

PRACTICE-LED DOCTORATE ENQUIRY: THE PHILOSOPHICAL CURRENCY FOR ART SCHOLARSHIP IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

This paper investigates knowledge in studio arts practice. The question is who creates it, who speaks it and who owns it? For a long time, dated back to Plato and Aristotle days, philosophers have always had superior attitude toward visual arts. Presently in Nigeria, inquiry in the Studio Arts in the academy is beset by a compelling argument that creative and cultural enquiry undertaken by artists is not necessary. This study opines that there is the need for practice-led enquiry; positioning it within the discourse of research. It thus advocates some fundamental reasons why visual artists who choose to be academic should embrace the studio Ph.D programmes in their respective genres. Some of which include: adding values by sharpening the hand, and eye as well as the mind and extends the artists range of creative expressions and possibilities; it qualifies the artist-scholar to teach theory, practice and philosophy; helps to create a new way of thinking and seeing among others. In order to create a uniform standard in practice led scholarship, this paper proposes the formation of a National University Commission (NUC) led curriculum drafters and monitors that will ensure high standard for Ph.D programmes for studio artists in Nigeria.

Keywords: Knowledge, practice, enquiry, philosophy, curriculum, standard, academy, scholarship

Introduction

In the past, within the milieu of studio art training, students traditionally found their way to the studios and classes of eminent artists, learning through the apprenticeship methods of watching, doing and instructing. Studio artists from time immemorial create their own credentials and are esteemed based on the quality and acceptance of their work, their influence on other artists and their frequency of exhibition and patronage. As a matter of fact, the nomenclature “Artist” as defined by Oxford Advanced Learners Dictionary is a person who creates works of art especially paintings or drawings (Hornby, 2010). What this means in essence is that anybody can be called an artist as long as traces of artistic, talent is inherent in such person with proof of practice. Also, it denotes anybody who trained under the instruction of a master artist and practices his skill. At this level of skill acquisition, this study agrees that no degree, diploma or certificate can confer value or importance to any work of art produced under this influence.

However, in the context of this paper, graduate art education is a total paradigm shift from the way the art and artists were perceived in the ancient days. It is no longer news that knowledge has been brought into the arts. In today's arts education, baccalaureate, diploma certificate, bachelor and master degrees in Fine art have become the union cards or leveler for artists since the second half of the 20th century. The curricula at these levels offer general education that includes fine and applied arts at the undergraduate level, and critical theory with studio practice in many other cases on the master's level. This position corroborates Cwobeel (2015) assertion which says:

Since World War II artist training has moved to elementary schools and contemporary art has become an increasingly academic and intellectual field. Prior to World War II an artist did not usually need a college degree. Since that time, the Bachelor of Fine Arts and then the Master of Fine Arts became recommended degrees to be a professional artist.

In a related development, Grant (2011) notes that over the past 50 years, the Master of Fine Arts (MFA) degree has been described as a terminal degree, which he says is the endpoint in an artist's formal academic and professional education. This abrupt end brought to the fore the notion that studio art was still limited in the areas of knowledge and philosophy, despite its entrance into the school system and its increasing academic and intellectual demands. In time past, philosophy has always been seen as the origin and oracle of knowledge and as self-proclaimed creator, speaker and owner of knowledge, philosophy assumes itself in charge of art. Corroborating the statement above Smith (2008), posits:

Anyhow, philosophy's superior attitude toward art goes back a long way. While Plato insists that truth of art is false, Aristotle allows that art is better than history, because its truth, its knowledge is closer to that of philosophy. Nevertheless, Aristotle's point remains: philosophy is higher than art because art's knowledge is less true. While Kant in 1800 famously grants the artist the title of genius, He is only too quick to assure his Enlightenment reader that the classical hierarchy of knowledge is still the order of things, precisely in so far as the mind of the scientist/philosopher is still to be viewed as superior to that of the artist.

As a matter of fact, William James in Smith (2008) postulates: centuries after the above theories by Plato, Aristotle and Kant in “The Principles of Psychology” debunked and throw away Kants fine proclamation that the artist is a “genius” and the scientist of “greater mind”. Instead, he took the title of “genius” away from the artist and hands it over to the scientists.

In the context of this paper and very much at the front burner of Art Education is knowledge. The questions raised by this study are who creates the knowledge; who speaks it and who owns it. Smith (2008) acknowledges the theory of deferred action which he notes is the key to Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalytic theory otherwise known as the fundamental concept of Zizek’s philosophy. Zizek theory agrees that the artist has always been a philosopher. He opines that the reason or part of the reason why the artist has not been regarded as such is that she often does not know exactly what she is doing when she creates art, when she produces knowledge and when she creates philosophy. In a discourse Maharaj (2004) describes the creative process as “spasmic, interdisciplinary probes, haphazard cognitive investigations, dissipating interaction and imaginary archiving. Maharaj is almost in agreement with Kant’s later withdrawn “genius” status for the artist. The difference is that Maharaj sees the artist’s creative process as a beautiful promise for the conception of knowledge; while Kant sees it as good reason to count artistic knowledge as less valuable, less credible, less useful and less pragmatic than the so-called scientific/philosophical knowledge.

Smith (2008) in Foucault and Lyotard et al observes that: the process of knowledge production is not a measure of bona fide knowledge; rather, bona fide knowledge the measure of legitimate philosophical inquiry, however and wherever it gets done – hypothetically or rhizomatically. And yet, because the process is different, the bona fide knowledge of the artist/philosopher is and will be different from that of the scientist/philosopher.

The position of the above statement according to Wilson (2008) in Slager is that the artist’s creative process not only produces fluent forms of knowledge production, but leads to novel artistic strategies and intensities of perception. In essence the scientific and artistic inquiry/philosophy are placed on the same pedestal of knowledge and these days has become more dialogical and less

dialectical. The onus therefore lies in the fact that the pre-knowledge of a creation of an art which is called the concept requires deep critical thinking. And this can only be giving birth to by the creator of such idea. An idea inside of the artist is ruminated upon and combined with some elements such as materials, space, design etc to give birth to what is called a work of art. This is illustrated vividly in the creation of the world according to the Biblical Studies Press, L.L.C (2001):

1:1 In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.1:2 Now the earth was without shape and empty, and darkness was over the surface of the watery deep. 1:3 God said, let there be light and there was light 1:4 God saw that the light was good, so God separated the light from the darkness. 1:5 God called the light day and the darkness 'night'.

Above quote affirms that the heavens and the earth is entirely the product of the creation of God and so the original act of creation or creative work is established. God's command of the existence of light presupposes the existence of a pre-existent matter. God, who seemingly is the number one creative artist creates the heavens and the earth, He speaks it to existence and owns it.

Aims of the Studio Doctor of Philosophy

(Cross, 1999) posits that practice-led PhDs are derived from majorly studio practice, either through studying the people, process or products using practice as the basis of investigation. It is a study where practice is used as an interrogative process. Therefore practice plays an instrumental part in the inquiry. One of the basic aims of the doctor of philosophy program in the visual arts studio is to seek advancement in visual arts and new media by working artists, art faculty teachers and all professionals in related fields. It is to give the visual artists (studio) the opportunity in the widest sense to explore space and inhabitation of space, the archive, documentary art making, language/image, software studies, network culture, performance and the role of art in peace, mediation and international relations. The studio research is further aimed at demonstrating systematic study, independence, critical competence and originality. Also, a record of good fervent 'practice' element which serves to contextualize the studio practice intellectually while clearly demonstrating its contribution to knowledge. According to the course curriculum handbook of the Department of Fine and Applied Arts, Delta State University, Abraka for the doctor of philosophy (Ph.D.) degree in Studio arts (2007), it says:

The doctoral degree in visual arts emphasizes the philosophy of art production. It is practice led in which materials, techniques/technology and other production induced ideologies take centre stage. It is envisaged that the Participatory Knowledge of the researcher as an accomplished studio master in an aspect of visual art, makes him/her a better philosopher on how it is or could be done. Professionalism in the visual art by this becomes entrenched.

Objectives of the PhD Studio Arts (Practice-led)

The practice-led Ph.D. programme of the Delta State University, Abraka model as witnessed by this study crates a space for students of all disciplines (Art history, Art education, English, Literature, Performing arts) to mention just a few to interact with a wide range of artists, scientists, theorists, media practitioners and visionaries. Students investigate their work independently in both cultural and studio context. Students are further enriched in praxis; foster change; facilitate a connection between group and personal work; provide the means for contextualizing work in the wider world; and develop interaction strategies with audiences. And so students researcher are expected to contribute significantly to the current creative cultural dialogue through informed, published, exhibited or performed work and documentation thereof. Also, practice-led research students are expected to do a rigorous philosophical study that sharpens the hand and eye as well as the mind and extends the artist's range of creative expression and her possibilities for the discovery of philosophical knowledge. It is also meant to bring together a community of practicing artists for the study of theory and philosophy at a time when we need new ways of thinking and seeing in Nigerian arts landscape. Still on the Abraka model which is an Art practice concentration designed for artists and instructors engaged in advanced research who wish to pursue their work in an environment geared towards doctoral study, and to produce studio work alongside a written dissertation. It thus therefore acknowledges artistic production as a field of intellectual inquiry capable of an equal level of theoretical elaboration and conceptual density.

Significance

Some of the significance of the practice-led doctoral programme in visual arts according to Abraka model to this study include; a steady builds on the achievements of the students masters level work,

by developing a creative project of significant and relevant practice-led research which represent an original contribution to the fields of art and culture. The specifics of each practice-led PhD project/thesis are particular to the goals, aspirations and interests of the candidate. The thesis in some cases show systematic study or step by step approach; independence; critical competence, originality and capacity of the publication in whole or in part. It thus includes a record of the 'practice' elements which serves to contextualize the practice intellectually while clearly demonstrating its contribution to knowledge. The relationship between the studio-based work and the written work is brought to the fore as practice-based research activities share a common set of resources. With this, the studio and written components of the PhD project are conceived as a whole. At project presentation levels (seminar/ critique sessions, departmental faculty), students experiment with exhibition and presentation possibilities in preparation for the final PhD defence presentation with options of exhibition display, performance or documentation).

Divergences and Criticisms

It is both heartwarming and challenging to note that since the introduction of the studio PhD in visual arts in Nigeria in 2008 pioneered by the Department of Fine and Applied arts, Delta state University, Abraka with Professor Osa. D. Egonwa playing the pivotal role (Edewor, 2015), there had been divergences and convergences for and against the scholarly studio programme. With most of its major critics coming from scholars in the art history and art education section of the Universities, seemingly supported by some MFA degree holder instructors in the universities who still hold the age long belief of the terminal status of the Master of Fine Arts degree. Some of the controversies regarding the introduction of practice-led doctorates in Nigeria include: the relative newness of the programme, the suspicions of the perceived institutionalisation and codification of the form of cultural production that is traditionally understood as intuitive, transgressive and decidedly anti-institutional. Some critics raised the issues of methodology and epistemology, which is the production of knowledge through a creative act. The issues of capabilities and capacities of qualified instructors and supervisors, lack of studio facilities, contest of legitimacy of the National Universities Commission (NUC) also surfaced. The question of what right does the NUC has to dictate which degrees an artist should have to qualify as instructors in Nigeria Universities. While it is easy to sympathize with these concerns, critics of PhD studio have forgotten the skepticism raised on a regular basis by scholars in other disciplines in the academia about the status of the MFA degree which was hitherto equated with PhD degree because of the

then terminal status of the MFA as a professional degree. The new generation of the holders of the MFA degree in the academia has come to accept the reality of their status that their MFA cannot and never be equivalent of the PhD degree after all. Interviewing Ikobi, Michael (2015), on the general acceptability of the MFA painting degree he holds from the University of Benin, raised some more issues. Said he;

“Perhaps the greatest problem with the MFA is that the degree is not understood or respected at some colleges and University though not at degree-granting art schools. Limitations in job opportunities and the exact levels to put the MFA holders are seemingly not define. Some people are employed as Assistant Lecturers, some Lecturer III while some fortunate ones bagged Lecturer II in the University system contrary to the belief of our equivalence with the PhD degree whom University employment upon entrant placed as Lecturer II. The concept of the MFA as a terminal degree” is unfamiliar to many Vice Chancellors, Rectors and school administrators whose fields do not have an equivalent structure; they see a master’s degree as no more than that. Obtaining a doctorate in the relevant studio area, he noted is perhaps the best way to obviate those insurmountable problems of parity, stagnancy, terminal delinquency, academic/professional status, respect and proper job, and salary placements.

Also the National University Commission (NUC) has spelt it out in clear terms that any degree that does not have or share the contents of higher philosophical knowledge to the level of PhD cannot and never be equated with PhD. While this paper shares that we need to retain some skepticism and tread consciously about the ongoing professionalization of studio art education in Nigeria, it is also important to recognize the increasing pressure exerted on art production, art education and culture generally by forces of the new dictates of standards of instruction in the academia in Nigeria. Just like in United States of America in the 1970’s during the widespread introduction of Master of Fine Arts Programme, Kesta (2008) notes that:

They underestimate the extent to which contemporary art production is already subject to disciplinary protocols and forms of formal and informal institutionalization that exercises a decisive influence on the kinds of art that younger artists produce.

One more thing the critics of the PhD studio (practice-led) failed to realize is the National Universities Commission's (NUC) privilege of supporting and encouraging more academic technocratic agenda for Nigeria which gives more space, opportunities and privileges to science and technology.

Benefits of the PhD Visual Arts (Practice-Led)

Just as Egonwa (2012), puts it:

The truth is that there is need for it. The PhD degree prepares one to be a scholar; it has to do with thought, theory and philosophy. Research enables you to philosophize over an issue. If you do not philosophize you will not have the basis for doing scholarly work.

This statement thus applies to artists who choose to be “hybrid individuals” who can both be artist researchers and artist philosophers with broader horizons to both domains. Artists who are in pedagogical domain at the higher level particularly in the institutions of higher learning (Polytechnics, Colleges of Education and Universities) are in the present dispensation encouraged to add knowledge-based philosophical research streams to their training. This will improve and give research practices that are theoretically robust, purposeful, process rich, idea based, strategic and adapt methods and innovations that are unique and distinct from traditional systems, and forms of inquiry.

One of the benefits of the practice-led PhD programme is that it provides rigorous training that helps artist-researchers expand their studio practice as well as the theories. In an interview with Prince Eweka, a doctorate degree holder in Ceramics (studio), he claims the academic exercise he passed through during his doctoral programme at the Delta State University has expanded his studio practice and theory beyond his expectation. He adduced this from his performance at his recent exhibition of his works and the lecture he gave on Ceramics: A Tool for Social Interface at the University of Benin, Benin City, Nigeria. Said he; “I am now better and can

now perform as both artist and philosopher with broader horizons in both domains. With the successes recorded so far within the space of 7 years (2008 - 2015) from the PhD graduates of Studio Arts in Nigeria, pressures hitherto mounted by the NUC to holders of MFA degrees who are instructors or adjunct instructors in Nigeria's Creative Art departments of our universities will no longer be because of the fear of not having courses of their choice. Unlike before when majority of them are lost to some not too related scholarships in the Studio Arts.

Jari (2014) in justify the introduction of PhD Studio Arts at the Ahmadu Bello University says: We reckoned that it was more rational to introduce the PhD in Painting and Sculpture to maintain the promotion of their distinctive scholarships than to lose Painters and Sculptors to other related disciplines.

Hitherto, many of these MFA holders in the academia seemingly feel limited because of the terminal status of the MFA degree and for not being allowed to pursue to the PhD level the discipline that earned them the Bachelors and Master of Fine Arts degrees respectively. Some believed the MFA degree holds them back in a realm where advancement goes to PhDs.

Grant (2009), Kester (2008), Smith (2008), Egonwa (2012), Wilson (2008), unanimously agree that the advent of the PhD studio degree for visual artists in the United States and Nigeria is making it easier for the holders of the degree to get research oriented appointment or placement. In particular people who have stayed with Master of Fine Arts degree (MFA) find it harder to get such types of teaching appointments in the academia. They testified to the fact that the moment visual artists obtain a Ph.D in their field, they are employed.

In an interview George Bauer in Grant (2011) puts his experience in this way:

“When I applied for teaching jobs with my MFA, I never made it to the finals of interviewing, said George Bauer, who received an MFA in Sculpture from Texas A&M in 1988 and doctorate in studio from Texas Tech. in 2002. After receiving a PhD, “he makes it to the finals” currently a full time faculty member at the Savannah College of Art and Design, he is convinced that it is just a matter of time before the MFAs won't be able to compete for job with PhD's.

Another benefit of the doctoral degree (practice-led) is the ability of holders to teach a wider variety of courses, such as classes in art theory and history which had hitherto been the province of art historians and art educators.

Smith (2008) avers that the PhD qualifies the artist-philosopher to teach some philosophy courses traditionally taught by non-artists in the American University. Also, the PhD studio helps to bring together a community of practicing artists for the study of theory and philosophy at a time when we need new ways of thinking, new ways of seeing. Covertly, the rigorous philosophical study during the programme sharpens the hand and eye as well as the mind and extends the artists range of creative expression and her possibilities for the discovery of philosophical knowledge.

Findings and Conclusion

In most of the higher institutions in Nigeria where Visual Arts is taught at the postgraduate levels, this study found out that art history and art practice are quite often segregated. In some cases, PhD programs in art history are housed separately from MFA programmes in art practice. This paper opines that scholars should at the graduate levels be more committed to trans-disciplinary work that challenges this segregation. It advocates a Visual Arts department that would foster a robust continuity between studio practice, art theory and art history. This will in no measure help in bringing art practitioners, theorists and historians together to encourage innovative work at the boundaries of disciplines, discourses and methodologies. If the visual arts practice-led PhD is encouraged, it will further engender advance research and create a better knowledge based environment for innovations and exploration in both written dissertation and studio work. It will thus bring to fore artistic production as a field of intellectual inquiry as it is done and evident in other disciplines, such as in the area of health (Candy, 2006), nursing, music, veterinary studies, engineering, and law (UK Council for Graduates Education, 1997).

With the establishment of the practice-led PhD program in Studio Arts through the pioneering efforts of Delta State University, Abraka; Ahamadu Bello University, Zaria; University of Port Harcourt and lately University of Benin and the successful defence of the doctoral thesis of their pioneer students in three of the universities except university of Benin, it is hopeful that the art practice concentration will despite the dangers of institutionalization, provide a space in which

critical forms of cultural production, writing and analysis can be sustained, and even flourish. Also, it is hoped that with the varieties of study areas now available at the PhD level in the Visual Arts (studio, history, education, philosophy) more openings or spaces are now available for artists to get to the peak of their academic careers without subjugation, limitation or intimidation. This will help to eliminate totally the statement of (Jari 2014) that says; it is almost impossible to defend a promotion case to the rank of professor of a candidate, without a PhD in almost all Nigerian Universities. What this means in essence is that MFA is no longer acceptable as the highest degree in Studio Arts. Be that as it may, there are lots of privileges and benefits in the Visual Arts technocratic agenda. Presently in Nigeria, there are very few doctorate degree holders and Professors in all areas of Visual Arts at administrative, political, social and academic levels. These few intellectuals are not enough to turn things around on a faster level in the development of the profession in Nigeria. It is a common knowledge that getting things done or approved for developmental process is in most cases a game of number and intensive lobbying. For the mere fact that Visual Arts have fewer representations at the highest policy and decision making system of administrations in Nigeria is in itself a minus for the development of the profession. As a matter of fact, the National Universities Commissions matching order of asking every academic staff of the University to develop themselves and disciplines to doctoral level is a blessing in disguise for the Visual Arts subsector. It has once again opened up the visual arts landscape both in theory and practice. Aside from the visual arts technocratic agenda, there must be a deliberate move by leaders, academicians and professors in the Visual Arts to create an art research agenda that will force new relationships with the world beyond the academy in a way that could moderate the debate across the entire spectrum of humanities and technology.

This study is interested currently in a new domain coming into being that will provide space for independent possibilities. This paper is not of the opinion that there are no grey areas even in our “perceived hurry” to develop the studio areas at the doctoral level of academics in Nigeria. There may likely be dull, grey methodologies in the new research initiatives. These may be dangerous threat for the programmes and its ambassadors presently. But, this calls for all instructors, researchers, graduates, curriculum drafters, curators, art dealers, gallerists and all stakeholders to be more willing to openly discuss these new programmes at seminars, workshops, conferences etc. with each other in order to resist bureaucratic, institutionalized exercises of self-reproduction. Standing on the platform that an art-research mode of inquiry open to a larger world beyond the

academy will take advantage of the potential of the academy and at the same time be transformative of the academy. For the PhD practice-led studio programmes to have the acceptability it desires among all stakeholders, this study opines that there should be the formation of a common acceptable curriculum for all the areas of studio arts and if possible a formation of a national association of PhD programmes for studio areas of visual arts. This will help in no little way to regulate and standardize the studio PhD programmes instructions and research for visual artists.

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