

# BRIDGING THE GAP BETWEEN TEACHING AND RESEARCH IN FINE AND APPLIED ARTS

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## **Abstract**

Many people have argued that research in visual arts is not necessary. The trust of argument is that the visual artists should not be burdened with the responsibility of research methodology. The lack of understanding of the need for visual art research has further compounded the problem. Suffice to say that research in visual art strive better as an open-ended exploration. In this era of globalism, the importance of research in the visual arts cannot be over-emphasized. Research enables the artist to be actively productive in the use of his techniques and media. This paper, therefore, seeks to address research and innovative development in Fine and Applied Arts, taking visual arts beyond studio practice for the purpose of bridging the gap between teaching and research. The factors militating against effective research in visual arts practice shall also be examined. The prospects of adequate research in the visual art practice also form part of this literature, and thereafter, recommendation was made.

Various attempt made to define and explain the concept of art by various writers and scholars have attracted serious debate in the discursive context. This is so because there is seemingly quite lack of words to express oneself accurately while defining and explaining the concept of art. Defining art requires a description of the entire phenomenon. It is crystal clear that even the basic definition of art has changed over the years and has continued to evolve during the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Art can be used to mean skill acquired to express artistic creativity. Creativity in this sense connotes mental development which is imaginative.

## **Concept of Arts**

How best to define and explain the term art is a subject of constant argument and contention. Various authors, scholars and writers have published books and articles in both local and international journals arguing and debating over the basics of what Arts is all about. In the same vein, psychologists, philosophers, anthropologists and sociologists all use the term art in their respective fields, and give it operational definitions that vary considerably from one writer to another.

Frankly speaking, there is seemingly quite a lack of words to express oneself accurately while writing about the concept of art. Taking narrowly, our concept of art cannot be an empirical judgment. Therefore, due to impossibility for precision, there is argument and confusion about what definitions and interpretation can be culturally negotiated. The argument and debate is however not limited to art. It exists in other disciplines or fields such as social sciences, humanities, engineering, law, medicine etc. Egonwa (2011) stated that this is now regarded as an index of progress or a sign that people are working and are putting forward newer ideas which are knocking off the old ones. This, of course, is what gave birth to the several definitions of art. Defining and explaining art requires a description of the entire phenomenon. Furthermore, it has become obvious that even the basic definition and meaning of the term has changed overtime and has continued to develop during the 20th century. In an ideal sense, the term "art" is an abbreviation for "Visual art". Here, we refer to art as acquired skill used to express artistic creativity. Uzoagba (2008). Supported this by saying that, art is a way to become a creative person. He expressed further that art is an aspect of mental development which is imaginative, creative and aesthetic. Barnes (2008) sees art as the product of creative human activity in which materials are shaped or selected to convey an idea, emotion or visually interesting form. Hornby (2005) defined art as the use of the imagination to express ideas or feelings, particularly in painting, drawing or sculpture. From all indication, the definitions above seem to emphasize one core area which is creativity. This, of course, remains the central focus upon which art stands. In the same vein, art is a doing thing. In other words, art

is something that involves the use of hands to make or produce an object of usefulness or serve utilitarian purposes, or as an object for decoration. This is further supported by Uzoagba (2008) when he stated that art signifies a doing, a making, a fashioning or putting together, and it usually implies that the thing is accomplished by human skill.

It is assumed that art aims at beauty, and that anything that is not beautiful cannot be said to be art. However, some art products serve utilitarian functions. While art has sometimes been used to depict beauty, its qualities are by no means essential to humanity. Ikponmwosa, Izogie and Ebodili (2013), asserted that defining art raises problems in that since the beginning of the 20th century, some artists have sought to challenge the very definition of art. Perhaps the major difficulty in defining art lies in the fact that art implies monetary, social and intellectual value. So many people, including the professionals and academia believed that art is nothing more than drawing. When I was admitted to Delta State University, Abraka, to read or study Fine and Applied Arts, I share the good news with my friends. Unfortunately, the good news turned out to be something else, as one of them aggressively reacted by saying, “you mean you are going to university to draw”? Little did he realize that at one time or the other, he can unconsciously practice and live by art. Again, Uzoagba (2008) made this clear when he said; sheer ignorance of what Art is and the mere misunderstanding of its social and technological role has led to all kinds of perversions of a most important and meaningful concept of art.

The real functions of art as it pertains to human activities are endless. It covers all aspect of human activities, in engineering, medicine, communication etc. In his book, Nigerian Art: Introductory Notes, Egonwa (2011) sees art as the simulation of experience in forms and images. He explains further that art is the result of the manipulative skill applied by man, usually a gifted person, to express an idea in a chosen medium. This definition suggests that any man-made object that gives a kind of satisfaction can be regarded as a work of art. Egonwa, however noted that there is a limitation in the application of this man-made-satisfaction-giving criterion in determining what is art.

Ebodili (2015) defined art as a creative process that involves the collection and gathering of different materials by the artist. This definition is limited in the sense that Ebodili reduced the entire function of art to mere collection and gathering of different materials. All over Nigeria, for instance, different people collect and gather materials for various uses. Those we referred to as scavengers move around the corners to collect and gather materials. The collection and gathering of objects as used in the above definition by Ebodili cannot be classified as art. However, he stated that the gathered objects are transformed into shapes that are called art works, which is the end product of the creative process.

### **Research and Innovation Development in Fine and Applied Arts**

Research as a term means different things to different people depending on the circumstance that necessitated the research. For the purpose of this paper, it is necessary for us to establish an understanding of the definition and meaning of research. This can be done by taking a critical look at some definitions.

Egonwa (2012), defined research as a systematic problem solving habit or systemic fact-finding procedure. He explains further that if there is no systematic way of doing thing, chances are that the care and detail involved may be compromised and one or another may not be able to re-do-it. Omoruyi, Osagie and Osemwengie (2011) see research as a careful, systematic investigation into any aspect of a particular subject matter. In the same vein, Hornby (2005) defined research as a careful study of a subject, especially in order to discover new facts or information about it, while in Wikipedia encyclopedia, research is seen as an active, diligent and systemic process of inquiry in order to discover, interpret, or revise facts, events, behaviours or theories, or to make practical application with the help of such facts, laws or theories. A careful analysis of Egonwa’s definition shows that, any research that is not directed towards problem-solving cannot be said to be a research. In the writers’ opinion, the above definitions can be summarized thus: An ideal research must have a systematic approach, must be fact-finding, must be

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problem-solving, must investigate an aspect of a particular subject matter, must discover new facts or information, and must interpret or revise facts.

A good research aims at discovery new facts, interpretation and documentation of the new facts. The purpose of research is to add to, or increase the existing stock of knowledge that will be of great benefit to the society. This stock of knowledge can be harnessed to further devise new applications. In his book, *Research Methods in Visual Arts*, Egonwa (2012) emphasized strongly that since research means to dig deeper carefully and closely for the real substance, source and truth of an object or issue in its best value, through a systematic procedure, it becomes obvious that the visual arts should not be excluded from such an ideal. He said further that research means to search again after searching previously, as nothing is completely new under the earth. So, in research and innovative development in visual arts, attempt is made to find new ways and processes of researching into an issue and to improve on the existing ones. It is on this premise that Egonwa conceived, birthed and delivered his concept of research in visual arts. He believed that research in visual arts thrives better as an open-ended exploration, and of course, along with the art product is the discursive text in the form of a thesis or dissertation which justifies the physical product. A research work can be an extension or expansion on previous work undertaken by a researcher. In other words, a researcher can redo a project work previously undertaken by another researcher.

### **Visual Arts beyond Studio Practice: Bridging the Gap**

Is research really necessary to the visual artist? What is the purpose of exposing visual artists to research? These, and many other related questions have developed or evolved into an argument and discursive text in the visual art practice. Many people are still contemplating why the visual artists should be saddled with research methodology. Conscious effort has been made to teach research in the Universities, Polytechnics and Colleges of Education. The lack of understanding of the need for research in the visual arts has further compounded the problem at master and Doctorate degree levels. As we mention earlier while citing Egonwa (2012) that research in visual art thrives better as an open-ended exploration. This further explain why research in visual arts is a important as research in other disciplines in the academics such as humanities, social science, engineering etc. When we consider the role of research in this era of globalism, the visual artist has no other alternative than to combine it with his studio activities. To the visual artist, research plays a vital role in his studio practice because his daily studio activities have to do with data collection, experimentation, exploration and interpretation of his artwork. The philosophy behind teaching and studio practice is that for the visual artist to be actively productive in the use of his techniques and media, he must also be actively involved in research methodology. Since the philosophy of studio practice emphasizes the production of art products, these products must be interpreted in theoretical form. In this era of globalism, the visual arts teacher should be able to combine his studio exploration with research. The goal of research to the visual artist is therefore designed to sharpen his artistic communication skill of interpreting certain variables of visual art forms. Bridging the gap between teaching and research will further broadening his visual horizon of studio art practice. While research is necessary, it is important to note that research in visual arts is not scientific as in social sciences and humanities. Visual arts research applies to procedures and techniques of art production.

### **Factors Militating Against Effective Research in Visual Arts Practice**

So many people have argued that research in the visual arts is not necessary. The lack of understanding of the need for research in visual arts has further aggravated the challenges at Master and doctorate degree levels. The truth is that we cannot do without research. Egonwa (2012, p.6) in his book, *Research Method in Visual Arts* said that;

there are some who say that there is no need for research methods in our discipline. Some time ago, i went to examine some students in one of our

Universities. After asking them one or two questions, I discovered that they do not even have an idea of what research methods is, even for a sub-discipline as history of art. Later, i found out that one of the lecturers said that there was no need for it.

The factors militating against effective research in the visual arts practice are many but varied. Most visual art practitioners are too engrossed with studio work that they have little or no interest in research. A good academic research requires time and financial resources, and the ability to communicate in writing. The inability by some art teachers to devote time and financial resources makes them shy away from visual art research. Another area of challenge is that most visual art teachers are faced with inadequate information that will help them build up or develop acceptable research work. Some artists erroneously believed that their profession is practical base and cannot be combine with writing.

### **Prospect of Adequate Research in visual Arts**

It is been established in this literature that research is a careful and systematic investigation into an issue in order to discover new facts. Research, therefore, enabled the artist to be exposed to method that hitherto, was not known to him before. A good knowledge in research writing enables the artist to get research-oriented placement.

Egonwa(2012) is of the view that;

Research enabled you to philosophize over an issue. You can only philosophize over an issue when you have the relevant theory and extant knowledge in similar issue. Researchers in the visual arts have artistic cognition rooted in the praxis of human engagement. The researcher is exposed to new knowledge of doing things and be able to think critically and accurately, and be able to manipulate concepts.

### **Conclusions**

The goals of visual art research are designed to sharpen artistic communication skills of interpreting and evaluating certain art variables. This will further help to broaden the visual horizon of the artist in studio practice. Since research is seen as a careful and systematic problem-solving habit, the visual artist in studio practice should look beyond the box by engaging himself in visual art research. By so doing, the gap between teaching and research in fine and Applied Arts would have been bridged.

### **Way Forward**

Frankly speaking, research in visual arts is as important as the studio art practice. When taking seriously, research enables the art teacher to experiment with new cultures and experiences within the visual arts content. Egonwa (2012) asserted that by writing about the artwork, the students are able to educate himself and his reader about this artwork in a concrete manner that facilitates a greater degree of visual literacy. It is through research that the visual forms of artwork is described, interpreted and analyzed. Visual art teachers should begin to think outside the box by using critical writings to bridge the gap between teaching and research. A good knowledge of research in visual art helps the visual art teachers to philosophize over an issue. It is, therefore, necessary for the visual artist to learn to philosophize in the discipline or area he is best suited.

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