

Waste Management in Nigeria: An Essential Tool to Visual Arts Profession

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Abstract

The global waste menace is a huge challenge, and Nigeria is not left behind. Waste management is a challenge in Nigeria and a joint effort by all and sundry alone can help solve the problem. These efforts range from employing the Rs in waste management. Foremost is Reduction of waste, which of course gets fewer materials into the waste stream. Following is Reuse, Recycle, Recovery and in recent times Repurposing, as well as other additional Rs. Visual arts discipline is a peculiar discipline with regards to waste management. Just like humans have done things in certain ways since time immemorial without understanding the reasons, visual artists have found themselves managing wastes in one way or the other. This study was undertaken to understand some current practices, reasons behind such, and propose greener and sustainable ways by which visual artists can position themselves well as waste managers within Nigeria.

Keywords: Visual Arts, Waste Management, Repurposed Material, Sustainable Environment

Introduction

The world now goes repurposive where nothing is considered waste. Artists have been said to see nothing as waste as any bit of creative input or modification can turn materials formally termed waste into purposeful creative uses (Asogwa *et al.*, 2013); except of course their own wastes. It is not clear however to what purpose the use of wastes in the visual arts profession is out to achieve. Are the wastes used so as to reduce the cost of purchasing raw materials for work, as art works may not get ready buyers as some other commodities? At the same time, are these wastes used in order to promote environmental sustainability? This might have been likely answer except that it will be wrong to generalize about artists, especially because they are also humans and contribute as well to the growing wastes menace directly and indirectly.

Waste, as useless to a lot of people, it is seen as a tool by artists to be transformed and has been a source of ideas and inspirations for artists, apart from being raw materials (Aykanat, 2014). Artists however, generally explore everything and everywhere for ideas and materials (Odoh *et al.*, 2014). Visual artists bring treasures out of trash; turning nuisance into aesthetics; and thereby have become environmentalists (Asogwa *et al.*, 2013). This act however is not only peculiar to artists, but they are the focus of this paper.

Waste Management

Wastes are materials of no use to the owner; they could be organic or inorganic materials and come from a wide range of sources including municipal and industrial environments (Ezebilo and Animasaun, 2011). Managing wastes is very important to the environment as wastes are a huge menace when unmanaged. Waste management covers point collection, segregation, storage, transportation, processing, recycling, treatment and disposal of waste materials" (Ezebilo and Achi, H. A. *et.al.* 2012). Improper waste management has characterized the Nigerian society in terms of open dumping, general landfilling, open burning or incineration, which of course causes more problems and is highly unsustainable (Achi, H. A. *et.al.* 2012). Efforts have been made in Southwest Nigeria and other parts to incorporate proper waste management, especially in the urban areas. However, these efforts are being frustrated on a daily basis by people's attitudes to waste disposal, and absent or inadequate facilities to manage wastes. Proper waste management reveals aesthetic appeals of places, and creates jobs for recyclers and others involved in any aspect of the waste stream (Oyeniya, 2011). Proper waste management is necessary for environmental sustainability. Proper waste management seems to be lacking on the general outlook, but it is more appropriate to say that the efforts should be intensified, as the problem lies with insufficient efforts in this sector.

Waste management is a challenge in Nigeria and it spans through most of the developing countries where environmental sustainable approaches such as resource recovery, reuse, reduce, recycle to mention but a few have not been well integrated into waste management. It has been reported that some major Southwest Nigerian cities are very filthy according to world rankings, showing the lack of proper waste disposal and management, as well as the opportunities for interested parties (Oyeniya, 2011 & Achi, H. A. *et.al.* 2012). Even though people expect the government to be the major investor in waste management which is the case, but private sectors, individual, and in this case visual artists, are also expected to be more involved and find solutions to converting

wastes into the larger portion of their raw materials.

Wastes can be grouped in terms of the nature of the materials (e.g. solid, liquid and gaseous), or in terms of the sources (industrial and municipal), among other classifications. Solid wastes however have been a major focus as regards waste management in Southwest Nigeria and other parts of the country, while it has been identified that the major composition of solid wastes is organic and can thus be well managed with proper expertise. Integrating visual arts into proper waste management usually begins from reuse and then on to recycling. Recycling of wastes converts waste into other innovative uses. It is not uncommon to find scavengers in refuse and dumping sites looking for items that are recyclable to sell to earn a living (plates 1 & 2). It is to this end that this piece is written to enlighten readers on the immense opportunities available in waste management for visual artists.



Plate 1: A scavenger at work, Yaba in Lagos State, Nigeria. Photographed by K.K. Olojo, 25/10/2017.



Plate 2: Scavengers and collectors at Ojuelegba in Lagos State, Nigeria. Photographed by K.K. Olojo, 25/10/2017.

Visual Arts and Environmental Sustainability

Visual arts discipline has thrived based on the elements of the ecosystem. These elements have been used by artists from time immemorial to communicate values, wellness, peace, beauty, creativity etc. to target audience, and many have made fortunes out of this. It is thus disheartening to realize that the environment from which visual arts has thrived is undergoing antagonism in form of degradation. Wastes are generally seen as potent creative resources by visual artists (Odoh *et al.*, 2014). It is no news that the visual arts sector has been active contributors to environmental sustainability for a long time as revealed in the study by Okwuosa (2013) where he focused on an artist whose creative works show the environmental challenges in Niger Delta, from his firsthand experience of acid rain, a phenomenon that occurs from environmental pollution with great potential to cause harm to ecosystem, which stimulated him to explore water as a medium in his sculptural works. Okwuosa (2013) described the artist as an avid environmental sustainability advocate through the use of water and other elements of nature in his creative works both in Nigeria and in diaspora. The artist distinguished himself by focusing on environmental challenges. He produced an art piece depicting Nigeria as dumping sites for toxic and electronic wastes from all over the world which he called, "Back from Shore".

Ekanem (2016) also noted repurposing as a way of reducing environmental pollution in no small way, help nature to be more organized, and is thus a tool for sustainable development. As a matter of fact repurposing is a way of maximizing inherent potentials in wastes by simple home dusting or cleaning for a different use. Ekanem reviewed the works of Urom and Edet in the textile domain, and showed how significant their works have helped the economy and the environment.

It is noteworthy that the artists have been involved in repurposing and recycling; and a vast proportion of

the wastes recycled, repurposed or reused as the case may be are usually non-degradable, thus saving a lot of energy and landfill spaces(s) needed to manage such wastes. Apparently, these abundantly available resources are fast-depleted themselves, and the need for preservation has been a motivating factor for repurposing recycling them.

Sources of Raw Materials in Visual Arts

The sources of the inputs by visual artists in creative artworks vary, and among such are wastes. An instance is the “discovery” of a half-buried “treasure” on a roadside (Camic, 2010), who maintained that man has been in the business of gathering and collecting items for millenia. Municipal solid wastes are common inputs with a wide range of composition that varies by location, standard of living and some other factors (Oyelola and Babatunde, 2008). It is not enough for visual artists to just stumble on “treasures” for which they need to work, there has to be directed searches. A visual artist needs to identify locations where he/she can be able to collect sufficient materials for his/her work. Information on general wastes being generated in various locations must be harnessed, as several works on waste composition have been done in different parts of Nigeria (Oyelola and Babatunde, 2008; Abur *et al.*, 2014; Adeniyi, 2014).

Waste streams of packaging materials are especially commonly seen to be used by a number of visual artists, and it is recommended to judiciously harness them as raw materials for specialized visual artworks. Recycling of wastes as raw materials therefore will provide cheap and sustainable inputs for visual artists, this therefore should be prevalent as a general focus rather than an incident stumbled upon every now and then. The concept of repurposing is also a forefront means of ready raw materials for artists. The usefulness of a visual artist is a function of their creativity. Therefore, the extent of exploring the diverse sources of wastes in artworks can only be limited by the mind of the artist. Diverse industries have diverse wastes as well. Handling ways also have to be researched to ensure safety for both artists and the consumers of the finished works.

Visual Arts as an Active Contributor to Reducing, Reuse and Recycling Wastes

Artists all over Nigeria and the globe have contributed to managing wastes by employing them in their works. This has put visual arts at the forefront in reducing, reusing and recycling wastes. In the context of turning “trash” to “treasure” Camic (2010) avers that collection of “treasures” by artists with some certainty of being pleasing as well as the essential of adding extra to every ordinary, is also a significant contribution whereby the discipline reuses and recycles waste. There are quite a number of Nigerian visual artists that employ the use of wastes, repurposed materials and found objects in the contemporary times.

In the recent times, recycling and repurposing have themselves become art coupled with the artworks done by artists; this according to Akpang, 2013; Odoh *et al.*, 2014 could have been a result of “globalization” leading to adapting waste for artworks. The association between artists and the environment as regards material repurposing, reusing and recycling waste can be termed a mutualistic association, wherein they both benefit. Many of the Nigerian artists have found use for wastes polythene water bags, popularly called “pure water sachets”, used tyres, used recharge cards, bottle corks to produce meaningful artworks that serve both aesthetic and functional values. These artists seek professional identity and recognition among equal thereby carving a niche for themselves. Amongst these are El Anatsui, Olu Amoda, Stephen Arueze, Adeola Balogun, Ernest Nkwocha, Taiye Idaho to mention but a few.

Taiye Idaho for example maximised effectively the use of repurposed material (used recharged card) in producing artworks relating to women and beauty and other related themes as culture erodibility and modernization. Taiye artworks unveil the other side of wastes, the inherent treasure and beauty which only a deep seeker can reveal, focusing on Africa value. She aims at unveiling the real hidden nature of Africa’s identity with her work (plates 3 & 4). Ernest Nkwocha is another sculptor who make use of used tyres to produce artworks. His love for wildlife is evident; most of his sculptural pieces are animals that have symbolical meanings attached to them in African society (plates 5 & 6). Olu Amoda and Adeola Balogun are also sculptors who have also distinguished themselves using automobile junks.

The reuse and recycle of wastes have also been well established and documented; Duchamp in his “Bicycle Wheel” artwork found a use for a discarded bicycle, El Anatsui has been very creative with bottle corks, Dilompzulike has distinguished himself as a waste manager as he specializes in transforming wastes. Aderogba, a painter, also rummages dumpsites for beverage cans. Folaranmi uses electronic wastes in his artworks.



Plate 3: Taiye Idaho (2012) "Change of Name Series (1)"
Size: 24x24 inches (discarded recharge voucher).
Courtesy: African Artists Foundation.



Plate 4: Taiye Idaho (2012) "Change of Name Series (2)"
Size: 24x24 inches (discarded recharge voucher) Courtesy: African Artists Foundation.



Plate 5: Ernest Nkwocha, (a Nigerian sculptor) arranging his essential raw material (used tyres) for repurposing. Photographed by K.K. Olojo, 20/10/2017.

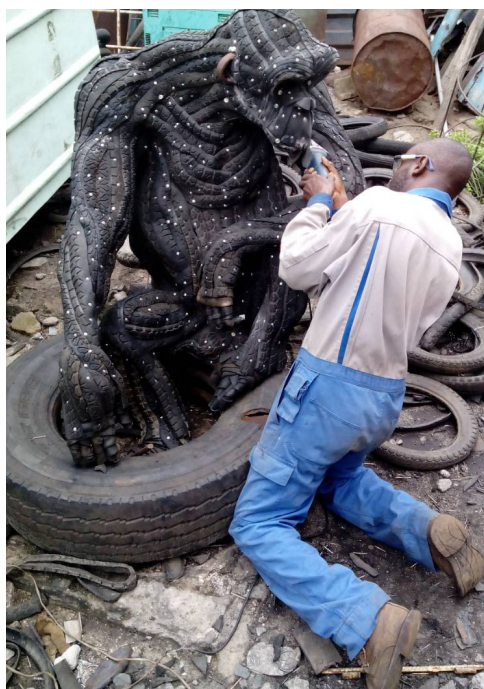


Plate 6: Ernest Nkwocha at work, Lagos in Nigeria Photographed by K.K. Olojo, 20/10/2017.

Artistic Wastes

Every activity or sector is known to generate its own waste, and it will be a fallacy to assume that waste managers do not generate wastes; mere existence does. Beautiful and creative artworks consume a diverse range of materials and products, besides wastes. It was reported by Dani (2016) who was at an art exhibition, that about 40 distinct range of materials were featured.

Generally, some art materials are known to be associated with their negative effects to human health and the environment. For instance, oil paints contain cadmium which are irritating even at low levels, a lot of solvents also contain turpentine which at low level is still flammable and dangerous to inhale (Murray *et al.*, 2011). Relevant bodies in Nigeria have policies as to regulate disposal of art wastes to control environmental hazard; the art waste as it were can also be repurpose in other fields of life, then repurposive continues in pursiut and purpose.

Beautiful artworks are also a result of a lot of mistakes, errors, repetitions, experiments, and finetuned concepts, therefore there could be a large stream of waste about five times the produced artwork, this is “artistic wastes”. A notable feature of artistic wastes is that the material composition is just as varied as mentioned earlier, and thus waste segregation and management could be arduous. Artistic wastes consist of metal, fabric, wood, sawdust, clay, plaster of Paris, cement concrete and acrylic paint to mention but a few. Some are recyclable while some are hazardous; though the wastes are minimal in comparison to municipal and industrial wastes, and may not be much of a trouble to artists, and their contribution to solving environmental problems should be emphasized so that the helpers do not become the troulbers. It is noteworthy that research into art wastes are uncommon, probably stemming from the generally accepted excuse of a low waste stream in the sector, which of course varies from artists to artists, and depends on the number of trials before a product is finally accomplished.

Possible Future Considerations

No individual is innocent of contributing to waste, their innocence can only be justified from their actions in properly managing wastes in the environment. Artists, like some other professionals, are known to see nothing as waste. Various reasons however, have been revealed as to why some artists use wastes. It is however proposed that the more artists get green in their work, the merrier for both the artists and environment in general. This is because, as wastes are known to have treasures within them, and people have been known to get wealthy from managing wastes, the potentials for visual artists cannot be quantified. Art materials also could contain toxic materials. This however can be offset when sustainable alternatives are harnessed in art production. Environmental sustainability should be a collective effort by all and sundry, regardless of field, and visual artists should not be left behind in this regards.

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