different. There is a group of very fine artists including South African artists such as Gavin Jantjes who are struggling to live in Europe, struggling to get recognition, trying to contact other artists from the Third World. Their interest is in other Third World art and artists. Oguibe has been drawing from Mexican art after he visited Mexico. He's also been drawing from Australian Aboriginal material. He saw a Fante flag exhibit and now he draws from Fante Flag designs. It is a sort of internationalism where a Third World artist draws from the art of other Third World people. Some of the artists in Nsukka are drawing from other cultures too. Ndidi Dike for instance uses little brass figures.

I have talked to Bruce Onobrakpeya about this and I think I am in agreement with him. His argument is you have to have a strong cultural base from which you're operating. From that base you can go out and either draw or refuse to draw from other cultures. You can take, mix styles, invent new ones, or re-invent old styles. But without a cultural base you're lost in a sense. It may be that some of the African artists in England or Europe and America are in danger of losing their cultural base like American artists in Paris such as Mary Cassatt in the 1930s, or American writers for that matter who had Paris as a Mecca and who became sort of pseudo-French for a while, being very much influenced by French Literature. This attitude contrasts with that of a few like Hemingway who kept on writing in the typical American style.

Nigerian artists want more contact with the rest of the world and this is very difficult now because of the economic situation in the country. At the same time they are occupied with social and political conditions here. Too much internationalism tends to pull them away from that kind of thing. But I think Internationalism will increase. There is no doubt about it that the external influences are going to increase although I do not think it is leading to one world culture. I think the distinction will deepen absolutely. In fact in some cases they seem to be reinforcing rather than disappearing.

GR: In spite of the vibrant developments in modern art in Nigeria which you reported in *ACASA Newsletter,* (1993) it is still disheartening that much of Western patronage and scholarship glosses over this fact with their insistence on the 'authentic' which refers to art forms that court the interest of the auction houses, collectors and gloss exhibition catalogues. There is this apparent reluctance by the West to recognise the existence of modern art in Africa.

Ottenberg: Either they say it is derivative of Europe or they say it's sort of folksy with all those masquerades dancing around.... Anthropologists have not been that much interested in contemporary Third World art until recently and the interest has come rather indirectly through 'tourist', 'naive' or 'popular' art, the kind of thing Middle Art (Augustine Okoye) does. Such art is interesting. I love to see it and I have bought a couple of them but it does have some kind of kitschy quality to it. They are produced by artists who are not artists in a technical sense.

Western art historians are terribly arrogant about the West. They are very Eurocentric and this is tied to an older view of evolution of human culture in which the modernist period in the West is the high point of this cultural evolution. These assumptions however are breaking down in the post-modernist period, the age of multiculturalism.

GR: But the West parasitises on other cultures, making pastiches of the so-called Third World and other non-Western cultures while insisting on defining the resulting cultural melange in its own terms, its own paradigms.

Ottenberg: There is a lot of writing going on in Europe. I was recently reading something that was written a few years ago, in Netherlands and I was surprised to hear the same arguments in England at the INIVA Conference, as well as in America. Multiculturalism which suggests that there is no one best culture is increasingly enhanced by tremendous migration, improved communication, the CNN phenomenon and the breaking down of nation-states because of multinational businesses. States are losing control of their economies and as all these things are going on, they suggest a loosening up - a much better situation for the 'Third' and 'Fourth World' who themselves are now making more demands and beginning to come together in large groups. But there's a sort of idealistic gloat over this multiculturalism. The fact is economic power still remains with Europe and America, and now Japan and China are coming up and that's going to be the decider on the direction

You can take, mix styles, invent new ones, or re-invent old styles. But without a cultural base you're lost in a sense.

of art and cultural discourses in the ultimate sense. I don't share the optimism that some of the people have.

There are substantial shifts but they are coming very slowly. The National Museum of African Art in Washington D.C is now committed to doing things on contemporary art on a fairly regular basis. It's going to have an exhibit of some artists living in the United States. It may be easier to put such exhibits together, but it's more difficult for me to find pieces in Nigeria and make arrangements to get them to the United States and so on.

In Europe, contemporary African art is better received in the continent than in England. I talked to the owner of Savannah Gallery in London, Leroi Coubagy sometime ago. I asked who buy from them and he said they are mostly Italians and Germans. I inquired about the British and Americans and he said the British practically never buy from them while only a few regular Americans visit the gallery. For the Nsukka group there is a strong, long history of relationship with Germany which goes back to the Nigerian Civil War when Uche Okeke had an exhibit of young artists from Biafra. Obiora Udechukwu, Tayo Adenaike and Tony Uwachukwu have shown in Germany and were well received.

GR: So the contribution any scholar, African or outsider, can make to contemporary art from African would be to shift focus to the present unfolding art experience rather than this insistence on celebrating beyond logic the arts of pre-colonial Africa?

Ottenberg: There's been a number of general exhibits that have covered contemporary African art, there was one in Paris, *Magiciens de la terre* in 1989, there was *Africa Hoy* and there was *primitivism in 20th Century Art* in 1984. *Africa Explores* which Susan Vogel put up. All of these did things of a general nature.

GR: But in these major exhibits you cited, there is always the temptation to show what you earlier described as kitschy art, take the constructions of Kane Kwei, the masks of Sossom and the paintings of Cheri Samba in *Magiciens,* and *Africa Explores* for instance.

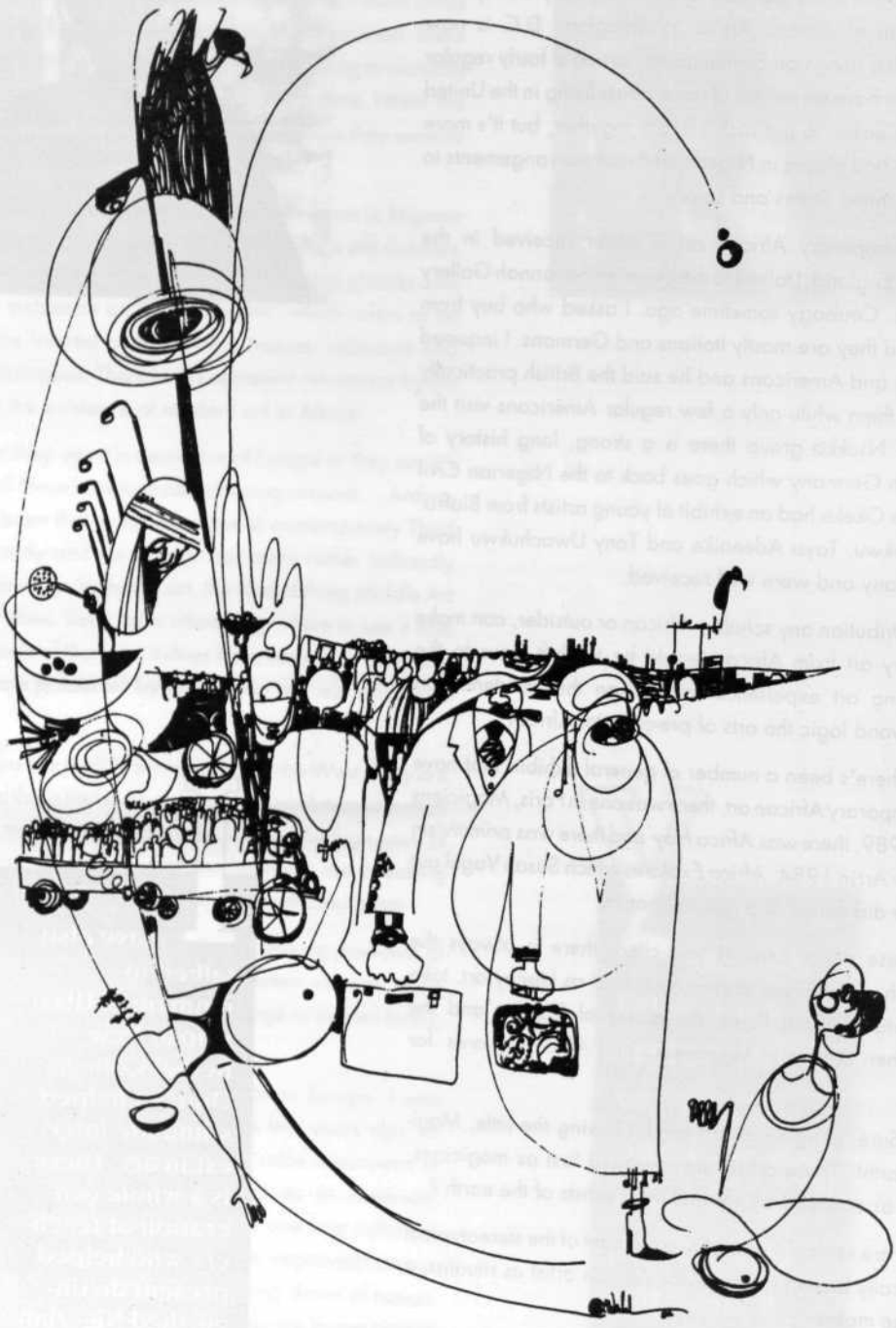
Ottenberg: Sure, imagine an art exhibit having the little, Magicians of the earth! These artists are identified first as magicians, conjurors, not as artists. Why weren't they 'artists of the earth'?

GR: What we are seeing is probably a remnant of the stereotypical but now generally faulted image of the African artist as ritualist, a religious image maker.

Ottenberg: It's undergoing a transition. There was this Dutch symposium that I was reading about. The big question was,

'where do you show Contemporary Third World Art?' Do you show it in an ethnological, or an art museum? There was a tremendous argument but the final conclusion was that it was all right to show in both in so far as the little differences are shown. In the anthropology museum, the exhibit may show a little more cultural background

I have also talked to Emmanuel Ulasi who at New Bethel College, Onitsha helped stimulate interest in art. There is a whole generation of teachers who helped present distinguished Nigerian artists to get their stimulus in art. What's been written about them? Very little.



Road to Abuja, 1983 by Obiora Udechukwu.
Pen and ink on paper, 50.9 x 38 cm.

material, while in the art museum, aesthetics and styles are emphasised. But look, to me what is needed is what I am trying to do. We've had enough general exhibits. We now need specific, detailed scholarly studies of groups of artists or of single artists and their works. We need to take individual artists or a group to show the kinds of stylistic changes or changes in images that they have gone through over time. We need to do that kind of basic work. There are very few detailed studies of contemporary art. There's a lot of literature, but most of these are very thin. You even see it in Jean Kennedy's book which I admire very much because she has pulled together a lot of data, even if a lot of it are surface studies. There are good descriptions there but not much analysis. It is a very good reference work. But I am not saying all these because I am an anthropologist. Nor am I suggesting anthropologists are the ones to do this kind of work. Art historians, artists themselves who are interested should be very much involved in the type of studies I am talking about because each one has certain skills the other lacks. I lack a thorough knowledge of European art history and it hampers my work. I lack knowledge of painting techniques and all of that.

GR: And this blocks your analytical sensitivities?

Ottenberg: I have to struggle with it. I am trying not to block myself. I read very carefully what others say about style and technique and then I try to understand the language of analysis. On the other hand people in art history may lack some of the sensitivities and understanding of cultures and cultural processes that I have.

GR: It is disheartening that we have our own art historians within, and several in America and elsewhere, yet we are not getting from them the kind of responses that you recommend. If they thought what you advocate is worthwhile, we probably would not need to have you engage in this project in spite of the odds, in spite of your handicaps.

Ottenberg: I think it's coming. I have met some younger people, graduate students at the Smithsonian who are interested in doing some work on contemporary African art.

GR: These young people, are they Africans?

Ottenberg: Mainly Americans.

GR: You see, one would prefer that they be Africans for the singular reason that they stand better chances of producing richer, more credible work.

Ottenberg: Dele Jegede has written a few specific things about individual artists but I think he now intends to write a general book on contemporary Nigerian art which would be, presumably, a considerable growth out of his Ph.D thesis at Indiana. Ola Oloidi wrote about the period up to the 1960s but he never published it. He rather published most of it in series of articles scattered in journals.

Ottenberg: Take Bruce Onobrakpeya. He is a perfect example of someone who right now while he is alive, while he is in his prime, somebody should be doing a study on. He is a very important artist not only in Nigeria and Africa, but in the world. One gets articles occasionally on him yet the only indepth studies on Bruce Onobrakpeya are the ones he has written himself which is all right because his own interpretations are very useful, and the publications are very rich in visuals, but it will be better if someone else does that. You can take some of the senior artists, like Grillo and Akolo, where are the definitive works on them, or on Enwonwu?

I would encourage African art historians who want to go into this because it's a rich and vast field. I have started to do some work on Nigerian teachers active in the '30s, '40s and '50s, who trained some of the prominent artists today. These include Rowland Ndefo, C.C. Ibeto and Jim Ibeto (the nephew of C.C Ibeto who died days after I had arranged with him for an interview). I have also talked to Emmanuel Ulasi who at New Bethel College, Onitsha helped stimulate interest in art. There is a whole generation of teachers who helped present distinguished Nigerian artists to get their stimulus in art. What's been written about them? Very little. Some of them studied with K.C. Murray and they learnt a certain style which is going out of date now, but they taught people like Obiora Udechukwu, Chike Aniakor and others. These teachers may not have initiated interest in art, in the artists but they helped sustain, stimulate and guide it. They are very important in the history of Nigerian art, but who is working on them other than students writing theses in the University of Nigeria? So if I could encourage people to do that kind of work, fine, I don't care whether it is art historians or anthropologists who do the work that should, and must be done. **GR**