

BA STUDENT, ART HISTORY, NIGERIA

In the discourse on contemporary African art it is commonplace to find tomes and exhibitions dedicated to exploring the variety and depth of artistic production on the continent. These gestures highlight the breadth of individuality and the transformation of Africa's artistic landscape. They have also played an unprecedented role in reshaping global perceptions about the arts of Africa in general. Despite this, contemporary African art continues to be marginalized by many Western academics, collectors, and curators, many of whom are keen on constructing analytical paradigms with little to no engagement with the history of the work or the culture from which it sprang. Such limited approaches fail to demonstrate a profound relationship between art and life, that objects of art are often informed by locale-specific cultural and sociopolitical circumstances. The following proposal outlines, specifically, my desire to conduct a much needed contextual study of contemporary art and culture in Lagos, Nigeria.

Although Nigeria has encountered many challenges emerging from its complex colonial history, the country we find today is in a state of flux and vibrant transformation. In its postcolonial rebuilding, Nigerians have demonstrated a profound commitment to observing the role of the arts in the development of a national cultural identity. One major achievement was the implementation of 1988's *National Cultural Policy*, which aimed to facilitate the establishment of a cultural infrastructure and recognize the cultural needs of the people.¹ The country's unwavering commitment to art and culture is most evident today with many widespread efforts to preserve and promote the visual arts. On August 27, 2008, Lagos hosted *ArtExpo Nigeria*, the country's first ever art fair of its kind, featuring 750 works of art by modern and contemporary Nigerian artists. As Nigeria's "art centre," Lagos plays host to more than forty art galleries, museums, and cultural institutions, thus making it a ripe environment for my project.

In developing a framework for my research, I have drawn on my past experiences in studying contemporary art in Rome, Italy. In the autumn of 2007, during my semester abroad, I took a comprehensive *Galleries and Studios* course that provided me with an in-depth awareness of contemporary art studies. In the study I am proposing, I will examine both contemporary art and culture through a combination of an internship and fieldwork. I will compliment these studies with university lectures pertaining to Nigeria's cultural history. My research will rely on a range of methods including informal and formal interviews with artists, studio visits, and a range of observations. I will record my data (interview transcripts, photographs, etc) in journals which will - depending on my Internet connectivity - be transferred to a blog dedicated solely to this experience. For my fieldwork, I have developed an approach that generates many questions concerning the *structure* that governs contemporary art practices, the *artists* who operate within (or without) this framework, and my own observations of the *public* aspects of these tenets. Some of the questions guiding my study include:

Structure: How do art galleries, museums and cultural institutions contribute to the promotion, exhibition, and evaluation of art? How do these venues interact with young artists, and art schools? What is the scope of art criticism? How does the art market operate?

Artists: What are the concepts/vocabularies being employed by artists? What are their formalistic/stylistic concerns? How are they impacted by the "globalization" of art? How do they define their practice? What is their relationship to indigenous visual history and culture?

Public: Who is the viewing public for contemporary art? How are exhibitions spaces designed? How prevalent is public art? How do street artists contribute to visual culture.

I have presented this proposal to _____, the Director of the Centre for Contemporary Art, Lagos. She, on behalf of the CCA, has wholeheartedly supported my application and has offered to host my research (see Letter of Support). _____ is fully engaged in the study of Nigerian visual culture, and has co-curated

¹ Ebum Clarke and Dele Jegede, eds., *Culture and Nation Building* (Lagos: National Council for Art and Culture, Kraft Books Limited), 1992.

many important exhibitions of contemporary African art, most notably the 2006 Dakar Biennale, and the African Pavilion at the 52nd Venice Biennale in 2007. The CCA, Lagos is an ideal research institute for my project because of its unique presence in the art community. The center exhibits the work of many contemporary Nigerian artists in its galleries. Its lecture hall provides a platform for many local and international artists, curators and cultural leaders to contribute to the ongoing discussions concerning art and culture. The center also has a research library and a study center that will assist me in chronicling my fieldwork. This affiliation will also provide me with a unique opportunity to contribute directly to the CCA's mission by participating in an internship. I am excited about the opportunity to contribute to the exchange of ideas while working with the CCA's curators and resident artists in researching and planning for exhibitions. The center will act as a hub for my fieldwork as it will play an integral role in helping me to establish relationships with members of the art community. With the aim of developing an historical preamble to supplement my fieldwork and internship, I will also pursue studies at the University of Lagos, Akoka (See Letter of Support). Here, I am planning to take one course per semester on the history of Nigerian art, and culture.

Parts of my research are already in progress. With the guidance of _____, Professor of the History of Art at Temple University, I am currently engaged in an independent study on three contemporary Nigerian artists, whose work references both global trends in contemporary art, and Nigerian visual culture. The paper resulting from this study will elaborate on how their works defy simplistic reading, and by functioning in a geopolitical context, challenge the capitalist structure underlying art and globalization. This Spring I will continue my studies of Nigerian culture and plan to undergo a rigorous study of two indigenous visual languages, *uli* and *nsibidi*. Because these forms appear in the works of many contemporary Nigerian artists, an in-depth study will improve my understanding of traditional visual culture and accelerate my engagement with artists and their work.

The projected timeframe for my study is ten months, beginning in mid-August 2009, just in time for the 2nd *Art Expo Nigeria*. I plan to spend the first two months interning at the CCA. In October, I will begin my studies at the University of Lagos, Akoka. With the completion of my project, I expect to have developed a thorough understanding of contemporary Nigerian artists, their work, and the cultural circumstances that inspire it. This endeavor will deepen my awareness of the ways in which art is used to shape cultural identity and foster relationships between people of the world. It will provide me with a culturally and historically grounded foundation for studying contemporary African art in graduate school. I believe my journals, in addition to acting as an academic resource for my graduate studies, will provide me with ample material to write a paper that reports on the developments of contemporary art in Lagos. In my quest for the long-term legitimization of contemporary African art, I hope to continue to cultivate my relationships with members of the Nigerian art community.