

## THE ROLE AND IMPORTANCE OF CONTEXT IN ART

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### Abstract

Often, artworks are considered in line with their physical properties alone; neglecting other vital elements, which holistically makes the art piece what it is. It is for this reason that this paper sets out to re-examine and re-emphasise the need for the consideration of the context in artistic evaluation. The paper's argument is however based on the submissions of Grigoriev (2005), who highlighted the shortcomings of the empiricist's approach to art consideration in his paper titled *Living Art, Defining Value: Artworks and Mere Real Things*. Therefore, it is in line with Danto's idea on the contextual consideration of art, that this paper offers its opinions. The paper concludes on the note that, to put art in context is to view the art from several possible angles, all in a bid to achieve a clearer understanding of the factors that make the work what it is.

**Keywords:** Importance, Context and Art

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### Introduction

Growing up in Ilorin Kwara State in the mid-1990s, the writer had little or no knowledge about the peculiarities of the various cultures and ethnicities, which abound in Nigeria. All he knew was that Corper Fiful, who lived in his area, was a Hausa man, from the Northern part of Nigeria. Actually, according to oral accounts from the 'area', as a serving member of the National Youth Service Corp (N.Y.S.C.), Corper Adamu (his actual name) was posted to a Local Government owned public school in the writer's area then, to teach English. However, on his first day in the school, after he was introduced

to the pupils by the Head Teacher, his response goes thus "You fiful are bery nice!" What he meant to say was "You people are very nice!" Since that day virtually everyone forgot his real name; his appellation changed from "Corper Adamu" to "Corper Fiful" In his ignorance, what he found strange was Corper Fiful's inability to pronounce these words appropriately.

Another cultural peculiarity the writer found strange at a first encounter is the Gbagyi's load-carrying culture, where the shoulder is used in carrying loads as opposed to the head, which most cultures use. As the writer's academic sojourn brought him to the Northern part of Nigeria,

specifically Zaria in Kaduna State, he acquired some fresh insights which cleared some of his doubts and culture-shocks. On the other hand, the table got turned, when the 'Northerners' started complaining about the Yoruba greeting culture. According to them, if you help a Yoruba man or favour him in any way, when he sees you tomorrow his greeting will be "thanks for yesterday!"; after two days it changes to "thanks for two days ago"; and so on.

If only these distinctive cultural manifestations were considered in line with their various historical, cultural and sociological backgrounds, which are vital contextual ingredients, perhaps they would have been considered less strangely. In the same vein, some people consider some genre of art as shocking or bizarre. Often, artworks are considered in line with their physical properties alone; neglecting other vital elements, which holistically make the art piece what it is. Considering that artworks sometimes intentionally possess some qualities, which are not exactly beautiful; ignoring these vital elements which will aid the proper comprehension of artwork, can only lead one to make a kitsch evaluation at best. It is for this reason that this paper sets out to re-examine and re-emphasise the need for the consideration of the context in artistic evaluation.

## Conceptual Framework

Over the years, many theories of art, which are channelled towards achieving a better comprehension of art, have been evolved by different art scholars. The aesthetic theories of art, the feminist theory, the formalist theory, psychoanalytic theory, and gestalt theory, are few examples of such theories. However, as effective as some of these theories may be, in aiding the evaluative process of an art piece, they also have their limitations. One of such limitations lies in the simple fact that some of these theories have a prescribed scope as well as an 'ideal' lens through which the artwork must be viewed. The implication of this is that other elements that would have equally helped the appreciation and understanding of the art in question, are most likely ignored.

However, this paper is not standing against the use of these theories or analytical tools; it is only prescribing the use of analytical tools with a wider scope. This standpoint is mainly based on the submissions of Grigoriev (2005), who highlighted the shortcomings of the empiricist's approach to art consideration in his paper titled *Living Art, Defining Value: Artworks and Mere Real Things*. For instance, the empiricist's attitude towards art, according to Grigoriev (2005) supports the idea that:

Experiencing an artwork is tantamount to being affected by its manifest and objectively verifiable properties. Thus, considerations on the historical and cultural contexts in which the work was produced, as well as the intentions of the work's author, may be of interest in and of themselves; however, they have no essential bearing on the reception and evaluation of an artwork qua aesthetic product.

The author further explains that a view such as the empiricists' (which views the artwork through its objectively verifiable properties), only enables one to treat artworks in the same way one treats ordinary objects or events. "Just like the warmth one feels when standing near a hot stove can be directly attributed to the properties of the heated metal, the aesthetic pleasure we experience in encountering an artwork can be unambiguously traced to certain properties of an artwork analysed qua a physical object." This analytical view draws attention to the artwork as the supreme entity, and by extension, the artist as the master craftsman. As such, all other elements, both cultural, historical among others, are ignored. More specifically, Grigoriev (2005) submits that:

The empiricist approach to art...places very strict and narrow-minded constraints on interpretation as a component in the appreciation of artworks, practically reducing the hermeneutic aspect of the audience's involvement with the artwork to nil...From an art-historical perspective, the empiricist stance is guilty of ignoring properties that artwork may acquire by virtue of its placement in a particular context; i.e., it underplays the semantic properties of the work in favour of physical ones. An empiricist, therefore, fails to account for the fact that aside from generating perceptual experiences and artwork also, and perhaps, primarily, generates a certain meaning, conveys a certain message, the actual content of which depends on and is necessarily mediated by the cultural-historical circumstances of the work's emergence and presentation."

The contextual approach to art consideration is therefore considered the right tool, for bridging the analytical gaps, created by the empiricist and the formalist's approach (which is mainly based on the physicality of the artwork) to art

appreciation. In specific terms, Danto in Deines (2011:28) says that "to appreciate the work of art for what it is, we have to recognize its specific determining properties. Perceiving it merely as a material object cannot be sufficient, because some of its determining properties are relational, and hence not directly exhibited." The author further explains that what is decisive for the identity of a work of art is, therefore not only its characteristics as a material object but rather the historical and cultural context in which it was made. It is therefore in line with the foregoing Danto's idea, that this paper offers its opinions.

### **The Role of Context in Art Consideration**

Having established the shortcomings of the empiricist approach, in its negligence of salient contextual ingredients, which would have aided and resulted in better consideration of artworks, this segment of the paper, therefore attempts highlighting shreds of evidence in the literature, on the implications of context in art consideration and appreciation. Marien and Fleming (2005: xix) give an illustration of John Dowland's love song composed more than 400 years ago in the introductory part of their book titled Fleming's Arts and Ideas. According to them, Dowland wrote: "My thoughts are wingde with hops". Because

spelling was not standardized then, the authors explain that it was acceptable to write 'winged' as 'wingde'. But what about 'hops'? Is Dowland sending warm thoughts to a lover with a package of the grain used as the basic flavouring ingredient of beer? Unlikely! 'Hops' is an alternative spelling of 'hopes'; thus the singer's thoughts are winged with hopes. The authors conclude by writing that "like language, the vocabularies of all the visual and tonal arts are needed to be understood as they were in their times." Deductively, there are styles and trends which are peculiar to some persons, at a particular age or time. A failure to put the age and time of production into consideration will most likely result in misunderstanding and consequently, the misinterpretation of creative production. Most human manifestations, though strange and sometimes considered far from the social aggregate of what constitutes a norm, emanate as a result of some specific set of reasons. Just as in the case of Corper Fiful, a closer, as well as multi-dimensional consideration of the case at hand just, might shed more light on the reasons for some certain seemingly strange manifestations.

Sometimes, the contextual consideration of behavioural patterns makes vivid, reasons for such patterns. As a result, instead of reacting in ignorance based on the behaviour, with a clearer understanding of

the reason for such behaviour, one reacts accordingly. For instance, Fanon in King, Perry, and Durbridge, (1999:8) writes:

I meet a Russian, or a German, who speaks French badly. With gestures I try to give him the information that he requests, but, at the same time, I can hardly forget that he has a language of his own, a country and that perhaps he is a lawyer or an engineer there. In any case, he is foreign to my group, and his standards must be different. When it comes to the case of the Negro, nothing of the kind. He has no culture, no civilisation, no long historical past.

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Referring to the ill-treatment of the colonized by the colonizers, the authors quote a portion of Frantz Fanon's book titled *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952). Ibrahima Frantz Fanon (July 1925-December 1961) was a Cultural Theorist.

Although Fanon assumes an antagonistic stance towards Africans (or the black race) here, the statement generally connotes his recognition of a foreigner's contextual peculiarities, which goes on to form the foreigner's identity. From language to his nationality, to occupation, all these make up

the Russian or German to whom Fanon refers in the foregoing. Similarly, Hall (1994:392) writes:

We all write and speak from a particular place and time, from a history and a specific culture. What we say is always 'in context' positioned. I was born into and my childhood and adolescence in a lower-middle-class family in Jamaica. I have lived all my adult life in England, in the shadow of the black diaspora – 'in the belly of the beast.' I write against the background of a lifetime's work in cultural studies. If the paper seems preoccupied with the diaspora experience and its narratives of displacement, it is worth remembering that all disclosure is 'placed', and the heart has its reasons...

Here, Hall gives reasons why some readers might find his writing tilted towards some certain ideologies. Recognizing that his education, family background, upbringing, and the likes, have formed his personality over the years, he prepares the mind of the reader to see things from his viewpoint and not from theirs. Again, an adequate understanding and appreciation of a person

lies in the recognition of the individual's cultural, social, psychological, educational, as well as geographical peculiarities.

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Hall writes about his background and other contextual factors that collectively form his personality, as an introduction to his paper titled; Cultural Identity and Diaspora

To consider subject matters concerning their contexts, aids the understanding of such an idea, as intended by the author. Ideas, which are the cradle of most innovations, both creative and scientific, are formed based on several factors. One's experiences, challenges, education, relationships, religion, socio-cultural leanings, environment, amongst many others; are few of the factors that influence and inform the various ideas, the human mind generates. According to Adewumi (2017:31), "all forms of artistic expressions are driven by an idea or a philosophy...some sculptors' philosophies are derived from either materials, techniques used in manipulating such materials, or the milieu in which such sculptors reside."



**Fig. 1:** Baboon and Young, Pablo Picasso, 1951. Bronze, 53cm. Museum of Modern Art, New York. Courtesy of Adams (2007:21).

The Milieu—context in which artists reside have been seen to bear somewhat heavy influence and impact on the formulation of their creative ideologies over the years. This is evident in the work of Picasso, where he conceptualized creative ideas from his immediate environment (Fig. 1). Adams (2007:21)The author cites Picasso's work as an example under the subtopic Art Inspired by Nature and the Environment.

states that "Picasso's mind was unusually creative and his ability to transform nature into brilliant, often humorous, works of art were prodigious. In the case of the baboon, he took a visual reference – the small car –

and gave it artistic form." In the same line of thought, diverse features of an artist's environment, as well as his/her identity, are usually mixed in his/her creative production. As such, several authors have advocated that to fully understand a creative work, it is not enough to view it as an aesthetic entity; a recipient of artwork will do well, to view artwork as a product of several contextual factors. According to Sporre (2009:29):

...contextual criticism seeks meaning by examining related information 'outside' the artwork, such as the artist's life, his or her culture, social, and political conditions and philosophies, public and critical reactions to the work, and so on. These can all be researched and applied to the work to enhance perception and understanding. This approach tends to view the artwork as an artefact generated from particular contextual needs, conditions, and/or attitudes.

Honour and Fleming (2002:27) also explain that regardless of how the formal qualities may be to us, works of art cannot be properly or fully understood unless related to their original context – to the beliefs, hopes and fears of the people by whom and for whom they were made. The authors

further explain that, in many works of art, there are several superimposed levels of meaning which cannot always be recovered. It is only by paying special attention to the context

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Here, Sporre wrote about the different analytical tools in art history. The author also explained the essence of contextual criticism in art.

of production, that such hidden meanings are unravelled. In support of the foregoing authors' assertions, as well as, to reinforce their standpoint, an instance is required.

The reason for the depiction of both Yoruba and Ghanaian cultural patterns in the sculptures of Muyideen Adio Jaji can only be understood if the sculptures are subjected to a contextual interrogation. By so doing, one will understand that being a Nigerian sculptor who hails from Kwara state, Muyideen spent a significant part of his early years in Ghana, before finally settling in Nigeria (Adewumi 2017:6). Thus, the dual cultural portrayal in his sculptures is as a result of the socio-cultural influence of his background, having emerged from two cultural and political backgrounds.

In furtherance, the power of context in art also lies in its capacity to evoke diverse forms of emotional and psychological

reactions from an audience. This can be seen in the work produced by Mu'azu Mohammed Sani's *In the Grave* (Fig. 2), which evoked negative reactions from an audience during an exhibition in 1993 at Ahmadu Bello University Zaria.



**Fig. 2:** 'In the Grave', Mu'azu Mohammed Sani, 1993. Collage (Mixed Media), 90 x 60cm. Courtesy of Adewumi and Labija (2017:311).

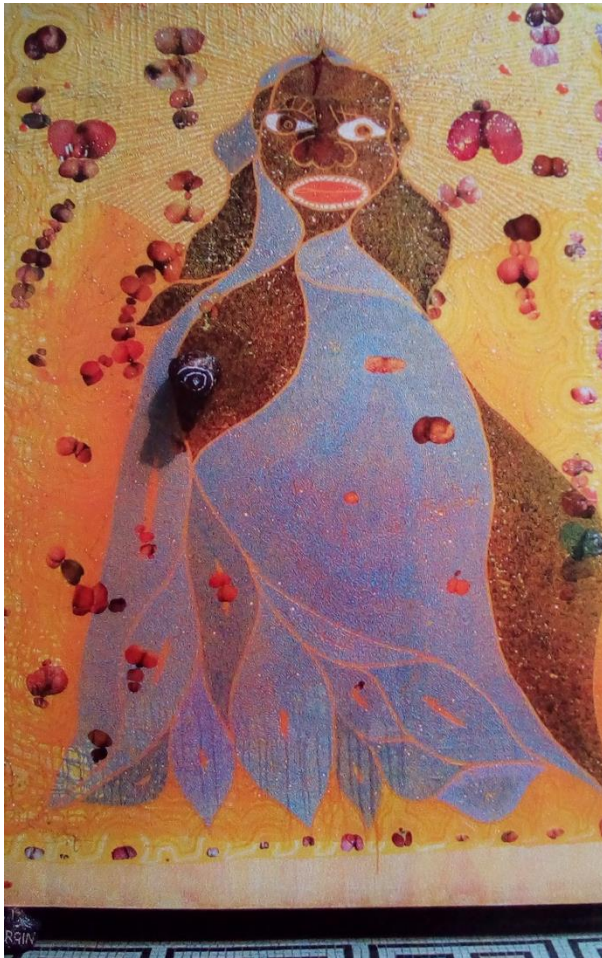
According to Sani in Adewumi and Labija (2017:311), "the work 'In the Grave' caught the attention of a member of the audience who found the collage blasphemous to his religion- Islam. He then rushed to where the work was hung for exhibition, removed it and made an effort to destroy the work."

Let us assume this piece by Sani was displayed in a traditional African context, perhaps the pre-colonial era, when the traditional African religion and ancestral worship had not been interrupted by the incursion of other religions, such as Christianity and Islam, such violent reactions to the painting would not have ensued. This is as a result of the fact that the audience of the painting in such a context would not probably have contention over foreign religious issues. As such, the painting could not have been considered blasphemous; therefore, no violent reaction is required. However, as a result of the time, place, religious inclinations and distribution, as well as the socio-cultural peculiarities of the 1994 exhibition of *In the Grave*, violence was virtually inevitable.

Similarly, Chris Ofili's painting titled *The Holy Virgin Mary* (Fig. 3), also evoked violent reactions and criticisms from its audience. As explained by Janson and Janson (2006:4), the work was displayed in late 1999 during an exhibition titled *Sensation: Young British Artists* from the Saatchi Collection, at the Brooklyn Museum, New York. A British of African descent, Ofili used dots of paint, glitter, map pins, and collaged images of genitalia from magazines, to depict a black Virgin Mary. Instead of hanging on the wall, the painting is placed on two large wads of



elephant dung, which had been a signature of the artist's large canvases since 1991.



**Fig. 3:** The Holy Virgin Mary, Chris Ofili, 1996. Paper Collage, Oil Paint, Glitter, Polyester Resin, Map Pins and Elephant Dung on Linen. 244 x 183cm. The Saatchi Gallery London. Courtesy of Janson and Janson (2006:5)

Several reactions and interpretations of this Ofili's creation filled the exhibition space and the media. Notable among these reactions was that of the Mayor of New York at the time, Rudolf Giuliani. Barrett (2003:57) says:

The picture and the artist achieved instant notoriety when the mayor of

the New York, Rudolph Giuliani, condemned it, calling it 'sick stuff.' The Museum is partially funded by city tax dollars, and the mayor demanded that the Museum remove the painting from the exhibition...he threatened to withhold the city's annual contribution to the Museum of \$7.2million...withhold a promised \$20million for building improvements, dismiss the Museum's board of directors, and reclaim the city-owned building. When the Museum refused to capitulate to the Mayor's demands, the city withheld the half-million-dollar October payment and sued to evict the Museum from its city-owned site. The Museum filed a lawsuit of its own, claiming its First Amendment rights had been violated by the freeze on its subsidy from the city.

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Regarding the interpretive possibilities and dynamics in art, Barrett writes on the different interpretations of Chris Ofili's painting titled; The Holy Virgin Mary.

Eventually, the court ruled in favour of the Museum. Fundamentally, all these

happened because of a painting, or better still, someone's interpretation of a painting. Depending on who is viewing artwork, the meanings an artwork can generate are quite numerous. Consequently, art has over the years, suffered misinterpretations, to fulfil personalised agendas. Corroboratively, Janson and Janson (2006:5) writes:

The public outrage at Ofili's work is one in a long tradition that probably goes back to the beginning of image-making. Art has consistently provoked outrage, just as it has inspired pride, admiration, love, and respect, and the reason is simple: Art is never an empty container; rather, it is a vessel loaded with meaning, subject to multiple interpretations, and always representing someone's point of view.

Perhaps the foregoing assertion is the reason why Ofili in Barrett (2003:59) says "the people who are attacking this painting are attacking their interpretation, not mine." In addition, Adewumi and Labija (2017:311) submit that "in some sense, emotional reactions to artwork such as this could sometimes connote the success of the artwork, as it has been able to communicate to diverse individuals, some of the ideas that are held sacred in their hearts."

The Amsterdam News, according to Barrett (2003:59) has a different interpretation of the Mayor's outrageous reaction to Ofili's piece: "We believe that his sensibilities were shocked by the belief that Mother Mary happened to be some colour other than the colour that he has accepted for everything good and pure and right and white." Putting this painting in context, if this painting was displayed in Africa, asides for its 'pornographic' features, the idea of

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From the somewhat violent reactions that Chris Ofili's painting *The Holy Virgin Mary* attracted, the authors wrote on the significance of interpretations in art.

representing the Holy Virgin Mary as a black woman would have been somewhat well received. However, staging such a display of racial conceptualisation, in a Eurocentric West, will most likely create such mixed reactions. It is in line with this thought that Janson and Janson (2006:5) say that "because the context for looking at art constantly changes, our interpretations and insights into art and entire periods evolve as well."

When *The Holy Virgin Mary* is subjected to contextual analysis, one will discover that the painting makes exposure of some

crucial aspects of Ofili's socio-cultural and religious backgrounds. The central theme, which is the Virgin Mary, makes clear that Ofili is a Roman Catholic Christian. Though he is British, the black conceptualisation of the Virgin Mary, points at his African ancestry, specifically of the Yoruba from Nigeria. It could also be interpreted as Ofili's reaction to racial prejudices and subjugations; as such, realising the significance of the Virgin Mary to Christianity, he decides to symbolically represent her as African. The Elephant dung on which he mounts his large canvases suggests his affiliations with Zimbabwe, where elephants are considered sacred. To further buttress the allusions made here, Barrett (2003:59) informs that Ofili revealed that he has a Roman Catholic upbringing and that he is a church-going Catholic. He is British-born with African ancestry. Both his parents were born in Lagos, Nigeria, and their first language is Yoruba. Ofili says he was very moved by the beauty of the African land as he studied and painted for eight weeks in Zimbabwe when he was twenty-four. He rests his paintings on clumps of dung, saying "it's a way of raising the paintings from the ground and giving them a feeling that they've come from the earth rather than simply being hung on a wall."

Another artist, who has experienced violent reactions from his audience for the sake of his creative creation, is Jelili Atiku, a renowned Nigerian performance artist. According to Adewumi and Labija (2017:311), "Atiku was arrested on January 14, 2016, for his performance titled 'Aragamago Will Rid This Land off Terrorism' in the Ejigbo area of Oshodi-Isolo, Lagos State, under the Instructions of Oba Morufu Ojoola of Ejigbo." Using his performances as a satirical tool, Atiku challenges societal ills and perpetrators of such illicit manifestations, in the socio-political arena.

A contextual consideration of artworks, as prescribed by Danto, avails the critic an opportunity to relate and interact with the work through diverse dimensions, as well as, from different points of view. As a result of his or her adoption of this multidimensional approach, the critic stands in a better position, equipped with the necessary tools, for a more apt evaluation and critique of the artwork. In this regard, Marien and Fleming (2005: xix) give an illustration of a tightrope walker, whose agility is being evaluated. For every stage of the test, another tasking dimension is added to the challenge of the tightrope walker. And as these challenges increase, the tightrope walker adopts different approaches to tackle the different

dimensions of the challenge. A final challenge came and the tightrope walker resulted in a combination of approaches and techniques, to surmount the task. The authors conclude by noting that "Just looking and listening to the arts, is like walking a single wire. It requires careful attention and offers rewards. But adding more wires – that is, accounting for the multiple, crisscrossing aspects of art-making – brings increased challenges, which, in turn, yield greater understanding of other people, times and places."

Evaluating art through formalist or empiricist approach alone is more or less like the single wire this tightrope walker started his challenge with. He/she could easily walk across this single wire, but that does not adequately display his/her agility concerning the performance. As such, the full potential of this tightrope walker can only be displayed by a multidimensional challenge. In the same vein, the overall message and symbolism of artwork can only be fully realised, through the adaptation of a multidimensional approach, to the consideration and evaluation of such art.

## Conclusion

In sum, to put art in context is to view the art from several possible angles such as its history and cultural affiliations, all in a bid to achieve a clearer understanding of the factors that make the work what it is. Viewing Chris Ofili's Holy Virgin Mary from his Roman Catholic and African affiliations, for example, enhances the viewer's comprehension of the visual metaphors which are incorporated in the work, by the artist. Perhaps, if these contextual factors were laid bare for the viewers at the Brooklyn Museum, New York in 1999, maybe, the painting would have been considered less blasphemous. However, the beauty of such displays is in their mystery. To rid the painting of its blasphemous reputation would have been denying the painting of its fame. Moreover, as Ofili puts it, the reactions to the painting are based on the viewers' diverse personalised interpretation of the work and not an interpretation imposed by the artist.

If I had understood the implications of mother-tongue interference in the linguistic delivery of the Northerners or humans generally, perhaps Corper Fiful's inability to pronounce those words the way the writer expected would not have been so strange. Also, an understanding of the Gbagyi's reverence and respect for the symbolic essence of the head would have

offered some clarity on the reason for carrying loads on their shoulders, instead of the head. As for the Yoruba greeting culture, the reason for such seemingly incessant greeting is encapsulated in a saying that goes thus: "Bi omode ba dupe

ore ana, yio ri imi gba." This means that if a kid gives gratitude for what was done for him or her yesterday, he or she will surely get another. Therefore, it is as a result of this concept, that the Yoruba offer incessant gratitude.

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