

Art Is Every Where 2008 and the Challenge of Continuity

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“Tick says the Clock tick tick...what you have to do do quick.”

A popular nursery rhyme

In January 2004, the Pan-African Circle of Artists organized the third in the series of its *Overcoming Maps*, a study tour and travelling exhibition of six West African countries. While on the trip Ayo Adewunmi was inspired by the “waste to art” initiatives that he witnessed in the various artists’ villages in Togo, Burkina Faso, Mali and Ghana. The “waste to art” initiative was mainly carried out by a cooperative of artists working in dedicated artists’ villages set up by the government. The most striking aspect of the “waste to art” initiatives in these countries was the ways in which it straddled creativity and enterprise. The initiatives not only provide artists with means of sustainable livelihood but were also outlets through which they reasserted their creative geniuses. The artists employed mostly found and recyclable materials in their natural or processed states that were cheap and easy to source from the natural or industrial environments.

For Ayo Adewunmi, the idea for the first “waste to art” initiative in Nigeria was conceived after the PACA trip in 2004 but only came to fruition in April 2005 when the first installment of *Art is Everywhere* was organized at Institute of Management and Technology (IMT), Enugu. The first workshop *Art is Everywhere I*, was organized with very lean resources provided mainly by Ayo Adewunmi. Logistics support came from IMT in form of its provision of the workshop venues and from Alliance Francaise, Enugu who provided refreshment and exhibition venue for the finished products that emerged from the workshop. Tony Odeh (a lecturer of textile art at IMT) and my humble self were involved as resource persons.

I have gone this length in describing this very modest beginning of *Art is Everywhere* mainly to focus attention on Ayo’s doggedness and more importantly, on his ability to circumvent the limitations that can be imposed on visionary ideas by two main culprits: time and lack of resources. At the danger of sounding celebratory, it required more than a burning desire on the part of Ayo to translate his idea to reality. He understood the maxim “a stitch in time saves nine” which is

the idea that embodies the nursery rhyme I quoted leading to the opening paragraph.

On many occasions we have been constrained to liberate very significant ideas pushing to see the light of the day, ideas that can impact society considerably. Yet, this is not the result of a lack of willingness on our part to persevere against challenging obstacles such as lack of resources (intellectual, physical or both) or even the moral courage to brave the odds. The problem as we may likely argue is that the existential framework within which we operate in this part of the world makes it very difficult for us to harness our creativity and productivity meaningfully. Productivity is not only constrained when we believe that our existential reality is a disabling factor, but also our freewill as creative thinkers and producers are also affected. “Time na money” is a popular vernacular maxim. However, money here does not necessarily translate to cash money. We can speculate that the concept of money in relations to time (as the saying goes) points to how valuable the notion of time both as a natural construct and human construct is. It is through the prism which this context provides that we can make sense of the constraints that were surmounted by Ayo Adewunmi in order to make *Art is Everywhere* a reality.

There are a range of significant reasons that we can engage in order to understand the significance of *Art is Everywhere* not only to the art community as the direct constituent, but also to the society at large. *Art is Everywhere* provides a point of entry for us to spare some thought on the importance of art to society. The contemporary understanding of art as luxury goods that is only affordable to the bourgeoisie class negates the central role art played in our traditional society. While this perspective is not new, its reiteration here is to draw attention to other capacities in which art functions in contemporary society that is similar to its role in the past. An instance is art’s capacity to engage the environment which has always been the case from antiquity to present.

If we turn to the classical traditions of Western art as much as ours, we will find how interwoven art is with the environment. When conceptual art became the iconoclastic exemplar of modern art in the 1960s, site specific projects - which required a direct engagement with the environment outside of the built space - was central to its enunciations. For the benefit of this essay, we can look at art’s engagement with the environment from two perspectives: as (a) “art for art sake,” which in this case, we can revisit the functional sites of Richard Serra or for more closer examples, the many sculptural pieces that dot the cityscapes across Nigeria.

And, (b), art's propensity to engage with germane environmental issues such as the current climate change debate.

In a global world where the reality of global warming has become as real as the production of the next cell phone, protection of the natural environment through proper ways of disposing industrial waste has become very pressing. Beyond the War Against Indiscipline (WAI) program of the brief Buhari/Idiagbon regime in the mid-1980s, there has been no other serious attempt in our national life to inculcate the virtue of environment-friendliness. As such, it is troubling that despite the reality of climatic change, the rhetoric of global warming is yet to make an in-road into public consciousness in Nigeria. Yet, it is here that we can locate the attempt by *Art is Everywhere* to participate in its modest way in the new global green revolution to reshape how we think about the environment. Green Revolution here does not recall the unsuccessful voodoo attempt at mechanized agriculture on a national scale by the military leadership of General Obasanjo in the late 1970s nor is it reconciled to the current "beautify the environment mantra" of the Imo State government.

The new global green revolution is invested in safeguarding the environment by providing new ways of reducing industrial waste and pollution. Therefore, *Art is Everywhere's* emphasis on recycling is a modest intervention in this global debate. *Art is Everywhere* also provides a framework for the artist to be creatively and entrepreneurially engaged. Rather than being enslaved to conventional art media that have been priced out of the reach of the average artist, the artist can look inward as well as outward to source other organic ways of putting his ideas across without been constrained by lack of resources. One artist who is a source of inspiration in this regard is the Ghanaian artist El Anatsui who has achieved more success and renown than any other living African sculptor. His recent engagement with detritus bottle tops which he turns into beautiful cloth sculptures becomes a point of reference on how we can recycle discarded materials from the consumerist environment and turn them into significant works of art.

Art is Everywhere has become a successful intervention not because it has made a draw in the public imagination but because of its perseverance and continuity. Projects are hardly sustainable in Nigeria because of the existential reality enumerated in the second paragraph of this essay. In its seventh installment in 2008, *Art is Everywhere* has expanded its horizon by extending a hand of creative fellowship to artists beyond the shores of Nigeria as a way of engendering the cross-fertilization of ideas. This was a boon for Nigerian artists who participated

but also for the international artists who were invited to share their cultural and creative experiences. Here again, I return to the *Overcoming Maps* project of the Pan-African Circle of Artists as a reference. Central to the ideological position taken by the Pan-African Circle of Artists through its *Overcoming Maps* project is the need for networking and integration among art professionals based in Africa. Ayo Adewunmi through *Art is Everywhere* builds on this salutary objective as well as the ideals espoused in the activities of the London-based Triangle Art Network who has created a network of artists' initiatives across the globe.

We recognize the steadfastness of the project's originator not only to sustain *Art is Everywhere* but also to expand the project to become an international event. The sustainable development of the project has been slow but steady. In the first installment in 2005, there were nine participants from the local environs of Enugu. The second installment in May 2006 attracted nineteen participants who were mostly students from the tertiary institutions in the Enugu and neighboring areas. There was a tremendous leap in 2007 which has also set a precedent of organizing more than one episode of *Art is Everywhere* in a year as well as decentering the workshop venue to include other cities in Nigeria. Three different installments were organized in Enugu in July, and in Jos and Kaduna in November. A total of seventy-two participants and nine resource persons were involved. The participants were mostly professional artists. In August 2008, the sixth installment of *Art is Everywhere* was organized in Enugu with thirty participants and six resource persons in attendance. The seventh installment which was hosted by the Cyprian Ekwensi Centre for Art and Culture, Abuja, drew thirty-three participants including five international artists from West Africa, East Africa and southern Africa.

Art is Everywhere has been able to thrive and expand due to sponsorship and logistics support that have increased exponentially in the years. In the beginning, logistics support came from IMT and Alliance Francaise. Over the years, sponsorship and partnership have included 7up Bottling Company, Cosmo FM, Enugu, NTA, Enugu, Radio Nigeria and Noble Enterprise, Enugu in 2006. In 2007 funding support and partnership came from IMT, Alliance Francaise in Enugu, Jos, Kaduna, and the Prince Claus Fund in the Netherlands. The 2008 installments were generously supported by Prince Claus Fund, *Art is Everywhere* Coordinators and Centre for Art and Culture, Abuja.

To conclude, Ayo Adewunmi teaches us the importance of challenging both time and financial constraints. In essence, he challenges us to contribute to society in

our different capacities by looking beyond what we may consider as obstacles. The lesson to draw here is the importance of perseverance, the capacity to believe in a vision and to bear it to fruition. Yet, the important task set for Ayo Adewunmi and his fellow travelers is to ensure that a culture of continuity is really enthroned that will sustain and expand the vision inscribed in *Art is Everywhere*.