

COST AND MATERIALITY IN CONTEMPORARY AFRICAN ART AND THE ISSUE OF QUALITY AND VARIETY

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Abstract

This paper examines how the rising cost of art materials has influenced material choices among contemporary African artists and how these choices have generated debates concerning quality and variety. In recent years, economic challenges, including inflation, currency fluctuations, and the increasing cost of imported artistic supplies, have compelled many African artists to explore alternative approaches to material usage. As a result, found objects, recycled materials, industrial waste, indigenous resources, and mixed-media techniques have become increasingly prominent within contemporary artistic practice. Drawing on Material Culture Theory and insights from contemporary scholarship on African art, the study investigated how material choices are shaped by economic realities and how these choices contribute to the evolving character of contemporary African visual expression. The paper argues that material improvisation should not be viewed merely as a response to financial limitations but as a creative strategy that has expanded the aesthetic, conceptual, and thematic possibilities of contemporary African art. Through experimentation with unconventional materials, artists have developed innovative visual languages that engage with issues of identity, memory, globalisation, environmental sustainability, cultural heritage, social inequality, and postcolonial experience. The paper concludes that the relationship between cost and materiality has significantly contributed to the diversity and vitality of contemporary African art. The adoption of alternative materials has expanded artistic variety, challenged traditional notions of artistic value, and reinforced the position of contemporary African art within global artistic discourse. Ultimately, the study highlights the resilience, adaptability, and creative ingenuity of African artists in transforming material limitations into opportunities for artistic innovation and cultural expression.

Keywords: Cost, Materiality, Contemporary African Art, Quality, Variety

Introduction

Contemporary African art has become one of the most vibrant and intellectually engaging fields within global art discourse. Since the late twentieth century, African artists have increasingly attracted international attention through their innovative approaches to artistic production, conceptual explorations, and experimental use of materials. One of the major factors influencing this development is the economic environment within which many artists operate. Across Africa, the cost of conventional art materials has continued to rise due to inflation, dependence on imported supplies, exchange-rate instability, and broader economic challenges. These realities have compelled artists to explore unconventional materials and alternative production strategies.

The rising cost of conventional materials has sparked significant debate about artistic quality and variety. On one hand, the use of found objects, recycled materials, industrial waste, different pigments for painting, and indigenous resources has expanded artistic possibilities and

enriched visual culture. Similarly, questions have emerged regarding durability, craftsmanship, and standards of artistic production. This paper, therefore, examines these issues and argues that economic constraints have stimulated innovation and diversity within contemporary African art while simultaneously encouraging a rethinking of conventional definitions of quality.

Contemporary African art occupies an increasingly important position within global artistic discourse. Since the late twentieth century, artists from across Africa have gained recognition for innovative approaches to material usage, conceptual engagement, and social commentary (Enwezor, 2009). According to Kasfir (1999). "One issue that has significantly shaped these developments is the rising cost of artistic materials. In many African countries, professional art supplies such as paints, canvases, sculptural materials, photographic equipment, and digital technologies are imported". Furthermore, the author notes that "inflation, exchange-rate instability, transportation costs, and economic uncertainty have increased the cost of artistic production". Therefore, the relationship between cost and materiality raises important questions concerning quality and variety.

Review of Related Literature.

The importance of materials in artistic exploration can not be overemphasised; as such, material is key, and that is what determines the end product. Lazzari and Schlesier (2005) describe materials as "the physical substance that the artist uses to make a work of art". Adewumi (2017) posit that, "without materials, the artist's idea remains an idea; as such, materials are the embodiment of the sculptor's innate impression, a progression from the intangible nature of his philosophies, to the tangibility of his sculptural piece". Dogo (2014) avers that, "art should not be restricted to any stereotyped convention, and no material has just one value. Anything can be manipulated to become an art material, but it takes artistic insight to be able to recognise the value inherent in any object". Thus, the liberty to manipulate any kind of materials using different styles, ideas and techniques by artists has paved the way for the acceptance of artistic innovations and explorations. Deductively, also, is the realisation from Lazzari and Schlesier, Adewumi and Dogo that it is materials that artists use to create the art that either aesthetically or philosophically speaks to the audience.

The authors agreed with Lazzari and Schlesier's (2005) position about what constitutes a material. The reason being that art is created with materials, and their character defines the larger part of the artwork and its style. Agreeing with Adewumi (2017), that "the artist's idea remains an idea without materials". Thus, materials are key elements in the execution of any visual expression, and they are important things to put into consideration when producing any artwork, as an artist's choice of materials is mostly based on the artist's preference or how best he/she can handle it. Ideas, themes or philosophies also inform the artist's choice of materials.

The concept of materiality has become a major area of scholarly inquiry within contemporary art studies, anthropology, material culture studies, and visual culture discourse. Materiality refers to the physical substances through which artistic ideas are created, communicated, and interpreted. However, contemporary scholars argue that materiality extends beyond the physical characteristics of objects to include the social, cultural, historical, political, economic, and symbolic meanings attached to them (Ingold, 2013). In contemporary African art, materials are not merely tools of artistic production; they function as repositories of memory, identity, history, environmental consciousness, political critique, and cultural expression.

Consequently, the study of materiality offers valuable insights into how artists navigate the complex relationships between creativity, economic realities, social conditions, and cultural meaning.

Scholarly literature on contemporary African art increasingly recognises materiality as a critical component of artistic practice. According to Enwezor (2009), one of the defining characteristics of contemporary African art is the innovative use of materials as vehicles for social, political, and historical commentary. He argues that African artists frequently engage with materials in ways that challenge conventional artistic hierarchies and redefine the boundaries of artistic production. Rather than relying solely on traditional artistic media, many contemporary African artists transform everyday objects, industrial waste, found materials, and recycled resources into powerful visual statements that reflect contemporary realities.

Similarly, Oguibe (2004) observes that “material experimentation has become a significant strategy through which African artists interrogate issues of globalisation, identity, post-coloniality, and cultural representation” Furthermore, the author contends that “the use of unconventional materials challenges Western assumptions regarding artistic value and questions the traditional distinction between fine art and ordinary objects. Through such practices, artists create alternative narratives that reflect local experiences while simultaneously engaging global audiences”. Kasfir (1999) further notes that contemporary African artistic production is characterised by adaptability and resourcefulness; many African artists work within environments where access to conventional artistic materials is limited. As a result, artists frequently draw upon locally available resources and develop innovative techniques that reflect both necessity and creativity. This adaptability has contributed significantly to the emergence of diverse artistic forms and visual languages across the continent.

Njami (2007) similarly argues that contemporary African art cannot be understood solely through formal or stylistic analysis. Instead, attention must be paid to the cultural, economic, and political contexts within which artistic materials are selected and utilised. He suggests that materials often carry meanings that extend beyond their physical appearance, functioning as symbols of social experience, collective memory, and cultural identity. The increasing use of found and recycled materials, therefore, reflects broader social transformations occurring within contemporary African societies. Recent scholarship has also emphasised the relationship between materiality and environmental sustainability. For instance, Harney (2021) argues that “many contemporary African artists utilise recycled and discarded materials as a means of addressing environmental degradation, consumer culture, and unsustainable production patterns. Through the transformation of waste into art, these artists challenge dominant systems of consumption while simultaneously creating new aesthetic possibilities”. Such practices demonstrate how material choices can function as both artistic strategies and forms of environmental activism. In addition, Okeke-Agulu (2015) highlights the significance of material experimentation within postcolonial artistic discourse. He posits that “contemporary African artists often employ materials strategically to challenge colonial legacies and reclaim cultural agency. By utilising indigenous resources, found objects, and locally sourced materials, artists resist dominant Western artistic standards and assert alternative modes of creative expression. Material choices therefore become acts of cultural negotiation through which artists redefine identity, history, and representation”.

Despite the growing body of scholarship on materiality in African art, debates continue regarding the implications of material experimentation for artistic quality. While some scholars

express concern regarding issues of durability and conservation, others emphasise creativity, conceptual depth, and cultural relevance as more appropriate measures of artistic value (Harney, 2021 and Oguibe, 2004).

Theoretical Frameworks

This paper adopts Material Culture Theory, New Materialism, and Postcolonial Theory as theoretical frameworks for supporting the discussion. Material Culture Theory emerged from anthropology, archaeology, and cultural studies and focuses on the social and cultural significance of objects and materials within human societies. The theory argues that objects are not passive entities but active participants in the construction and communication of meaning (Miller, 2005). Materials embody cultural values, social relationships, historical experiences, and symbolic associations that influence how individuals interact with and interpret the world around them. According to Ingold (2013), materials possess what he describes as “social lives,” meaning that they accumulate meanings and associations through their movement across different social and cultural contexts. Within artistic practice, materials therefore contribute actively to the production of meaning rather than merely serving as neutral substances. This perspective is particularly relevant to contemporary African art, where materials frequently carry complex histories related to colonialism, trade, consumption, environmental change, and cultural identity.

Therefore, the study also draws insights from New Materialist thought. Bennett (2010) argues that materials possess forms of agency that influence human actions and creative processes. Rather than viewing materials as passive objects controlled entirely by artists, New Materialism emphasises the dynamic interactions between artists and materials. This perspective helps explain how the physical properties of recycled, found, and indigenous materials contribute to artistic innovation and shape aesthetic outcomes.

Furthermore, Post-colonial Theory provides additional insights into the significance of material choices within contemporary African art. Post-colonial scholars argue that artistic production in formerly colonised societies often involves negotiating systems of representation established during colonial rule (Okeke-Agulu, 2015). The use of indigenous and alternative materials can therefore be understood as a form of cultural resistance that challenges Eurocentric definitions of artistic value and affirms local knowledge systems. Through material experimentation, contemporary African artists assert creative autonomy while simultaneously engaging global artistic discourses. The integration of Material Culture Theory, New Materialism, and Post-colonial Theory provides a comprehensive framework for understanding the relationship between cost, materiality, quality, and variety in contemporary African art. These theoretical perspectives illuminate how artists transform economic constraints into opportunities for innovation, how materials function as carriers of meaning, and how artistic production reflects broader social, cultural, and historical processes. Ultimately, they provide valuable tools for examining how contemporary African artists negotiate issues of affordability, creativity, identity, and artistic value within an increasingly globalised world.

Cost and Artistic Production in Contemporary Africa

Economic realities significantly influence artistic production across Africa. In many countries, artists operate within environments characterised by limited resources and fluctuating economic conditions. Imported materials are often expensive and difficult to obtain. As a result,

artists continually adapt their practices to available resources. The increasing cost of conventional materials has affected studio practice, artistic planning, and project execution. Many artists have reduced dependence on imported supplies and instead developed innovative approaches using locally available resources. Such adaptations demonstrate that artistic production is shaped not only by aesthetic considerations but also by economic conditions. Recently, in a paper presentation, Nadama (2026) proposes and advocates that, due to the high cost of materials, artists should locally source for their materials. Thus, these developments illustrate how cost can become a catalyst for innovation. Artists frequently transform limitations into opportunities for experimentation, producing works that challenge conventional expectations regarding artistic media.

Improvisation, Material Experimentation and Innovation

Improvisation has become a defining characteristic of contemporary African art. Through improvisation, artists transform available materials into meaningful visual forms. Found objects, industrial waste, discarded plastics, newspapers, textiles, scrap metals, and electronic components are increasingly incorporated into artistic production. This process extends beyond practical necessity. Alternative materials often possess symbolic and cultural significance. Waste materials may reference environmental degradation, consumer culture, poverty, resilience, or urban transformation. Consequently, material choices become integral components of artistic meaning (Njami, 2007). Artists also experiment with indigenous resources including raffia, bamboo, gourds, leather, wood, beads, and natural fibres. Such materials connect contemporary artistic practice with local traditions and cultural memory. Material experimentation therefore operates simultaneously as an economic strategy, a conceptual device, and a cultural statement.

Cost and Materiality as Sources of Variety

One of the most profound consequences of material experimentation in contemporary African art is the remarkable expansion of artistic variety. Variety, in this context, refers not only to the diversity of materials employed by artists but also to the multiplicity of techniques, visual forms, conceptual approaches, and thematic concerns that emerge from such material engagements. As the cost of conventional art materials continues to rise across many African countries, artists have increasingly turned to alternative resources, resulting in a broader and more dynamic spectrum of artistic expression. Traditionally, artistic production relied heavily on conventional materials such as oil paint, acrylic, bronze, marble, canvas, and other imported supplies. However, economic realities have compelled many contemporary African artists to seek creative alternatives. This shift has led to the incorporation of found objects, discarded industrial materials, recycled plastics, scrap metals, newspapers, textiles, wood fragments, electronic waste, and organic materials into artistic practice. Such developments have significantly diversified the material vocabulary of contemporary African art. According to Enwezor (2009), the use of unconventional materials has also expanded the formal possibilities available to artists. Different materials possess unique physical properties, textures, colours, weights, and structural characteristics that influence artistic outcomes. Recycled metal, for example, produces visual effects and symbolic meanings that differ considerably from those associated with bronze or stone. Likewise, discarded plastics, fabric remnants, and industrial waste introduce distinctive aesthetic qualities that enrich artistic production. Consequently, artists can explore innovative visual languages that challenge conventional artistic norms and expectations.

Beyond formal experimentation, material diversity has contributed significantly to thematic variety. Materials are never neutral; they carry cultural, social, historical, economic, and political meanings. Through deliberate material selection, artists communicate ideas relating to identity, migration, environmental degradation, consumerism, urbanisation, memory, spirituality, globalisation, and social justice. For instance, the use of discarded plastic materials may serve as a critique of environmental pollution and excessive consumption, while the incorporation of indigenous materials may symbolise cultural continuity and resistance to cultural homogenisation (Harney, 2021).

The rise of material experimentation has also encouraged the growth of new artistic genres and forms. Installation art, assemblage, environmental art, conceptual art, performance art, and mixed-media practices have flourished partly because artists have embraced alternative materials. These forms often require flexibility in material selection and allow artists to engage more directly with contemporary social realities. Consequently, contemporary African art has become increasingly interdisciplinary, blurring the traditional boundaries between sculpture, painting, photography, performance, architecture, and digital media. Furthermore, material innovation has contributed to the democratisation of artistic production. By reducing dependence on expensive imported materials, artists from diverse socio-economic backgrounds can participate more actively in creative practice. This has broadened artistic participation and encouraged the emergence of new voices within the African art scene. In many cases, artists working outside major urban centres have been able to develop distinctive practices based on locally available resources, thereby enriching the diversity of contemporary African visual culture.

Material experimentation has equally strengthened the relationship between art and sustainability. Increasing global concern about environmental degradation has encouraged artists to transform waste materials into meaningful artistic expressions. Through recycling and creative reuse, artists not only address ecological issues but also demonstrate how artistic practice can contribute to sustainable development. This environmental dimension has added another layer of variety to contemporary African art by introducing themes of ecological responsibility, conservation, and environmental activism. The international visibility of African artists has further reinforced the significance of material diversity. Global audiences are often attracted to the innovative ways in which African artists transform ordinary objects into extraordinary artistic statements. The creative adaptation of materials has become one of the defining characteristics of contemporary African art, distinguishing it within the global art landscape and contributing to its growing recognition within museums, galleries, biennales, and academic discourse. In essence, the relationship between cost and materiality has become a major source of artistic variety within contemporary African art. Economic constraints have encouraged artists to explore new materials, techniques, and conceptual possibilities, resulting in a rich and diverse artistic environment that continues to evolve and expand.

The Issue of Quality in Contemporary African Art Practice

The increasing reliance on alternative materials in contemporary African art has generated considerable debate regarding the question of quality. As artists continue to move beyond conventional artistic media, scholars, critics, collectors, and audiences have raised questions concerning the standards by which artistic quality should be assessed. Central to this debate is whether the use of improvised, recycled, or found materials enhances or diminishes the quality of

artistic production. Historically, artistic quality was often associated with the use of durable and expensive materials such as marble, bronze, oil paint, hardwood, and other traditional media. Within such frameworks, the value of an artwork was frequently linked to the prestige and permanence of its materials. Thus, according to Oguibe (2004), contemporary art practice has increasingly challenged the aforementioned assumptions. Many contemporary African artists argue that artistic quality should be measured not by the monetary value of materials but by the effectiveness with which materials communicate ideas, emotions, and experiences

One important dimension of quality is creativity. The ability to transform discarded, inexpensive, or unconventional materials into visually compelling artworks demonstrates a high level of artistic ingenuity. In many cases, artists working with limited resources must exercise greater creativity than those with unrestricted access to expensive materials. The process of identifying, selecting, manipulating, and recontextualising ordinary objects requires imagination, innovation, and conceptual sophistication. Craftsmanship also remains a crucial indicator of quality. The successful use of unconventional materials requires technical competence and mastery of process. Artists must understand the structural properties, limitations, and possibilities of their chosen materials. Effective material manipulation involves careful planning, experimentation, and execution. Consequently, the quality of an artwork depends largely on the artist's ability to transform raw materials into coherent and aesthetically engaging visual forms. Another important consideration is conceptual depth. Contemporary art increasingly prioritises ideas and critical engagement over purely formal concerns. In this context, materials function as active components of meaning-making rather than merely serving decorative purposes. When materials are carefully selected to reinforce thematic concerns, they enhance the intellectual and communicative power of artworks. Thus, quality is often determined by the strength of the relationship between material choice and conceptual intent.

Originality constitutes another significant aspect of quality. Contemporary African artists have distinguished themselves globally through innovative approaches to material usage. By transforming everyday objects into sophisticated artistic statements, they challenge conventional understandings of artistic media and contribute to the development of new visual languages. Such originality is often regarded as a hallmark of artistic excellence. Nevertheless, concerns regarding durability and preservation remain relevant. Certain recycled and organic materials may be vulnerable to deterioration resulting from environmental exposure, humidity, pests, or physical wear. These challenges raise important questions regarding conservation and long-term preservation. However, durability should not be regarded as the sole criterion for evaluating artistic quality. Many contemporary artworks are intentionally ephemeral, temporary, or process-based, emphasising experience and meaning rather than permanence. Furthermore, quality in contemporary African art must be understood within its socio-cultural context. Artists frequently engage with issues such as poverty, environmental degradation, migration, urbanisation, and social inequality. The use of unconventional materials often reflects these realities and contributes to the authenticity and relevance of artistic expression. Consequently, quality should also be assessed in terms of social engagement, cultural significance, and intellectual impact.

Ultimately, the issue of quality in contemporary African art requires a more inclusive understanding of artistic value. Rather than focusing exclusively on material expense or permanence, contemporary evaluations of quality should consider creativity, craftsmanship, conceptual depth, originality, cultural relevance, and communicative effectiveness. Such an

approach acknowledges the innovative contributions of African artists and recognises the transformative potential of material experimentation.

Case Studies of Artists Using Improvised Materials

The creative use of improvised and alternative materials has become a defining feature of contemporary African art, and several artists have achieved international recognition through their innovative material practices. Their works demonstrate how economic constraints can be transformed into opportunities for artistic invention while simultaneously addressing important social, political, cultural, and environmental issues. Among the most celebrated examples is El Anatsui, the Ghanaian-born artist whose large-scale installations are constructed from discarded aluminium bottle caps and liquor-bottle seals. Through meticulous processes of collection, cutting, flattening, and stitching, Anatsui transforms industrial waste into monumental works that resemble richly woven textiles. His installations explore themes of trade, colonial history, consumer culture, globalisation, and cultural exchange. By converting discarded materials into objects of extraordinary beauty, Anatsui challenges conventional assumptions about value and artistic worth (Enwezor, 2009). Similarly, Romuald Hazoume of the Republic employs discarded plastic petrol containers to create sculptural masks and installations. These materials reference the informal fuel trade that operates across West Africa and serve as metaphors for identity, exploitation, economic inequality, and survival. Hazoume's work demonstrates how everyday objects can be transformed into powerful symbols of contemporary African realities (Njami, 2007).

Yinka Shonibare, a British-Nigerian artist, is renowned for his use of Dutch wax-print fabrics. Although widely associated with African identity, these textiles possess complex transnational histories involving European manufacturing and colonial trade networks. Through sculptures, installations, and photographic works, Shonibare uses these fabrics to examine colonialism, globalisation, race, identity, and cultural hybridity (Harney, 2021). In Nigeria, Okwudili Humphrey Umezulike has developed an influential artistic practice centred on urban waste and discarded consumer goods. His installations incorporate abandoned household objects, broken furniture, worn clothing, discarded electronics, and other materials collected from urban environments. Through these works, he interrogates issues of consumption, memory, social neglect, and environmental responsibility. His practice exemplifies how waste materials can become vehicles for critical social commentary. Ndidi Dike similarly employs found objects, reclaimed wood, metal fragments, and industrial materials to address environmental degradation, resource exploitation, corruption, and economic injustice. Her works often combine aesthetic sophistication with strong activist messages, demonstrating the capacity of material experimentation to engage with pressing social concerns.

Collectively, these artists demonstrate that material improvisation is not merely a response to economic hardship but a sophisticated artistic strategy. Through innovative engagements with unconventional materials, they have expanded the possibilities of contemporary African art, contributed to debates concerning quality and value, and strengthened Africa's presence within global artistic discourse.

Conclusion

Cost and materiality have become central issues within contemporary African art. Rising costs of conventional materials have encouraged artists to adopt innovative approaches involving

found objects, recycled resources, indigenous materials, and mixed-media experimentation. These developments have expanded artistic variety and contributed to the emergence of distinctive visual languages. Although debates concerning quality continue, evidence suggests that artistic excellence depends less on material expense than on creativity, craftsmanship, conceptual depth, and effective material transformation. Contemporary African artists have demonstrated that economic constraints can function as catalysts for innovation. Their practices challenge traditional assumptions regarding artistic value and enrich global art discourse through diverse and imaginative engagements with materiality. Cost and materiality have become central concerns within contemporary African art. Rising prices of conventional artistic materials have encouraged artists to adopt innovative approaches involving found objects, recycled resources, indigenous materials, and mixed-media experimentation. These developments have significantly expanded artistic variety and contributed to the emergence of distinctive visual languages.

While debates concerning quality continue, contemporary African artists have demonstrated that artistic excellence depends not on the monetary value of materials but on creativity, craftsmanship, conceptual depth, and effective material manipulation. Economic constraints have therefore functioned as catalysts for innovation rather than barriers to artistic achievement. The experiences of contemporary African artists reveal the resilience and adaptability of artistic practice. Through experimentation and critical engagement, artists have transformed material limitations into opportunities for creative exploration. Their contributions continue to enrich global art discourse and affirm the importance of material diversity within contemporary artistic practice.

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