

Mixed-Media as Metaphor: African Perspectives on Postmodernism's Technological Turn Through ICT and Detritus in Four Artists' Works

Okoronkwo Ikechukwu **Abstract**

Francis

*Fine Arts and Design
Department,
University of Port Harcourt*

Article DOI:
10.48028/iiprds/ijsreth.v12.i1.16

Keywords:

Africa,
postmodernism,
Technological turn,
Fragmentation,
Hybridization,
Fluidity, Reflexivity,
Contemporary,
Metaphor, Mixed-
media

Corresponding Author:
Okoronkwo Ikechukwu Francis

Postmodernism's technological turn has fundamentally reshaped artistic practice, collapsing distinctions between past, present, and future through the influence of Information and Communication Technology (ICT). This shift finds a compelling metaphor in mixed-media art, where some African artists had repurposed material detritus of the society to address its key features of the rejection of grand narratives, discourse on power and knowledge, indeterminacy, open-endedness, fluidity, hybridity, consumerism and memory. This paper explores the mixed media works of four contemporary African artists namely; Bruce Onobrakpeya, El Anatsui, Elias Sime and Ike Francis to see how they used evocative materials from contemporary African societies as metaphors of representing African narratives of contemporary postmodernism. While interrogating their works through the features of postmodernism as postulated by early western postmodern scholars, the perspectives of some Nigerian scholars such as Chike Aniakor, Chinua Achebe, Chinweizu and others will also be used to anchor this discourse within African intellectual traditions. This serves as a means of emphasizing the cultural and temporal fluidity inherent in African art. The study demonstrates how materials used by these artists for mixed media art serve as metaphors which reflect their sources, narratives and functions as transformative symbols of time.

Background to the Study

Postmodernism's incredulity toward metanarratives, as articulated by Jean-François Lyotard in "The Postmodern Condition" (1984 pp xxv) marks a departure from modernist certainty, favoring a fragmented, fluid, and multi-perspectival approach to knowledge and creativity. While Ihab Hassan, in his seminal work "The Dismemberment of Orpheus" (1982, pp.123-24), identifies key characteristics of postmodernism, including indeterminacy, fragmentation, and hybridization. In the same vein, Michel Foucault (1972) sheds light on how these shifts reposition memory by continuously reshaping artistic and cultural narratives. Tracing the origin of the concept of postmodernism, Huyssen (1982, p. 11) ascribes the term to Leslie Fielder and Ihab Hassan as an identification of later cultural manifestations that transcended modernism in the late 20th and early 21st century. Within the African context, Chike Aniakor's studies on Igbo art history highlight the history of traditional African artistic practices which embrace fluidity, adaptation, and cross-temporal influences (1984). Chinua Achebe's literary critique further underscores the importance of reclaiming historical narratives in the face of colonial disruption, a theme echoed in contemporary African art's engagement with found materials and technological remnants. Chinweizu's (1975), critiques of neocolonial cultural impositions draw attention to the necessity of integrating indigenous artistic expressions with modern technological tools to create authentic, evolving visual languages.

These epistemological shifts and creative underpinnings resonate strongly with the mixed-media approach in contemporary art, where artists integrate materials, ideas, and influences from diverse sources to generate works that defy singular categorization. In this paper, selected mixed-media works from four contemporary African artists namely; Bruce Onobrakpeya (b. 1932-), El Anatsui (b.1944-), Elias Sime (b. 1968-), and Ike Francis (b. 1970-) will be interrogated as a metaphor for understanding the African contemporary experience. This will demonstrate how postmodernism's technological turn through its social influences finds a direct corollary in the mixed-media works of these artists and captures the African perspective of the time. The scope of this study does not include digital art as in, the use of digital tools or processes to create artworks. Rather, the scope covers the interrogation of works created through using material from computers and other contemporary detritus of society as containers of the people's histories. The link lies in the artists sourcing physical materials from technological discards and beyond as resource materials to create aesthetic experiences charged with contemplative energy through the mixed media approach.

This paper examines the role of repurposed materials evocative of the technological turn of postmodernism in Africa in mixed media play agency as metaphors for reflecting the African experiences. A valid contribution to this topic is, Akpang (2013, p.41) who observes that the "majority of contemporary African artists experiment with waste as their preferred artistic medium and find in them (waste), potent metaphors for creative expressionism". This supports Manuel A. Arroyo-Kalin's paper on the subject of materiality, agency and history:

As a surrounding world, materiality is peculiar: it is a subset of matter that is instantiated through engagement, it is an ongoing outcome that is transformed through the objectification of relations, and it exists not just 'in the present' but also as a trajectory of constitutive occurrences whose unbroken 'causality' we are not immediately aware of (2004, p. 83).

In the above sense, the contemporary technology which in its intended function enabled transgression of boundaries and access to historical references left material detritus just in the same way the colonial enterprise between the West and Africa left residues as reminders. While the material's intended functions enabled global cultural exchanges, their post-functional state as wastes ensured that the artists' creative productions remained an evolving dialogue with the materiality and influences to speak to global issues. These artists accessed these materials as evocative materials and aesthetic metaphors to reflect the features of the technological turn of postmodernism in their mixed-media work. As containers of the people's interaction and experiences of the past, the materials and influences coalesce to speak about the experience of the people in metaphoric terms. Their works interrogate an ongoing negotiation between historical memory, contemporary experience, and speculative futures.

Mixed Media as a Metaphor for Contemporary Technological Fluidity

Mixed media involves the combination of multiple materials and methods within a single artwork. W. J. T. Mitchell argues that “in mixed media, the message is carried not by one mode of representation but by the interplay of semiotic systems, emphasizing the instability of meaning” (2005). In another context, Chika Okeke-Agulu (2015) highlights the concept of “visual polyglossia” within contemporary African art context, where mixed media approach allows the multiplicity of artistic and cultural voices within a single work. Rosalind Krauss (1999) situates the mixed media discourse succinctly as an extension of postmodernism's “expanded field.” She notes that the “material heterogeneity of mixed media works resists categorization, reflecting a condition of late modernity in which art no longer adheres to strict disciplinary boundaries.”

The mixed media approach affords the artist the freedom to transcend traditional boundaries by integrating elements from painting, textiles, photography, collage, sculpture and any other sources of their imagination. Materials for mixed media art reflect their sources and functions as transformative symbols of time, through the unpacking of a considerable number of forms into a considerable amount of content. Through the vast possibilities of materials and approaches, the mixed media artist creates synthesis while also collapsing linear temporality and transforming art into a space where past, present, and future coalesce. As mixed media approach valorizes the improvisation and repurposing of waste material, “interrogating the rich meanings locked in waste and found objects is considered quintessential for artistic self-expressionism and the creation of heightened multifarious layers of meanings” (Akpang 2013, p. 41). From the above, it is evident that the mixed-media approach in art embodies the postmodern tendency toward deconstruction, reassembly, and intertextuality. The

paper aims to show that the artists' works mirror the African contexts presented through the technological turn of postmodernism by investigating their materials as important insights into experiences of contemporary global culture.

Any discourse on how mixed media art metaphorizes contemporary experiences will not only reminisce its ability to transcend modernism, repudiate grand narratives and valorization of pluralism, but will surely factor the advent of new technologies to define contemporary. The important point to be gleaned here is how some postmodernist features refined by new technological experiences present a flow of materiality in presenting possibilities for creative expressions in mixed media art. Aligning with Arroyo-Kalin's submission that human agency to materiality is both social and historical (2004) depends on the transfiguring intervention of the artist to direct its course. As it transgresses time and subjectivities, mixed media form and approaches practically manifest the interdisciplinary theory of contemporary multiculturalism to make a coherent and comprehensive artwork. This provides a metaphoric handle that helps us to make sense out of things around us.

Though art historians and curators had situated Anatsui's work as sculpture, in this study, his work alongside others with similar attributes in resisting rigid categorization will be interrogated through their process of mixing materials as mixed media art. Since Anatsui, Onobrakpeya, Sime and Ike's works adopt both conventional and non-conventional approaches in sourcing, executing and displaying the works under review, a more inclusive term of mixed media art will suffice to accommodate all the subversive nuances of their approaches.

Discussions: Postmodern aesthetics in the works of Onobrakpeya, Anatsui, Sime and Ike.

Onobrakpeya combines the motherboards with detritus of wastes from his studio such as leftover rags from his printmaking sessions, metallic print-making blocks, plastics, jute bags, bones and other societal wastes. As noted earlier, Onobrakpeya's works align with the intellectual perspectives of African scholars and uses that platform to reflect the tensions between tradition and modernity, colonial legacies, and cultural hybridity. These can be seen in Onobrakpeya's "*Environmental Regeneration*" (2006) and "*Cathedral*" (2006). The fragmented aesthetic in "*Cathedral*" mirrors Chinweizu's argument against neocolonial cultural domination, where African societies reconstruct their identities from colonial disruptions (Chinweizu, 1975 ;). Chike Aniakor (1984), arguing that African art must embrace its fragmented yet resilient heritage parallels Lyotard's rejection of "grand narratives". Furthermore, fusing Christian, African traditional motifs and digital iconographies has been severally noted by scholars (Ofuafo, P. U. 2019; Yibowei & Ubogu, 2018). Most of his works within this genre reinforces Baudrillard's theory of hyperreality where meanings shift depending on cultural context. They resist fixed meaning favoring postmodern uncertainty and the fluidity of African identity formation while also, critiquing colonial epistemologies that suppress indigenous knowledge (Achebe, 1975).



Fig. 1: Environmental Regeneration, Bruce Onobrakpeya, 2006. Mixed Media, 215 x 114 5cm.

Source: ovuomaroro.blogspot.com.ng

El Anatsui's aluminum foils sourced from wine corks are rooted in historical antecedents that span the transatlantic slave trade and colonial-era trade networks and their remnant on African cultures. Works like 'Man's Cloth' (2006), *Earth Skin* (2009), *Fading Cloth* (2005), and a host of others capture aspects of the transatlantic slave trade and colonial commerce where the role of liquor, textiles and firearms in the exchange of for are well documented. Deriving inspiration from these histories is also evident in the manner he layers fragments from this economic and cultural interaction to create works that defy fixed and linear categorization. From critiquing neocolonialism which Chinweizu (1975) claims had continued its exploitative pattern to the hybridization of forms (Bhabha, 1994) Anatsui in *Fading Cloth* (2005) and 'Man's Cloth' (2006) had reconstructed African histories with the west not as fixed, linear accounts but as fragmented and layered experiences. The shimmering, malleable structures of the works mentioned above, brings in textile patterns alongside the narratives of imperialism as metaphors of fluid, shifting nature of the African identity in a globalized world. These works carry imbrications of Chike Aniakor's thoughts that African art evolves through absorbing and transforming external influences as well as Foucault's claim that who controls materials and narratives determines meaning.



Fig. 2: Man's Cloth II, El Anatsui, (2006). Aluminium bottle caps, neckbands and copper wires. 274 x 449 x 9 3/50 inches.

Source: <https://www.duendearthprojects.com/artworks/categories/3/1-el-anatsui-mans-cloth-ii-2006>

Elias Sime's Tightrope series on the other hand, engage with technological debris, incorporating discarded circuit boards and electronic waste to construct intricate assemblages which blurs the boundaries between the organic and the mechanical. Ihab Hassan's discussion of postmodernism's embrace of chance and indeterminacy finds resonance in Sime's practice, where obsolete materials such as rusted metal, buttons, keys, yarns, dolls and others acquire new significance through artistic recomposition. Sime utilizes e-waste as metaphor to highlight technological fragmentation and indeterminate boundaries between the organic and synthetic. The role of ICT in his use of material is twofold: while the materials themselves are byproducts of technological advancement, their transformation into art underscores the fluid exchange between past technological artifacts and contemporary creative practices. "Tightrope 9" (2009) represent the tension between technological advancement and environmental degradation and questions the ephemerality of technology and the environmental cost of rapid digital consumption. This resonates with Baudrillard's critique of hyperreality in his book "Simulacra and simulation", where representations can evolve through stages; objects are stripped of original meaning and repurposed into abstract symbols.



Fig. 3: Tight Rope 9. Elias Sime, 2009, 160 x 600.7cm (63 x 236 ½ inches). Mixed Media on Panels (Six Panels)

Source: http://www.ncartmuseum.org/art/detail/tightrope_92

In Ike Francis work, the concept of fragmented narratives, where the viewer's perception is constantly altered, postmodern indeterminacy and discourse on perception and surveillance in the digital age are all explicit in his thematic concerns. Typical example can be derived from 'Eight Faces and a Village Square' (2003), a mixed media composition on nine panels with computer motherboards transistors, wires, and other electronic equipment combined with paint, and fabrics which blur the boundary between digital and organic aesthetics. Greg Stuart (2010) captured this attribute of indeterminacy and plurality of interpretation, in a Graduate seminar presented at School of the Art Institute of Chicago when he notes that:

In some respects, these works function as a multicable perception phenomenon, which occurs when an image has two or more subjective interpretations, with each contradicting or canceling the possibilities of

the other. In this case, it occurs in Ike's work where the urban grid is only visible if one ignores the portrait and the portrait is only visible after ignoring the grid.

Explicating further on this work, Stuart notes that the panels, “refer to the urban grid and portraiture simultaneously as circuit boards stand in for both anthropomorphic features and an aerially-viewed lattice-work of the urban grid”. This multi-panel mixed-media piece, created from reclaimed electrical wires and circuit boards, features technological and natural symbiosis to form human faces, reinforcing the tension between digital and organic life. As Stuart draws our attention to how the faces highlight tecnomorphic and anthropomorphic symbiosis, so also does his concern with the ecological consequences of technology in facilitating human connections and also with environmental degradation.

Another work from Ike that references the notions of indeterminacy, fragmentation, reflexivity and multiplicity is “Power Tales”. The mixed-media/Installation piece composed of LED lights, mirrored surfaces, and spatial illusions, destabilizes the viewer's sense of time and space, creating an environment where physical and digital realities converge. In the above work, Ike questions the power dynamics through three archi-sculptural icons representing countries and their global profiling. The work in a way references Foucault's call to interrogate sources of power and authority systems. Relating this piece to these postmodern attributes, (Okoronkwo and Ubogu, 2017) notes that “The work illustrates a popular postmodern obsession with multiple sensibilities and implications that no single point of view is comprehensive enough of the depth, richness or complexities of the contemporary experience” (pp. 278-279). The irony of the work presents a visual lexicon for interpreting our entangled present amidst postmodern epistemologies and recent technological breakthroughs. In its embrace of material hybridity, multiplicity of meanings, and critique of dominant narratives, the work obliterates apprehension of real boundaries and presents variations of viewpoints and multiple perspectives through reflections on the glass cubes.

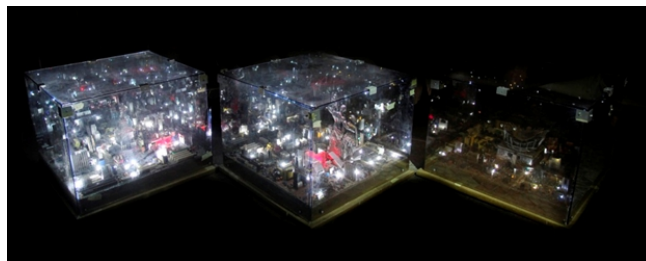


Fig. 4: Power Tales. Ike Francis, 2013. Installation Art. W- 64cm X L- 64cm X H -51cm.
Source: The artist.

By engaging with consumerism and issues of technological excesses, connectivity, and repurposed materiality of computer motherboards, wires, and keyboards to reflect a

world saturated with digital communication, rapid innovation, and the detritus of obsolescence Sime and Ike are coevals. They interweave technological remnants to reflect the contemporary African experience where deeper cultural intrigues had affected their participation in global schemes. Notwithstanding the promises of postmodernism, the African experience of the contemporary reflects the issues raised by Foucault in his 'Discourse on Power and Knowledge'. Onobrakpeya, Sime and Ike subvert the technological determinism of the discarded electronic materials they use through a reconfiguration and recontextualization as aesthetic elements and thus emphasize the human agency in redefining meaning. Along with Anatsui, they appear univocal in projecting the narrative of the themes of sustainability, resourcefulness, and resilience as noted by Aniakor and Chiweizu respectively. In addressing issues of global consumerism and the marginalization of African narratives within technological histories, these works reflect on the position of Africa in current conflictual contemporary power games.

Conclusion

The advent of ICT has changed the outlook of postmodernism and enabled art to remain a site of synthesis, adaptation, and perpetual reinvention. The mixed-media approach in contemporary art serves as a metaphor for the technological turn of postmodernism, where diverse materials, historical references, and digital innovations converge to create works that exist across multiple temporal and spatial dimensions. The practices of El Anatsui, Elias Sime, Ike Francis and Bruce Onobrakpeya, exemplify how ICT facilitates this process, binding past, present, and future into a dynamic whole. As digital technologies continue to evolve, the postmodern condition will likely deepen, embedding technological hybridity into the very fabric of artistic and cultural production. Significantly, these artists deploy unconventional materials to critique consumerism, mass production, and global waste. Onobrakpeya's assemblage of his deep etching blocks with detritus of technology transforms traditional storytelling methods into tactile and rich mixed media works that bridge historical African artistic traditions with contemporary expression. Anatsui's sculptural installations exemplify this interplay between material hybridity and temporal fluidity. Sime and Ike similarly embody the intersection of technological residue and artistic decomposition.

Within the concourse of politics of consumerism; waste and its repurposing into artistic composition, manifold commonality seeps through the works of Onobrakpeya, Anatsui, Sime and Ike. By recontextualizing detritus materials from contemporary technology, these artists through mixed-media engagements critique consumerism, globalization, and the rapid technological shifts that create both excess and marginalization. This call to mind Foucault's ideas on discourse and power as materials, once considered useless, are imbued with new meaning and agency. From Onobrakpeya, Sime and Ike's technological repurposing to Anatsui's wine cork materiality allude to the metaphorization of the complexities of African history, identity, and material culture as imbricated in the contemporary era through the mixed media art.

References

- Achebe, C. (1975). *Morning yet on creation day: Essays*, Heinemann.
- Akpang, C. E. (2013). Found object, recycled art, readymade or junk art? Ambiguity in modern African art, *Arts and Design Studies*, 12.
- Andreas, H. (1984). Mapping the postmodern, *New German Critique*, 33, 5–52.
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/488352>
- Aniakor, C. (1984). *Igbo art and aesthetic systems: A study in stylistic changes and continuities*. University of Nigeria Press.
- Arroyo-kalin, M. A. (2004) an ongoing outcome, a surrounding world: Materiality, agency and history. In E. DeMarrais, C. Gosden, & C. Renfrew (Eds.), *Rethinking materiality: the engagement of mind with the material world* (pp. 81-96). McDonald Institute for Archeological Research.
- Baggott-Brown, J. (2023). We all share the same language”: Elias Sime—Eregata, Arnolfini, Bristol, October 21, 2023 – February 18, 2024, exhibition, *Journal of Cultural Analysis and Social Change*, 8 (2) , 1 7 .
<https://doi.org/10.20897/jcasc/14070>
- Bhabha, H. K. (1994). *The location of culture*, Routledge.
- Baudrillard, J. (1994). *Simulacra and simulation* (S. F. Glaser, Trans.), University of Michigan Press.
- Bury, L. (2019). Social sculpture: Elias Sime interviewed—Creating a space between humans and machines, *BOMB Magazine*. <https://bombmagazine.org/articles/social-sculpture-elias-sime-interviewed>
- Castellote, J. (2014). *Ike Francis Okoronkwo*, <https://jesscastellote.wordpress.com/2014/08/15/ike-francis-okoronkwo/>
- Chinweizu. (1975). *The West and the rest of us: White predators, Black slavers, and the African elite*. Random House.
- Darah, G. G., & Quel, S. (Eds.). (1992). *Bruce Onobrakpeya: The spirit in ascent*, Ovuomaroro Gallery.
- Foucault, M. (1972). *The archaeology of knowledge & the discourse on language* (A. M. Sheridan Smith, Trans.), Pantheon Books.

- Hassan, I. (1982). *The dismemberment of Orpheus: Toward a postmodern literature* (2nd ed.), University of Wisconsin Press.
- Lyotard, J. F. (1984). *The postmodern condition: A report on knowledge* (G. Bennington & B. Massumi, Trans.), University of Minnesota Press.
- Manovich, L. (2001). *The language of new media*, MIT Press.
- Mitchell, W. T. J. (2005). There are no visual media, *Journal of Visual Culture*. 4(2), 257-266. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1470412905054673>
- Ofuafo, P. U. (2019). Bruce Onobrakpeya's integration of Urhobo belief system in two-dimensional visual art forms, *International Journal of Research in Arts and Social Sciences*, 12.
- Oguiibe, O. (2004). *The culture game*, University of Minnesota Press.
- Okeke-Agulu, C. (2015). *Postcolonial modernism: Art and decolonization in twentieth-century Nigeria*, Duke University Press.
- Okoronkwo, I. F. (2018). *Netizens: Exploring contemporary discards of technology in mixed media and installation art*. [Unpublished doctoral dissertation]. University of Port Harcourt.
- Okoronkwo, I. F., & Ubogu, N. O. (2018). Netizen: The aporia of 'power tales' in contemporary Nigerian society, *Maiduguri Journal of Arts and Design (MAIDJAD)*, 2, 273-282.
- Onobrakpeya, B. (1999). *Forty years of Bruce Onobrakpeya in contemporary visual art: The portrait of a visual artist*. Ovuomaroro Gallery.
- Roy-Omoni, S., Onibere, V., & Osakwe, S. (2024). Visualizing divinity: Analyzing the evolution of religious iconography and graphic design in modern African art, *Abraka Journal of Religion and Philosophy (AJRP)*, 4(2).
- Sassen, S. (2005). The global city: Introducing a concept, *Brown Journal of World Affairs*, 11(2), 27-43.
- Stuart, G. (2010). Issues of the digital divide and e-waste in the artwork of Ike Francis, *School of the Art Institute of Chicago*.
- Ubogu, O. N. (2013). Bruce Onobrakpeya's Jewel of Nomadic images: Improvisation and recycling as hallmark of ingenuity, *Academicia: An International Multidisciplinary Research Journal*, 3(8), 108-117.

Yibowei, Z. & Ubogu O. N. (2018). The enigma of Bruce Onobrakpeya: The Artist's major ideas that bridge the Surreal to the Real as Universal Themes in a Classical Urhobo Culture. *International Journal of Strategic Research in Education, Technology and Humanities | IJSRETH* 5.(1). (p. 187-197)

Young, A. (2015). El Anatsui, old man's cloth. *Smarthistory*, Retrieved March 2024.

Zegeye, A. (2017). The seemingly seamless subversion of Sime, *Eastern African Literary and Cultural Studies*, 3(1), 53-71. <https://doi.org/10.1080/23277408.2017.1323171>