

ORGANISING VISUAL ART EXHIBITIONS IN CONTEMPORARY NIGERIA: PROBLEMS AND SOLUTION

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ABSTRACT

POOR PERFORMANCE AT ART EXHIBITIONS IN CONTEMPORARY NIGERIAN ART: CAUSES AND EFFECT

This study looks into one of the most vital areas of visual arts practice which is ART EXHIBITION. However its main focus is on organization of art exhibitions in contemporary Nigeria. The scope of this paper shall be limited to the causes and effects of poor performance on visual arts and artists. Some of the challenges this study notes are; inadequate statement of purpose and objectives of staging exhibitions by artists, low turnout of patrons/buyers/viewers, instability in the civil structure of the country (political and economic), wrong location of the gallery or exhibition centre, presentation of low quality works, natural disasters, quality and class of artists, over pricing of artworks, poor publicity to mention just a few. It also proffers some solutions which look peculiar, local and contextual. If all concerned artists, curators, gallerists, art dealers, artist representatives, art managers and administrators etc, can take heed to the suggestions given, a healthier development of the visual arts sub sector in Nigeria shall be experienced.

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POOR PERFORMANCE AT ART EXHIBITION: CASUSES AND WAY OUT

Introduction

In many societies all over the world, art is seen as one of the most magnificent and valuable things human beings can create where it represents or seeks to represent. Genuinely, art exhibition goes beyond mere commercial issues; it has a moral dimension, which means there are overriding issues of education, documentation, entertainment, enlightenment, integrity, dignity, moral, social, political and religious responsibilities. Aside describing values for human survival and peace, art is a necessary ingredient for change, hope, inspiration and information. Documentation art especially in exhibitions and cataloging forms has the power to communicate the continuum of life, the threads that link the past, present and future.

According to Thick (1995)

Art has the power to demonstrate, along with other disciplines such as history, sociology and economics, that to progress society needs to recognize both what has worked and what has failed in the past, and to use that knowledge to identify the right way forward.

Arts and art exhibition as catalysts of development helps in integrating social, physical and economic conditions of a community at both local and international levels, and promotes self-sufficiency. In addition, it is equally a powerful tool for cross-cultural accommodation.

Definition and Types of Art Exhibition

Adeyemi (2004) posits that art exhibition can be defined as a public display of works. It could be paintings, drawings, sculptures, metal works, crafts, textile works or antiquities as the case may be. It also refers to an art show or market which brings around many artists, dealers, collectors and press, thereby creating room for artworks to be seen, written about and discussed. Grant (2000) asserts that artists are not people, who simply create art and then drift off into oblivion, rather want their works to be seen and receive some sorts of reaction from those who see them. For many artists, the quest for an exhibition is the primary goal due to the fame successful exhibition can bring to exhibiting artist. There are many venues available for exhibition which includes banks' corporate headquarters, real estate offices, hospitals, libraries, restaurants and community

centres, other means by which artworks can be shown include juried art competitions, sidewalk, art fair, university and polytechnic art galleries, and alternative spaces of non-profit making organizations dedicated to art activities may be outside the main stream; community or town hall, city mall or art display centres, co-operative galleries, museums and commercial galleries.

Art exhibition can be temporary or permanent, solo or one-man, joint or group, etc. Solo exhibition as the name implies, is a form of show prepared and performed by one person with or without subordinate accomplishment. It is strictly the works of art displayed by an artist singularly at a particular place or time. The responsibilities, credits, and liabilities for whatever happens are born by the artist alone. Unlike joint exhibition, which increases the number of artist, plans, work styles, and likely reduces the burden of work production and criticism. Joint exhibition is a showcase by only two artists; while group exhibition brings together two or more individuals under one umbrella or theme at a particular place and time. The group could emerge in the name of an association, societies, guilds, contemporaries or professional colleagues; group exhibition is an exciting idea which receives explosive result. A good example in recent time, in contemporary Nigerian art is the 2010 “Nigeria at 50 art exhibition, Abuja, which brings together formally and informally trained visual artists all over the country with mastery in different media under one roof for a contemplative forty five days. Also, “Just Prints” an exhibition of Nigerian Printmakers in different medium but similar reproductive techniques. “October rain”, an annual group art exhibition mounted by Lagos State, Society of Nigerian Artist is another example of a group show. The desire to exhibit abounds in every artist but within the language are many road marks that must be followed to get a successful performance. First and foremost, it is informing to state that every move of the artist beginning from work production to exhibiting stage matters.

Challenges

Grillo (1998) remarks the art scene is a very busy one today. Almost every month, one young artist is making his debut at an exhibition while the established artists are also exhibiting once or up to thrice annually, but some informed opinion is still largely undiscerning. It is against this backdrop that it becomes essential to define the boundary

of our argument, identify and expound the factors contributing to good performance at art shows.

Grant (2000) opines that marketing or high sales in art exhibition gives what he calls a success or performance. In an interview with Kenny Ojo, Chigbua Osua and Jide Korede all studio based practicing budding artists in Lagos are not different from Grant's assertion. To Grant (2000), it is admissible that most exhibitions have sales in focus. And hitherto successes in exhibition are aptly but wrongly being judged by it or better still by the amount of red tags. But on the overall assessment, this paper does not believe that high or massive sales at art exhibitions should be used to measure success or performance. This is a floating gourd that resembles a rock above the water top. It could be swept off by the raging storms. Ideally, the professional factors that give an art performance for success are constant and global in nature. Admissible, poor sales at commercial art shows is art of poor performance, others are poor or low attendance, poor reception or appreciation of the exhibitor's efforts, poor publicity or low visibility of the exhibits at a given space and time. Also poor organization or lack of it can actually make an art exhibition to be unsuccessful. In the light of the above, this paper will discuss some of the causes of poor performance at art exhibition and some possible way out of this quagmire in the Nigerian art landscape. This is necessary now for scholastic documentation so as to help the hitherto underdeveloped visual art appreciation in contemporary Nigeria. Some of these factors are:

Purpose and Objective(s)

Inability or lack of stating purpose and objectives from the planning stage is a major challenge to a successful art exhibition. If the aims and goals of staging an art exhibition are not properly defined before its commencement by the artists, galleries or curators, then the boat of such exhibition is heading for a rock. The purpose and objectives of art exhibition varies from artists to artist, galleries to gallery, institution to institutions, etc. primarily, some of these are: education, information, enlightenment, documentation, and commercialization. If the purpose and objectives are not clearly spelt out and followed strictly, there is bound to be problems during planning and execution, and therefore may result in directionless of purpose which may lead to poor performance.

A researcher-artist may decide to exhibit his findings with new materials and techniques purposely to educate and document his exploration on materials, techniques or contents rather than commercialization. The object of exhibition here is clearly spelt out to document and by extension educate his viewers, readers and possibly his students or followers. Meanwhile, at a later time, after profound mastery and inputs from critics and the public, he may decide to commercialize. Such artist(s) would be understood to be objective and purposeful. The first annual printmaker's exhibition which took place in July 2004 at Mydrim gallery, Lagos is a good example of art exhibition with clear purpose and objective. According to Ogunsanya (2004), "it offered more artists the opportunity to experiment with prints and needed exposure," the gallery curator went further to state that we are sure that the viewing of this unusual exhibition will be interesting experience for art lovers. On the Just Prints exhibition, Filani (2004) posited that the exhibition had the objective of educating painters, sculptors and the public at large. He went further to state that many tertiary institutions now include printmaking in their curriculum, and many artists are now conscious of the new creative possibilities that the technique offer. Exhibition with definite purpose has positive effects on the mind of the patrons, public and the artists. French Impressionist Saloon exhibition of 1880 is equally a good example. They educated the public and later sold themselves to popularity and monetary gain. Example of which is Manet and Monet.

Quality and Class of Artist(s)

The quality and class of the artists participating in an exhibition can determine the performance of the exhibition. If the artists are not credible professionals, the turn out of audience to the exhibition ground may be discouraging and thereby lead to poor performance. Tested and credible art masters attract more patrons and viewers more than the budding artists when occasion calls for them to exhibit.

Every show is supposed to be a success in its level. Grant (2000) speculates sidewalk art shows, art fairs, Juried Art Competition and alternative spaces for budding artists. Artist making a sidewalk arty show works for part of the year and travel down with his works for show for the rest of the year. Juried art competition is another way through which uncelebrated artist could move out of relegation, opening doors of opportunities for him.

Since Nigeria became independent, the British Council, USIS, Goethe Institute, Italian Cultural Institute and the French Cultural Centre have been giving a lot of encouragement and patronage to serious and quality contemporary Nigerian artists by sponsoring solo, joint and group exhibitions of their works, thereby bringing them to the attention of the collectors. These bodies also organize overseas exhibition and tours of artist's studios, asserted Grillo (1998). After recognition, the artist can vie for competitive commercial galleries. Artists who exhibit at this level are always greeted with resounding success.

Quality Works

Every exhibition requires a presentation of quality works. This becomes a challenge since poor and low quality can affect the success of an art exhibition. If works of art in an exhibition are not properly finished and presented, the response of the audience, critics, writers, patrons, artists, student and professionals in the allied art trades will be negative. Further negative comments of substandard works poses danger to the artist(s), exhibition, the gallery and the art profession. This may lead to a total poor performance in the area of attendances and patronages at such shows. Equally, presentation of works especially paintings need not to be bogous. Most contemporary paintings seem to be fantastic and sell in relatively simple-adored frame become an integral part of the artwork. Picasso sometimes placed his paintings in seventeenth century Dutch frames which is not only worked aesthetically but also fit his over all concept of use pieces as within an artistic tradition. The researcher noted that Ben Osaghae's exhibition of 26 painting at the Goethe Institute in Lagos in year 2000 were frameless. In an interview with Osaghae (2000), he claims, "I had a bitter experience with my framing in the last exhibition. When they bought the works, they yanked off all the frames in my presence."

In most cases, paintings look standard in neat, simple and good frames. Substandard framing and presentation in other genres of art can reduce aesthetic qualities. This can turn down collector's interest and thereby lead to poor performance.

Pre-exhibition Plan

If and when proper pre-exhibition plans are not well laid out and followed strictly by the exhibitors, there may be a major challenge to exhibition success. Pre-exhibition plan for a good show include, educating, informing the public, making publicity and getting media attention, picking date, time, venue, special guest, planning and giving a date for preview by critics, media and some major patrons, etc. poor performance will result where poor attendance in exhibition is the case due to poor information strategy. In an ideal art exhibition, there ought to be a very well grounded pre-exhibition promotional plan; artist should not depend only on the promotional strategies of the gallery alone nor relying solely on family members attending the show.

In educating and informing the public, buyers, critics and patrons, the following points should be taken seriously in order to avoid poor performance in art exhibition:

1. Early direct mailing of invitation letters, cards, brochures of the exhibition and follow-up particularly via the internet. This should be done with greater precision than random mailing.
2. Visiting buyers and patrons
3. Sending sales incentive or promotion through brochures and slides to collectors and invitees.
4. Pasting of posters and promotional stickers of the show in credible and conspicuous places.
5. Distributing handbills in places where quality people that attend exhibitions go to.
6. Make insertion of the exhibition handbills in national and international directories, Art journals, magazines, and web pages.
7. Running radio jingles and television commercials.

It is equally good and informing to include artist's bio-data or resume where mailing stride to expected visitors to boost the image of the artist. All these are necessary to gear the visitors and art lovers to decide to visit the show. Pre-exhibition publicity helps to identify who to expect and who to chase up. It also provides fresh opportunity of talking to collectors and the viewing public on the prospect of the exhibiting artist(s), the exhibition and the excitement to be created.

The studio museum in Halem exhibition by seven African artists titled African Contemporary Art changing traditions in 1990 which showcased Bruce Onobrakpeya, El-Anatsui, Ablade Glover and others began its pre-exhibition campaign six (6) months before the exhibition proper. Due to the vigorous, continuous and successful publicity, sights and talks about the show, the exhibition was seriously looked forward to and the artist in themselves became patrons and collectors household names. The exhibition recorded immense viewing, criticism and patronage. Well-packaged exhibition catalogue and invitation cards to art exhibition must go out on time; at least a month to the exhibition proper. Equally, constant reminders must follow, this is to enable the initial visitors, patrons and connoisseurs etc know the caliber of artist(s) exhibiting and plan their time especially in visiting the exhibition. By these acts, poor performance at art exhibition is completely avoided.

Soliciting of Media Support

To avoid poor performance in an art show, the artist needs to overcome the challenge of broken communication gap between him and the press by putting up enough press releases about his works. This is to be read almost exactly like every regular newspaper article, with the most germain information, for example (An exhibition of paintings and sculptures from the best of Ife of 2000 will he held at...) at the top. It should contain news release, one or two photographs of works, information about the artist and the artist's statement.

Press release should be sent at least three (3) months in advance to the press with subsequent reminders. Considerations should be given to magazines, travel publications, and newspapers and electronic media.

In addition, a reporter, an editor or a critic might be invited to the artist's studio prior to the show in other to build an investment of time and interest towards the artist work and career. This will enable a post exhibition roomage of reviews and criticisms. Art exhibitions that are not given enough publicity in the media may witness poor performance.

Location of Gallery

In order to witness and experience a successful art show, it is best to look for an exhibition space or stand in an art friendly metropolitan area. Bad location of a gallery or exhibition hall could affect a well-packaged art exhibition negatively. It is always good to have an art show in an already developed, educated and enlightened art community and cities. An exhibition in a remote town like Ondo would not attract the same quality of visitors as of Lagos and even in Lagos, choice of area matters. Good galleries are usually located in high-brow areas devoid of any security risk or area menace. Galleries abound in Ikoyi and Victoria Island in Lagos because of its perceived safety, good road and other conducive amenities. It could look expensive but where extensive publicity about the show is productive, the artist will smile at the end. Gallery location is always affected by historical tradition and development. Artists need to be careful about the choice and location of gallery to exhibit. For instance, an exhibition that has commerce as its goal will do well and be appreciated well in places like Ikoyi, Victoria Island, Government reserved area in Lekki, Lagos because of the high class of people there; other than in ghettos like Mushin, Ajegunle, Oshodi – all in Lagos. More importantly too is the fact that art is for intellectuals and its consumers are the elitist. Other places exhibition could take place are university or polytechnic galleries and museums.

Arrangement of Works

Unattractive arrangement of artworks on the stands or hall and insistent power outages at the exhibition hall definitely add to poor performance at art exhibition. It is informing that works of painting, sculpture, etc be sectionalized thereby making arrangement understandable to art lovers and buyers. Illumination is another important factor to bear in mind. Works in dark colour require well lit hall for appreciation. Therefore galleries should promise a standby power generator to tackle light outages.

Personnel Performance

Handling and management on the part of the personnel running the gallery or exhibition becomes another challenge. They must be capable of making selection of right works. A gallerist or curator is better qualified with courses on museum or gallery management. Artist needs not be ad-hoc about exhibition to run into galleries with undistinguished

works and personnel. Art exhibition that is poorly handled will not come out with the required success.

Quality of Visitors

The quality of guests that are invited and indeed visit an art exhibition determines the success of the show. Invitation must be extended to different class of people who at one time or the other will have something philosophical to do with art. These set of people must cut across different disciplines and interests viz: patrons, connoisseurs, art dealers, professionals, students, critics, artists, etc. the gallery or artist must be able to explore and use modern communication gadgets to the fullest. Facilities such as telephones, fax, internet and mobile vehicle for quick communication and others like postcards, slides, album of works, and brochures with which art lovers, connoisseurs, buyers and all other visitors can be mobilized to attend the show. This is because the opportunity of getting the desired quality of buyers and critics expected is apparently a mirage. A situation whereby quality visitors are not contacted and followed up should be avoided.

Natural Disasters

Natural disasters such as heavy downpour of rain, scorching sun, earthquake, typhoon, etc can cause poor attendance which may lead to poor performance at art shows. Others such as miscreants and touts or social or political demonstrations in one form or the other can disrupt good attendance by invitees to an art exhibition. One of the ways through which may be avoided or gotten under control is to get both private security agents and the police high command on standby as guards to the show. 2004 NUXART – a National University Undergraduate Exhibition held at the Yaba College of Technology Gallery, Lagos was disrupted on the opening day by some protesting students in rampage. Quality visitors who came to see the show were turned back from the gate of the college. They were not opportuned to have access into the college talk less the exhibition hall. The exhibition ended in a disaster. This could have been avoided if security men had being positioned to keep watch of the vicinity of the gallery and college.

Political and Economic State of Affairs

Coup d'état, riot or worker's strike or protest in the city or town where exhibition is taking place can cause a mandatory stay at home orders for viewers, critics, connoisseurs and buyers including journalists and other invited guests. Against this background, an artist or gallery and their manager may need to be close to the powers that be especially in a politically unstable society. This point also underscores the reason why artist should have his ears on the ground. Therefore contingency plan should be kept in place where instability in government/economy is rampant.

Corporate Identity

Poor corporate identity of promoters of art exhibition, and the artist(s) in question should be avoided. Artist(s) should be careful of selecting or asking for sponsorship of any corporate organization. The organization the artists associate with must not be a fraudulent one; they must not be seen to be supporting terrorism and so on and so forth. The company an artist associates with must be responsible corporate citizen, if not he artist will be given a negative name and publicity that may mar his career for a long time. The design of the posters, banners and other fliers to be used should be consistent in publicizing the gallery or artists and sponsors' corporate identity, such as logo, type faces, house colours, etc. the walls of the gallery or exhibition hall should be painted white, light cream or light grey so as to produce a contemporary effect leading to quick sighting. The ground floor should also be taken care of properly. Sound, sight space and air freshener may be used creatively to the advantage of the gallery or exhibition hall. However, caution should be exercised with music; it could distract attention and derail purchase of works.

Technical Handling and Control

Breakdown in technical handling and control leading to last minute haphazard arrangement such as unfinished display stand or screens on the opening day of the show or late arrival of price list and so on can be very disastrous to a show. In whatever situation technical display of works and general arrangement should be ready a day or many hours before the opening of exhibition. Creating room for review of work done, relaxation of gallery attendants and coordination of mind. In addition, a daily checklist of

vital items that will project the image of the artist, gallery, and the exhibition should be kept. For example, visitor's book, enquiry log, brochures or catalogues of exhibition, price list, business/complimentary cards of the gallery, artist or their representative(s). Badges to identify staff of the gallery, samples of work in case of prints or other crafts, press packs for press crews, give away promotional items such as pens, notepads, stickers, key holders, etc, refreshment, insurance and first aid box.

Pricing

Yemisi Shyllon (2004) remarks that many artists are desperate to make a living and are often confronted by hit and run collectors who take advantage of their situations by under pricing. There are artists who place too bougous a price on works to which ignorant collectors comply. However, prices of works should be commensurate to its materials, class and level of the artist, durability of work, and the amount of craftsmanship/skill exerted on such work among others. Reasonable amount should be placed on artwork to encourage collectors who with time will get used to the artist's works and invest in his creations. Over pricing discourages would be buyers and collectors and it may lead to poor performance especially at commercial galleries.

Recognition of Buyers

There is also poor recognition of buyers, connoisseurs, patrons, dealers, and people that have to do with buying and appreciating art. Recognition should be inviting and friendly. Where this is not available, this class of people feels bad and get discouraged. Quality visitors may keep away or keep to themselves when they are not recognized.

The artist needs to be present or represented, explain his works to the viewers, chat, full of sense of humour, personal warmth, and display a good deal of social skills. These will be rewarded with good commendations. The artist(s) sometimes could offer to deliver purchased works for buyers, thereby increasing friendliness. Learn more about the environment of buyers/collector which could lead to private commission in time.

Other forms of recognition from the artist or gallery include sending greeting cards, during festive seasons such as Christmas, Id-el-Fitri, Valentine day or invitation to dinner or other parties. Thank you card could also be sent after attendance of an art exhibition. All these will build a good relationship between the artist and his admirers.

Follow-up

Follow-up correspondence to visitors of art shows should not be delayed. The artist must open up correspondences with visitors even after his exhibition, while the aura of inspiration created by the show is still fresh in the collector's or buyer's mind. This is easy because a good rapport had been created earlier during the show. This does not serve to make the artist a beggar or collector. He should maintain his dignity or coordinate himself properly. The benefits derivable from follow-up are limitless. Here the artist will understand his collectors on one on one basis. Equally others who have contributed one way or the other like the media members, friends and critics should be got back to. Grant (2000) suggests that for a couple of two years the relationship should be maintained so that they don't feel used and dumped. However, it could be sustained for life, depending on interest of the players.

Art exhibition provides a range of opportunities but where the show is allowed to be a poor one through lapses in any of the areas discussed above by the stakeholders involved, the corollary is that the artist's profession, name and prospect may suffer beyond expectation.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this paper has been able to outline some of the challenges artist(s) face or are likely to face most especially when they plan to exhibit their works in galleries or any exhibition arena. It equally discusses on possible solutions or way out of these numerous problems with some practical experiential knowledge of the researcher. Some of the solutions proffered may be creatively looked into or applied on the merit when such situation unfolds. Adeyemi (2000) posits that professionalism in any area of human endeavour is always a rough road to thread. Hard work, dedication and talent constitute progressive principles for the artists. Relatively to other professions, the art vocation is a worthy one where individual can effectively contribute to the value of the society. Besides, art exhibition needs hard works, consistency and doing the right thing at the right time. Exhibition can thrive better for the exhibitor if they are properly planned and integrated with other communication, academic and marketing tools. The reward for a well-planned and implemented art show goes beyond the financial. There is always a

good honour and respect for a successful art exhibition. The road is long and rough for good performance in art exhibition. Strategic planning, patience, creativity and hard work which must be the exhibitor's watchword need to be skillfully woven like the bird's nest otherwise he could be frustrated out of the profession if care is not taken. Finally, art exhibitors must always thirst for uniqueness of ideas and style.

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