

Beauty from Detritus: Aestheticizing Discards in the Visual Arts

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Abstract

Wastes result from human interactions with the environment. Generation of wastes has been on the increase following the global population growth, and subsequent development in technology and its attendant urbanisation. The neglect or mismanagement of wastes constitutes environmental degradation and human health hazards. Thus, various arms of government globally have invested a lot in its management; its proper management generates employment and wealth. Wastes have in the recent times engaged the explorative and creative attention of the visual artists as well as that of the art historians and critics. However, scholars and critics have concerned themselves more with the materials used and forms created than they do with the contextuality of the forms. The research, in addition to finding out how artists creatively manipulate discards to create beauty and wealth, also seeks to probe into the contextuality of the forms created. Textual and visual materials were employed to execute the research. The result indicates that they provide artists with unending supply of materials which they skillfully convert into aesthetics and wealth. Artists find in them veritable alternatives to conventional art materials which they recover and transform into objects of utility as well as aesthetics imbued with.

Keywords: Aestheticize, detritus, discards, wastes, art, creativity, contemporary artist.

1. Introduction

Generally, wastes or junks are considered to be any useless, discarded materials that are no longer good enough to be kept and therefore need to be disposed as unwanted. In this sense, wastes constitute all objects or substances which the owner no longer has need for and, therefore, discards them. It has also been described as “a transient object, decreasing in value, becomes rubbish where it exists in timeless limbo, without value, but where it has a chance of being discovered and suddenly transformed into a durable object.”¹ Visual artists have, in the recent time, eventually discovered them and turned their discovery and transformation into new creative exploits. The artists have discovered the potentials of these objects which provide them with viable alternatives they transform into magnificent, pleasant visual configurations.

The use of discards as materials in contemporary artistic creation is not novel. It probably began when Marcel Duchamp exhibited a disused bicycle wheel he turned upside down and mounted on a stool. This assemblage titled Bicycle Wheel was the precursor of his so-called ready-mades in 1913. Three decades later, in 1943, Pablo Picasso ‘coupled’ and exhibited the seat and handlebars of a discarded old bicycle he called the Bull’s Head. Since these two artists exhibited these disquieting assemblages as art forms, artists have, in various ways, been exploring the adaptation of discards as art forms. This has attracted the interest of artists, art public, art scholars, art historians and critics. There have been a growing number of artists exploring this medium as a way of expressing artistic creativity, a function of the creative mind. It requires artists with creative insights to engage in the endless search for ways of discovering, recovering and appropriating discards to create works of art.

2. The concept of discards

The concept of discards has been variously interpreted in different ways by different people. It has been variously referred to as rejects, rejected elements, trash, debris, and junks, among other terms by different people in different contexts. An environmentalist views waste as any raw material in a wrong place. A wrong place in this sense does not necessarily imply the trash bin or dumpsite but like the farmer would describe even yam growing in a vegetable garden as a weed. In the simplest sense, weed is crop that grows where it is not wanted. Even yam, regarded as the king of crops among the Igbo of the south-eastern Nigeria, found growing in a vegetable garden is considered a weed in a real sense. The understanding and interpretation of waste by an environmentalist is, therefore, not so much at variance with that of a farmer. Similarly, an artist also sees discarded items as useful raw materials misunderstood by an uninformed society. After all, in Mary Douglas’s analogy of what constitutes junk, any object that is found in a place where it is not meant to be found is considered a junk.²

Today in the contemporary society, everywhere in our homes is littered with objects that no longer have any utility values but are not yet disposed; because there is no immediate need for the space they occupy. Put in another way, junk is a phenomenal ideation: what one calls a junk or waste becomes a junk. Understood in this

manner, artists see nothing as a waste; they see in every material a veritable medium of creative expression which their forms can be put to new purposes. Hence, they have, in the recent time, turned to junks such as beverage cans, bottle metal corks, table water sachets, cellophane bags, and automobile parts, among others, for artistic creations. Thus, artists shift contexts of discards from public nuisance to the aesthetically public-friendly objects.³

In the global art circle, wastes, particularly the non-degradable have occupied the centre stage of expressive experimentation and artistic discourse in different art fora. Artists have ingeniously been converting wastes from the immediate environment to astonishingly creative works of art, saving the society from the menace that wastes constitute to healthy living. Contrary to the general understanding of waste materials as useless and unusable, artists appropriate waste to create objects of aesthetics and wealth. The artists' appropriation of wastes in this manner is in consonance with the Yoruba aphorism, "*eko eleko oun ni egba elegba*, which literally translates "one man's trash or garbage is another man's treasure". The aphorism substantiates artists' understanding of waste as a source of wealth creation. It is interesting to note that artists are not alone in the quest for converting wastes into things that can be beneficial to humankind. In their fight to convert biodegradable wastes to something meaningful, electrical engineers have found waste to "be alternative power sources" that can supply "electricity generated by power stations which run exclusively on biogas, a gas resulting from the decomposition of household waste".⁴

3. Modern Nigerian artists working in the medium of discards

Prior to the advent of the western civilisation with its conventional art materials, artists in the pre-colonial and early postcolonial Africa used predominantly found objects such as cowry shells in their art rendition. They carved wood, soapstone and ivory and made elaborate use of similar objects for their carving. They equally painted on surfaces such as walls, human body, animal hides and skins using substances like coloured stones and different types of vegetables. They also employed discards such as pieces of metals and glasses as well as shells and beads to decorate their carved objects. For example, Moshambwooy, a BaKuban royal mask, is profusely covered in beads and shells. The beads are, however, not purely intended to aestheticise but to attest to the importance of the mask and also to symbolise their culture hereto whom the origination of royalty in their culture is ascribed.

Therefore, that many modern Nigerian artists today have taken recourse to the use of discards is just a mere rehash of materials and media; a recast of an old tradition in a post modernistic mould. It is pep up of old ideas to move in tandem with the rapid industrial growth the nations of the world are currently experiencing. In the old, the materials and media used were mainly of the flora and fauna found within the immediate environment. Presently, modern artists who have earned global acclaim creating impressive and resplendent works from discards use mostly discarded industrial materials. Today hundreds of modern Nigerian artists found in this category include masters of junks such as El Anatsui who, since he discovered the latent potency of beverage bottle corks as a creative medium, has abandoned wood which he had made amenable to his creative hands and tools; Sokari Douglas-Camp, Dil Humphrey-Umezulike (pen name, Dilompzulike), and Olu Amoda, among others. Their works are entirely made of disused and discarded materials such as bottle corks, beverage cans, clothes and automobiles salvaged from party venues or restaurants, rubbish bins and dumpsites, mechanic workshops, residential buildings as well as roadsides.

Dilompzulike is an eccentric Nigerian sculptor whose art is inspired by society's discards. He has become a celebrated artist around the world.⁵ He has creatively indulged in "revitalization, rehabilitation, and transformation" of wastes. He has enthralled the art public with his artistic creations from nobody's properties – the wastes of society. He graduated a sculptor from the University of Nigeria, Nsukka in 1986 but today, in addition to sculptures, he makes performance and installations with which he makes visual statements.⁶ Since he embarked on a voyage into the unknown provinces of the junks and discovered their latent creative potencies, he has been busily exploiting these junk items to comment on socio-political issues, see figures 1 – 3.



Fig. 1: Dilompzulike, Waiting for a Bus, Installation, 2005

One of his oeuvres is Waiting for a Bus (fig. 1). It is a thought-provoking seventeen-piece installation of human figures in a queue waiting for a public transport. This installation is a visual critique which lampoons the messy transport system and dilapidated road networks in the country. The artist decries the manner Nigerian citizens are subjected to seemingly unending suffering by the ruling class. Waiting endlessly for public transport without success is just one of the various ways the Nigerian populace enjoys infrastructural democracy dividends. The ban of private cab services in some cities in Nigeria without at least providing adequate palliative measures exposes the citizenry to untold transportation hardship. These figures are garbed in discarded materials salvaged from the trash bins. The figure at the fore is clothed in blue jeans with a yellow plastic helmet on the head. The male figure at the rear wearing a black shoe, shot out of the queue as if to boast that with or without the bus, his big shoe has equipped him to embark on the journey.



Fig. 2: Dilompzulike, Nigeria, Installation, 2003

Diplomzulike's other installation Nigeria (fig. 2) seems to be a sequel to the Waiting for a Bus. This installation is a heavily burdened, crumbling and defaced Mazda car that is heavily stacked inside and outside as well as on top of the roof top with firewood and other junk items from the dumpsite. Contextually, the artist has used the woods which occupy the boot of the Mazda car to represent the oppressed Nigerian citizens in a public transport vehicle. Public transport vehicles usually carry above their capacity. The operators of the public transport systems probably do this so as to make enough money for the day. As a result, passengers suffer undue discomfort in spite of the heavy presence of the men of the Federal Road Safety Commission, whose responsibility it is to checkmate these anomalies, on every nooks and crannies of the road. Previously, this seemed to be peculiar to Lagos "where public transport vehicles (called Molue) have more passengers standing than those seated"⁷ but today because of the corruption that has eaten deep into the marrow and overwhelmed the psyche of our individual and public life, it has uncontrollably spread like wildfire to all parts of the country.



Fig. 3: Diplomzulike, The Politician, Installation, 2000

The Politician (Fig. 3) satirizes Nigeria's political situation. The installation is a composition comprising of a central human form and four pseudo-humans, all garbed in flowing gowns. The installation parodies politicians as a double-tongued human who says one thing and does another in a single swish, making unrealistic and unfulfillable promises to the electorate to get their votes.

Olu Amoda is another of Nigeria's foremost artist in the pedigree who converts junks to astonishing works of art in which there is obvious fusion of aesthetics, artistry and utility. He uses junks to make a statement of both personal and social import. He obtained a HND in sculpture from Auchi Polytechnic, Edo State, and an MFA degree also in sculpture, from Georgia Southern University, Statesboro, GA, USA. He is a metal sculptor whose media are mainly discarded automobile relics that their original owners had tapped all they could from the parts before their eventual abandonment as scraps.⁸ According to him, working with discarded steel from motor scraps is quite exciting because it offers an overwhelming range of discovered objects for sculptors who are inclined towards the art of re-cycling materials.⁹

These automobile wastes are generated from misused, abandoned, discarded, replaced or disused automobiles which include motor cars, Lorries, and motor-bikes, among others. They result from routine servicing of automobile engines, auto accidents, and replacement of faulty or malfunctioning parts of an automobile engine or replacement of whole due to old age. Thus, he usually has enough supply to work with. What a better way of solving the problem of environmental degradation in Nigeria?



Fig. 4: Olu Amoda, The Independence Generation,
Wood, wire gauze, rods, and metal scraps
© Maen Shour Collection

The giant achievements of these great masters in the use of waste materials otherwise considered as useless in creative works, have spurred other young Nigerian artists to sourcing materials from the waste

dumpsites for creative expressions. Thus, experiments in utilising waste materials for artistic creations have continued unceasingly in global art world. This creative restiveness has also been embraced by many younger, upcoming Nigerian artists. Rotimi Aderogba is a painter who has almost turned a scavenger, always rummaging waste dumpsites in search of discarded cans. Oftentimes, he also sources these cans from party venues and restaurants. He cleans and sorts these cans which come in different colours into their different colours. He then cuts them into different shapes and uses collage technique to transform the cut shapes into strange, disquieting works of art. This he does by attaching them to the board using gun stapler. In 'A o m'erin joba' (Fig. 5), a visual representation of a popular Yoruba folk tale, he employed the cut shapes and textured thick lines for the expressive rendition of the folkloric theme.



Fig. 5: Rotimi Aderogba, A o merin joba, cans on hard board, 48" x 48", 2012.
Photograph by: Segun Ajiboye

The collage work is composed of cut pieces of beverage cans executed on a square hard board. It shows a big, powerful but ignorant elephant, being convinced by the tortoise, both centrally positioned on the picture plane. To the right hand side of the picture plane is a rectangular adire-like format placed in verticality. In the rectangular format are different Yoruba symbols such the *opa ase*, the symbol of the King's authority, and cowries which symbolise wealth. The central figures, the elephant and tortoise, in the picture are enclosed with thick black lines used to hem the forms together into a visual whole. The use of contrasting secondary colours of green and orange, intermixed with dark colours in the background, creates striking pictorial amalgam.

Contextually, the painting re-enacts a Yoruba folklore that teaches morals. It preaches caution in accepting offer without critical examination, so as not to fall a prey of deceitful humans abound and hovering all over the places. The work is a visual, pictorial configuration telling a story of a King who was terribly ill. Ifa oracle had to be consulted for what the gods would require for their appeasement so that the King gets healed. Ifa demanded a big live elephant to be sacrificed to the gods. The King promised that whoever succeeds in bringing an elephant would be made wealthy and the King's daughter also given to him to marry.

On hearing this, the cunning tortoise contrived a deceitful act to lure the elephant to the King's palace by telling him a lie that he has been chosen by the oracle to become the king of the humans. Carried away by the juicy offer but without cogitation, the elephant followed the tortoise who led him to a death trap already prepared by the King's executors. The death trap was a pit over which was placed a weak wood framework, covered with a mat and a throne placed on the mat. The elephant ignorantly danced to the throne but on sitting down, fell into the pit.



Figs. 6 and 7: Artist: Unknown, Wine sellers,

A Fulani Herdsman,

Stephen Folaranmi, a painter, also belongs to the category of artists who have found succour in the junks. His work, *He Died for Me* (fig. 8) is a pictorial narrative of the Christ's arduous journey to death on the cross of Calvary. The work is executed in a vertical orientation with the visuals centrally positioned on the picture plane. It is a medley of wastes, particularly computer hardware, crucifix, barbed-wire and pieces of wood. The bloodlike splashes on the composition represent the blood of Christ. Two pieces of wood are lashed together, the shorter one at the centre and the longer one towards the upper end, at an angle 90 to form the crucifix at the lower part of the picture plane.

The crucifix personifies Christ. The crucifix bears the brunt of the composition; it looks as if the weight of the composition is born by the crucifix. This symbolises the enormity of the load that Christ carried to salvage mankind. The whole work is an expression of the Calvary sacrifice which forms the basis of the Christian faith. The barbed-wire hanging on the top side of the work represents the crown of thorns worn on the head of Christ while the general rough and harsh looking computer hardware is used to symbolise the very agonising treatment Christ received in the hands of his assailants. The inscriptions on the upper part of the picture plain represent the Greek expressions INRI translated "it is finished", that is part of the Cross of Calvary.



Fig. 8: Stephen Folaranmi, *He Died for Me*, mixed media, 36" x 19".
Photograph by: Fajuyigbe, M.O.

Traditional Female Dancer (Fig. 9) is an exploration of wood shavings, abundantly available in carpenters' workshops and sawmills, as an alternative material for sculpture. Oyewole Ajibola, a sculptor, has been able to temporarily provide solution to the problems wood shavings constitute in sawmills and furniture workshop environments by appropriating them for artistic expressions in the visual arts. The artist dexterously glues the wood shavings to an armature. The work represents the Ekiti (Yoruba) cultural heritage of dance and choreography. The irukere flywhisk made from horse tail, the elaborate suku hairstyle and the dance attire of brassier and mini skirt are all symbols of virginity, fruitfulness, beauty and royalty. This cultural dance is aimed at preparing the maiden for womanhood, motherhood and all the virtuous accompaniments of a married life.



Plate 9: Oyewole Ajibola, Traditional Female Dancer,
wood shavings, 1.2metres, 2012
Photograph by: Makinde, D.O.

4. Conclusion

Wastes or discarded items provide artists with invaluable materials with which, through the deployment of their creative talents and skills, they create works of arts. The visual artists in their quest to remain creatively productive in an austere economy, for individuality, uniqueness and relevance, seek for ways, thus they turn to discards. Working with discards not only eradicates them from the environment, shifting its context from constituting environmental and health hazards to the utilitarian and the aesthetics but it also creates employment and wealth. The few visual artists whose works were studied have proven that with discards visual artists can create splendid works of arts.

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