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ENUGU on my mind

Dapo
Adeniyi

The soul of the city was de-

pressed, notwithstanding that it had been twenty-eight whole years since the war ended. Enugu rose each morning and went about its normal business without enthusiasm, without gist. But as prominent citizen and artist Bona Ezeudu would opine, what accounted for the present prostration, weighing down on the terrain of the city was the scourge of auto gas scarcity - for the area had witnessed no single official supply in ten months.

Without question, engaging art criticism and literature had the power - and probably not the right-to dictate or affect attitude among creators of art

Echoes from the war resonated variously still, even beyond the present non-exultant atmosphere and mood. Mokwugo Okoye the social scientist author and nationalist had just died and the city was waiting to bury him; writer Cyprian Ekwensi told me only the night previous in his Lagos home that the civil war yielded far more casual-

'After the War',
by Chris Afuba



ties after it ended than within the actual shooting war. Proving uncontrovertibly that the war was history for other sections of the country but memory for those of these parts.

I stood rooted in front of one of the most striking emblems of memory, exorcised out of an artist. The tag underneath the piece of sculpture appropriately christened it as 'After The War'. Its creator, Chris Afuba informed me that this was the one sculpture that he was most attached to, emotionally, in his entire gallery. It comprised of two materials significantly - wood and iron; a rugged stump of wood, its coarse exterior well resembling the trunk of a decomposing body, a human stump, head and limbs severed. The human vertebra being imitated by slats of worked metal wedged inbetween.

Afuba said,

'when you visited a scene of battle a few days afterwards, that was what you saw'.

When asked if he already had a price in mind for the piece, he promptly returned that a work like that was priceless; he had no intention of parting with it really, except to public acquisition like the National Gallery of Art or to the United Nations, if they ever conceived of the idea of using works of art to preach peace wherever peace was being breached in the world.

Enugu and by extension, Nsukka had, arguably, the highest concentration of well endowed visual artists in Nigeria, possibly in West Africa. Some with histories of significant thrusts to the farthest ends of the earth. But the artists belonged to colonies and cliques on the grounds of which annual and bi-annual exhibitions were organised, mainly in Enugu and Lagos. Notable among influential coteries were the Aka and the *Visual Orchestra*. Additionally many of these artists appeared to be living by the art, with marketing agents and galleries doing promotional work in Lagos and Onitsha. And more than living by the art they were also living the art; homesteads were either cluttered with art materials like wood, trunks of trees and scrap metal or the visitor was greeted at the doormouths by grotesque, scary figures and masks.

Obi Ekwenci applied the brakes suddenly and reversed, right in the middle of road.

**El Anatsui
at his
Nsukka
Studio**



Neither myself nor Nsikas Essien had seen it through rain-drops over the windshield-an elaborate mound of roots, encrusted with wet clay, formerly in use by some traffic police, now abandoned, as a road checkpoint. Ekwenchi would be heard mulling over the sight for the rest of the night, scheming on how best to retrieve the material to his home and convert to some artistic ends.

El Anatsui

The almost youthful mien in the video clips which we reviewed with Ola Oloidi, Nsukka's art history teacher corroborated the artist's present statement about having been in the university town for some twenty-five years. The figure sculpting through monumental wood trunks with a chain saw in far away Brazil preparatory to the 1992 *Earth Summit* in Rio lacked all the rings of grey hair

presently forming around the tapestries of his head.

Not only has age honoured him, his work more so, placing him in the bracket of Africa's brightest and most revered artists. His unique design elements on accumulated narrow planks and broad wooden pillars being his signature.

Hues of black and ash ink running in the tracks of sculpted surfaces, mediated occasionally by solitary jarring primary colours, rendered his motifs the ultimate reminders of textile patterns.

And then there was the series called "broken pots" which shared the intricate detail and sophistication of the wooden sculptures. Among early milestones was his nomination to the 44th Venice Biennale in 1990 where he represented Africa and the Kansai Telecasting Corporation prize announced during the Osaka Triennale in Japan in 1995. And following a most recent exhibition at the October Gallery in London, a multilingual book of essays describing the sculptor's thematic and stylistic preoccupations, *El Anatsui: A sculpted History of Africa* was published, edited by John Picton of the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London with contributions from writers as widespread as Yukiya Kawaguchi, Gerard Houghton and Elisabeth

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Laouschek among others.

The publication shows off Anatsui experimenting with hi-tech tools which elevate his art to a type of post-modern techno-art. Just as in the video clips recorded during working residences in Germany, Brazil and Denmark, testimonies to craft and modes of execution abound in the depth and through distentions of those boundaries within which contemporary African artists normally traffic, particularly those on the continent. Even more prominent were documentations of the sculptor's forays into the regions of installation art.

The artist's spacious studio on the edge of Nsukka town, toward the forests, a converted warehouse, held a sizeable collection of works in progress, even though he gave the assurance from the outset - in his campus apartment - that there wasn't much there to see. Works in various stages of completion, and many to all appearances

Peter Ezeh's reaction to Ikwuemesi's comments on installation art was a personal response of course but PACA provided frequent critical and intellectual sparring sessions for its members as a unique characteristic of its own programmes.

virtually completed, dominated the long walls, including recent arrivals from the October gallery exhibition in London. Least conspicuous, in the shadows, on one edge, was *Devotees, 1987* a variable installation on black Afara (quality of wood) which loomed so large on the pages of Picton's book but was, opposite to the photographer's magnification, only 43cm in height, 43cm in width and 30cm depth.

Anatsui opened a couple of windows and ushered in rays of sunshine.

He would soon complain that my photographing was unable to take advantage of the room's natural light, even as my little compact lens camera began to flash its own light. The window also ushered in other kinds of spectacle: a little hotel with short-time room service where the artists assured me he had observed many campus acquaintances arrive with furtive lovers and dissolve

into the accommodation, with the least knowledge that they were being perceived.

Two questions bothered me even as he traced lacerated and burned surfaces of woodwork with his fingers. The first was on the safety of the art pieces, considering the fact that the window had slight wooden doors without the spiderwork of iron reinforcement that is a must on Lagos buildings. He turned, midstride, in astonishment, as though he had just heard the most ridiculous question of the year, then burst into laughter -

'you mean to say a burglar might break in and the works stolen? Look, I have left completed works out in the open for days. No one, I suspect, spared so much as a glance, let alone stole them!'

I continued to follow him through the hall.

'Besides, if you stole them where would you display or exhibit them? Naturally I will get to hear and would be arriving with the police!'

We both laughed.

Art Societies and Changing Attitudes

Why installation?

(For there were a significant number of his current and recent collection under this description)

Should an African artist bother about fashionable streams of thought from the West, allow himself/herself to be controlled, yield to the times, heed the voice of art writers who spurn new concepts and dictated attitude changes in the world art?

El spent the rest of the evening responding to my queries, joined providentially by the art historian, Ola Oloidi, just as Chris Afuba had, before them in Enugu.

Without question, engaging art criticism and literature had the power - and probably not the right - to dictate or affect attitude among creators of art. Enriching the picture were recent and not-so-recent tomes of literature on African art and artists, and journals and volumes of criticism of which a cross-section of African artists were evidently not unaware. African exhibition catalogues interestingly became as important a forum for discourse, dissemination and influence upon the thinking of other artists as the newspaper and magazine columns and formal book publications. Reaction to world trends and directions like installation art for example, or installation and perfor-

mance, video projection etc. etc. have been documented through intentionary statements in the exhibition catalogue. When it involved group exhibitions or art society exhibitions, we had the benefit of a group reaction even if it was one representative voice speaking on behalf of others. And when the speaker stepped beyond lines of mutual consensus, there were rejoinders on individual bases or some sort of group remodification. An archetype being the response to Krydz Ikwemesi's introduction to the Pan African Circle of Artists biennale in Lagos in 1997. Peter Ezeh's reaction to Ikwemesi's comments on installation art was a personal response of course but PACA provided frequent critical and intellectual sparring sessions for its members as a unique characteristic of its own programmes.

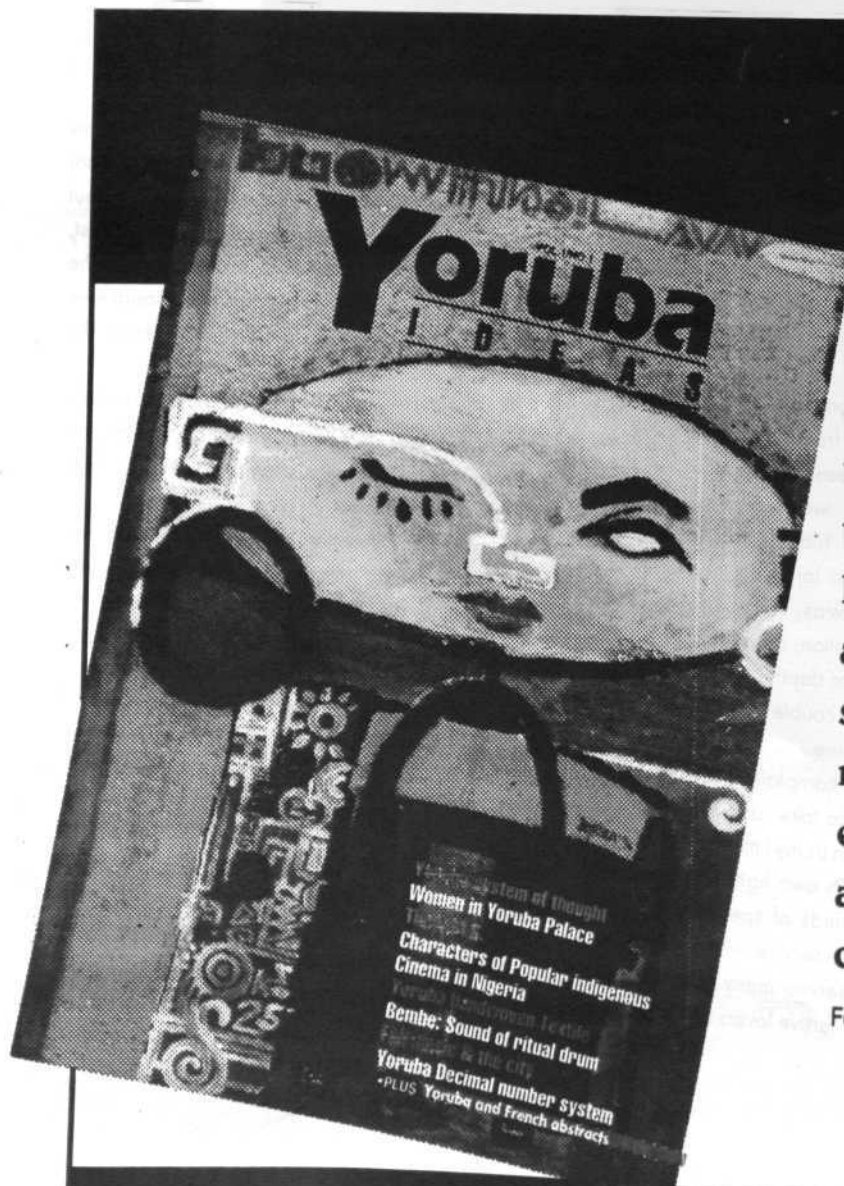
We include this twosome for illustration.

PACA interestingly made no pretences about treating whatever sides it chose seriously, with the possible objective of affecting attitude among its own creative constituency.

Anatsui spoke for no one but himself.

Amazingly, his views were the exact replications of those that Afuba had expressed in response to similar questions in his studio in Enugu.

Rather than express fear that the West was recolonising the mind of the African artist, Anatsui and Afuba said that the West was borrowing far too much from the continent - installation art for example, they said, was the most conspicuous sight in any African clothes and yam tuber market, where wares were installed daily, in striking fashions, to invite patronage. **GR**



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