



Art Theories: Sustainability and Enhancement of Art Practice in the Contemporary Times

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ABSTRACT

This paper on art theories: sustainability and enhancement of art practice in the contemporary times expresses the experience of art practitioners in the contemporary times in Nigeria art practice. It unveils the process that art theories and concepts over the years have helped to guide, promote and sustain art practice in the society. Theories of art varies, each of which has its theoretical and philosophical concepts towards promotion of artworks of the contemporary artists. Conceptual art or art concepts such as interpretation, representation and expression are the ideas behind artworks which is very vital to the finished art forms. The importance and benefit of art theories cannot be overemphasized; theories and concepts of art are natural phenomenon in art that are needed for the composition of any artwork. Thus, this paper aims at discussing the overview of art theories and identification of art concepts in work of art in the contemporary art practice. The effect on modern art practice, art theories and its impact on modern day practice in Nigeria. The paper concludes that art theories are vital philosophical principles that guide artists or art practitioners to produce meaningful artworks as it sustains art practice in contemporary times. It recommends that art theories and concepts be implemented in creating artworks. That art theory should be adhered to in this contemporary art practice.

Keywords: Art Theories, Sustainability, Enhancement, Art Practice, Contemporary Times

Introduction

The emergence of art or art education theories over the years of art practices in Nigeria has been one medium which has enabled artist to better identify, explain, interpret and understand artworks. Busch (2009) avers that contemporary art practices are saturated with theoretical knowledge. That means, through theory the essence of art is established and artist can carefully examine and explain the concept of art and rightly distinguish them accordingly. Art theories according to Webster, (2002) is the analysis of the body of facts in their relation to one another. It emphasized that art theory is also an abstract thought, principles and speculation of body of facts. Theory of art or art education sustains and enhances art practice in the society. Art theories examine consciously all aspects of meaning and definitions that explains what art is. The above statement and definition implies that art theory can be explained as precepts, guidelines that artist follow in producing works of art reflecting their feelings and their surroundings. Thus art theories can be seen as assumption or accepted fact, and guided principle that is employed in the work of art which explains and guide analysis of the work.

In contemporary times, art practice and art productions cannot properly be identified, explained without correct application of art theories and concepts especially when it comes to analyzing, interpreting or explaining a work of art. These theories are observed to serve as guide for artists to function optimally in their art practices. There are various art theories, and these theories are embodiment of various ideas that give form in the process of art practice. The following are some of the art theories; art as communication, art as expression, art as representation, art as nature and aesthetic theory or art as beauty. Others are institutional, formalism, empathy, mimesis, Hegelian symbolism theory and much more.

Art practice has been made a lot easier today because of these theories. Some of them will be highlighted in this paper. These theories in contemporary times had been of huge benefit to art and art practitioners. It is imperative that one acquire the knowledge of these theories which aid artist and academia to identify, explain, and define the views concerning the work of art. Thus, to understand and have good knowledge of the concepts of art theories and how crucial it is towards the development of art practice in Nigeria in the contemporary times is not negotiable. This is focus and interest of this paper.

Overview of Art Theories

Theories can be seen from different perspective and have lots of meaning. According to Business Dictionary (2017), theory is a set of propositions, assumption or accepted facts that attempts to produce a plausible or rational explanation of cause and effect (causal) relationships among a group of observed phenomena or guided principle. The Oxford Living Dictionary (2017), also posits theory as a supposition or a system of ideas intended to

explain facts, especially one based on general principles independent of the idea to be experience. Thus art theories can be seen as assumption or accepted fact, and guided principle that is employed in the work of art which explains and guides analysis of the work.

Art theories play important role in art and art practices such as description of aspects of reality that are represented by works of art and explains what they are all about. Describes the nature of artistic process and explains the nature of response to works of art. Different kinds of art theories had existed which were propounded by various art theorists. The essence of propounding these theories was to explain, interpret and develop an assumption concerning artworks. Traditionally, the Oxford Living Dictionary (2017) state that art theory originated late 16th century in the Latin Greek and the word was as well derived from the Greek word *thoros*. Interestingly, Boyd (2005) asserts that the roles of art theory in late 1960s inspired artists to produced artworks that led to the era of art movement in the history of art. The theories of art shed light on the structure and concept of art illuminating the philosophical and the perception of the nature of the work of art. Free Dictionary (2017) corroborates art theory as a branch of philosophy that deals with the nature, expression and perception of beauty as in the time of art. These theories were put together by different artists who understood the times and they set principles to solve aesthetic problems. There are different types of art theories which guide or direct artists to produce and interpret artworks. The following are some of the art theories we shall consider with their proponents and their functionalities:

1. Art as Communication

This theory presents the primary objective of the works of art in the society which is communication. Works of art conveys unambiguous messages to the audience. The message of the artist is never inhibited either by culture or language. Just easy to understand because of the universal language it portrays. Communication expresses the act of conveying information from one entity or group to another through the use of mutually understood signs, symbols and semiotic rules. From ancient times, people have used images to communicate to others. Visual art explores concepts or ideas without requesting written statements. Words are sometimes included and can be an effective complement, but they are not the primary way ideas are conveyed in visual arts. Artists have made drawings, paintings, sculptures, and many other art objects to challenge assumptions, to support causes and to explore deep personal questions. All through the history, art has been used for many purposes including communicating others with artworks. Communication through arts can be achieve in many ways that do not rely on words. Sometimes they are obvious, like a celebratory image of something interesting (political leader). But in other times art works communicate through elements you might not notice at first. Like the choice of colors in a composition, the underlying forms and how elements relate to one another or how the forms are either put together or fractured. Communication presupposes that the works of art are capable of transmitting concrete and definite "messages". For example, Tolstoy holds that the purpose of art is to transmit feelings of brotherhood of man. Many modern thinkers claim communicability as the defining future of all artworks.

2. Art as Expression

Art is all about expression; that is, a situation whereby artists express themselves in a unique language other than spoken or written form, a visual language of communication. Art as expression theory is a product of a movement of the late 19th and early 20th centuries of most leading artists who worked in Germany. Art as Expression was an art that looked inward to the "soul and psyche". According to Ocvirk et al (2006:267) Expressionism is a form of art that tries to reveal the emotional essence rather than to show external appearance. The expressionist (artist) looked inward and sought a direct expression of their passions and terrors. Kathe Kollwiz is one of the most moving artists who specialized in prints or printmaking. Another popular artist was Jackson Pollock, a painter and an abstract expressionist. He emerged in the mid-20th century; that is, in late 1940s and early 1950s. He was known with his convergence work. He derived comfort working with his Canvas on the floor (Hobbs and Duncan, 1992:481).

3. Empathy theory

This theory was propounded by Leo Tolstoy, a Russian born theorist and acclaimed literary legend among other accolades. The theory holds that humans anticipate and make sense of the behavior of others by activating mental processes, if carried into action would produce similar behavior. Popova (2003:1) states that Tolstoy's definition of art "as a form of consciousness frames the essential role of art as a vehicle of communication and empathy." The author alludes that the ability of art to this regard according to the Tolstoy's empathy theory of art is that the activities of art is based on the fact that a man receiving through his sense of hearing is capable of experiencing the emotion which moved the man who expressed it. This includes intentional behavior as well as the expression of emotions. Popova noted that Tolstoy calls this core quality of art as "infectiousness" and upon the artist ability to "infect" and others depends on the very recognition of something as art. Tolstoy's theory has a lot of aspects, one of which he believes is that art is a means of communicating emotions, with the aim of promoting mutual understanding which is a means of expressing one's feelings. If only the spectator or auditor is infected with the feelings the author has felt, it is art to evoke that feeling in oneself by the means of movement, line, colors, sound or forms expressed in works of art, in order to transmit that feeling for others to experience it. Empathy is the capacity to understand or feel what another person is experiencing from within their frame of reference that is the capacity to place oneself in another's position. Definition encompass a board range of emotional state. Types of empathy include cognitive empathy, emotional or affective empathy and somatic empathy:

Classification of Empathy Theory

Empathy is generally classified into two major components affective empathy and cognitive empathy.

Affective empathy

Affective empathy, also known as emotional empathy, is the capacity to respond with an appropriate emotion to another's mental states. Our ability to empathize emotionally is based on emotional contagion being affected by another's emotional or arouse state. This type of empathy is subdivided into two scales:

1. Empathic concern: sympathy and compassion for other in response to their state of being.
2. Personal distress: self-centered feelings of discomfort and anxiety in response to another are suffering. There is no consensus regarding whether personal distress is a basic form of empathy or instead does not constitute empathy. There may be a developmental aspect to this subdivision, like the way infants responds to distress, and by the time they are two (2) they can start to respond in order-oriented way trying to help, comfort and share, proofing the theory of Tolstoy to be true and effective.

Cognitive empathy

Cognitive empathy is the capacity to understand another's perspective or mental state. The terms social cognitive, perspective-taking, theory of the mind and metalizing are often used synonymously. But due to scientific proof comparing the theory of mind with that of empathy it is unclear whether these are equivalent. Cognitive empathy can be subdivided into the following scales

1. Perspective-taking; the tendency to spontaneously adopt others psychological perspectives.
2. Fantasy; the means to identify with fictional characters.
3. Tactical or Strategic empathy; the deliberate use of perspective-taking to achieve certain desire.

This theory deals with the feelings of an artist and also enable the artist express and communicate those feeling through art works. This theory helps artist to pass messages that can develop arts in the society.

4. Institutional Theory

The institutional theory is also an art theory which was propounded by Arthur Coleman Danto and George Dickie. The theory is widely accepted with theoretical posture that points to rational myths, isomorphism, and legitimacy. This theory focuses on the deeper and more resilient aspects of social structure Scot (2008). This is a theory of art that talks about the nature of art in the context of an institution: Robert J. Yanal in his essay on Danto confirms that a work of art in the classificatory sense is an artifact on which a group of persons are acting on behalf, Institutional theories also form one of the theoretical bases for the study. Yanal (1998) posits that "to say that something is a work of art is to imply that it is a thing of interest and of worth". However, it is not the purely private taste of a single individual which hones something sufficiency to make it art. Neither is it the decision of the general public, but rather the joint verdict of the republic of art.

Institutional theory is a theory that deepens the processes by which structures, schemes, rules, norms and routines are established as authoritative guidelines for a piece of artwork, Binkley (2017) opines that perhaps for the most minimal institutional theory of art to be a piece of art, an item needs only be indexed as an artwork by an artist.

5. Symbolism theory

Symbolism is an art movement of French, Russian and Belgian originated from poetry and spread to other arts which started in 1886 by Jean More as in Le Figaro. Balakian, (1967) and Conwry (2007) opine that as opposed to impressionism in which the emphasis was on the reality of the suggested ideas through symbol and emphasized on the meaning behind the forms, lines, shapes, and colors. This 19th century, symbolism spread to all areas of arts and influenced the European and American whose artist communicated ideas through symbols instead of bluntly depicting reality. Symbolism develops new and often abstract means to express psychological truth and the physical world laid a spiritual reality, Symbolists could take the ineffable such as dreams and visions and give it form. Occasionally, symbolism could be confusing due to the fact that we use the word to refer to the study of symbols or iconography in artworks, but it also refers to a specific movement which is usually grouped with the other post-impressionism, so it will not be entirely accurate to call it "post-impressionist".

Origin of Symbolism

Symbolism first appeared as a literary movement that opposed rationalism and materialism that dominated Western culture in the late 19th century. The history of the movement can be traced back to 1886 when the writer, Jean Moreas published his famous symbolist manifesto. The manifesto proclaimed that every person, natural element and object should be used to represent a symbol of a deeper idea or emotion. Moreso believed that, rather than replicating reality, artist should suggest it with symbols. Though it began as a literary movement, symbolism was quickly adopted by a group of young visual artists who followed its rules. Symbolist's artwork are marked with unmodulated colors broad brushwork and flat abstract forms. It is important to note that symbolists were a loose group of artists who had different artistic styles and techniques, but they all emphasized the importance of imagination and emotions over realism and rationalism which made them members of the symbolists' movement.

Key Facts of Symbolism

1. Instead of depicting their immediate reality, the symbolists expressed emotions, thoughts and fantasies. Symbolists were looking for an escape from their everyday life. They found a sanctuary in their personal beliefs, fantasies, mythical and biblical stories. Love, eroticism (sexual abuse), but also fear, decadence, death, and the occult are often featured in the symbolist's works.
2. Most symbolists painted in wide strokes of unmodulated color creating flat, abstract figures and forms. The technique was popularized by Puvis de Chavannes, who used highly simplified form to express abstract ideas articulately.
3. German philosopher von Schelling and Sigmund Freud raised the interest in the subconscious that greatly influenced the movement. Inspired by psychoanalysis, symbolists often portrayed the subject's inner life. In the artwork Oedipus and the sphinx, for example, the subject's mutual gaze serves as the symbol of introspection, the necessity to look inside oneself.

6. Expressionism or Expression theory another version

Expression theory is a theory that relates the emotional life of the artist to be the emotional impact of the work of art. This theory holds that an artist needs to have experience with an emotion in order to express it to viewers through a work of art. Although it is not necessary for an artist to be sad when painting a picture expressing sadness, it is necessary for the artist to have felt sad at some point and be able to recall the experience.

This theory was popularized by Leo Tolstoy and Robin George Collingwood. Matravers (2009:1) states that Leo Tolstoy was the best experience of expression theory. The author alludes that the term "expression theory" has a broad and a narrow usage. According to Noel (1999:61) Leo Tolstoy in this theory of expression thinks of expression as a form of communication in art. While Collingwood in his view sees art as the expression of emotion (Kemp, 2017).

However, Khatchadourian (1965:336) while viewing Leo Tolstoy's expression theory, asserted that a work of art is an expression of the artist's feelings or emotions embodied in it by the artists. The simplest interpretation one can give to the assertion concerning the theory is that if one expresses himself or herself to another, the person has expressed an emotional feeling to the other. The mode of communication differs from artistic communication; Artistic communication with visual presentation as a form of communication and this communication reflects emotions as it were in the expression theory. Just as the mathematician uses numerical figures, so artist uses lines and colors to communicate or express themselves. Bruyn (2017) while viewing the definition of arts by Tolstoy as it relate to his expression theory states that Tolstoy defines it as an expression of a feeling or experience in such a way that the audience to whom the art is directed can share their feeling or experience.

7. Romanticism

Romanticism also known as the romantic era was an artistic, literary, musical and intellectual movement that originated in Europe towards the end of the 18th century, and in most areas was at its peak in the approximate period from 1800 to 1850. This theory has relationship and emphasis on imagination and emotion, this theory began at the aftermath of the French Revolution of 1789. According to freedictionary.com (2013), Romanticism was characterized by a heightened interest in nature and was originated in Europe in the late 1700s. In this theory, emotions, individualism, imagination, paganism, idealization of nature and with the combination of these elements in a composition and they can stimulate a kind of response called an aesthetic experience

9. Imitation theory

Imitation theory was propounded by Plato. He was a great Greek critic of literature, a philosopher, thinker, and an educationist. He was also a fine storyteller. According to him, nature is only true and other materials are imitation or copy of the truth. Joshy (2013) states that he gave physical shape to his idea out of mood and created a chair. The painter imitated the chair of carpenter; thus, remove the reality.

Art Theories and Its Impact in the Contemporary Art Practice in Nigeria

Art theories also known as art movement over the years has help to develop the art sector in European countries for centuries, and also in this contemporary times artist have used it to structure, and reconstruct their art practice styles and these theories has also helped in their explorations and investigations. According to Boyd (2005) art theories has more than mere influence, and they have proved to be an essential intellectual grounding for most artist in the contemporary times that is geared towards uplifting the society. Berland Straw & Tomas (1998) sees art theories and art practice as two sides of a coin, they work hand in hand. So, an artist cannot compete a work without exploring and applying art theories in that work, Sullivan (2006), states that the image and ideas created in art have the capacity to change not only the artist's conception of reality but also influence the viewer's interpretation of the work. However, the importance of art theory to art practice cannot be over emphasized in the contemporary times. Here are a few reasons why art theories should not be neglected in art practices:

1. Art theories are responsible for conductive and comprehensive improvement in art works and art practice, hereby helping artist and art student to always improve in their works of art. Comprehensively to high-quality talent on the bases of cultivating art.
2. Art theories guide artist in improving in their choice of techniques by cultivating cultural and universal knowledge in their areas of specialization.
3. Art theories strengthen the role of art education and art practices there by utilizing various artistic expressions in all fields in art education. Also, art theory has promoted the development of art education and the formation of more interdisciplinary sciences in art.

Conclusion

Art theories are carefully examined and explained concept of art that distinguished art from other kinds of subject and events. While the theory is view as the principle or ideas that govern and explain something. There are different type of art theories, and these theories are invented/propounded by different theorists and philosophers. The various art theories has their symbolic and unique theoretical background and due to these reasons they should be put into consideration when producing or interpreting a work of art. Theories are suggestion, assumptions, ideas and principles which are proposed to guide the effective learning and production of art work. There is no doubt that in the contemporary art practices, artist that adapts art theory in the production and interpretation of artworks will out shine those who neglects it. In other words art theory has come to stay.

Recommendations

This study recommends that contemporary artist should at all times put art theories to use in expressing themselves. Contemporary art practitioners should imbibe the art theories or be influenced by art theories which should guide their production of artwork. Artist should explore art theories and incorporate them into their works.

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