

Traditionalism in Contemporary Art: Re-contextualizing African Ideographs through Hybrid Aesthetics

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Abstract

Contemporary African art is multifaceted by virtue of proliferating art styles springing up across the continent. The most common feature of these diversified genres of modern African art is the phenomenon of appropriation, which involves hybridization of traditional African and western art cultures within modern practice. However, most modern African arts have been dubbed fake or prototypes of western modernism because of mimicking as a result of overarching appropriation of elements from African or western art. This study reviews recent artworks by Clement Akpang, which adopts the concept of 'Hybrid Aesthetics' as methodology to interrogate traditionalism in modern art. Following my experimentation of adapting African symbols and scripts into modern painting and sculpture, this paper investigates how traditional African visual culture is restaged in modern art-space to create artworks that not only bear cultural identity but possesses qualities that define contemporary art. From findings, I posit that 'Hybrid Aesthetics' ostensibly leads to the creation of authentic contemporary African art since it enables the re-invention of Africa's rich visual culture in modern art utilizing contemporary techniques. Such hybridization generates a unique genre of African art capable of contemporary artistic existence and having a strong voice of originality in the global art scene. Works discussed herein expound the fact that, modern African artists can refer to cultural background including its visual realm, and produce new realities reflecting 21st century artistic advance.

Keywords: Hybrid Aesthetics, Traditionalism, Appropriation, Re-contextualization, Ideographs, Africanism

1. Introduction

African culture and civilisation is distinguished from those of other continents by traditional abstract philosophies (belief in the existence of a supreme being in control of the universe, made manifest in nature and ancestors). Consequently, pre-colonial African societies were governed by such philosophical belief systems through which cultural space was ideologically adapted for meaningful living (Ogumor 1993, Kreamer et al 2007). African abstract myths are codified into symbols (African traditional ideographs), which convey concepts, ideas, and beliefs. This is why Kreamer et al (2007, p. 2) observed that "these African symbols constitute versatile and aesthetically potent ways of knowing and affecting the world". Accordingly, many societies in Africa from prehistory have developed their own unique graphic systems reflective of their tribal traditions, identities and ideologies. Amongst some renowned African ideographs are, *Uli*, *Insibidi*, *Kente*, *Bantu*, *Adinkra* etc, which are inspired by the dynamism of nature and adapted from the environment or composed by combining geometric shapes into scripts systems of interrelated symbols. Their appropriation from nature accounts for their rhythmic and floral characteristics, since from an African view point nature bellies the source of all creative inspirations (Bozimo and Ajibade 2012). This traditional graphic system has long been integral and a recurring feature in traditional African art and continued through postcolonial era were such symbols became synthesize with western cultures, as intrinsic to the expression of African identity (Odibo, 2009). Adaptation and appropriation of symbols within art is a dominant creative practice even in contemporary art of Africa as was in pre-colonial and postcolonial period since they inspire creativity, by virtue of their constituting compelling means of self-expression.

While some contemporary African artists have sacrificed traces of cultural identity in their art in favour of western driven art styles inspired by global creative advancement of the 21st century as observed by (Odibo 2005), others tend to exert Africanism in their art practice to reflect the rich creative qualities of traditional visual forms and explore the various possibilities of restaging traditional identity in modernism (Op cit 2005, p.6). Artists such as Yinka Shonabere, El Anatsui, Paul Sika, Odili Donald Odita, Karen Seneferu etc, in their contemporary art practice, find cultural appropriation quintessential for the sustenance and promotion of cultural values and identity. Because, culturally inspired works of art are believed to assume superlative contemporary status and argued in a recent study to be more sustainable and the right direction for contemporary African art (Bozimo and Ajibade 2012). More so, as contemporary African art remains under intense scholarly scrutiny for definition, modern artists have taken to this phenomenon of traditional visual culture appropriation and material experimentation in their art, synthesized with modern western techniques and media to propagate this genre of

art as the new form of modern African art. Since, as Kreamer et al, (2007, p. 7) observed, “artworks incorporating inscriptions or ideographs gain greater visual and communicative strength because the power of visual form combines with the mystical powers graphic symbols manifest to produce a heightened level of expressiveness”. This apparently explains why contemporary African artists adopt and invent graphic symbols to explore the tension between visual form, symbols and meaning within and outside their works to locate their culturally inspired oeuvres within contemporary global art space. This concept of appropriation and adaptation has thus categorised African art for the past nine decades and dominates contemporary practice in the continent like elsewhere, reflecting a global parallel artistic advance in the 21st century, inspiring Sandler to argue that, “If art from the 1980s onward could be categorised, it will fall under the umbrella ‘Appropriation’” (op cit 1996, p.321)

Although, appropriated genres of modern African art still battles for global recognition since European and American connoisseurs often dismiss this art form as inauthentic and lacking originality because of instances of overarching mimesis of European or traditional African art styles, Van Camp posits that, “We value originality because it demonstrates the ability of the artist to advance the potential of an art form” (2007, p.247). This theoretical proposition forms a great contextual background upon which contemporary African art that appropriates exist. This is because, from an African perspective, these “*Reprise*” (Kafir 1999) [repeated works made through appropriation of traditional aesthetics and styles into contemporary art] is seen as a reflection of contemporary cultural exchange and a continuation of the original [African art style]. Thus, this means that through appropriation techniques, modern African artists help in advancing the visual form of African art in contemporary original context. Furthermore, Shiner 1997 argues that contemporary art forms created through appropriation or creative synthesis are considered to be special forms of expressive symbolism, indicating cultural identity, making social commentary with decorative motifs and creates a bridge between cultures. Such art expresses the symbolism of Africa’s changing cultural space occasioned by contact with foreign cultures, indicating growth and the maintenance of traditional material culture and values using advance technologies which modern societies offer and at same time, blur the boundaries between cultures. The aforementioned theories and assumptions emphasises the importance of appropriation and adaptation in contemporary art which could be seen as a new defining feature of modern art especially in Africa. Such therefore forms the basis upon which works discussed herein derive the potency for their contemporary art being.

This paper reviews some of my recent artworks which adopt the concept of adaptation and appropriation under the rubric ‘*Hybrid Aesthetics*’. These research driven artworks interrogate traditionalism within contemporary art practice and examine how appropriation and synthesis of art cultures can transmute traditional visual forms and idioms, into contemporary art while still bearing their cultural identities.

1.1. Hybrid Aesthetics

Hybrid aesthetics as adopted in my experimentation is defined as an art style or convention which combines two or three art cultures, styles or techniques to create a unique art which exist in the boundaries between the two cultures and at same time elevates mundane visual forms or art to a creative contemporary status. Hybrid aesthetics is viewed as the point where contemporary art styles and techniques intersect and as an admixture of what is traditional and that which is modern (Odibo 2009, Kappenberg 2010). The idea of hybrid art is advanced in various works of contemporary experimentalist who combine art and sciences, visual arts and performances art, three dimensional art and digital technology. For example Rob Kessler combines art and science working with microscopic plant material, Eve Reaven, produces silk scarves and ties with patterns based on subcellular structures such as mitochondria, MacKenzie juxtaposes visual arts, performance and therapy etc. The resultant effect of hybrid creative experimentation is the creation of a new genre of art, which challenges our perception of the boundaries of art, thus expanding the field of art to greater heights than could have been possible some five decades ago especially in Africa. The concept of admixture of western art techniques with traditional African visual culture is adopted in these works which drew heavily from the rich qualities of African symbolism [*Insibidi, Adinkra and Bantu* ideographs] (See Figure 1), subjectively experimented with and composed into various design concepts using western techniques to reinvent, re-contextualize and extend their creative existence in a more complex contemporary context, with clear expressive visual qualities of the African cultural identity in various dimensions.

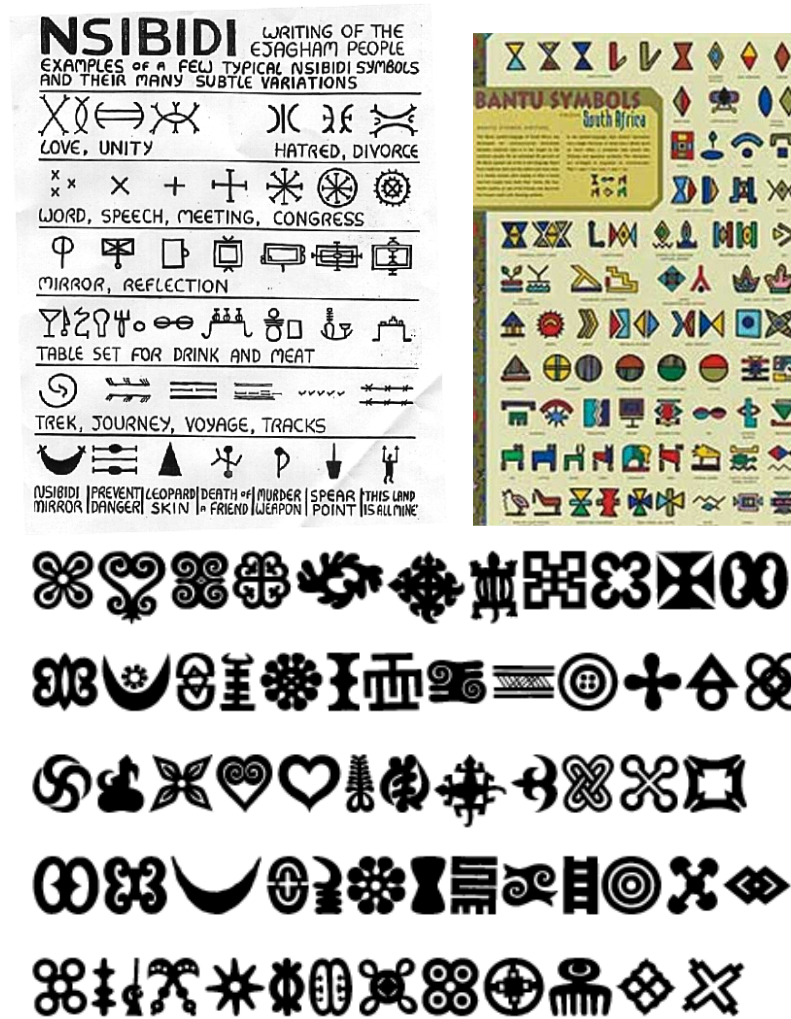


Figure 1. Traditional *Insibidi*, *Adinkra*, *Bantu African* Symbols Adapted for modern art and design in the works discussed below

These symbols form the basis for my creative interogation of traditionalism in modernism by which I attempt to transform elements of traditional material culture and accord them a sense of creative existence in contemporary art scene through hybrid juxtaposing of African script with western techniques. One work accruing from this experimentation is '*Identity I 2012*'. (See Figure.2) below

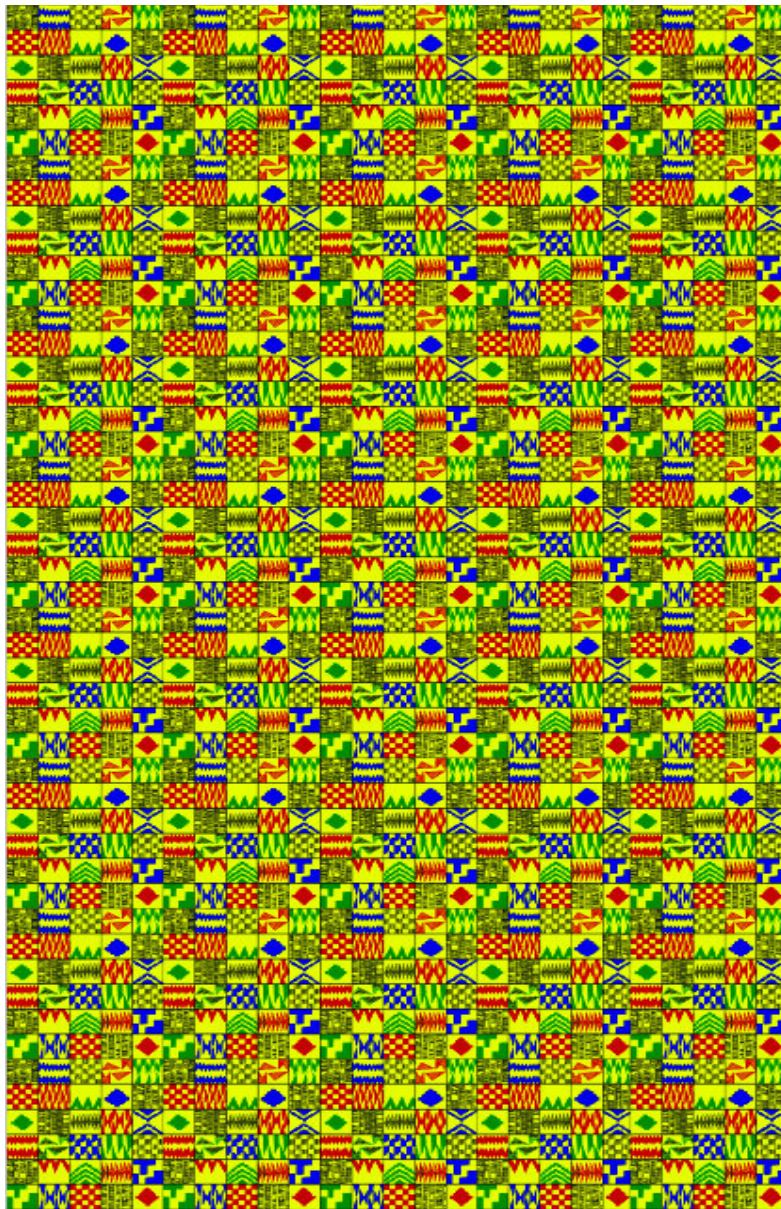


Figure2. Title: *Identity I 2012*
Artist: Clement Akpang
Medium: Acrylic Printing ink on paper
Size: 257 × 569cm

Identity I 2012 is a painting, an installation of print motifs, adapted from African symbols and composed into a single unit. Its making process begins as a hand drawn composition of symbols into a design, the drawing is transformed into a vector and separated into layers after which, is screen printed manually using the screen printing technique. The contemporary existence of this piece is underpinned by the fact that; firstly, it symbolises the various possibilities through which traditionalism is present in modernism (contemporary art practices) by means of creative re-invention of the primitive. The re-invention of traditional visual idioms in this creative experimentation bears credence to the significance of influences of past generations on modern art. An ideology strongly propagated by postmodern critics and theories who view such appropriation of ancient styles and images from pop culture into contemporary art as a means which returns meaning and re-posses objects, thus evoking history within the present (Verwoert 2007). Because according to Le Corbusier 1999, p. 56-57 “the past teaches or forms the foundation of the present or is seen as lessons and the sign post of permanent human value” (in Neil Maycroft 2002). Through my hybrid exploration, Africa’s ancient graphic system of body and wall painting is dislocated from its traditional milieu and restaged into new realm of creative existence in the contemporary. Its reinvention is a visual metaphor reflecting the radical transformations Africa has undergone since her encounter with the west, the extent of dynamism in modern African art practice, as well as the changing face of traditional institutions, symbols and their iconography in what is now modern Africa, largely due to enculturation and appropriation.

Secondly, the hybrid making process of this piece attempts to bridge the gap between art and design. My hybrid aesthetic experimentation adapts traditional artistic graphic process in African (wall and body painting), creatively manipulates them with digital graphic techniques and use manual artistic printing process for its completion. This art style marries together traditional art and the concept of design in an attempt to find the meeting point and dissolve the boundaries between the two which has been keenly contested over past decades. ‘*Identity I 2012*’, not only demonstrates traditionalism within modernism but also illustrates the possibilities of creating works of contemporary Africa art which can exist as art and design, and champion the course for a new style capable of illuminating in modern era, Africa’s rich tradition and material culture which at the moment is completely relegated to the background. Furthermore, *Identity I 2012* which is a product of screen printing experimentation, interrogates the concept of multiplicity in art and the idea of the authentic original. Very often works of contemporary African art are dismissed as fake or in-authentic prototypes on the basis of multiplicity or repetition. This piece explores the effect of multiplicity and the perception it triggers as a result of its repetitive elements. The concept of multiplicity adopted in this artwork, first and foremost act as a catalyst of transmutation which transforms prints into paintings. The piece is made up of 40 individual screen print designs (See fig 3), which are juxtaposed into a single piece (See figure2).

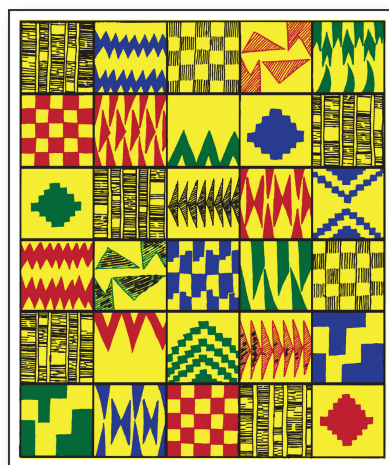


Figure 3
Single Print Unit of the Identity I Painting.
Medium: Acrylic Printing ink on paper
Size: 24x25cm

This technique is adopted to explore the effect of repetition and mounting on the perception of a particular art form or style. It is observed from this experimentation that multiplicity engineers creative transformation of a particular art form to be perceived as and become another. Visitors to the exhibition spent time appreciating this artwork and others created with same techniques (See Figs 4 and 5) as paintings and never thought of them as prints. Thus, demonstrating that repetition/multiplicity in art affects the formal configuration, perception, and appreciation of art thereby forming a new aesthetic convention. From the foregoing, one can agree that multiplicity and repetition are means of self expressionism and as observed in the works of Andy Warhol such self expressionism gives works of art power and larger importance, creating continuity and infinity (Formanek et al, 2000). These works exert a strong impact on the viewers who are drawn into it as a result of its continuous multiple qualities, engaging them into a contemplative realm of identification and meaning making. This is the greater power for which Formanek et al describe in their writing, [that extra creative value and power which draws viewers into the works]. The motifs create an unending spectacle, a visual effect of continuity and infinity which in turn influences the way the works are perceived and appreciated. This further interrogates the whole idea of originality. Each single unit of the compositions (artworks) are individual originals that combine into a single original piece. As Warhol puts it, “no two works are the same” repetition therefore, comprises of a continuum of the original in a different context to account for its continuous original existence. This is because, “through the act of repetition, the original is liberated from its uniqueness and is newly brought to manifestation by reanimated realizations that also breach boundaries and deploy its origin in the process... hence, repetition is aesthetically, culturally, and historically a category that forms the basis of the original...” (Frohne 2012). Therefore, from Frohne’s assertion stated above, the branding of contemporary African works of art which appropriates and repeat forms as inauthentic or fake is problematic. This is so because the concept of adaptation/appropriation as I have experimented in this works, rather asserts through creative experimentation with ‘hybrid aesthetics’ the fact that repetition leads to a continuation of the visual form of traditional African art in modern art-space providing the platform for its contemporary contextual art being and originality. While these works make references to their cultural roots, they exist on the contemporary scene as new realities, originals that extend the originality of African art.



Figure 4. Title: *Identity II 2013*

Artist: Clement Akpang

Painting made from same Hybrid aesthetic technique and exploration of the effect of multiplicity and mounting

Medium: Acrylic Printing ink on paper

Size: 120x297cm

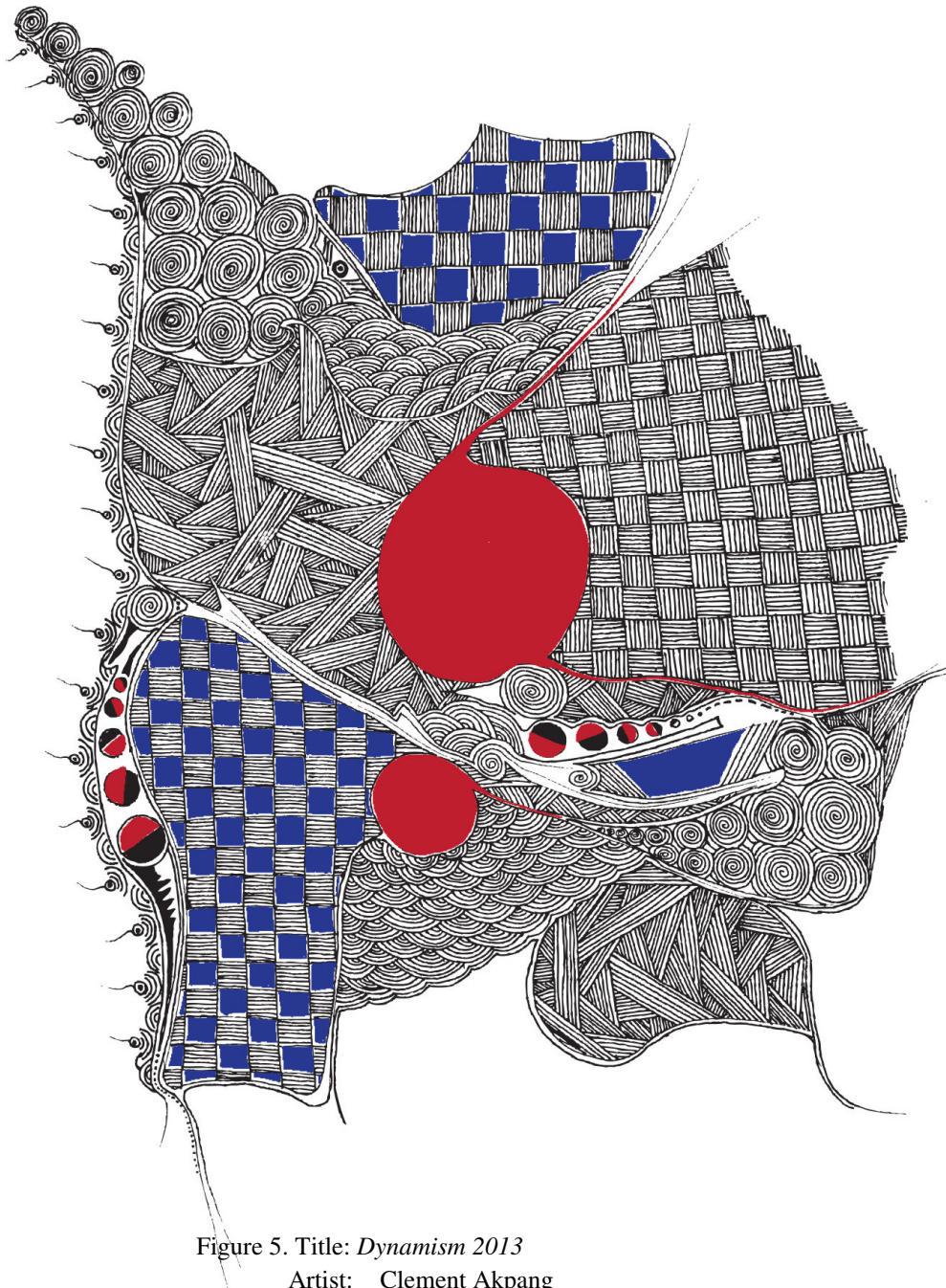


Figure 5. Title: *Dynamism 2013*

Artist: Clement Akpang

Painting made from same Hybrid aesthetic technique exploring Insibidi and Uli lines.

Medium: Acrylic Printing ink on paper

Size: 53×79cm.

1.1.1. Digital Carving in Hybrid Appropriation

Another artwork produced from my hybrid aesthetics experimentation and interpolation of traditionalism in modernism by adopting and reinventing traditional symbols in contemporary practice displayed at a recent exhibition is tilted *Orator 2012* (See Figure 6).



Figure 6. Title: *Orator 2012*
Artist: Clement Akpang
Medium: Found Wood
Size: 60 × 36 cm

Orator 2012 demonstrates how this concept of re-contextualising traditional African symbols is advanced into contemporary sculptural practice. I re-appropriated an iconic form of traditional African heritage (the wooden gong) which was the medium for announcement or information broadcast in various tribal societies, often placed at community centres that served as multicultural spaces, used to disseminate information to the general public. This iconic traditional form is adapted into a modern contemplative sculpture titled *Orator 2012*, consisting of an array of symbols inscribed into its surface to achieve a texturized finish. These codified African scripts and symbols collected from various tribes are juxtaposed with no regards or desire to create continuous sense or convey any particular message; rather symbols with different meanings are randomly composed to explore their visual form and compositional unity.

Orator 2012 assumes the status of contemporary sculpture by possessing visual qualities that now describes and categorises sculptures of the 21st century; That of attraction, contemplation and challenge (Ottman, 2002). While viewers are drawn to its aesthetics, its meaning, function, etc become even more ambiguous and challenging on close-up viewing which throws the viewers into contemplation, attempting to make meaning for themselves of the possible metaphors imbedded within the sculpture. African art and sculpture has for a long time been thought of as simply comprising of mask and ancestral figures, categorised as the generic art type of Africa. Conversely, any mention of African art (sculpture) in the west is likely to trigger thoughts of ancient mask, masquerade and ancestral figures associated with primitive tribal religion and philosophies. Thus, for large proportions of the 20th and 21st centuries, westerners view African art as being predictable and unchanging. But *Orator 2012* provides a different perspective to contemporary African sculpture [the concept of digital carving] which has not been recorded before in African art. Although the piece appropriates ancient visual ideographs, it possesses a contemplative artistic ting, making it a new non expected visual form with modern artistic metaphors on different polarities.

Firstly, traditional carving in Africa like elsewhere in the world is often carried out with chisels in a subtractive process. This piece however, adopts modern technology to substitute for traditional carving methodology by again, hybridizing art method and digital design. The process is rigorous; symbols are drawn into motifs, converted to vectors and then engraved/carved on wood boards using a laser cutter, after which the carved wood strips are assembled into one form. This process re-contextualizes the idea of carving since it takes a traditional art technique and adapts it into a completely digital base system to arrive at this new reality. Above all, *Orator 2012* is made entirely from found and discarded objects. It is a product of artistic 'Upcycling' which involves the transmutation of found, ready-made and discarded objects into new objects of greater values in this case, into a work of art. Creative resuscitation of discarded materials has long been integral to my creative practice but in this hybrid aesthetics methodology, I advanced the idea of 'Upcycling' further to arrived at a challenging piece made through digital design techniques, thereby blurring art and design boundaries and inserting traditionalism in modernism.

On the other hand, my experimentation with *Orator 2012* is reflective of a genre of contemporary African art (that of material transformation), which currently dominates scholarly discourse with ambiguities of definition and problematic categorisation (Binder 2008). The artwork demonstrates the fact that found object transmutation into art in Africa has differentia elements from those practiced in other continents of the world especially in terms of methodology, motivation and practice ideologies. This is an area currently lacking in-depth scholarly investigation to provide clarity. With this hybrid methodology, I explore the limitless creative possibilities which discarded materials posses and ways in which their exploration can be advanced to expand the field of sculpture and use these 'Upcycled' works of art for social commentary. This is the case with many contemporary African artists who work with found objects although they do not adopt the hybrid aesthetic techniques, but they use found objects for similar creative purposes and cultural motivations. As Peek 2012 observes, such aesthetic/cultural motivations are tailored towards transforming discarded objects into art, and using such artworks to comment on environmental and socio-political issues traditional to Africa. *Orator 2012* ostensibly bring to the fore the fact that African found object art tradition differs from those of the west, although they are often confused by many contemporary African and western scholars and generalised as recycling art. According to Binder (2008), though many African artists are involved in material reclamation, generalization and categorisation under the rubric (Recycling in Contemporary African Art) is misleading. She proposes a localised reading to fully understand this art form in Africa. Until this is done, the ambiguity of description and

classification with regards to contemporary African found object art genre which *Orator 2012* helps to bring to limelight for investigations will remain.

1.1.2 Contemporary African Art: Why Appropriate and Hybridize?

“...appropriation is a materialist model of art production involving the gradual re-shuffling of a basic set of cultural terms through their strategical re-use and eventual transformation” (Verwoert 2007, p.1). Verwoert views appropriation as a strategy of reinvention a means of transformation that restages what is old in a new modern context. This assertion indicates that, the concept of appropriation/adaptation is not just an important aspect of contemporary art but a contemporary measure of self expressionism which illustrates paradigm shifts and the changing face of modern societies. Thus, appropriated artworks become visual documentations and metaphors of such gradual re-shuffling. Supporting this argument, Shiner (1994) observed that, incorporation of traditional stylistic features into modern art is a process of continual cultural exchange, with creative appropriation documenting in visual form that cultural exchange, and providing a platform for re-thinking and redefining what is primitive or traditional. The aforementioned and discussed works showcases the creative significance which the concept of appropriation in hybrid aesthetics offers in contemporary art practice especially in the African context for various artistic reasons especially because this creative methodology and experimentation, enables restaging of traditional visual culture in modern art-space, to account for the continuous existence of traditional visual culture and idioms in contemporary society.

Many modern African artists are more concern with keeping pace with global artistic trends of the 21st century and for them, alienating their art from any element of cultural identification is the core of their practice (Freeborn 2005). However, their total reliance and copying of western styles and techniques, accounts for why their art is often dismissed as prototypes of western art and lacking originality. Of course, it also means that their denial of traditional identity does not allow them to experiment with cultural forms and as such traditional African visual idioms become relegated to the realm of history. This ironically is not the case in western art spheres where contemporary art in most cases, is a result of creative experimentation with the past and in the process, restructuring, re-inventing past art traditions using modern techniques for newer original creative innovations. This is because, Contemporary art is a cultural product, an expression of highly differentiated cultural process showing higher level of complications occasioned by certain developments in life due to information technology, multiculturalism, globalisation etc leading to art that reflects and faces up to the challenges and developments of the ‘Now’ (Karlholm 2009). African societies in the past four decades have experienced such heightened levels of cultural expansiveness which globalisation has occasioned. Thus, from the hybrid aesthetic experiments and generated works discussed above, hybridism of cultures and art techniques is used as a creative concept, an artistic ideology of re-invention and re-invigoration, through which tribal material culture are effectively re-invented in contemporary times. It exhibits the possibilities inherent in extensive experimentation with traditional visual idioms and how such experimentation can lead to a variant genre of modern African art. Through such appropriations, traditional African ideographs and scripts can be restaged in modern culture released from their primitive existence. In doing this, artists can re-invent their practice by adapting African culture, and combining it in hybrid explorations with western techniques and ideologies to create modern art with an African identity but possessing contemporary art qualities. Such works will stress their Africanness and contemporary originality cut across sculpture, textiles, print making, painting, graphic design etc, and significantly, no longer will such contemporary African artist’s works be dubbed fake or prototypes of western art. Furthermore, if the ideology of hybrid aesthetics is adopted, not only the artist’s artistic practice is re-invented, but African modern art in general will record a creative contemporary advance reflective of the limitless artistic possibilities in the 21st century which modern education, technology and new multimedia provides.

1.1.3 Conclusion

As contemporary African art continues to advance and stir up debates with regards to classification, appropriation ideology and concept has become a defining component of modern African art and art the world over. Works reviewed in this paper and the experimentation technique of bridging art and design, indicates that adapting traditional African visual culture (symbols and scripts) into modern art practice, will lead to a new form

of African hybrid aesthetics. And this new convention, will produce artworks which are not only culturally oriented, but are contemporary in form and content. Therefore, adaptation and appropriation in hybrid aesthetics, are creative conventions of reinvention which in the process leads to modern innovations thus indicating the new direction for which modern African art (sculpture, textiles, painting, graphics, printmaking, ceramics etc) can digest western art culture within African rich traditional culture to create a new artistic and creative identity which will stand out like traditional abstractionism of pre-colonial Africa revered the world over. Finally, adopting such hybrid appropriative techniques will accord modern African artists an original and dominant voice in global art worlds and market for which at the moment many seem frozen out based on their overarching mimesis of western art leading to the dismissal of their art as inauthentic prototypes and fakes by western Eurocentric hegemonies.

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Notes

Photographs of all works featured in this paper are provided by the artist himself.