

Dapo
Adeniyi

CHRIS Afuba's studio and open air workplace on the outskirts of Enugu. October 2, 1998. In the background of sound recording were falling anvils on metal panels and fire sparks, as the interview lured the sculptor's concentration away from his work.

For Now & Always

Interview with Chris Afuba

GR: Motivation comes in various forms. I was asking about your response to installation.

Afuba: It is a nice idea. There is a need for people to change with the time.

I am saying that people do not, should not lose sight of the fact that art is not just that temporal.

Some impressions could be so fleeting that they require fast execution, to capture the mood and spirit of that idea.

But again you discover that one needs to see something he has just dreamt of or he has just created. After some years one needs to see that again and again under different light and style. The more you look at how a work that has been created is recorded it enables not just you as an artist to appreciate it, it enables generations to come to appreciate what you created. It gives scope for wider interpretation so I do not believe or agree that people should just be doing installation because it is in vogue. But if people are moved to do installation



installation as a form of art.

If you are inclined to a particular style or interpretation in art which you are so much at home with, continue with that particular style. There's no need for you to change as an artist.

GR: You don't feel under pressure, sometimes, from reviews, critical discourse from international circles, more or less pointing ways forward or suggesting new vogues; you find it easy to shrug them off, damn them, and continue with what you're doing?

Afuba: Actually I've never really come under pressure from any quarter because, what I'm doing is internal. A work that is individualistic and emotional comes from within. And as far as I am concerned, it's only someone who's not convinced or serious with what he's doing that would be distracted or have pressure from external influences, when doing a work.

Once you have an idea in art, record it, irrespective of what people think about it, that's how great ideas have been created. Picasso, for instance had not been listening to people, Monet and others were not listening to people's criticism about their work and styles. Cubism, impressionism and all that which they created in no time evolved.

They stay in it, they were convinced and not bothered about what people thought. And later they brought people to see to the idea because what they were doing was honest and authentic. And when I talk of authenticity, I mean the thing that they started, and they are fully convinced that they are pushing out their own idea.

They continue doing it until people accept it or reject it. That's what has been happening to art styles and movements in the world. So I do not feel any pressure neither am I under pressure.

G.R: Do you read a lot? Essays, criticism about your work about the work of other African artists?

Afuba: I read about my work. But in fact there are many things about my work which I have not read, not because I do not want to read them, but because I do not just go about asking people whether my work has been critiqued. I do read things, if I come across them, I've got magazines, articles, I like reading a lot but I do not just search papers to see if I have been criticised or others have been criticised, as a routine, because you see in life, as you get older and more mature, you discover that you have very little time left.

You have little time to attend to your domestic needs, attend to your work, push out your ideas and record them. So I read, but I do not actually, if you mean that I should be looking out for articles where my

works have been critiqued or to know what people say about me, I do not bother myself about that.

G.R: You belong to AKA. In your circle do you sometimes get together to discuss, at the theoretical level, certain currents, certain emerging currents which run across the work of artists within the group, some elements, maybe some mild form of self-criticism; and things like that?

Afuba: We do get together when we have our meetings. And of course you know that when artists meet there is no limit to what artists discuss. We do not say we are coming together to talk at random. We do have agenda but what I am saying is that when we meet, we discuss trends in art, and it comes naturally; people talk about us, about our work, some bring people, and we listen to them and react naturally. When artists meet, that is artists who are involved, we discuss our work, creativity, developments in art, art appreciation and so on.

We even get information on people, may be about us, about our work and often these lead us into intellectual discussion. When artists meet there's no limit to what can be discussed.

G.R: In an interview Obiora Udechukwu who is a member of your group complained that art historians were not doing enough work to support what the creators of the art are doing. That they are not forthcoming in terms of projecting what people are doing on the field and all that, do you agree?

Afuba: If you say not doing enough yes he is right. Because I have always quarrelled with the fact that art historians and critics do not go out to the field as you have just come to me. It's only on very few occasions that you see them coming like this to sit down and interview artists at work.

Many artists in the hinterlands who work and who even find it difficult to go out do not go out looking for publicity. And of course a studio artist is a studio artist and he works on his art twenty-four hours. It is true that one should go out to organise certain things for himself. But you must remember that creative artists are not that extroverted. They are not gifted with running around and then coming back to the studio to do their work.

So art historians need to reach out to artists by contacting them where they do their work, just like their colleagues look out in most developed countries. If they hear or read about an artist who they think is worthwhile, they go out to the person and find out what he's doing; they do not wait for the person to come to them or may be write from what has been



submitted in terms of exhibition brochures or look at how many exhibitions the person has held.

There are many great artists who may not even hold one exhibition, yet they are great. They stay in their homes and work, people collect their works and they are at home working there and creating. They are much more productive that way than if you ask them to go out, get involved in running around, with the idea of exhibitions and things.

Thus, as far as I'm concerned, art historians are not doing enough because they are supposed to reach out to people, to artists, because it is hard for someone to do the work and again have to write about himself.

G.R: Do you feel satisfied by the things that have been written about you, especially by non-Nigerian critics?

Afuba: If you say satisfied it would seem like I have read everything that's been written about me...

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G.R: But whatever you have read; do you sometimes feel repulsed? Or even feel like responding to say, well, I don't agree with this?

Afuba: I have responded on a number of times over things written on me, then there are those that I prefer not to bother myself over.

Agreed, sometimes I feel repulsed but most times I feel encouraged. There are people who either because they do not understand what the artist was telling them or one way or another, because of their own disposition, they decided to represent the artist the way they thought best. Therefore, the artist is bound to find what they have written repulsive and one feels like reacting or responding.

I think there have been one or two occasions when I felt like responding but I'm always here working, before I know it, the day is spent and I find out I have not done all that I had hoped to do.

On the whole, both internationally and locally, I sometimes feel encouraged by what has been written on me, even though sometimes I have also been unhappy over some articles on me.

G.R: Are you happy about this generalisation... when people want to define, y'know, even contemporary artists in this section of Nigeria, they tend to want to group all of them under Uli. And I can see that many of you have actually extended beyond some of those confinements.

Afuba: Well, this is a problem of the world. Generalisation about Uli or what we may call Uli Stylistic Approach which is the Uli traditional element of design: If I get your question very well, you're asking if I feel...

G.R: I'm referring to some publications in fact, in which even contemporary artists, people like you, and then they say all of you fall under Uli.

Afuba: You see even the so-called Uli artists, those exponents of Uli do not always use Uli elements in their composition. They do not draw specifically, always working in the Uli style of art expression.

We shouldn't generalise that all artists in these areas fall under the Uli stylistic approach. Dapo, actually art is a universal language. So it is not safe for one to say that in a particular area a group of people express themselves in a particular traditional style. There might be the tendency for most artists in that area to be working in a style that is local or traditional to them but you'll find that a number of artists within that group might be off that style completely because they are not inclined to that.

For instance, in the AKA group, we have members who are not strictly inclined to Uli: Boniface Okafor is one case in point, his style is surrealistic but he comes from this part of the world, the Igbo ethnic group.

Another example, Nsikak Esien, is expressionistic in interpretation. He has lived here for so long, like Tayo Adenaike; Adenaike works in this style may be because he was trained at Nsukka.

But then it's not everybody who was trained at Nsukka that is at home with the Uli style. It depends on personal idiosyncrasy, art has to be a notion of feeling: what you feel and how you want to push it out.

Nsikak Esien actually does use Uli motive but that is not a dominant feature in his work. He likes to produce works that can be characterised as the strict IMT approach to art interpretation, which is experimentation. The Institute of Management and Technology (IMT) Enugu art style has to do with experimentation. Nsikak likes to produce images that are charged with strong movement. Nsikak loves movement, he likes dramatic expression.

This is obvious in his work, but people should not be generalising or take it for granted that if you come from an area you are using the art style of that area.

The people who use Uli artform as a mode of expression are people who, from their background, from their root, have been in love with that art style.

Take myself for instance, I started using Uli even before I knew its use in contemporary art. I started using Uli in wood where it was a way of life. Scrubbing the mud house, painting it, watching women draw Uli on their bodies.... Once you're a child in Igboland and you have a mud house in your area you have to learn how to use Uli; you have to decorate the walls with patterns.

So those children who grew up in that way, when they come out to understand, like myself who came to study under Uche Okeke, it was there that he exposed me to the use of Uli in contemporary art.

He taught me that. How to use Uli. I saw him doing that and I became aroused. So we could be using Uli in contemporary art, not copying the old style but interpreting it, using it in your work as a form of expression, trying to draw like the traditional artist but using your own style, your own language. You do not copy the past. That is what Okeke calls synthesis. Using the past to join the present to create the future.

G.R: I want us to return to this issue of changing attitude: look at installation art for example, you were

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telling me that it is not new....

Afuba: It is not new. I keep saying it is not new. Remember that when you asked me the question you were asking me whether I agree with the trend; that trend in art.

I told you that installation is not new, because what people do temporarily, expressed as an art form (I mean in fleeting impressions; fleeting expressions by persons who are creative by nature). There are works, even footsteps as you take a walk, that are instinctive. It is prompted by instinct,... of course there is a natural tendency to take steps and walk, and move, but again there is this creativity that comes into walking.

If one sees his girl friend or her boy friend approaching and she/he wants to impress him/her, the lover walks in a particular pattern. You would be surprised how creative the human being can be... they swagger and pose.... Even the affluent do it, when they want to throw their weight around.

G.R: But we are defining installation essentially as a kind of stylistic pattern.

Afuba: It's a stylistic pattern that is very temporal. I told you about laughter; about how a market woman sets her things in the market. How she sets her wares such as cocoyam or other articles. It's not exactly the way she sets them today that she'll set them tomorrow. At times even in the course of the market day, as the day progresses, she might think that what she had just set may not be impressing customers, or may be she did not set the most attractive articles in a more prominent place for people to see... she would re-organise the setting.

Talk of installation, it's just a temporal art; it has to do with a fleeting impression, fleeting expression. So you do it, you re-organise it, you do all.

But my own... what I find against it, what I keep

saying is, art is supposed to... art is supposed to be lived. In that way installation is good - art as it is lived. This could be captured with photographs, video cameras and so forth. With people acting out their daily living the way they should be acted, set things that could not actually be made permanent - in that way, installation is very wonderful. If people go to set them up on beaches, in areas, on parks where people come and watch what has been set up, photographed, documented, that way that is okay with installation.

But if you want to talk about installation and you tell me that because it's in vogue, therefore it has to be adhered to, even by artists who are not so inclined, then I would say that that is wrong. Because, there's nothing greater than the art of posterity, the art that is bequeathed to the future. The art that could be concretised.

If it's something that is to be carved you carve it, so that people will keep on seeing it, appreciating it; If it is something that's going to be constructed you construct and its preserved for people to see.

G.R: So preservation and permanence are important...

Afuba: Yeah, they're important otherwise the world would not have history.

G.R: I saw the work of a graduate student who is actually working in soft sculpture, and of course, that is not exactly installation because it lasts much longer and is not as fleeting but at the same time it isn't made in enduring material.

Afuba: Soft sculpture like that has been part of what I teach students... you know the name of the student?

G.R: No.

Afuba: Okay. Those who have passed through me, (in the Institute of Management and Technology, IMT) study soft sculpture as craft. Dolls, puppets, pillows, cushions, upholstery are all doing soft sculpture. They are using soft materials, cut foams to get shapes, create forms and even though they could be made as art objects that could be kept and appreciated for what they are, they could be functional when they are produced as cushions to sit on, or pillows for people to lay their heads or as dolls if used as puppets; they're all soft sculpture.

The area of soft sculpture is really wide. Bread-making is another aspect of soft sculpture...

G.R: Bread is even soft sculpture.

Afuba: Yes, it's soft sculpture. After all what is

In any party, even during a party, human beings install themselves in a sitting position. A dancing hall is an installation. It is a unit of design set with balloons, every thing. Somebody set them up. It's installation. Installation is very wide and soft sculpture is very wide; using balloons to create different forms, is soft sculpture

sculpture other than the creation or carving of forms in three dimensions or in relief.

G.R: And come to think of it, do you know that many years ago my father was a baker and they used to actually create forms on the bread and bake and the bread had patterns, a form of Uli if you like, on the hunch of the bread...

Afuba: And many of them, apart from representing forms of animal, figures, you have purely bread shapes and forms that are purely formalistic in terms of what they call 'Luxurious Bus', a large rectangular loaf.

It looks like a bus. A big bread now baked, has a roof; may be because of the rising of the bread in forms like the roof of a vehicle. It's just the basic form of a bus but that's not just the point. You have other shapes that are created by the bakers.

Even making cakes, when you go to a wedding you find different types of forms. One woman baker tries to outclass the other in making of cakes. And it is installation. The installation is just cut and destroyed when the bride and bridegroom deconstruct the cake. But its an installation brought together there and set and everybody admires it.

G.R: It is constructed in order to be deconstructed...

Afuba: True, so even bread; you bring a loaf of bread and place it on the dining table for people to eat. And within a moment everything is set. The dining table during any meal is an installation; women who are dedicated, who are artistic (because everybody is an artist... have one thing in mind there's no human being that's not an artist. People make that mistake. When we want to begin to classify them we want to talk about the 'Professional Artist'. But everybody is an artist by nature).

So when you set the table it is installation and

before the time to say the Grace, the food to be presented to guests, the table is an art piece. And when you see different baked bread, cake, meat, all set, it's installation.

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Even on the street, how cars move, how cars are parked in open spaces...

G.R: And the fuel stations...

Afuba: The filling stations, you see when I stand and look at these things I just laugh.

G.R: I remember some photographers who capture such moments, and it becomes enduring.

Afuba: Yes, that's the only way installation can become recorded or what you might call Recorded Installation. Installation is, for me, 'the art of daily living'. Everybody is involved in installation. If somebody wants to do that now and invite people to come and see, for me, it becomes, 'contrived installation'.

Natural installation is the life that is lived by everybody, every day: the way that people park their cars, queue up, the way people atimes crowd together to view one event or the other...

G.R: Or watch soccer...

Afuba... or watch soccer, gather in the stadium, is installation. You see though video cameras, you see people when they want to clap, they rise up, (Mexican Wave - M.A) I don't know how they do it now, it's like they shout yeah! yeah!!

It looks like everybody is planted. You go to the stadium, some architects, designers, planned the stadium or stadia in such a way that when people sit down, they form some letters...

G.R: Bulgarian art!

Afuba: It's installation. People sit down... the architects had planned it, designers, landscape designers had planned it such that when people come to an arena, when they sit down they form in the environment, elevation, depression, when people come to sit there they conform and accentuate the form of the environment therefore creating and enhancing that environment creating a picture, a work of art.

G.R: So it becomes limitless, y'know....

Afuba: It's limitless.