

## THE IMPORTANCE OF ENVIRONMENTAL SCULPTURE IN CULTURAL IDENTIFICATION

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### **Abstract**

*This paper examines African Environmental Sculpture and how African artists have deployed it to engage certain socio-cultural circumstances in the continent. The paper argues that culture is not only evident in physical form but also reflected in certain sculptures mounted on strategic sites in the African environment. Through this paper, it is observed that the project of waste recovery has been used by African artists who in one way or the other have contributed to an aesthetic revitalization of the environment.*

**Keywords:** Environmental, Sculpture, Cultural, Identification

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### **Introduction**

Environmental sculptures are sculptures that create their own environments, large enough, for viewers to enter and move about in (Gilbert, 1995). It could also mean larger sculptures designed for display in the outdoor environment such as sculptures commissioned for a city square. Again it could be sculptures that are actually a part of the natural environment, such as the president's head carved out of the natural rock of Mt. Rushmore. While this style of sculpture may have been represented in many cultures before the 20<sup>th</sup> century, many western authors prefer to see it as a development of 20<sup>th</sup> century Euro-American artistic tradition. The fact remains that Environmental sculpture is not a preserve of the West but usually creates or modifies the specific environment it is situated, irrespective of culture, space or geography, for the viewer, as opposed to presenting itself, in the characteristic monumentality that define traditional sculptural medium, before the viewers. A recurrent attribute of larger

environmental sculptures is that one can actually enter or pass through the sculpture and be somewhat or totally surrounded by it.

Contemporary understanding of environmental sculpture has also linked it to ephemera in which case humans attempt to bridge the uneasy gap between art and life. For example, such materials as dust, light, stone, among others have been utilized by modern environmental sculptors to tease out the uncanny dichotomy that disconnects humans from direct communication with their environment. In other words, the argument advanced in this paper is that every environmental sculpture is an exemplification of the type of environmental resources and raw materials available in that environment. It also argues that African environment provides a unique kind of sculptural styles that befits the African environment. Artists examined in this paper represent one form of unique experience in environmental sculpture.

### **Environmental Sculpture: A Historical Overview**

One could argue that the first form of Environmental sculptures that existed were the type cave men produced during their time. The process involved in the inscriptions cave men made on rocks and walls of caves provided that situational relatedness an artist or an audience could establish with the environment. However, art historians have not been able to articulate cave art in relation to environmental art.

Most importantly one should observe that environmental sculpture is the type of sculpture that is created for a particular environment, surrounding or setting (Uyehara 1971; Sonfist, Wolfgang, Rosenblum. 2004). Beth Galston argues that, "An environmental sculptor plans a piece from the very beginning in relationship to its surroundings. The site is a catalyst becoming part of the creative process, Galston stresses further that "Environmental sculpture entails the idea that the piece also functions to alter or permeate the existing environment or even to create a new environment in which the viewer is invited to participate, the finished sculpture and site become one integrated unit, working together to create unified mood or atmosphere. Environmental sculptures have been re-invented in many ways by contemporary African artists. These re-inventions have been termed 'site-specific' in art historical parlance. "Site-specific art" has consisted one of the greatest manifestations of conceptual art since Christo and his wife produced one of the greatest site-

specific environmental installations in modern art history. Christo Vladimirov Javacheff and Jeanne-Claude were a married couple who created environmental works of art. Christo and Jeanne-Claude were born on the same day, June 13, 1935; Christo in Gabrovo, Bulgaria, and Jeanne-Claude in Morocco. They first met in Paris in October 1958 when Christo painted a portrait of Jeanne-Claude's mother. They then fell in love through creating art work together.

Their works include *Running Fence* which is made of a fabric fence, supported by steel posts and steel cables, running through the landscape and leading into the sea. The fence was to be 5.5 meters high and 40 kilometers long and constructed in Sonoma and Marin Counties, California. For the project, 59 families of ranchers needed to be convinced and the permission of the authorities had to be obtained, so Christo and Jeanne-Claude hired nine lawyers. At the end of 1973, Christo and Jeanne-Claude marked the path of the fence with wooden stakes. On 29 April 1976, the work finally began after a long struggle against bureaucracy. Approximately 200,000 m<sup>2</sup> of nylon fabric, 2050 steel posts and 145 km of steel cable were needed. On 10 September 1976 the work was completed. However, Christo and Jeanne-Claude had to pay a \$60,000 fine, because they lacked permission for the coastal region. Jeanne-Claude died, aged 74, on November 18, 2009, from complications of a brain aneurysm.

Although their work is visually impressive and often controversial as a result of its scale, the artists have repeatedly denied that their projects contain any deeper meaning than their immediate aesthetic impact. The purpose of their art, they contend, is simply to create works of art for joy and beauty and to create new ways of seeing familiar landscapes. Art critic David Bourdon has described Christo's wrappings as a "revelation through concealment" (Bourdon, 1970). To his critics Christo replies, "I am an artist, and I have to have courage ... Do you know that I don't have any artworks that exist? They all go away when they're finished. Only the preparatory drawings, and collages are left, giving my works an almost legendary character. I think it takes much greater courage to create things to be gone than to create things that will remain.

A reason for blurred definitions is that much of site-specific and environmental art was created from 1970 on for public spaces all over the United States, sponsored by federal (GSA and NEA) or state and city Percent for Art

competitions, and many of the artists were women trying to succeed outside the established art-gallery world (Busch, 1974). Younger art historians will have to sort out the development of this marginalized "movement" and the importance of artists such as Olga Kisseleva, Patricia Johanson, Athena Tacha, Mary Miss, Alice Adams, Elyn Zimmerman and others who, from the early 1970s on, won and executed large outdoor public art commissions with new formal, kinesthetic and social underpinnings. Many of these artists were also ecologically conscious and created works that could offer a further definition of "environmental sculpture": art that is environmentally friendly and cares for the natural environment.

One of the most unusual form of environmental sculptures has been created by Martin Hill who for over 20 years has been creating temporary sculptures from ice, stone, and organic materials that reflect nature's cyclical system. Often working with his longtime partner Philippa Jones, the duo create sculptures and other installations that "metaphorically express concern for the interconnectedness of all living systems." Speaking specifically about the use of circles Hill shares:

The use of the circle refers to nature's cyclical system which is now being used as a model for industrial ecology. Sustainability will be achieved by redesigning products and industrial processes as closed loops—materials that can't safely be returned to nature will be continually turned into new products. Of course this is only one part of the redesign process. We need to use renewable energy, eliminate all poisonous chemicals, use fair trade and create social equity (Hill in Jobson 2014).

While Hill and Jones adopt a more theoretical stance in their pursuit of environmental art, others have a more tangible, physically engaging style that allows the individual opportunity to commune with the environment. Beyond the above historical overview, Africans have produced environmental sculptures that are unique as will be discussed subsequently.

### **African Environmental Sculpture and artists**

A typical case of African environmental sculpture could be seen from the Mbari art practiced by the Igbo during the early twentieth century. Under this type of art sculptures embodying aspects of traditional lifestyle were erected in the village square where individuals came and communed with them. Mbari proves to be one of the most evocative indices of how African Environmental sculptures could become a vehicle of cultural identification thus the significance of this investigation. Mbari may never adequately symbolize the very empathy Africans feel with an artwork that is situated within a specific public environment, yet it is one of the likeliest suggestions of communal aesthetic idiosyncrasy where the sculptures may be sited in a space where the gesture of the sculptures individualism is consciously ruptured by the juxtaposition of human and environmental elements. More curiously one of the immediate cases of sculptures meant for the environment in Africa could be seen from certain sculptures mounted on strategic locations in some Nigerian cities, for example. A model could be found in Enugu, South East Nigeria where artists have consciously mounted sculptural works across major centers of the city in a bid to enhance the city's aesthetic quality. In effect while the intention of the artists may have stopped at this aesthetic appreciation, the works have relatively transcended that narrow purpose to encompass a public site of engagement and reflection. The works bring humans and the environment into a fruitful dialogue of how a city's space could serve as a site of discourse for politics, history and socio-economic encounter.

In Africa a good number of artists have produced environmental arts. One of the major exhibitions that have redefined African artists' relationship with their environment include Environment and Object which opened at the Frances Young Tang Teaching Museum and Art Gallery at Skidmore College, Saratoga Springs in New York on February 5, 2011. The exhibition specifically concerns African artists and how they deal with environmental degradation. Important artists that exhibited in the show include Zwelethu Mthethwa, Bright Eke, Sokari Douglas Camp, Jerry Buhari, Romuald Hazoumé, El Anatsui, Viye Diba, Nnenna Okore, Garth Meyer, Yinka Shonibare. Most of the works in the exhibition are concerned with the notion of art as an object with which to speak to environmental degradation. However, most of the artists attempted to view the environment from one particular perspective: the environment as the defenseless, fading being.

Outside *Environment and Object* other exhibitions such as 'Human Nature' reveals a unique show exploring our changing relationship with the environment. The show is a carnival of developing and cutting edge environmental art. From photography exploring our link to nature, to artworks made from recycled materials, paintings and music interrogating the very kernel of our humanity; the mixed medium show explores what drives us to connect to our environment and how we're responding to nature's call to adapt to a world of finite resources. The exhibition, which held at Hoxton Arches, Cremer Street, London on Tuesday 14th & Wednesday 15th October 2014, was produced by Charlotte Webster at Good Shout Studio. Webster, a respected environmental and financial reform campaigner, is also an artist whose aim is to create closer links between creatives and organisations to communicate positive, social, environmental and economic change.

In this show South Africans Oliver Barnett and Christiaan Nagel, and Zimbabwean artist [Gordon Glyn-Jones](#) showcased their most recent work. Gordon Glyn-Jones' new work, as well as immersive landscape photographs from Harry Cory Wright, sculpture from the magical Lesley Hilling and mysterious photographs of natural symmetry by Oliver Barnett clearly demonstrates human's fraught relationship with their environment.

### **Environmental Art As Cultural Identification In Nigeria**

One of the easiest pointers to reflect over African artists' relationship with their environment is by looking at the work produced by certain Nigerian artists who are passionate about the environment. For example, Bright Ugochukwu Eke has made conceptual images out of what is known as satchet water in Nigeria. In one of his works titled 'Acid Rain,' Eke uses water as both a material and a metaphor to speak about universal human and environmental problems. He states: "Water is a universal medium. It's common to everybody, no matter who or where you are. Whatever I do with water is what every other person does with it in every part of the world. The most interesting part is that we are bound or connected by [water]" and "having perceived this interconnectedness and interdependence of humans and nature, and having felt the damage, the separateness, and barriers we have created selfishly and egoistically, I thought it pertinent to find ways through which we could ameliorate or proffer some solutions to some of these [...] I thought of a common language in nature. That brought me to the language of water." Eke uses plastic bags to wrap water

forming installations pieces. Other installation materials of Eke are made from recycled bottles like that of Ripples and Storm I, (Figure 1), comment



Figure 1 Bright Ugochukwu Eke, Ripples and Storm I.

on the industrial production of water bottles and the fact that these bottles end up in the trash and are not always recycled. Plastic is not biodegradable and is littering the environment, harming wildlife, releasing toxic fumes during incineration, and filling our garbage dumps. The corporate exploitation of its raw material, oil, causes ecological destruction as in the oil-rich Niger Delta region. Eke is also concerned about the safety of drinking water bottled in plastic due to chemical leaching. The ripples fascinate him with their allusion to water and their structure: problems but also actions can start out as a point and have broad ramifications.

Eke speaks to the destruction of environment in Nigeria. What is unique about Eke's works is that they recover one of the most environmental hazards in Nigeria, what is known as pure water sachets. Other Nigerian artists that have produced unique Environmental art include El Anatsui, who has recovered bottle cocks and converted them to huge fabrics sold in the international art market. Anatsui transforms simple materials into complex assemblages that create distinctive visual impact. He uses liquor bottle caps and cassava graters to create sculpture that defies categorization. He reuses and transforms intrinsic ideas to connect to his continent while crusading against environmental degradation that results from late capitalist mercantilism. His mission resides meticulous recycling of environmental mess into aesthetic objects. His work

interrogates the history of colonialism and draws connections between consumption, waste, and the environment, but at the core is his unique formal language that distinguishes his practice.



Figure 2  
*El Anatsui Wastepaper Bag 2003; Aluminum plates and copper wire Collection of the artist*

In one of his works titled *Wastepaper Bag*, (Figure 2) produced with aluminum, Anatsui intends to "subvert the stereotype of metal as a stiff, rigid medium and rather reveal it as a soft, pliable, almost sensuous material capable of attaining

immense dimensions and being adapted to specific spaces." Yet the forms he creates are layered with meanings that reach beyond the physical characteristics of the materials he chooses. In this eight-foot-tall sculpture of an oversized wastepaper bag Anatsui makes a blatant statement about the rising problem of waste transformation in nations with limited recycling capabilities. More subtly, however, this piece also comments upon the all-too-often disposable nature of human life. Made from discarded printing plates used for newspaper obituary pages, these images and announcements of the dead remind us of the continuous scourge of disease, crime and persecution in a nation struggling with the long-term effects of post-colonialism, underdevelopment and political corruption.

### **Conclusion**

From the above it is evident that the environment is culturally represented in environmental sculptures. Conclusively it should be noted, that in spite of the roles that art forms have been playing in Africa, environmental sculptures specifically have been performing leading roles as far as issues of cultural identification are concerned. While western understanding of environmental art may not adequately address the wider contexts of other cultures, this paper has shown that the concept of Environmental culture was traditionally inscribed in the sculptures Africans produced in the last early and decades of colonialism. Contemporary African artists have also deployed creative repertoires of their environment to speak to a modernist and postmodernist ethos that define the African environment. Evidently this paper has shown that the environment is crucial to the aesthetic possibilities that could artists are exposed to in the continent. In conclusion there is need for proper documentation of sculptural role in cultural identification. The objective of this is to be able to present a documentation of prominent and salient roles sculptures play in most African cultures.

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