Studio Practice As A Base For Effective Academic Research In Creative Arts

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Abstract

If research is the systematic investigation into a subject with a view to discovering facts, establishing the truth about something, revising a theory, or to developing a plan of action based on facts discovered, then the art studio should, as a matter of necessity, form the basis for an effective and analytical research crucible for an academic discourse. Creative works of art are themselves channels of communication as they convey unwritten messages, subject to interpretations by the beholder, irrespective of culture or language. This article attempts to look at studio practice and how it could form the core of research in the visual arts, considering the fact that most studio artists find it difficult to publish what they practice, as well as generate academic discussions for the development of the sector. It examines the artist's desire to make statements with what he does and how he does it, what inspires him, what message/s he intends to put across, etc. Focus is also on the studio, practice, processes, methods, materials and how all of these can be harnessed for research purposes. Therefore, this paper opines that the dynamics of the creative arts require stage- by- stage documentation of the work process and only then can an effective academic research be created for artistic growth.

Keywords: Research, Studio, Documentation, Practice-led, Studio-led, Artefact

Introduction

Research is ordinarily considered as a close and careful study of an issue to expose facts and information…. (Egonwa, 2012). It is also seen as an investigation undertaken in order to discover new facts, get additional information, etc. (Hornby, 2000). Research can be carried out on virtually anything with the expectation that whatever fact or information that is revealed at the end of the exercise will be useful to society and mankind. In research, attempts are usually made to dig deep into an issue or issues with a view to justifying the reason for which the exercise is embarked on.

Besides, it helps remove the cobwebs of ignorance and doubt from our minds (Obadan, 2012). Research, therefore, is the process of arriving at dependable solutions to problems through the planned systematic collection, analysis, and interpretation of data (Imahe, 2010).

Research in the studio, therefore, involves the study and analysis of works done by an artist in a workplace. This type of research is practice-led, or studio-led. It is so ascribed because in the course of practice, the artist is usually confronted with a lot of challenges and, considering the fact that what he is doing is open-ended, meaning that there is no definite conclusion in mind, the result is determined, usually, by the experimental processes.

Often, many artists find it extremely difficult to put pen to paper and write about their works, and/or talk about what they have observed in the works of others. This deficiency is partly born out of the misimpression that practice and theory hardly go together and partly for lack of knowledge of what to do.

Until recently, most art materials, not specifically art textbooks, were either written by archaeologists, sociologists, or anthropologists who understandably see art through their lenses and create a world of belief which they pass to their audience. The story of art, without doubt, can only be told better by the artists themselves who see art not just as a passion or a pastime, but also as an integral part of existence, an existence that is defined by human creativity.

The process of creating an art piece is a journey, which, sometimes, could be smooth and sometimes rough. The defining factor, however, is dependent on a variety of influences which could include the creative ability of the artist and the desire to pass a message, amongst others. However, in passing a message, one has to first of all understand what one is doing and only then can one successfully convince others to agree with you.

The art studio, be it sculpture, painting, graphics, ceramics, metal design, or textiles, is a place where ideas are generated, executed, and documented. The art studio offers the artist an opportunity to carry out a comprehensive research on what he or she is doing, with lots of things to add and others to be eliminated because in the process of working, many things are thrown up which are worth documenting.

The Artist And The Problem With Research

A good studio for an artist, according to Virbickas (2015), is a very important place. Our creative studios, he continued, might sometimes look like a pile of rubbish or a mixed-up room, but this is where thought-provoking creations are born. Beyond the creation of great works of art, is the insightful generation, possibilities exploration, and product execution through the process of research.

Often times when confronted with the issue of research, most artists shy away from explaining the several research engagements before an art piece comes up, by not knowing exactly what to do and this puts our discipline at a disadvantage. A very good percentage of artists are guilty of this offence and the most culpable, bluntly speaking, are those in academia.

Apart from the fact that the academic artists owe society the duty to do research extensively and publish the same for the growth of the sector, they also should be able to verbalise the same for all to see and appreciate where he or she is coming from. In fact, the only reason we have the paucity of materials that are available for researchers today is this inability to pen the aforementioned on paper. This also, for the academic staff, has become a prerequisite for promotion.

The average artist in the classroom, apart from the reason given above, is not too keen about publication. One reason that cannot be overlooked is the economic issue. It takes a lot of effort to do research and publish and when the economic benefit is very minimal, then it is taken that such effort is not worth the trouble. How many patrons buy art books? Assuming as a university

lecturer one compels students to buy your books, how many are you likely to sell considering the fact that the number of students offering Fine Arts in Nigerian schools is so insignificant.

Many artists hide under the guise that practice and theory hardly go together and while this may be true to some extent, it is not an excuse for someone who has chosen to take up a career in the classroom. Many art teachers in Nigerian higher institutions are today stunted, unable to gain promotions to the next level partly because of their inability to publish articles of research findings. In fact, what is there to publish when there is no attempt at research?

The studio artists, in reference to non-teaching artists, are not doing better either. Even when they are more involved in practice, they contribute virtually very little in the area of research and publication and the reason is not far-fetched. They believe it is not their duty to do research and write in whatever form about their works and the works of others. Their vocation, they assume, is clearly cut out – to satisfy their clients in order to make ends meet.

Looking Inwards

Having said much, the big question arises, "if the artists themselves cannot translate research in the area of art, who will? The story of art can better be told by the artists themselves. Artists, according to Sjoholm (2013), are throughout their careers engaged in new projects, constellations and therefore need to develop new knowledge in order to produce new pieces of art as well as be able to manage their work and live off what they do. Always. Artists engage in research to come up with any new products, form and content. This is therefore to say all art transmutations into new forms are research.

The introduction of the Ph.D programme in the studio area in Nigerian universities, which is believed to have emanated from the UK, is an attempt by many universities across the globe to address this disturbing issue. Though some scholars still argue that a Ph.D in this area is not desirable and therefore a waste of effort, citing the Master of Fine Arts (MFA) degree as a terminal programme in fine and applied arts, the truth is a Ph.D in fine and applied arts is as desirable as a Ph.D in other areas of academia.

The original intention of the degree (Ph.D), according to Irokanulo and Ndubuisi (2013), is to help clarify the process and method of development of an artwork and theorising on them; and show the possibility of its process as a method of research inherent in the creation of art with philosophical and psychological logic.

Hoffert (2008), in an article "*Taking Art Seriously: Understanding Studio Research",* said, "Research has become an increasingly important concept in the visual arts. Encouraged by government policy, universities place emphasis on research output. Artists and art educators describe art making in terms of research, and academic art staff apply for grants as a source of research income". In continuation, Hoffert submitted that "disciplines known for their creativity are now equally acknowledged for their research. 'Practice-led' or 'practice-based' research is becoming an aspect of research discussion, in part to establish the prestige of academic institutions…"

In a quest to express oneself creatively, the visual artist in today's world is saddled with the additional responsibility of ensuring that new frontiers are broken and artistic statements made. Furthermore, in the words of Hoffert, artistic production processes are complex and involve a variety of creative spaces, socialites, and practices. He, however, submitted that within the studio walls, artists engage in individual production and making, and the studio is essentially an individual workshop.

In visual art, research could either be based on the exploration of a new material or technique, or both. One can also look into an old material but applied differentially in a way that will make sense. All these are expected to take place in an art studio. Frank (2014), in her catalogue of forty four Stunning Art Studios, notes that "whatever your artistic studio may look like, its purpose remains the same: a holy place designed specifically for the goal of making art".

The average artist is daily, inadvertently though, involved in research without knowing. As he or she creates, he or she is breaking new grounds; developing new styles and techniques, discovering new things, and the only thing probably not done, ignorantly, is documentation. The biggest problem this paper found is that most artists lack the ability to document what they do, and the gap between where they are and where they ought to be lies squarely on the ability to document stage-by-stage the process of the art production. See figures 1 and 2, as examples of art studios where ideas are translated into practicals.

The methods of studio art are naturally discernible from what the studio artists do (Egonwa, 2012). The principal concern of a studio artist, according to Egonwa, is art production with all it entails. These include the media for production, the techniques, the tools, and of course, the purpose of production. The artist's studio, therefore, offers countless opportunities for the artist who is inclined to research. In the studio, the artist practices his trade, which passes through a process, using certain methods and materials which can all be harnessed to make a statement. While all these are going on, with proper coordination and documentation, research is already in progress. Njoku (2011) expresses his experience in the studio this way:

> Unlike the previous unsuccessful effort, the researcher stumbled on bitumen accidentally. At the instance of this discovery, different mixtures of bitumen with other materials gave birth to a new medium which the researcher here refers to as 'bitunjoplast'. The main objective of this report is to document this process of discovery, its details of technique and method, as it promotes studio scholarship.

It should be noted, however, that research is worthless if it contributes nothing to society. In fact, any research that is worth its effort should be able to make a significant contribution to at least an area of human endeavour. In art, deep, intense observation is the core because practice is the centre point in studio research.

It is pertinent to note that there is a difference between research in art and research on/about art. While the former is about the doing in the art, practice generated, workings in the studio, with emphasis on materials, techniques, styles, practical approach, the latter has to do with research in documented art, as in art history, theoretical, which may not be in-depth and intense. Research in art gives room for experiment and most times the result is suggested by how the artist works. The

studio work is mostly very unpredictable unlike in the sciences where there is usually a logical way of achieving results.

The Need For Documentation

In every research effort, documentation is key. A deliberate, concise and precise jotting down of the work process, stage by stage, is very important; as this will enable the researcher/artist to remember what he/she has done without leaving the details out. There is the tendency that certain details could be forgotten and left out if they are not written down. The journey of an art piece starts from conception, and then sketches, if the artist so desires. After these stages, a lot more



Fig.1: A Painting Studio: Source: Osawaru, I. R. (2025)

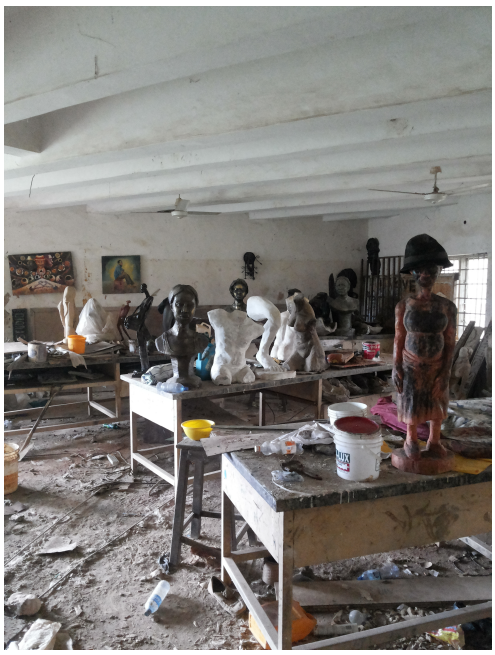


Fig.2: A Sculpture Studio: Source: Osawaru, I. R. (2025)

follows and these have to do with, mostly, the practical processes. Here, styles, techniques, materials, methods and data analysis all come on the front burner and the reasonable thing to do, as an artist/researcher is to document everything stage by stage as the work progresses.

The need for documentation in the art studio cannot be overemphasised because this is what makes the difference between the researcher and others in the trade. Naturally, the desire to jot down every bit and every detail of the work process comes easily if one is research-oriented. And for the not-so-gifted, a deliberate process of learning to document events as work progresses is a panacea for breaking the deadlock in research stagnation.

Given that research in visual art is primarily centred on creating artworks and analysing them, as well as critically examining visual phenomena to generate and advance knowledge for teaching and understanding of the historical, cultural, conceptual, and psychological components of the arts, the researcher is duty-bound to use the insight gained to educate, inform, and progress the course of the sector. This particularly becomes more intriguing when the setting is an academic institution. Sullivan (2010) opined that:

> Visual arts practices pursued in art schools and universities have often had to respond to questions of identity and purpose posed by internal and external sources. This is part of a rich historical legacy that can be traced through modernism, to postmodernism, and to the present "liquid times" that Zygmunt Bauman (2007) so eloquently describes.

He (Sullivan) concluded that "the contemporary artist today is part theorist, performer, installer, writer, entertainer, and shaman".

Recommendations

The average artist, irrespective of his calling, owes society the singular responsibility of promoting arts in all ramifications. One of the ways in which the artist can make meaningful contributions to the development of the sector is by ensuring that he leaves a landmark, not only by creating pieces of art and exposing them for public consumption, but should endeavour to document his processes and procedures for achieving his finished works. By this, the artist should keep a record of the progress of work as he explores, manipulates, and investigates with materials and tools, even as he attempts to adopt a new style. Every stage of work in progress is worth documenting because they may turn out to be valuable assets in the future.

The stage-by-stage documentation of events in the course of the production of art works in the studio is the panacea for the lukewarm attitude being exhibited by many creative artists toward research and publications. The art studios offer the best opportunities for artists to express themselves creatively in both the practical and theoretical realms.

The development of art, generally, should be the responsibility of all stakeholders. Either as a student/trainee, teacher, studio artist, curator, or vendor, everyone has a role to play in ensuring that art attains its unique position in society. Growth and development are usually a result of committed and deliberate efforts aimed at success-oriented goals, and no other professionals would build the structure of art more than the artists themselves, hence the need for art practitioners to take advantage of the opportunities in the studios to make the desired difference.

The academic artists, as a matter of necessity, should stir the ship of development by virtue of their privileged position as teachers and researchers. This category of artists holds the pillar of development in the art sector in view of the fact that they are statutorily empowered to carry out research, train up-coming artists, and affect their communities positively. They have both the classrooms and the studios at their disposal, which should be melting points for development, and failure to take advantage of these opportunities would be a disservice to society.

CONCLUSION

The artists, academic and studio artists alike, can achieve proficiency in research if the right attitude and approach are adopted. The artist is not in any way less intelligent than other professionals, except that the average Nigerian artist, like his counterpart elsewhere, is a little bit careless and individualistic. This attribute, as negative as it is, is pleasantly true, and this to an extent is partly responsible for the lull currently being experienced in this sector, research-wise.

Many artists in academia have refused to take advantage of some government organs like the Tertiary Education Trust Fund (TETFUND), an intervention body aimed at giving financial support to academics in higher institutions in Nigeria for research and academic scholarship. The art professionals, particularly in Nigeria, need to understand that it is not all about money. Leaving a legacy of professionalism and fostering an ideal ethic for academic advancement is something that even money cannot buy.

The artists need to wake up and set their own agenda as well as take absolute control of their destiny. There are hundreds of thousands of challenges out there that need the artists' attention, and taking up these challenges by way of research will go a long way to promoting the culture of scholarship in an area that is wrongly believed to lack literary depth.

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