

# Social and Ecological Issues in the Works of Some Contemporary Sculptors

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## Abstract

Ecology in social or human terms owes its stability to man's activities on the earth planet. In the mainstream of modern art, different visual artists have produced notable works that explore either social or ecological concerns, most of which revolve around issues of climate change. This paper analyses some sculptures and installations created by Quayola Alastair Noble, Jin Soo Kim, El Anatsui, Ekenechukwu Anikpe, Amarachi Okafor and Johnpaul Ezeugwu, which in different ways refer directly or indirectly to global warming. It discusses how their works provoke relevant questions or proffer solutions to problems associated with social and ecological stratification. The paper concludes that the artists have employed their art as a tool for mass orientation on the implications of undermining the natural rhythm of the earth.

**Keywords:** Climate Change, Quayola Alastair Noble, Jin Soo Kim, El Anatsui, Ekenechukwu Anikpe, Amarachi Okafor, Johnpaul Ezeugwu

## 1. Introduction

The current spate of events involving the disturbing upsurge of catastrophic reactions in the earth's climate is a major cause for concern around the globe. Industrialization is taking on a new dimension in the twenty-first century. While many countries put up a desperate struggle to survive economically, others try to demonstrate their military and technological might or superiority as regional powers or world super powers. These efforts depend on industrialization which adversely affects the environment in one way or the other, and thus generating a plethora of scholarly responses from diverse academic and nonacademic fields, as well as reactions from prominent personalities and organizations worldwide. In Africa, however, the situation has heightened to a whole new level and consequently provoking a stronger debate on the issues of the environment. Indeed the impact of the gradual adoption of alien forms of expressions into the heart of African indigenous cultures is beginning to take its toll on the continent's societal norms as well as on the entire state of its ecology.

In other cultures around the world, art has also been significant in describing the connection between social systems and ecological systems. It visually re-echoes the interaction between social and ecological spheres of existence. In agreement with Keith Basso's argument that human existence is irrevocably situated in time and space and that social life is accomplished everywhere through an exchange of symbolic forms (Basso, 1996), the human potential to adapt and aesthetically interpret changes in resident environment, in order to improve social standards, is a significant survival trait. Nevertheless, one cannot ignore the possibility of increasing transformation of spaces, symbolic forms and places occurring as a result of the diverse impact of climate change (Crate, 2008). Vital tenets of socio-cultural existence like wisdom, physical make-up of cosmologies and worldviews, and the very human-environment interactions (which is the hub of culture) have the potential of being threatened (Netting, 1968; Steward, 1955).

This paper argues that modern art, especially in Nigeria, provides insights and remarkable leads in the efforts being made to salvage the problems of climate change. It also explores the following questions: What is the relationship between the positions individuals and — in the global context — nations hold in the status order and socio-cultural patterns of habitation and the implications of this in the overall climate change discrepancies? To what extent, and in what ways, does modern art express and interpret the relationship between social and ecological stratification? A gradual build-up of facts, especially from the analysis of some works by Quayola Alastair Noble, Jin Soo Kim, El Anatsui, Ekenechukwu Anikpe, Amarachi Okafor and Johnpaul Ezeugwu, which have social and ecological implications, is provided to support these questions. Some of the works are viewed in terms of social and ecological stratification.

## 2. Stratification, Climate Change and Installation Art

The term 'stratification' is a rather vast term. It has been used to characterize instances of structural inequality where individuals in a society are identified by segregated structural positions. These positions can be described in layers (or strata) graded hierarchically with respect to standards accepted by all within that society. Parsons (1940) in his essay, *An analytical approach to the theory of social stratification*, states that "Social stratification is regarded here as the differential ranking of the human individuals who compose a given social system and their treatment as superior and inferior relative to one another in certain socially important respects". Davis and

Moore (1945) on the other hand comment that “social inequality is thus an unconsciously evolved device by which societies insure that the most important positions are conscientiously filled by the most qualified persons”. Social inequalities on the global scale (or global “society”) are evident in the nature of the international transactions occurring in recent times. On the 11<sup>th</sup> of December 1996, the Kyoto Protocol was adopted in Kyoto Japan and enforced on the 16<sup>th</sup> of February 2005 (UNFOCC, n.d.). The Kyoto Protocol is an international agreement linked to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change.

The major feature of the Kyoto Protocol is that it sets binding targets for thirty-seven industrialized countries and the European community for reducing greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions. This amounts to an average of five per cent against 1990 levels over the five-year period 2008-2012. It is an agreement that is strictly in accordance with the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, with its major focus directed towards placing binding targets for 37 industrialised countries and the European community for reducing the rate of greenhouse gas emissions. The levels have changed over time from an average of five percent emission against 1990 levels over the five year period from 2008 to 2012. The protocol, however expresses leniency towards underdeveloped countries based on the assumption that the developed countries bear some major responsibility for the abnormality in greenhouse gas emission rate in the atmosphere, and therefore should be more committed as well as pay a greater price towards resolving it.

Ever since Marcel Duchamp’s readymade exhibits and Kurt Schwitters’ Mertz art objects gained popularity in art arena, ‘installation art’ has become a constantly evolving genre of modern art and influential in addressing diverse issues like relationships (both on a personal and interpersonal levels), identity and ecology among others. As the art developed into conceptualism around the 1960s, the artist’s purpose became instrumental in the expression of the art form. This contrasts with the preconceived definition of traditional sculpture where the emphasis is based on form. To further illustrate this Rosenthal (2003) posits that “the viewer is asked to investigate the work of art as he or she might explore some phenomenon in life, making ones way through actual space and time in order to gain knowledge.” Julie H. Reiss also describes this form of art as “a wide range of artistic practices, and at times overlaps with other interrelated areas including Fluxus, Earth art, Minimalism, video art, performance art, conceptual art and process art” (Reiss, 1999). Works of Johnpaul Ezeugwu, Amarachi Okafor and Quayola'Alastair Noble could, however, be described as installations executed in different ways in which the nature of the materials used as well as the artists' intentions combined to shape the form and content of the works.

### 3. Art Works On Strata: Allusions and Symbolisms

Stratification was briefly discussed earlier in this paper from different perspectives. Nevertheless in the arts, some notable modern artists have created major projects and installations with themes associated with stratification. They include Quayola'Alastair Noble, William Smith and El Anatsui. The environmental/installation artist, Quayola'Alastair Noble, creates installations with themes associated with architecture and the natural environment. He usually has his focus on specific sites in the context of poetry and literature. He is well known for his *Noble Strata #4: Still Process* (Fig. 1), which is a new multi-screen video-installation created first around October 2011, at the renowned Palais des Beaux Arts in Lille. In the work, he employed series of paintings from the *Palais des Beaux Arts*’ Flemish collection, especially the Rubens altarpieces, and attempted to create a new perspective of the masterpieces by directing the viewers’ attention to the world beneath their figurative skins after unveiling the outer layers of dramatic symbolism (“Strata #4 by Quayola”, n.d.). The installations are exhibited as large-scale diptych and are placed in the atrium alongside the related original paintings used in the film.

Jim Soo Kim’s installation titled *Strata* (Fig.2) is a visual excerpt from a larger group which stands by itself. It is a component of a series of similar structures that the artist presented as a single work of art at the Madison Art Center in 1992. The artwork is a vertical assemblage fabricated with found objects and materials encased in handmade open-metal cages. Besides, a discarded damaged keyboard, detached from its original instrumental box, is attached to one of its side. The work is a metaphor with layers of meaning and forms. It suggests a kind of intrinsic reverberating cage that entraps as well as it protects. It is a paradox that illustrates loss and healing (MMOCA, n.d).

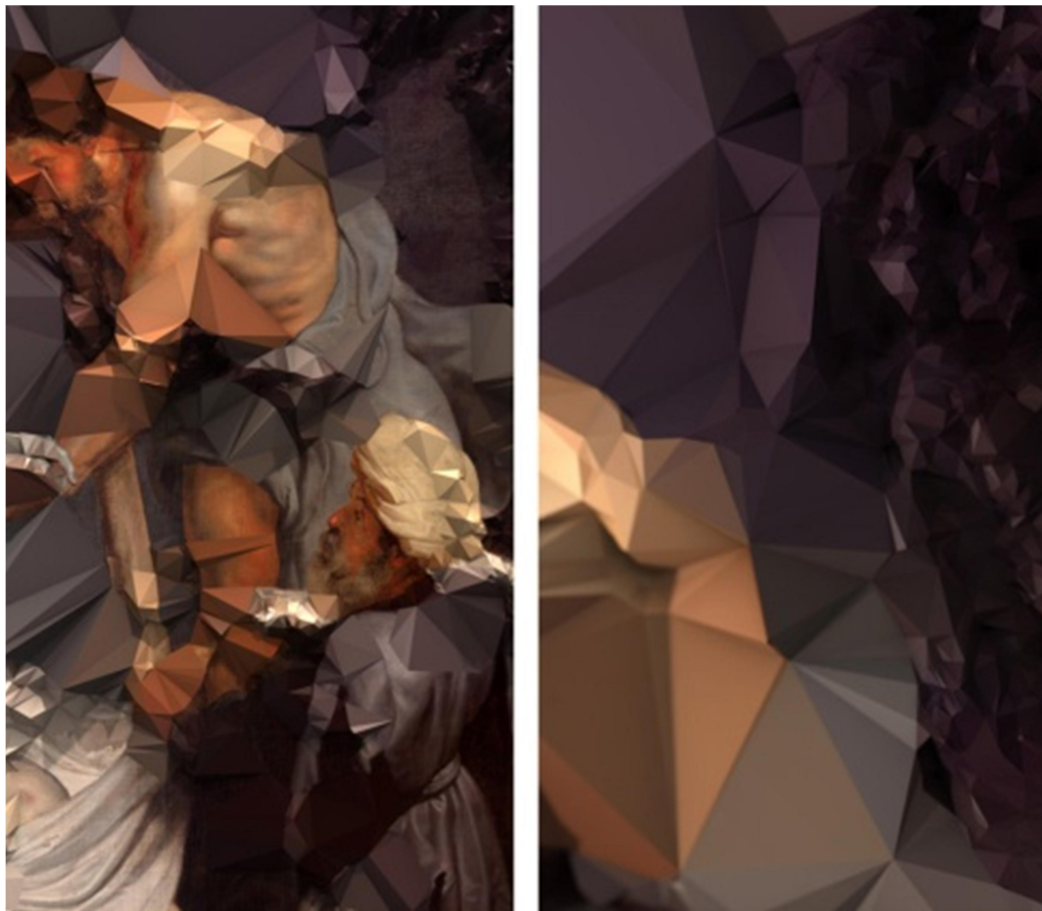


Figure 1: Quayola/Alastair *Noble Strata #4*. © [www.elmsly.com](http://www.elmsly.com)

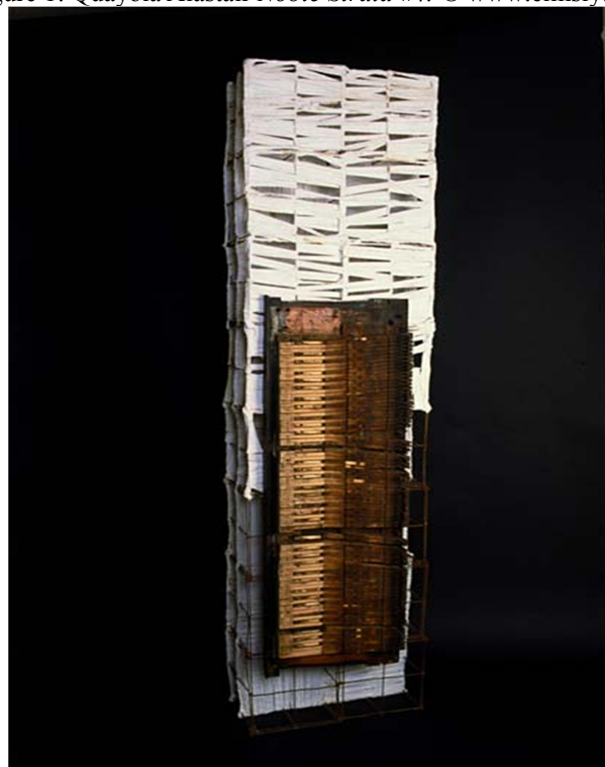


Figure 2: Jin Soo Kim, *Strata*, (1991) chenille acrylic, steel, copper wire, medical plaster, bedspread, bandage, and found keyboard. © [www.mmoca.org](http://www.mmoca.org)



Figure 3. El Anatsui. *Erosion*, (1992), piqua-marfin and tempera. © October Gallery.

El Anatsui's 1992 *Erosion* (Fig.3) is a wood sculpture which addresses the issue of erosion in an inimitable way. The unique thing about the work is the process of creating the work itself is also part of the theme, whereby he used a chainsaw to slash thousands of cuts into a hewn upright tree trunk he had previously painstakingly covered with indigenous African motifs. He was relating, through this process, another aspect of stratification in the aspect of foisted hierarchy in the rape and erosion of Africa's indigenous languages and cultures by western colonialists and so-called civilized cultures. The rubble of wooden slabs piled around the base of the sculpture represents the remnant of these African cultures. But the interpretation of this reads beyond the figurative sense of erosion of cultures to metaphorical idea of represented erosion of physical and political world. The chainsaw tracks that run all over the wood, as well as the scorched surfaces of these devastated tracks, mirror the physical landscape carved and inundated by flood, baked by the sun and covered with soot.

Ekenechukwu Anazor Anikpe's *Strata series* are a response to the question of climate change. The series are developed from his M.F.A research project, *Sieving as a Sculptural Process*, in 2007, which earned him a Sandor Peri Art Award, a residency in Royal Overseas League in Scotland, as well as an exhibition in 2009 and 2010 at Oxo Gallery, London (Obodo & Morgan, 2014). Using straws as expressive material, Anikpe captures the phenomenon of stratification from the global ecological perspective. He created diverse installations that are symbolic reference to global warming. The thematic contents of works in the *Strata series* embody the natural essence of the physical landscape. The artist explored complex and varied ideas in creating them and this imbues them with meanings profoundly lyrical and contextually narrative. They straddle graspable reality that point to construction, alteration and deconstruction summed up into individual art forms, which their alluring outlook tends to pull the viewer like a mesmeric vortex into their very essence.



Figure 4. Ekenechukwu Anazor Anikpe, *Displacement* (Strata series), 2009, plastic straw, glass. © The artist

Straws, generally, are used for diverse purposes including architectural construction, stuffing and craft

making. There are the synthetic straws specifically produced for sipping drinks. They are manufactured, not just for hygienic reasons but, to facilitate easier extraction of liquids from their containers. Due to their non bio-degradable nature and the fact that they litter homes and streets because it is now fashionable to drink beverages using straw, Anikpe has decided to use them as art material in an attempt to project recycling as a good way of cleaning up the environment and fighting the global warming. In Africa, and indeed Nigeria where he works, the issue of recycling has been underplayed and people indiscriminately cause (including all sorts of discarded plastics and electronic objects) ozone depletion. In his 2007 "*Restrawing*" the Earth, the artist coined the word "*restraw*" from *restore* based on sound, meanings of the words, and the vision for the project. Hence, by "*restrawing*" the earth (encouraging the recycling of non bio-degradable materials), he *restores* it (help the earth return to its normal condition). Besides, the glass casings of the synthetic straw and the pyramidal forms in *Strata* series are means of forcing his viewers up against the eternal problems of climate change where, like glass, the implications of greenhouse effect are transparently open beyond imaginary tales; and like the ancient Egyptian pyramid structures, the problems are quite enormous. In fact the entire concept of the works in the *Strata* series was a creative odyssey.



Figure 5. Ekenechukwu Anazor Anikpe, *Tremor* (Strata series), 2007, plastic straw, glass. © The artist

While a few selected materials have found their way into the work of Amarachi Okafor, the depth of poetry inscribed in it is striking. The artist engages the viewer with simple but complex arrangements of reclaimed discards. Her 2006 *About Black - The Bag Wall [1]* (Fig. 6), is an installation created with polythene bags picked from garbage bins and from the open fields around her environment. In Nigerian, plastic bags are very commonly used so much so that almost every item bought in a market is wrapped for the buyer with it. Even different food items, including water, are packaged with plastic bags, and many people carelessly discard the bags wherever they have used their contents creating situations where different kinds of plastic bags litter urban spaces and are eventually blown into the countryside where they block drainages and cause erosion problems. Okafor's work, however, is an attempt at addressing the effect of this non bio-degradable waste on the environment.

*About Black - The Bag Wall (1)* appears constructed and organic. A close look at the work suggests an army of pests besieging a tree for sustenance. In creating the work, Okafor attached bloated plastic bags onto a tree in an arrangement similar to a cluster of caterpillars gleaning the bark or leaves of a plant. She used black, striped and yellow bags to compose the "pests" which are animated by breeze that sways them as it blows. In the work, the artist forged connections that seem to have the logic of survival and devastation which, as a metaphor, fits perfectly into the on-going dialogue concerning global warming and environmental degradation. The juxtaposition of a petrochemical product with a natural plant in the installation conveys an incongruous relationship in which artificiality eclipses nature. As in most of the artist's works, forms are marked by a sophisticated interplay between the actual and the recreated.



Figure 6: Amarachi Okafor , *About Black - The Bag Wall 1*.  
2006, polythene bags on a tree. ©The artist



Figure 7: Johnpaul Ezeugwu, *Minerals*, 2005, empty bottles of soft drinks © The artist



Figure 8: Johnpaul Ezeugwu, *Suspense*, 2005, empty bottles of soft drinks © The artist

Johnpaul Ezeugwu explores waste papers, plastics and bottles. His 2005 *Minerals* (Fig. 7), *Suspense* (Fig. 8) and *Paper Basket* examine Nigeria's waste management. These works are abstractions of social problems with collections of discards, transformed into tactile visual narratives. In creating *Minerals* (Fig. 7) for instance, he employed a very ordinary conceptual approach of arrangement that involved the use of discarded empty bottles of soft drinks belonging to bottling companies that are no longer in production. Because the bottling companies making the drinks have folded up, the dealers and consumers of the products dumped the bottles wherever they could (around their homes, along streets or at refuse-dump sites). Ezeugwu's idea of recycling wastes for creative purposes was initially inspired by piles of these abandoned bottles which litter his environment. He has focused on the environmental, cultural and social aspects of bottles and bottling activities, which pushed him to explore wastes beyond the non degradable bottles. He devised an artistic strategy that enabled him to create metaphors that spark an enduring interest in waste management.

#### 4. Conclusion

Climate change can initiate profound and insightful investigations from the arts that are directed towards literal and figurative transformations of cultures and environments, as well as a future of unmanageable change. The works of some artists like Quayola Alastair Noble, Jin Soo Kim, El Anatsui, Ekenechukwu Anikpe, Amarachi Okafor, Johnpaul Ezeugwu among others, attest to this fact. The diverse themes of their respective works of art have revealed profound perspectives on climate change, that have raised insightful questions that provide significant leads to the possible resolution of the issue.

The African socio-cultural tendencies can be encouraged to adapt to current trends in the globe relating to ecological issues. One major challenge the indigenous groups in Africa face today is lack of sufficient information on certain existential issues affecting them, particularly on questions of waste management and environmental matters. Hence, there is the need for proper orientation geared towards revealing the potential of rich cultural traditions that encourage environment friendly practices. Many artists have employed their art in the campaign for getting people informed on the implications of disrupting the harmonious rhythm of nature. Their works encourage the societies to build up their environmental ethics in order to increase their willingness and capability of ensuring sustainable development of their respective environments through individual and collaborative public participation efforts.

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