



ART Feedback and Other LITERATURES

Dapo
Adeniyi

Conversation with El Anatsui and Ola Olajide

African Quarterly
on the Arts
Vol. 2/No. 4

GLENDORA review

021

The setting is El Anatsui's Nsukka campus quarters. Running on the TV monitor were clips of oldtime Anatsui workshops in Europe, Brazil and Asia. Conversation, interrupted now and then with drinks, took a most informal and casual turn. October 1, 1998.

G

J.R.: I just want us to throw the issues in the air.

Oloidi: In the air ke, I thought you said you wanted to throw stones. (laughter)

Anatsui: ... We'll catch them don't worry.

G.R.: I want us to start by looking at this issue of feedback. By feedback I mean the response or reaction to the work of artists. Some people say that they actually endure them, or enjoy them, which ever way - how people respond. I'm referring to two categories: professional or critical reaction and there's the non-professional or pedestrian reaction. Can you share some of your experiences generally- have you been enjoying them or enduring them?

Oloidi: How people receive...

G.R.: May be we should start with the professional reaction, reviewers locally...

Oloidi: Okay, what I have seen or experienced so far with reviews, especially if you talk about reviews, then you'll talk about two categories that we all know around. And one which is commonest is newspaper reviews as against, proper or, in-depth academic reviews, which are rather very few and far between.

G.R.: In some places, the edges have gradually blurred. In some journals like the *Times Literary Supplement* which is supposed to be operating within a popular medium, and at the same time the quality is not compromised...

Anatsui: Yea but we don't have much of that in the country. May be you can find that elsewhere although once in a while you find brilliant writing in the newspapers. What I can say about journalists' criticism is that most of it tends to be one-sided.

Y'know they want to praise. May be they think as newspaper folks they have to sing praises, for an artist that can be very boring.

There's been only one occasion that one young, I've forgotten the name, attempted to really look closely when I had an exhibition. He looked closely at the show and he attempted to look at what was on show and what I had said so far and he made a statement which I thought was very critical y'know, the kind of thing that one would expect, y'know. He said that looking at the works, my rhetorics were more than the works. So when I read it, I said men, we're getting somewhere.

But you don't have much of that happening you know, people who would want to now look closely. Look at the work critically. They don't do it. Most of them, most of the time, they want to only deal with your C.V. Beyond that they don't do anything to help their readers as such. There's no bridge they are building. Critics are supposed to build some bridge-they're supposed to build a bridge between the artist and the audience.

G.R.: Sometimes they are even supposed to talk back to the artist. There's an interview where Soyinka was saying certain critics are really creatively endowed, they reinterpret the work.

Anatsui: Yeah, when you read Roger Pryor, one of these British art critics, you read his critique and you have a feeling he is doing a new job out of the experience. He's not just regurgitating, vomiting; let me use that crude word, vomiting the material back to you.

He's giving you an extension of the experience.

G.R.: Is it because, there's an handicap, and people tend to may be expect too much from the newspaper reviewer?

Now if we really look at it, how much technical insight would someone who does not have any real training in art.... Its not also helped by the fact that many newspapers assign the same person who's doing reviews for visual art to drama, music, to everything.

Apart from that may be, y'know he/she even read the social sciences at school.

But we also have cases where people, apart from the fact that they have a lot of insight, people also come from without who are real professional critics, and they make judicious use of the newspaper space.

Oloidi: It is the duty of the critic to interpret! The artist has created his works, he doesn't really have to let us know what the work is all about. It is the duty of the critic to see, and see beyond what others see because the critic sees, but sees differently. There's a difference between looking and seeing. He sees more with his mind and not just with his eyes.

So it is the duty of the critic to use his critique of art not as a decoration but as a symbol towards understanding.

G.R.: I just want to add one thing to show the extent to which I agree with what you are saying. We actually went to one exhibition in Lagos recently and when we arrived there, the people running the place, not the proprietress but some of the staff, came and said, 'what are you planning to do?'

Of course we were going to appreciate this exhibition and discuss it on television and she said, 'what exactly are you going to say?' She was pleading, she said it might even be safer for them not to allow us... just to support what you are saying that some people actually think that the critic is coming to hack the artist down, and so on.

If the level of social awareness about the role of the critic is so low, who do we blame? Do we blame the critic?

Oloidi: I'm personally disappointed with many reviews. Even depressed at times. For example in one of my review clips an exhibition of Yussuf Grillo is entitled 'Yussuf Grillo, an exhibition of painting'. That is meaningless. The public will see that title, that highly artificial, very nude title has allowed the exhibition to shed off its purpose.

People will see that title. Who cares about the exhibition of Onobrakpeya's prints on display?

G.R.: At the same time, may be I should be on the side of the newspapers. I think we actually have to delineate between a report and a review, because they are not essentially the same.

Oloidi: Reporting. What is the purpose of art reporting? Is it to help a newspaper, or the artist or to help art...?

G.R.: But a report is not supposed to interpret.

Oloidi: No, no, no. Anyway we are not talking about the art critic now, we're talking about the art reporter.

G.R.: Well, it may be confusing, y'know, because on the same newspaper page where there's a review, there's a sort of critical engagement with a work, you also have some other report there.

Oloidi: When you talk about criticism, you devalue art reportage. What they do is not art reporting. They don't see themselves as art reporters. They see themselves as critics because they make judgement.

If you think they are art reporters then you'll be surprised when they are making conclusions.... That the exhibition is this.... They do make judgements and critics make judgements.

The art reporters are not supposed to make judgements, they are supposed to present things as they are, without attempting to offer interpretation.

G.R.: Yeah, certainly.

Oloidi: ... and no newspaper will tell you that it's just

satisfied with this. Why do they make, or break, artists? 'An artist is born', that's a critic's expression.

You see, biographers, praise singers, these are not reporting. To report is to say that an exhibition opened at, till, this,... that's all.

But if that is the purpose, then anybody can do that....

G.R.: It has its own art too. Reporting has its own art. I'm just saying that it has its own pre-occupation without necessarily crossing lines. The atmosphere of the place can be captured in a report, who was there and all that. And actually reporting what was said, the intentionary statements of the exhibition, without necessarily having a critical or analytical engagement, y'know, with the mind of the work.

I'm saying it doesn't mean that reporting is necessarily a kind of lower art.

Anyhow, you are actually confirming that art criticism in Nigeria has either failed or is failing.

Oloidi: But we want it to be up to standard. Okay, look at the review pages; they say 'Art Review.' With art reviews you are to review, you're doing reviews. You are able to synchronise.

G.R.: Some call theirs 'Friday Review', 'The Arts' or something like that.

For journalism in a very broad sense, people are trained to be journalists. Ultimately it is not possible to subordinate journalism to scholarship, to criticism.

Anatsui: I do not see a good criticism which wouldn't at the same time report. A good criticism has to report because you have to present the thing somehow before you now go into criticising it or analysing it.

G.R.: For instance, it is possible for me to write a review and just say that well, El Anatsui's exhibition which opened on so so y'know is a major departure from the exhibition which he had...

Anatsui: In what way?

G.R.: I have given... y'know, its just a shred of information, whereas a report would sound differently.

What we are trying to do is just to assess. How far we have gone.

Anatsui: A very, very, short distance....

G.R.: Very, very short distance?

G.R.: Do you sometimes feel like picking up your pen to jot something down. In a way that is similar to some extent to what Bruce Onobrakpeya has done a lot, by actually having to write on your own work. Do you get that urge sometimes?

Anatsui: No, no. Well, it does come, once in a very, very long while, very long while.

My approach is that if the urge is not strong enough then don't do it.



Ola Oloidi, Anatsui's flat, Nsukka

Even in the studio, you have an idea and its floating in your mind, if you don't think you can anchor it very, very effectively, forget it. Or even if you start anchoring it and then you find that it's not it, you leave it.

G.R: A number of visual artists from Nsukka I observe practise as poets and creative writers.

Do you think that creative writing gives the artist an edge?

Anatsui: I don't think creative writing should. There's no difference between them because they're all sourced from the, as I mentioned earlier, the right lobe of the mind. Not the left lobe.

Anything creative comes from the right lobe. And whether poet, or whatever, you should be able to cross over. Whether you are in... some people go to art schools, may be they did painting and they say 'oh I didn't do sculpture so I can't...' you should be able to cross over easily because, they are... all of them being creative endeavours, reside on the right side of the mind.

And to do poetry, fiction, you should be able to, once it is creative, as against critical.

Y'know, the critical is different from the creative. The critical is from the left lobe. So he's (Oloidi) a left lobe (laughter), and I'm right lobed.

So they are to sit down as critics and say okay, 'we can see this, that, that. That, can translate into this'.

And when, as the artist, you read it you say 'oh! Okay, they're making sense. So they are able to use the left lobe to read meaning into right lobe product.

It shouldn't be difficult at all. In fact, most times when I do some work, y'know, if the work is successful and you want to title it, you find that you find yourself writing poetry. There have been times when I had that feeling. Most of the titles that I did... the exhibition 'pieces of wood', the titles were very, very... some of them were poems, may be four, five lines and so on.

G.R: And your intention was to really get a caption?

Anatsui: Yes. Yes. But because they're all in the same...

G.R: But it seems that you had to move from the right lobe to the left lobe...

Anatsui: No, no. I was still in the right.

G.R: Still in the right.

Anatsui: Yeah...

G.R: But the very act of getting a caption for a work that is completed...

Anatsui: It's also a right lobe function. So I was still in the same...

G.R: The creative is the right? But it seemed that to get a caption you had to cross to the left.

Anatsui: I wasn't crossing to the left. Titling a work is a creative endeavour as well.

G.R: Well, there's a school of thought that's also arguing that criticism is possibly as creative as...

Anatsui: Eh, eh you are combining the left and right, like the critic I mentioned whose work you read and you feel like he's created a new work out of yours. Perhaps such things happen. And there are artists, too, who can operate left and right. They find it easy to shift there, shift back, and so on and so forth.

G.R: If we had a situation in which practising artists were also discussants, y'know, in public once in a while, it might actually enliven and may be stimulate those whose real pre-occupation is criticism.

Anatsui: Yes, yes. Especially if they are able to, the right lobe is really broad. I understand it's the most difficult, but if they're able to reach the audience from that lobe, you know, then probably a lot of problems would have been over.

G.R: I remember, from my personal experience of editing the arts pages of a newspaper, that we had space for visual arts, literature, performing, and other

areas of the arts. But literature just almost always took more than 70 per cent of our space because we found that those who were creative writers were also creatively responding, and that tended to increase the quality and the kind of responses you got from that critic who literally sent you back to your own work. That happened more in the area of literature than in the visual arts where you found that people were jealously kept within the right lobe as you said.

Anatsui: I think literature people might have read criticism of people in literature who operate on the right lobe very intensely. I think they find it easier to shift between the two because words are very much a vehicle of the left lobe. And since that's what they use as their medium, they find it easy to cross over.

That's why you can have more of people who respond. If you source your response from artists, in words, you'll find it difficult to because most of them are locked in that... y'know, they find it difficult to shift into the left.

G.R: So the question now is this, to whom, or where does the practising African artist turn? If the newspaper reviewer is not delivering, the professional critics within the universities are not performing, where does the practising African artist turn?

Anatsui: And the teachers too are not performing... (laughter).

G.R... So where does he/she turn? And where does he/she actually get stimulation?

Oloidi: I wouldn't say that they are not performing. Things are really improving, there's no doubt about that. Things are improving. But the thing is slow.

So, about the artist, you say where does an artist turn? To his/her creativity.

You see an artist is supposed to have... any artist without any sustaining ideology cannot be called an artist. Because it is your ideology, which becomes highly instrumental and no critic, no matter how negative can be discouraging.

Some artists create, not for money, they continue to work without thinking of the attending gratification. They are creating because of that rush in creativity. They are full of experimentations.

But they are only a few. Some artists create because they want to sell. And such people, anything goes. If they say this is the style in Lagos, yes that is it....

G.R: But again you're already shutting out the younger ones. Those who have not actually reached that ferment. Those who are still highly impressionable, and they still have to depend on...

Oloidi:... if they want to be artists nothing will discourage them. That's why artists will always fail, and artists will always pass..

You discover that there are many art teachers now and

few artists. Many art teachers. Many art administrators. It depends on your interest!

If there's that rush of creativity, nothing! Okay, like Yusuff Grillo, Grillo said when they took to art they never knew the future. He said they just took to art because they loved art.

Look at installation which came up in our discussion the other time. If you want to be academic you can say that what you call installation has been with us. If you go to the villages you see all those shrines, they didn't see it as installation. But that has been their own system of art arrangement.

G.R: I want to take up this issue on behalf of some artists who still insist that the authentic feedback should come from African reviewers and critics.

And they give the following reasons. I'm going to give four of them.

The first is that Africans should determine their own canons, in art as well as in literature; that we should not allow others to do it for us. We ought to determine who are the frontliners, who are in the middle and so on.

The second is that there is the danger for contemporary African art to be classed as an appendage of museum ethnography.

The third is that even when contemporary African art is well acknowledged, it is put in the same bracket as auxiliary art forms like bread labels, sign writing and those which Ulli Beier classed as Middle Arts.

And the fourth. The soul of a work, they reason, cannot be accurately interpreted by critics who are outsiders to the mental and cultural worlds the artist has drawn from. How do you react?

Anatsui: Lets have the first reason again...

G.R: That Africans should determine their own canons in art as well as in literature.

Anatsui: Well, I think that stands to reason. You can't have canons determined for you by anybody.

And how do you determine canons? What are the things that bother you? What are the things in your environment, for instance, which bother you, impinged on you or which make you uncomfortable or even make you very happy. What are the things around?

They say art is something which is not in a vacuum. You don't grow in a vacuum. Its grows on an environment, therefore they certainly would reflect. No matter what you do, it will reflect. Since it draws its strength from the environment, that environment would certainly be reflected in it.

That's why when, for instance, I meet some young artists who finish their art training and they come and say, 'we've heard about this installation thing. What is your view on it? Is it African?' I tell them it is as African

as anything you can think about. Even more African than European. And I cite so many examples after which they'll say okay, okay it's true.

But the problem again is the extent to which Europ has destroyed our sensibilities. We have all around us things that are in current fashion but look down on them.

Around Nsukka y'know, I do go to the villages, most times over the weekend, to just roam around and see very exciting things that we do in Africa.

In Africa we live with art. We do art without calling it art. What somebody referred to as 'Art Without Artists'. You can have a lot of sculptures all over the place without sculpture. It's a matter of well, somebody decides that we'll call it sculpture and people say okay we give it a name. But we don't give names to such things. And that doesn't mean that we don't have them. We have them.

So, installation art is African. In the market, everyday the Ugba seller cooking his 'Ugba' has a technique of wrapping and the form it takes are forms of sculpture, and you can call them installation.

Recently I found while reading, the only aspect of art which has been bandied about in the West which I had not tried to find an example for in Africa, but recently found an example of. I was reading through some book, I think *The Guardian of the Word* by Camara Laye. There's this, y'know Sungolo Njata...

G.R: Sundiata...

Anatsui: There's this episode in which he did something which, y'know, if you look at it, it's just what they call 'Conceptual Art' in the West.

The art whereby you don't use... you want to express that you want to wage war on somebody and you don't make a human being carrying a gun. But you use some other signifiers which if anybody sits down and looks at it closely he can get the message.

There was a time he (Sundiata) had this encounter with a king who wanted him to succeed him. The king didn't have a son and Sundiata had lived with him as a, I think he sought refuge, and the king so liked him for his prowess and everything. And since the king didn't have a son he wanted Sundiata to succeed him but this guy had problems in his home.

His people searched for him and found him in the king's domain and they wanted him to come back and help them fight some enemy. And since blood is thicker than water he decided to go back.

So he went and told the king that he would want to take leave. And the king said 'Ah ah but I want you to succeed me, I don't have a son' and the chap said 'well I have a call from home'.

Meanwhile he was living there with his mother and the

mother died just a night before he was due to leave. So he went to the king again to beg for a piece of land to bury her corpse.

And the king said 'well, you don't want to succeed me, you don't want to inherit this place, anything you have carry. Carry your mother's dead body'.

So the chap said supposing I buy the land and pay for it, and the king said: 'well, maybe'.

So the chap went away awhile. When he returned he came with a basket of feathers of guinea fowl, broken pieces of pots and some other ruffles and said 'okay this is your payment'.

And the king said 'How? I can't have this rubbish... you call this payment?' Meanwhile, the boy left.

But there was somebody whom we can call a critic on the spot. I think he was from Saudi Arabia because the Arabs were already in contact with that area, so he understood and came and explained to the king what the guy meant.

He said: 'if you don't give me this land, I'll wage war on you, and not only wage war, I'll destroy your kingdom. It would become a place that guinea fowls come to take their dusty bath'.

Y'know he had dust, guinea fowl feathers, broken pots and so on.

That's a very good example of Conceptual Art when you look at what they call Conceptual Art in the West. Y'know this took place in the Thirteenth century.

There's no difference between it and what Sundiata did a long time ago. When I meet this new phenomenon abroad, I don't just come back and say okay I've seen installation art let me do it. I first search my environment. If I find it I say okay then. If I'm doing it I'm not doing something European.

Anything that I do now I can cite examples of it in parts of Africa. Not necessarily of my people, but people of African descent. So that's what I do.

What I want to say again is that artists need to open up. We have attempted to open up to go back and find out that what is happening in the West is not a new phenomenon, or a new idea.

The West are also going back to their past to pick from whatever they had done so many years ago. And in some cases you find what they're doing is much more relevant to the African situation than it is to theirs.

These ideas about conceptual art, installation art and all that, I think we have more material and more inspiration and more ideas that can enable us to do it better.

So our canons are things that we have to shape and if you go back you'll find many, many things. Very many models. **GR**