The Quest for Environmental Justice in Dilomprizulike's Sculpture Installations

By

Anumiri, Chukwuma
Department of Fine Arts and Design,
University of Port Harcourt,

Bridget N. O. Nwanze
Department of Fine Arts and Design,
University of Port Harcourt,

Frank A. O. Ugiomoh
Department of Fine Arts and Design,
University of Port Harcourt,
Choba, Rivers State.
Frank.ugiomoh@uniport.edu.ng

Abstract

Dili Humphrey Umezulike, otherwise known as Dilomprizulike, is a sculptor famed for his art installation, appropriated from environmental discards earning him the nickname "The Junk Man from Africa." This interventionist approach to materiality and style aligns with ecocriticism and answers to the crucial environmental stewardship advocacy. Such focus has not been accorded scholarly attention in Nigeria's art history. The appropriation of environmental discards to engage visual dialogue has a bearing on ecocriticism, eco aesthetics, and eco-visuality. This study aims to present an ecocritical reading of Dilomprizulike's sculpture assemblages while locating them within the evolving framework of Nigerian art history. The study incorporates a biographical sketch of Dilomprizulike and complements the evaluations of his sculpture installations in Nigeria and Germany. Prevalent theoretical engagement in this regard is located in the work of

Bruno Latour's Actor-Network Theory [ANT], within his advocacy for the non-human components of the environment. This study thus links Dilomprizulike's installations to sustaining the ecosystem and environmental justice initiatives. Installation art as a conceptual framework situates the art of Dilomprizulike within the historiography of African art and a contemporaneous global frame. Reading the artist's work reveals a complex range of social concerns beyond their ecocritical foundations. This work posits significant pointers to reordering the government's environmental policies as it reverses recent proclivities in our technologically-driven world to undermine nature.

Keywords: Ecocriticism, Consumerism, Actor-Network Theory, Discards, Assemblage, Sculpture, Found Objects, Upcycling.

Introduction

Art is constantly enmeshed in evolution and captures fleeting moments as much as it documents culture. In this understanding, art negates the Kantian notion of "art for art's sake." Art is a testament to humanity's trophies, which are won for the culture it represents, including the artists who created it. Art expresses various dimensions of awareness. Art, consequently, in its all-encompassing notion and traced to its etymology *ars* (which in Latin means skill), defines the humans' expressive capacity to birth artistic forms in metaphors. These include architecture, sculpture, painting, poetry, and music (Hegel, 1975). Thus, art is a means to define and document human engagements and passions.

The Installation Vogue in Cultural Production Engagements

Art has shown its value in the history of Fine Art by revealing the prevailing sentiments of the time and opening concepts regarding how it could be perceived and understood. For instance, installation art gained popularity in the 1970s. Installation became a vogue, attracting many other forms of artistic expression, such as music, environmental art, ephemeral art, painting and sculpture, performance art, and theatre art. Photography, video art, new media, technology, and virtual reality now constitute diverse installation art expressions. By the 1970s, cultural producers had found the practice of art exhibitions inadequate to convey

the expressive potential of the creative spirit (Ugiomoh 2002). Art installations increasingly became a popular alternative to exhibitions or became part of it. Installation art involves reconfiguring physical or media scenes within specific spaces for human encounters. Installation art integrates the perceived ideologies into the configured scene of installed objects in an encounter where meaning is sought in the object of art.

Installation is a fitting methodology the visual artists have explored to address issues in ecocriticism while accentuating eco-ethics, eco-health, eco-aesthetics, eco-feminism, and eco-justice. As a hermeneutic endeavour, ecocritical art focuses on the absence of social consciousness regarding the environment's health and the recklessness with which discards litter the environment. Many artists have resorted to repurposing such discards into visual metaphors as narrations of fluid time (Ugiomoh, 2012). Early hints at pseudo ecocriticism in the visual arts are traced to Pablo Picasso's work of 1942 titled "Bull's Head'. It is the first example of upscaling found or discarded objects in Western art history. Upcycling of environmental discards gradually became entrenched in the vocabulary and methodology of visual art practice. The works of Dilomprizulike are derived from environmental discards that have been upcycled and repurposed.

Dilomprizulike: A Biographical Sketch

Dilomprizulike was born on the second of November 1960 and named Dili Humphrey, with the surname Umezulike in Enugu. Apart from the above alias, he earned the sobriquet 'Junk Man from Africa' - 'thejunkmanfromAfrica' owing to the choice of media he employs in his creative communication tacit environmental visual commentaries (Feeke, 2007, 15). Dilomprizulike is not just a name but bears significance wrapped around the word "icon" (Hampton, 2009). For him, Junk represents Africa's present state in the face of modernist consumerism, eroding cultural inclination, social issues and vices. These metaphors are inscribed on the excavated rubbish heap containing discarded building materials, disused furniture, useless electronic gadgets, textile fabrics and rags, plastics, and objects, revealing myriad walks of life. These objects' life histories are reinvented as they are assigned new aesthetic meanings and functions (Offoedu-Okeke, 2012, 480).

In 1988, Dilomprizulike graduated from the University of Nigeria, Nsukka, specialising in the sculpture option, and proceeded to the University of Dundee in Scotland to acquire a Master's in Fine Art. Between 1989 and 1995, he lectured at the University of Benin before going into full-time studio practice. Within this period, he apprenticed for two years under the Ghanaian artist El Anatsui, who had once been his lecturer at the university and had drawn a substantial level of inspiration from the methodologies of Anatsui (Osha, 2022b). As a sculptor, his installation art practice has enabled him to actively participate in painting, writing, and performance art. He has participated as a guest lecturer in many universities beyond the shore of Nigeria and has spoken at conferences and symposiums.

His art practice and teaching have spanned decades. Beyond leaving lecturing in the mid-90s, his pursuit of studio practice brought him to the exhibition space of many international shows, such as the Africa Remix (2005), which toured many countries. Dilomprizulike has, to his credit, many exhibitions comprising groups and solos, shown locally and internationally, many of which are shown in Germany. The nature of Dilomprizulike's installations, as any large format artworks assembled in the world, does not appeal to private collectors but museums (Osha, 2022); thus, his involvement in biennials and exhibitions in museums has spanned through many international institutions, including Biennales at the Centre Pompidou, Paris; Tate Modern, London; Moderna Musert, Stockholm; Centre de Cultura Contemporània de Barcelona; Center of Contemporary Artists, Osaka; Herzliya Museum, Telaviv; Johannesburg Art Gallery, South Africa; as well as Dakar and Guandju Biennals. He has also been an artist in residence at various institutions, including the Artist Village in Detroit, United States (2007), the Victoria and Albert Museum in London (2005), the Scottish Sculpture Workshop in Lumsden, Scotland (1998), and the Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung in Bonn, Germany (1995-96) (CCCB, 2015; Sumaryono, 2019; CCALagos, 2022).

Dilomprizulike has developed a property where he established, in the event of his arrival to Nigeria, the Junkyard of Awkward Things. The establishment serves as his residence, offering studio spaces for resident artists and a destination for international exchange programmes (Hampton, 2009). The space, just beyond the Chevron Estate on Lekki Peninsula, Lagos, is designed to accommodate budding

artists as much as it serves as the Museum of Junk Art (Das, 2020; Osha, 2022b). The junkyard is a product of junk and a reflection of the stories of these discards emanating from the streets of Lagos, telling the Lagos stories (Hampton, 2009; Sumaryono, 2019). Offoedu-Okeke (2012) has averred that Dilomprizulike prides the junkyard as the final destination for the rejected objects of Lagos' materialistic society. Having built the structure on these waste materials, the Junkyard lives up to its name and the personality of its principal.

Dilomprizulike has drawn his artistic tendencies from his father, who used to mend wares and return them to full use. His inquisitive nature as a boy gained prominence as he watched his father handle repairs in their home in eastern Nigeria (Osha, 2022b). For him, the junk affinity had stemmed from the father's workshop, who had worked as well with junk, repairing umbrellas, cooking pots, buckets and keys (Osha, 2022). He observed that he had been born in a junkyard and had grown up with junk. If the junk that makes up the work composition of his assemblage is a result of our lived experiences, an extension of our lives, then we all are enmeshed in this junk circle in a commonly defined stereotype. Dilomprizulike's early exposure in his father's workshop is a psychoanalytic indicator and response to his reality, evident in his appropriation of found objects. Whereas his father had mended broken wares and returned them to proper use, those broken wares told stories of the lives of their owners as much they told of themselves. However, he presently collects these wares in their discarded natures and reinvents their stories in multi-dimensional aesthetic levels as installation art. Installation art is an alternative to the famed modernist invention known as an exhibition. As a method of presenting art to the audience, the artist explores a wide range of media while enacting their configuration as a metaphor. Unlike traditional plastic art, installation art, as much as performance art, also utilises essential art production elements and may incorporate the art of theatre practice.

Explaining the Crux of Installation Art

Defining installation art has posed challenges to critics and historians (Reiss, 1999, xi), who consequently have left many loosely related definitions aiming at giving a proper textual form to the subject matter. This is more or less common in art practice with sundry subjective phenomena—most definitions of installation art stem from the personal point of view, leaving room for lacunae. However, Bishop

Claire's explanation of the term draws attention to it as a mode of presenting art that courts the immersion of a beholder. For Bishop, installation art refers to the art form where the viewers physically enter the art (Bishop, 2005, 6). Bishop's supposition strikes a definite factor in the concept of installation art. Without delving into an extensive installation description, Bishop relates to the core of installation art as a contemporary vogue in art practice and the presentation to the audience.

Understanding installation art from the above perspective suffices to create a mental framework while relating the methodology to Dilomprizulike's installation sculptures. In 2019, when Tokini Peterside-Schwebig presented Art X Lagos, the array of works on display revealed the masterly crafts of most Nigerian artists as well as some international artists who participated in the art fair. Arthouse – The Space presented Peju Alatise's installation art, *One Side of the Coin (Not Born to Suffer)* (2019), a composition of metal, granite and marble cast. Alatise's installation took up a whole space allotted to the gallery at the fair. With metals running overhead and sideways, chains ran from the top, holding globelike forms with winged figures hanging at different angles. Equally, numerous forms and figurines hung loosely from the topmost limits in suspension from metal pillars. The extraction here is the impression an installation composition presents to the viewer. In the space, the viewer is absorbed into the artwork and tempted to go further into the created scenario. Alatise's work and ambience exemplify one significant characteristic of the installation method: it often occupies a designated space in a contemporary convention known as site-specificity. Site-specific artworks command and dominate their ascribed space in often grandiose scale. The implication of site-specificity relates to artworks crafted to fit a given or specific space. An installation visual space usually enacts a bond between the audience and the installed objects as an integral piece (Bishop 2005, 6; Kelly 2010, 8; Reiss 1999, xiii). The viewer unconsciously is not perturbed by the sacred unwritten code of withdrawing from the awesomeness of an installation, unlike the mounted two or three-dimensional works will demand, by engaging them from a reasonable distance in what is theorized as aesthetic distancing. Aesthetic distance is a supposition in the Enlightenment modernism where there exists alienation between an audience or a spectator of an exhibited artwork (Gadamer 1998, 24-25). On the other hand, the engagement with an installation takes one

deep into an artwork and signals an open invitation to dive into the artist's mind. The preceding highlights Grau's (2003) assertion on processes of mental immersion, which heightens multisensory engagement in what the art on display presents.

The sculpture installations of Dilomprizulike address the ecological impact of human relations to the environment. The moniker JunkmanFromAfrica indicates the artist's association with junk, found objects, and scraps, as his works remain products of the appropriation of waste materials or tangible societal discards. Thus, Dilomprizulike's work is steeped in ecocriticism. As an environmental interventionist, his metaphors combat societal derelictions that range from waste management to socio-cultural and socio-political issues within the enclave of eco-visuality and trenchantly call for environmental justice.

Early Ecocritical Pathways

The concern for the ecosystem, apparently evident in the installations of Dilomprizulike, audibly lends voice to the universal campaign on restoring a green, safe and healthy earth. Early indications of ecocritical positions in Nigeria are associated with literary scholars and documentary photographers. Poets such as Tanure Ojaide, Kenule Saro-Wiwa, Martin Bestman, Obari Gomba, and documentary photographers like George Osodi and Timipre Willis-Amah initiated concerns in ecocriticism with their works. Nigeria and her regions are not unaware of this need and the struggle ensuing to ensure the sustenance of a clean, green, and safe environment. The Niger Delta region, for one, has seen many industrial activities that have left most of the region within the basest and most execrable state (Nnamdi et al. l, 2013).

The environmental activist Ken Saro-Wiwa of the Movement for the Survival of the Ogoni People (MOSOP) is recognised as a front-runner in healthy environmental advocacy. Added to Saro-Wiwa's advocacy and the artists earlier mentioned, lectures and several academic positions have addressed such environmental menace and the need to tame them and restoring a sense of environmental stewardship and a reverence for eco-aesthetics, especially in Nigeria's Niger Delta region (Nnamdi et al. 2013, 67-75). In the above regard, initial attempts to focus on ecocriticism have emanated from the activities of poets

and photographers. In Ugiomoh (2025, forthcoming), Dilomprizulike's work 'The Herd' earned a discussion focused on ecocriticism from seventy or more works attributed to him. Interestingly, Dilomprizulike's work, beyond the above mention, has not attracted further ecocritical attention.

The environment is an essential aspect of our collective lives, which is why the eleventh and thirteenth Sustainable Development Goals of the United Nations aim at ensuring sustainable cities and communities and climate action, respectively (United Nations, 2015). These goals, targeted to be met by the year 2030, are directly environmental sustenance-oriented, accentuating how a healthy ecosystem is globally an issue that requires its preservation by all means. This expression of environmental care ethics, theorised in Dilomprizulike's work, confronts human engagements with the environment, regarded as the Anthropocene. A geological phase in the development of civilisations, articulating an outcome of human impact on the ecosystem in the present era. It has become imperative in both the long and short run to salvage the biosphere by refocusing on the ideals of eco-ethics and ecocriticism to preserve the environment and sustain its aesthetics as a common good imperative.

Proposing A Necessary Agenda for the Present

Collecting detritus for art's sake, for installation sculptures or assemblages, situates Dilomprizulike's art within an established mode of a paradigm shift instigated by environmental care and stewardship. The metamorphosis these pieces of materials undergo through the production process and eventually translated into artworks becomes their new essence and a contingent reality, far beyond their erstwhile state as environmental discards and nuisance to the social space. The above prompts the need to re-engage Dilomprizulike's work from its value as an ecocritical prompting. The composition of threadbare textiles, discarded assorted woods, plastics of diverse kinds, broken electronic parts, earthenware, porcelain, and all sorts of broken fragments create artworks which command attention in his work and hold the kernel for engaging research outcomes.

The need for more attention in Nigerian art history and criticism of eco-ethics, ecocriticism, and eco-aesthetics in the visual arts calls for a refocus. Critical and

historical studies appear to ignore such subjects when, indeed, visual artists have repurposed and upscaled discards and junk in their practice despite the pioneering efforts of literary artists. Dilomprizulike's work, despite its number, remains under-evaluated from the prism of eco-ethics, ecocriticism, environmental aesthetics, and environmental justice, where hitherto they have dominantly been x-rayed from the lens of junk art, found objects, subjected to mere recycling.

This above realisation requires a commitment to engage in an ecocritical reading of the works of Dilomprizulike while locating them within the evolving art history of Nigeria. In the above regard, while calling for redirected attention to Dilomprizulike's work to take inventory of the installation sculptures of Dilomprizulike for documentation and analysis, examine relevant theoretical frameworks these installations fit into and relate them to these theories, highlight the impact of solid waste in the immediate environment and its adverse effect on the biosphere, engender the need for a sustainable ecosystem within our immediate and global environment.

The above focus offers numerous significant values. A study analysing Dilomprizulike's installations will unfurl their environmental significance as testaments in eco aesthetics. Therefore, such a focused study holds the implication of bringing to the fore the positive bearing of the need to pursue a healthy ecosystem and the essence of care ethics for nonhuman objects as extended to the entire biosphere. Such study also expands the knowledge of contemporary art in Africa and the world about the inter-creative exchanges on a global scale.

Conclusion

The metamorphoses of human existence are knitted on the fabrics of our various lived experiences and linked to our cultural signatures regarded as markings of our true identities. Consumerism, the free market economy and enterprise with its cultural outcomes have informed the collection and appropriation of discards that Dilomprizulike has found not only intrinsically appealing in the confines of what found objects and junk may inspire, but also a way of telling the story of a people. The honesty imbued in these objects manifests their unique trajectories against the

duplicity inadvertently found in humans in the guise of veiling their weaknesses, further bolstering these collected discards as a choice media for Dilomprizulike. The quest for environmental justice, which Dilomprizulike's installations call for, remains cogent in the present epoch, even more in a country battered by western influence, consumerism and lack of moral rudder in leadership. Dilomprizulike's stance in eco-ethics and environmental aesthetics revolves around the retrieval of discards from their imposed environment, restituting same to the sociocultural environment that birthed them, while making judgmental call on our various lifestyles.

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Figure 1. Alatise, *One Side of the Coin (Not Born to Suffer)*, 2019 (Courtesy the Author)



Figure 2. Dilomprizulike, *The Herd,* 2014 (Courtesy the Artist)



Figure 3. Dilomprizulike, *Sisterhood,* 2019 (Courtesy Fabric of Being, Sumaryono, 2019)