

VISUAL ART EXHIBITION: A CATALYST FOR SOCIAL UNIFICATION IN NIGERIA

IDIBEKE AMOS JOHN Ph.D

Department of Fine and Industrial Arts, University of Uyo, Uyo, Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria.

&

SUNDAY ETIM EKWERE Ph.D

Department of Fine and Industrial Arts, University of Uyo, Uyo, Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria.

&

PROFESSOR EDEM ETIM PETERS

Department of Fine Arts and Design, University of Port Harcourt, Nigeria

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.56293/IJASR.2022.5401>

IJASR 2022

VOLUME 5

ISSUE 4 JULY – AUGUST

ISSN: 2581-7876

Abstract: This paper attempts a definition of the term exhibition with particular attention to Visual Art Exhibition, knowing that there are different forms of exhibitions that may not relate to visual arts. The paper equally highlighted on the various types of exhibitions pointing out the virtual exhibition as a new inclusion that has greatly changed the traditional format of visual art exhibition with its attendant impact on the outcome of the results of exhibitions. The highlighted focuses on the challenges of understanding the scope of the basic types of exhibition in contemporary times, as has been redefined by the concept of virtual exhibition. The relevance of exhibition to artists and the significance to the public is deeply discussed with the aim of positioning visual art exhibition in its rightful place as a catalyst for social change. This assertion could be seen in the significant effort of Kenneth C. Murray as a pioneer curator and organizer of visual art exhibition in Nigeria. Murray was a British Art Teacher in Nigeria who was instrumental to the establishment of Oron Museum in Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria, and he recognized Oron Carvings since 1938 and collected them for permanent art exhibition in the Oron Museum. The above therefore formed the conceptual framework of this paper. The opinions, positions and oppositions of other authorities in this matter are considered as they form the indices for postulating the idea of art exhibition as catalyst for social unification. However, the paper concludes that for the visual art exhibition to function as a catalyst for social unification, the elements of unity and integration must be factors the exhibitions composed of, for it to engender the expression of such feelings of social togetherness.

Keywords: Visual Arts, Catalyst, Social Unification, Virtual Exhibition, Contemporary times.

INTRODUCTION

Exhibition in general terms is a presentation or display of items for viewership, either by the public or private individuals. It could be items of culture, arts, educational or historical values. The essence of such presentation or display is to create a platform for people to interact with the items so displayed. For the purpose of this paper, exhibition will be viewed with specific focus on visual arts in Nigeria.

The concept of exhibition has partially assumed a pre-cast notion of being majorly an art event. It is common knowledge to classify exhibition as predominantly as an art term only. Even if this were to be true, there is nothing wrong in the visual art allocating to itself a concept it has total monopoly. Visual art exhibition therefore, is concern with the display of finished or perceived to be finished art products for public viewing. The idea of an artwork being finished is solely the responsibility of the artist based on the conceived message of the artist as a creator.

Visual art exhibition being a display for public consumption equally satisfies multiple function of providing the viewing public with content for their viewing pleasure, education and critical appraisal. In the same vein, visual art exhibition especially in Nigeria and perhaps the world over affords the artist the avenue to ventilate his inner creative energies for public participation. This notion is what Udosen (2018) stated when he said that exhibition “offers artists the rare opportunity to indulge in modest self-adulation”. It creates for the artists, that altar of self-praise, although often times most of the praises comes from the viewers.

Udosen (2018) went on to describe exhibition, as a cultural crusade needed by the artist to help him savour expectations that magnifies aesthetics and conceptual vitality, achievement and creative exuberance. However, the artists' creative ingenuity, expectation of successful appraisals of his creations usually must come from the viewer, who in most cases are members of the public or what can be termed a subset of the public with bias in creative taste. This expected public appraisal or approval is pivotal in the boosting of the artists' creative and conceptual vitality.

However, Musa (2007) posits that exhibition is an avenue for the exposition of the strangest bunch of artistic expressions that are sometimes lurid, absurd, baffling, profound, mesmerizing and most often indescribably beautiful. The assemblage of such a combination can certainly birth an overwhelming emotional response that can create in the viewer who is a component part of the larger society a corresponding response with great social implications.

Seeing that the Nigerian society is communally inclined due to the factors of cultural affinity, it is therefore assumed almost truly that the effect of one social response on an individual may equally have a 'contagious' effect on a larger number of the other members of the same society. Conceptually therefore, this paper believes presumptuously that art exhibition might in a way foster a sense of social integration in the Nigerian public given several factors which might include but not limited to, the concept of works, meaning, content and emotional responses occasioned by the viewers' responses to the perception of the exhibited art piece or pieces.

Adding credence to this ascertain, Ukpong (2015) submits that art exhibitions 'constitutes a subject of public spectacle and amusement'. Going by the above submission therefore, this paper sees virtual art exhibition as a catalyst for social awareness, a vehicle for unity and platform of social unification. These assertions are not far-fetched given the attractive nature of art products themselves.

Ezuluomba (2019), reflected on the inter-relationship of audience in the making of a successful show such as exhibition or carnival as the case may be. By doing this, Ezuluomba evaluates the interactive responses by placing value to the time created by viewers to become participants in art exhibition. This is a pointer to how priceless time is. Thus allocation of such valued possession for the purpose of satisfying one's aesthetic feelings is a clear indication of the fact that arts, apart from being attractive, has an enduring place of importance in the social fabric of the society.

TYPES OF EXHIBITIONS

According to Mateos-Rusillo and Gifreu-Castells (2017) there are various forms of exhibitions especially in the visual art sector. Though emphases are on Museum exhibitions, but this paper is not limited to exhibitions in the museum institutions alone. The different types of exhibitions are; permanent exhibitions, temporary exhibitions, mobile exhibitions (in most cases held on roadsides, junctions, parks, and other unconventional spaces) and most recently, virtual exhibitions.

The permanent exhibitions are usually installed in museums and galleries. They feature national or historical collections which are displayed for a long period of time and open for public view from generation to another. The exhibitions never changes nor are they outdated in terms of content, but are preserved and maintained. Visual art exhibition practice in Nigeria has witnessed tremendous and significant approaches from inception.

According to Peters (2015) "Among the conspicuous art practices of Kenneth Murray were development of Uyo Art School, orchestrating the pioneer international art exhibition from the art works of Uyo Art School, as well as making frantic effort to preserve some art works which brought about the Art Department of Oron Museum." It is interesting to note that Kenneth C. Murray exhibited the pottery products from the kiln he built at Uyo and other works of his students from Uyo Art School which he displayed at Zwember gallery (Britain) in 1937; and among his students who exhibited were Ibrahim, Ibeto, Enwonwu, Nnachi and Umana (Peters 2015). Visual art exhibition brings unity and it is a catalyst for social change as noticed in the early art practice and exhibition in Nigeria.

Furthermore, Peters (2015) observed that "K. C. Murray founded the Nigerian Antiquity Service (now Federal Department of Antiquities in 1943. In 1948, he collected over three hundred specimens of Ekpu (figures) carvings

from Oron and on the 7th December, 1959 Oron Museum was opened with the display of Ekpu figures permanently. The culturalistic ideology of K. C. Murray contrary to what others did aided him to search for Ekpu figures or carvings for preservation which led to the building of museum at Oron for exhibitions of the said art works and others for public view from one generation to another.

The temporary exhibition on the other hand as the name implies are displayed for a given period and later replaced or dismantled completely. In some cases, this feature solo or group artists or collections by museums or galleries intended to be showcased for a short period. Artists in their private galleries also host this type of temporary exhibition, sometimes for sales purposes and the works are taken off when sold.

More recent is the virtual exhibition, which has come to change the traditional format of visual art exhibition. According to Mateos-Rusillo and Gifreu-Castells, virtual exhibition has made it difficult to have the true sense of temporary exhibition as the works displayed virtually cannot actually be determined if they are temporary or permanent due to the seemingly permanent presence online. The virtual exhibition is an online exhibition where works of arts are displayed and can be viewed by far-reaching viewers regardless of distance and physical presence. The only limitation of virtual exhibition is the availability of internet connectivity which in recent times are almost everywhere.

The advent of virtual exhibition has greatly affected the nature and influenced the visual art exhibition in achieving the usual coming together of people. Thus, the social unification aspect of exhibition is challenged with a new meaning. What constitutes social gathering therefore needs to be redefined to accommodate beyond the physical geography. Therefore, a new normal is given birth to, the “virtual Social Community” or the digital community. Although these are not physical convocation of persons, yet they are ‘real’ community of ‘real’ people except where robots are allowed to participation in the census of the digital community. However, even at that, they are a new society of socially responsive personalities.

EXHIBITIONS AS A CATALYST FOR UNITY

The guiding principles of exhibition in museum have constantly changed, sometimes in small ways and at other times in larger ways (Albano, 2018). These changes in ways have fostered new consciousness and outcomes. The changes mostly due to technological advancement have at some point altered traditional perceptions of the roles of visual art exhibition, which is being considered as catalyst for social unity.

However, the change or technological modifications, societal social behaviors can still be identified even in its new form. Interestingly, this change has not assumed a massive dimension in Nigeria due to the slow rate of response to technological advancement. As such, the dominant global effect of the change consciousness may not be so applicable in our society yet. In this case, it is still safe to base our assumptions, conclusions and assertions on the predominant old trend with minimal alterations to accommodate the existence of the ‘new normal’.

As earlier submitted by Ezeoluomba (2019), the acceptance of the art exhibition as an important component of our social fabric is seen in the aspect of time allocation to such event in the face of competing factors. Whatever occupies such level of relevance as to take out time from amongst competing preferences is in itself a factor of great value. It is therefore safe for this paper to agree that art exhibition is of such great value capable of playing a catalytic role in social unification in Nigeria. Though since this study is not empirical in nature, there is no need for statistical data to compare social responses of art exhibitions and other social engagement like sports, festivals and religious gatherings. It cannot be wished away that visual art exhibition had its pride of place in such social engagement.

In addressing the concept of art and social change, Murray (2012) stated that arts have historically played important roles in both discouraging and facilitating social action and change. He went further to claim that art can be characterized as either anesthetic or aesthetic. By anesthetic, Murray meant that art could dull the sense and diminish questioning of the social order. Conversely, Murray submits that art as aesthetics could be “concerned with increasing awareness”. “It can draw attention to issues that are often ignored”. This later characteristics of art is what this paper is aligned with in order to establish the place of art in fostering the concept of social unification in Nigeria. Since art in itself can challenge people to think, engage in different behavioural experiences and experience different emotions, thus it is safe to accept that art can certainly be a catalyst for unification.

Murray argues that since different forms of art can involve or influence people emotionally, as such they can be a source of personal satisfaction as well as a catalyst for social action. This social action is thereby extended to social unification for the purpose of this paper. The ability to influence an individual's emotional reaction is a corresponding influence on societal emotional reactions. The ability of certain forms of art to exert such influence that result in social change is correspondingly capable of fostering unification if the elements of social unity are such that are expressed in the work of arts so exhibited.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

In the assimilation of the concepts of artistic influences above, it could be seen that the said influences are relative. They are determined by the prevailing factors of artistic expressions such as; content, concept, form and meaning. The purpose of the arts or the intension of the artist in producing the works to be exhibited to a great extent determined the result of the feelings so expressed by the viewing public in a given exhibition.

Today, visual art exhibitions are found engaging both indoor and outdoor display. The display of installation art works in public and private spaces for out-door aesthetic and other functions is also gaining more grounds apart from the art display in museums, galleries and other specified indoor spaces as observed by Peters (2015).

It can therefore be concluded that if the elements that foster social unity are factored into the production of arts, if the elements of integration are expressed in the visual art exhibition, then it is inevitable that the goals of achieving social unification can be achieved without inhibitions. The reverse is the case if element of social unifications are lacking in the art exhibition.

Consequently, the intent or purpose of the exhibition must be taken into consideration while creating artworks. In conclusions therefore, it can be presented that this paper aligns with the notion of visual art exhibition being a catalyst for social unification if the purpose is what the exhibition intends to achieve.

REFERENCES

1. Albano, C. (2018), "The Exhibition as an Experiment: An Analogy and its implications in Journal of Visual Culture. www.journals.sagepubs.com Retrieved 19th May, 2021.
2. Ezeoluomba, N. C. (2019) Time and Season and Its Relationships To Exhibition and The Ibom Christmas Celebration. Culture and Tourism, Akwa Ibom State.
3. Mateos-Rusillo, S. M., Gifreu-Castell, A. (2017) Museums and Online Exhibitions; A Model For Analyzing And Charting Existing Types, Museum Management And Curatorship. www.socholargoogle.com.
4. Murray M. (2012) Art, Social Action And Social Change. www.researchgate.net retrieved 20th May, 2021.
5. Musa, J. (2007) Introduction to Metonymies: Media and Expressions, Exhibition of Partings, Drawings, Pyro-Techniques and Mixed Media by Simon Best Ochingbo, National Gallery of Art, Nigeria.
6. Peters, Edem E., (2015). Revisiting Kenneth C. Murray's Pioneering Art and Pottery Development: The Uyo Art School Example (1935 – 1990). The Art Journal (TAJ): A Journal of the Faculty of Environment Studies, University of Uyo, Uyo, Nigeria. Vol. 1, No. 1, pp154 – 158, December, 2015
7. Peters, Edem E., (2015). Issues in Designing and Producing Ceramics Installation Wares for Out-Door Aesthetic Function. International Journal of Research, Innovation and Development. A Publication of University of Port Harcourt. Vol. 2, No. 1, pp27 – 34, June, 2015.
8. Udosen, A. U. (2018) Beyond the National Frontiers: An Exhibition of Nigerian Contemporary Art and Craft. By Society of Nigerian Artists (SNA) AKwa Ibom State Chapter, Uyo.
9. Ukpong, O. (2015) Forward to Bourgeon II, "Growing in Unison". Exhibition Catalogue, National Gallery of Art, Uyo.