

# The Changing Paradigms of Art Activism in Nigeria and the Problematic Context of Contemporary Art

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**Abstract:** The radical formalism of art constitutes a critical resource for activism, weapon for political/cultural battles and tool for subverting various notions of power. As a revolutionary mechanism, art activism was pivotal in anti-colonial movements from the 1900s and the Civil War of 1967 in Nigeria, yet this is under-researched in contemporary scholarship. Adopting historiography and contextual analysis, this paper explored the changing paradigms of protest art in Nigeria, as well as identified factors responsible for its decline in postcolonial practice. The paper puts forward the theory that the phenomenon of *Democratic-Dictatorship* in Nigeria and West Africa has created a culture of ‘Attacks on Art’, which is responsible for subduing subversive art and problematically re-contextualising contemporary art into ‘passing amusement’ and tool for political sycophancy in Nigeria. The findings of this paper corroborate Herbert Marcuse’s theory that the use of art activism only flourishes in societies that uphold freedom of expression.

**Keywords:** Protest art, Art activism, Avant-garde, Activist art, Artifactuality, Renaissancism, Negritude, Contemporary.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Art expression encodes forms with powerful contents that create new knowledge, epistemologies and realities that change perceptions, deconstruct ideological/cultural subjectivities and instigate revolution. Graeme Sullivan observes that the creation of counter-culture/realities through formal manipulation, inscribes in art powers that facilitate resistance movements and societal transformations (Sullivan 2010). This is why the German philosopher Herbert Marcuse defines art as a mechanism for protest and refers to its radical force as the ‘subversive power of art’. He posits that “the radical qualities of art, its indictment of established reality and invocation of liberation, creates the realm in which the subversion of experiences, authority, culture and institutions becomes possible” (Marcuse 1972: 495). This power to indict, incite and transform through formal manipulation, as well as to instigate revolutionary sentiments which Marcuse and Sullivan allude to, extends art beyond aesthetics into bohemianism and radicalism as a resource for activism and weapon for resisting/overturning oppression and restrictions. It is this subversive powers of art that Carol Becker propound as the true essence of modern expressionism – which is to challenge, disrupt, antagonize, confuse and rupture in order to bring about socio-political change (Becker 1994). This phenomenon is referred to as art activism, which involves the inscription of socio-political, economic, cultural and societal concerns in artistic an form to critique institutions and authorities in order to alter and transform society (Grant 1998, De Caeter 2011).

This display of bohemianism and avant-gardism in art to challenge/rupture power systems has been central in various resistance movements. The *French Revolution* of 1789, for example, harnessed the radical counter-culture formalism of art to foster socio-political/cultural resistance with the invention of *Neoclassicism*. Artists such as Jacques Louis David, Henri-Pierre Danloux, Jean-Baptiste Regnault and others dedicated themselves to the service of the revolution by propagandizing resistance ideologies; they inscribe politics in aesthetics with themes that embodied enlightenment thoughts of human rights, rationalism and moral rectitude whilst attacking the political-religious system on which

absolute monarchy was founded in order to overthrow the constitution and the ruling monarchy (Herbert 1972, Boime 1987). The *Mexican Revolution* of 1910 provides another example where art was used as weapons for political activism. Mexican artists interlaced political beliefs and resistance sentiments with artistic style, creating rebellious anti-establishment images and disseminating such nationalist resistance dialogues to all Mexicans, thus contributing to the revolution (Rochfort 1993). On the other hand, the phenomenon of modernism was defined by the use of art for protest – as Daniel Singal observes, “it was a deliberate cultivation of the perverse and decadent, and flaunting of outrageous behaviour to shock and subvert the bourgeoisie” (Singal 1987: 8). During modernism, avant-gardes such as Pablo Picasso, Marcel Duchamp, Vladimir Tatlin, Jackson Pollock, Andy Warhol, Andre Breton, Tristan Tzara and others, created resistance art driven by anti-establishment ideologies to subvert various notions of power. *Cubism* subverted power by designed disorder; *Dadaism* by ridiculing authority and *Surrealism* by the denial of reason to attack institutionalized rationalism; through radical art, these avant-garde movements altered the socio-political structures of European and American society at the turn of the Twentieth Century. However, as Herbert Marcuse observes, the use of the subversive powers of art to foster activism, only flourishes in societies that permit it. In exploring art activism in Nigeria, this paper will test this theory; it focuses on first reconstructing the genealogy and impact of protest art in Nigeria, then proceeds to analyse its changing paradigms in order to establish the factors responsible for its current decline in postcolonial art.

## 2. ART ACTIVISM IN NIGERIA – GENEALOGY OF PROTEST ART

Art activism in Nigeria began with the emergence of modern art given rise to by artistic reactions to colonial hostilities. Under colonial rule, discrimination, racism, cultural imposition and Western stereotypes of Africans as inferior intellectually lacking humans, resulted in the various indigenous protest that took place in the colony of Lagos. As the battle against colonialism and to defend what African elites considered the natural rights of Africans intensified, artists became conscripted to the invincible army championing the battle against colonialism and imperial Britain (Enwonwu 1957). This early indigenous resistance activism against colonialism, provided the impetus for radical avant-gardism and protest art, as nationalist called on artists in Lagos to direct their art as propagandist formalisms to advance the battle for decolonisation.

Modern Nigerian artists began developing anti-colonial images framed in modernist expressionism to subvert European stereotypes of Africans as savages/sub-humans, and to prove Africans’ equality with the colonizers by debunking white superiority ideologies on which colonialism was based. Such anti-colonial art activism from 1890-1930 beginning with the nationalist-inspired portraiture of Aina Onabolu, was designed to undermine colonial authorities by flaunting the portraiture of Nigerian nationalists to challenge the marginalisation of African elites, subvert European racist stereotypes and protest against the branding of African nationalist as rebels by colonial regimes. During the late 1950s, art became a radical tool for fierce anti-colonial protest with a collection of artists joining forces to dismantle colonial rule. The independence decade witnessed the merger of art and nationalist politics to foster the battle for liberation and reconstruction of Nigeria’s lost identity/culture. Second generation modern Nigerian artists such as Ben Enwonwu protested against European cultural imposition, Akinola Lasekan through radical subversive cartoons such as *Freedom Sea 1950*, *Imperialist Propaganda Medium 1949*, *MacPherson Constitution Island 1950* (figure 1) etc., challenged colonial injustice in Africa and capitalism, while Uche Okeke and the *Zarianist* used radical indigenous formalisms to battled against white supposed supremacy and foster decolonization. Inspired by politicians and activist, these artists inscribed indigenous resistance in visual forms, using art to protest against Western oppression/stereotypes/subjugation, which in turn contributed to dismantling colonial rule in Nigeria. This early paradigm of protest art in Nigeria provides evidence of direct link between societal socio-cultural/political resistance tempo and the emergence of art activism, since the anti-imperial ideologies of Nigerian elites and nationalists inspired by *Harlem Rannaisancism*, *Pan-Africanism*, *Nationalism* and *Negritude*, informed the subversive themes of anti-colonial protest art in Nigeria which constitutes a form of cultural avant-gardism that soon spread across the African continent in the 1950s and 60s.

1967-1970 ushered in a new paradigm of protest art or art activism that pitched postcolonial Nigerian artists against each other. Right from imposed amalgamation of 1914, colonialism inscribed ethnic distrust amongst Igbos, Yorubas, Deltans and Hausa/Fulanis, creating tensions that culminated in the Nigerian Civil War of 1967. Protest by the Igbos against federal marginalization and declaration of the East as sovereign republic of Biafra, and the used use of excessive military force by the federal government to subdue such protests, plunged Nigeria into three years of brutal war. As the battle between pro-government and pro-Biafran forces advanced, artist contributed to the proliferation of the war through

protest art. Artists from Southeastern extraction of Nigeria supported Biafran secession by creating protest art against General Gowon's military-led dictatorship and massacre of minorities in Nigeria. Posters such as 'Victim of Atrocities', 'Gowon Hates You' by Biafran Press, 'Blue Print for Guerrilla War' by Oke Hortons, 'Help Biafran Refugees and Storm Over Biafra' by Uche Okeke (figure 2) etc., were anti-government propaganda designed to instigate revolt against General Yakubu Gowon by emphasizing the atrocities of his onslaught on the Igbos and other ethnic minorities. Pro-Gowon artists, on the other hand, created anti-rebellion art to foster the battle against Biafran secession. Such pro-Gowon propaganda attacked Ojukwu in order to inspire national resistance against Biafrans' attempts to destroy Nigeria's supposed post-independence unity. 'Crush The Rebellion' by Josy Ajiboye which depicts Colonel Ojukwu's head under an army boot, 'Wait my People First Things First' by Ajayi Ayo, 'To Keep Nigeria One is a Task that Must be Done' by the Federal Government as well as Oke Hortons 'Better to sit on the Fence and Watch the Fight from a Safe Distance' (figure 3), were pro-Gowon propaganda art used to foster the dismantling of Igbo rebellion. During the war, this new paradigm of art activism expressed oppositional ideologies – on the one hand, ethnic revolt against the suffocation of liberties/freedom, deprivation and discrimination by General Gowon's dictatorship, and on the other, Federal Military Government battle to subdue the rebellion. For three years, artists fostered the war through protest art defined by distinct visual vocabularies and logics, inspired by the ideologies of the faction they supported.

However, from the 1970s till date, there is a rapid decline if not a complete absence of art activism and the creation of protest or subversive art in Nigeria. The following factors are identified in this paper as responsible for this decline; a) *Democratic-Dictatorship*: Governance in West Africa is defined by an ambiguous system of *Democratic-Dictatorship*. By *Democratic-Dictatorship* I refer to a phenomenon in which a few affluent members of a country, seize state powers through rigged political systems, monopolise the nation's wealth and manipulate the constitution to protect their power, then use intimidation/persecution to silence opposition. This contemporary plague in Africa is evident in countries such as Nigeria, Cameroon, Libya, Egypt, Zimbabwe, Tunisia etc., where Africans have been held in democratic captivity for many years by their fellow Africans. This problematic phenomenon is a manifestation of colonial legacies in postcolonial societies; according to Samba Diop, "the forced labour of capitalism and bureaucratic class nurtured during the colonial era is promoted as the new instrument of governance since colonialism implanted the notion that authoritarianism is an appropriate mode of political rule and that force is an acceptable instrument of that rule" (Diop 2013: 224); contemporary African leaders employ such colonial ideologies, using "oppression and subjugation as weapons for legitimating their hold on their own people" (Ekeh 1975: 97). These leaders are intolerant of opposition or resistance, thus, silence all forms of subversive expressionism or resistance posture against their rule, by persecuting those with antithetical ideas. This intimidation and persecution that define the phenomenon of *Democratic-Dictatorship* are responsible for the decline of art activism in Nigeria. The arrest of Nengi Josef Ilagha, Jelili Atiku and five other artists in Nigeria of recent, exemplify this new culture of art attack in West Africa as a whole occasioned by government intolerance to criticism or opposition. This attack on art in Nigeria extends to all genres - song writers such as Baba Iyali, Ahmed Audi Zarewa, Idris Abdulkareem, as well as documentary film producer Ishaya Bako, have all been arrested, detained without charge, some placed on security watch, while others were given extended bans for criticising politicians, political corruption and excessive looting of government resources by those in positions of authority. In January 2016, an entire creative space 'The Artists' Village' in Lagos was demolished on the orders of the federal government with artists mishandled by armed officers after government branded their anti-government art illegal. This trenchant attempt by political leaders to silence scrutiny and opposition has created a culture of attacks on the arts/artists, thus subduing artists' critical/subversive powers to transform society. It is this intimidation and persecution of artists by the corrupt political class who have full control of all institutions of government including the judicial system that has impeded art activism or the creation of protest art in postcolonial Nigeria.

b) *Economic Hardship*: it is an unfortunate reality that majority of African artists cannot sustain themselves through art alone. As Ulli Beier pointed out, the condemnation/stereotyping of art as paraphernalia of barbarism, primitivism and heathenism during colonialism, created a negative imagery that led to public disdain for the arts (Beier 1960). This colonial legacy (public disdain for the arts) still continues till date, resulting in poor patronage for the arts, which leaves contemporary Nigerian artists in dire financial need. The only art genre that flourishes in Nigeria is commercial art (graphic or print designs), which politicians patronise for selfish publicity. In a survey I conducted in 2010, 99.9% of 100 artists interviewed across Lagos, Calabar and Uyo, confirmed that their livelihood is sustained by the production of political souvenirs and electioneering propaganda, as politicians only invest in graphic communication to publicise their candidacy. Nigerian artists thus shy away from subversive or protests expressionism and are forced into decorative or

commercial art to flatter politicians in order to sustain their families, knowing full well that art forms that criticise or oppose political corruption and tyranny are sanctioned by the government or rejected in galleries. Worst still, majority of those who assume public offices are religious fanatics with missionary informed construed/hypocritical disdain for art and use their offices to block government funding for art. In this sense, poor patronage, which leads to economic hardship, has contributed to the abandoning of radical or subversive art in postcolonial Nigeria with artists now conforming their art and practices to state/political demands for economic gains in order to sustain their livelihood.

### 3. POLITICAL-DICTATORSHIP AND THE PROBLEMATIC REDEFINITION OF CONTEMPORARY ART

This problematic re-contextualisation of art to conform to state/political dictates in order to avoid the wrath of *Democratic-Dictators* has redefined the notion and function of contemporary Nigerian art. Art in its new political-conformist context in Nigeria is created to adorn the abodes of the rich/famous/powerful, or deployed as veiled visual evidence of idealised democratic dividends in city centres. Over the past two decades, politicians contract artists who are party affiliates to create large relics in city centres and public spaces for aesthetic beautification and to serve as physical evidence of supposed advancement under their tenure – artworks situated in strategic positions such as roundabouts and iconic buildings in many city centres in Nigeria exemplify this re-contextualized notion of contemporary arts where art objects are deployed to adorn public spaces as visual mechanisms of deceit deployed by politicians to create tangible illusions of political development. Forfeiting their critical powers, contemporary artists now channel their art to flatter political bigwigs, contributing unwittingly to political corruption, as well as devaluing art as a whole. Their deployment of art as a fleeting play, to afford recreation and entertainment, decorating public spaces, and making other objects stand-out by artistic adornment, influenced by their political patrons for economic gains, reduces art to what Georg Friedrich Hegel refers to as “passing amusement” (Hegel 1975: 7). This re-contextualization of art deprives contemporary Nigerian art of the infinite freedom of conceptual/subjective/subversive expressionism often harnessed to revolutionise societies. This problematic redefinition of contemporary Nigerian art devalues it when theorised in the context of global contemporary expressionism characterised by new avant-gardism, thus placing many contemporary Nigerian and African artists way behind their global contemporaries.

### 4. CONCLUSION

This paper provided a genealogical account of art activism in Nigeria with emphasis on its changing paradigms. It established a direct link between societal socio-political/cultural resistance and the emergence activist and protest art using Nigeria as a case study, thus corroborating Herbert Marcuse’s theory that art activism only thrives by drawing upon a broader societal resistance impetus and where freedom of expression is tolerated. *Democratic-Dictatorship* and economic hardship were identified and theorised as the factors responsible for the decline of art activism in Nigeria because of its stifling of artist’s creative freedom of expression. It is hoped that the findings of this paper will create awareness about the current culture of art attack in Nigeria in order to instigate institutions such as the *Society of Nigerian Artists* (SNA) to prevail upon the Nigerian government to respect constitutional freedom of expression, to enable artists to regain their power and freedom to create art that challenges, interrogates and scrutinise institutions and governments for the benefit of the nation as a whole.

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## APPENDIX - A



Figure 1: Akinola Lasakan's Anti-colonial Cartoons. 'Freedom Sea 1950', 'Imperialist Propaganda Medium 1949', 'MacPherson Constitution Island 1950'



Figure 2: Pro-Biafran Posters. 'Victim of Atrocities', 'Gowon Hates You' by Biafran Press, 'Blue Print for Guerrilla War' by Oke Hortons, 'Storm Over Biafra' by Uche Okeke.



Figure 3: Pro-Gowon propaganda posters. 'Crush The Rebellion' by Josy Ajiboye 'Wait my People First Things First' by Ajayi Ayo, 'To Keep Nigeria One is a Task that Must be Done' by the Federal Government as well as Oke Hortons 'Better to sit on the Fence and Watch the Fight from a Safe Distance'.