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# Contemporary Discourse and The Oblique Narrative Of Avant-Gardism In Twentieth-Century Nigerian Art

Clement Emeka Akpang

<sup>1</sup> Department of Visual Arts and Technology, Cross River University of Technology CRUTECH, Cross River State, Nigeria.

**Abstract.** The history of Twentieth Century Nigerian art is characterized by ambiguities that impede understanding of the underlying modernist philosophies that inspired modern art from the 1900s. In the past five decades, scholars have framed the discourse of *Contemporary Nigerian Art* to analyze art created during that period in Africa starting with Nigeria in order to differentiate it from that of Europe and America. However, this quest for differentiation has led to a mono-narrative which only partially analyze modernist tendencies in modern Nigerian art, thus, reducing its impact locally and globally. Adopting *Content Analysis* and *Modernism* as methodologies, this research subjected literature on Twentieth Century Nigerian art to critical analysis to reveal its grey areas, as well as draw upon recent theories by Chika Okeke-Agulu, Sylvester Ogbechie, Olu Oguibe and Okwui Enwezor to articulate the occurrence of a unique Nigerian avant-gardism blurred by the widely acclaimed discourse of contemporary Nigerian art. Findings reveal that the current discourse unwittingly frames Twentieth Century Nigerian art as a time-lag reactionary mimesis of Euro-American modernism. This research contends that such narrative blocks strong evidences of avant-garde tendencies identified in the works of Aina Onabolu, Ben Enwonwu, Uche Okeke and others, which exhibited intellectual use of the subversive powers of art for institutional/societal interrogation. Drawing upon modernist theories as a compass for analyzing the works of the aforementioned, this paper concludes that rather than being a mundane product of contemporaneity, Twentieth Century Nigerian art was inspired by decolonization politics and constituted a culture-specific avant-gardism in which art was used to enforce change. Thus, a new modern art discourse is proposed that will reconstruct Twentieth Century Nigerian art as an expression of modernism parallel to Euro-American modernism.

**Keyword:** *Art, Aesthetics Avant-Garde, Contemporary, Modern, Modernism, Nigeria, Twentieth Century*

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## 1 Introduction

Modern Nigerian art history remains highly contested as a result of the adoption of ambiguous theoretical frameworks that de-emphasizes the ideologies, philosophies and conceptualism of Twentieth Century Nigerian art [1]. Inspired by a plethora of factors, from the 1900s, the development of modern art, that is art that transcended traditional Nigerian aesthetics, assumed a new experimental paradigm, thus, leading to the invention of various art genres. However, the

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\*Corresponding author at: Department of Visual Arts and Technology, Cross River University of Technology CRUTECH, P.M.B 1123, Calabar, Cross River State, Nigeria.

E-mail address: clementakpang@yahoo.com

multifaceted nature of the invented modern art at the turn of the Twentieth Century has resulted in scholars grappling with constructing a modern Nigerian art history that comprehensively philosophize and contextualize art of that period in modernist conceptual frameworks. This has led to the dominant discourse of '*Contemporary Nigerian Art*,' which although rich in its contemporary adoption of historiography to visit the past, embodies certain conceptual problematics. Rather than interrogating Twentieth Century Nigerian art in relation to the modernist artistic discourse of the time because of the historic timeframe it flourished, instead some African and European scholars have developed a discourse that canters on a construed ideological interpretation of artistic contemporaneity. This conceptual framework covers art created from the 1900s to the early 1970s providing detailed stylistic genealogy of Twentieth Century Nigerian art with some degree of iconographic analysis.

The problematic associated with this discourse lies in the fact that it unconsciously constructs Twentieth Century Nigerian art as a form of reactionary aesthetic response to the benevolence of colonialism and colonial cultural imperialism as opposed to looking at it from the dominant modernist lens of art historical discourses of the period [2]. In other words, by not adopting a modernist compass in analyzing Nigerian art from the 1900s, that is by not focusing on interrogating in-depth iconography and conceptualism of such art, it is unwittingly interpreted as a loose mimetic artistic form which occurred as an extension of European expressionism through indigenous reaction to western imposition and subjugation. While this has been the dominant narrative in modern Nigerian art history, the idea of a mono-narrative itself to a great extent impede understanding of the underlying ideologies and philosophies that informed 1900s artistic expressionism in Nigeria and the role art/artists played in fostering anti-imperial battles as a form of indigenous avant-gardism.

This research focuses on interrogating the problematic associated with the discourse of *Contemporary Nigerian Art* and suggests a new theoretical framework to redefine Twentieth Century Nigerian art in modernist perspective. The idea is not to dismiss the established modern Nigerian art historical discourse but to build upon existing theoretical, thematic and conceptual frameworks in available literature to provide a new narrative that interprets such art in modernist, avant-gardist and bohemian context mirroring the dominant artistic discourse of the Twentieth Century. The rationale for proposing this alternative narrative is premised on the fact that since the institutionalization of the discourse of *Contemporary Nigerian Art* in the past five decades, the philosophically charged ethos of art produced from the 1900s continues to be partially articulated hence impeding a sophisticated understanding of the avant-gardism that took place in Nigeria from the 1900s bearing semblance to those of Europe and American. To achieve the objective of this research, it suffices to draw upon *Content Analysis* as methodology and the analytical tools of *Modernism* to interrogate existing literature on Twentieth Century Nigerian art and society.

## 2 Method

This research adopts *Content Analysis*, which provides in-depth interrogation of textual matter to determine the presence of repeated words, phrases and concepts used in the formulation of discourse. It is used to determine the actual content and internal features of media, and makes inferences about the messages within text, the writer(s), the audience, and even the culture and time of which these are a part. Writers create communication and language structures by composing text in distinct patterns to define different perspectives of society, culture and phenomena, thus, content analysis helps to deconstruct such textual composition and communication structures to reveal hidden concepts and meanings. This analytical framework was formulated by the political scientist Harold Lasswell in the mid Twentieth Century when he proposed the following core questions for examining all text: "Who says what, to whom, why, to what extent and with what effect?" [3]. These questions are designed to preen text in order to reveal root meanings often masked by complex textual constructions. Bernard Berelson later define content analysis as an emblematic "research technique for the objective, systematic, qualitative and quantitative description of the manifest content of communication" [4]. Berelson's theory led to the application of *Content Analysis* in qualitative research, a stark contrast to its predominant use in quantitative research by Lasswell as it opened two possibilities or trajectories of method: conceptual analysis and relational analysis.

Conceptual Analysis examines the existence of a concept by analyzing its presence in a collection of text, while Relational Analysis examines the relationship among concepts in a text. Due to the fact that content analysis can be applied to examine any piece of writing or occurrence of recorded communication, it helps in Identifying the intentions, focus or communication trends of an individual, group or institution. Thus, it is adopted in this paper to interrogate literature on Twentieth Century Nigerian art to firstly, unravel the problematic associated with the discourse of *Contemporary Nigerian Art*, then to identify patches of modernist references in same texts.

The ideological, philosophical and conceptual framework of *Modernism* is also used as an analytical tool for the critique of Twentieth Century Nigerian society, as it provides an alternative and abstract mode of interpreting the creative/ideological worlds. Many theorists have employed *Modernism* as an analytical tool to interpret society and aesthetic paradigms. Clement Greenberg for example, opines that, modernism marked the initiation of "a new kind of criticism of society made possible by the quest to transcend *Alexandrainism* and this criticism examined the forms that lie at the heart of every society" [5]. Modernism as demonstrated by Greenberg's theory, provides a critical framework through which the core and structures of societies can be interpreted; this view is shared by Harold Rosenberg who argues that modernism constitutes a visual critique that enables the interpretation of subjects such as language, representations,

ideologies, structures, aesthetic paradigms and philosophies that sit at the base of modern societies [6].

Both Greenberg and Rosenberg regard modernism as a potent analytical framework/tool and used it to establish contrasting intellectual theories from the 1940s in their interpretation of American society, modern art, avant-gardism and culture. In *Modernist Painting* Greenberg (1965) submits that from the time of the philosopher Kant, modernist analysis lies "in the use of the characteristic methods of a discipline to criticize the discipline itself - not in order to subvert it, but to entrench it more firmly in its area of competence" [7]. Greenberg believes that modernist self-criticism is used to purify and authenticate art and this he employed to interpret modern society; he applies Kant's laws of modernism in his interpretation of the creative world which informed his theory that art assumes modern status when it sheds away all that is not necessary to that genre, capturing only its essential features in order to justify its existence, autonomy and authenticity through that genre's means. In this sense, Greenberg defines anything modernist simply if it overhauls conventions in order to renew the vitality of that genre.

Rosenberg on the other hand provides an alternative philosophical standpoint in which modernism is analyzed as a critical reflection on the psychological, the intellectual, the spontaneous, and the evocative; he emphasizes the motives and actions, which influence the use of a particular medium or style in modern expression as the defining feature of avant-garde art. Rosenberg used modernism to interpret Twentieth Century American art, as art authenticated by discarding all traditional aesthetics, focusing on the psychological, processes, emotional and intellectual energies of art as an event [8]. Rosenberg, thus, adapts modernism as a tool to analyze psychological paradigms in modern society and how such psychological changes impacted the formalism and reception of modern art. These analytical approaches are adopted to interrogate literature and images of Twentieth Century Nigerian art to provide an extended narrative of modern Nigerian art history in a new modernist perspective as a manifestation of a unique avant-gardism in Nigeria.

### **3 Twentieth Century Nigeria and the Discourse of Contemporary Art**

Available literature on Twentieth Century Nigerian art is defined by the prevalent discourse of *Contemporary Nigerian Art*. The term contemporary art refers to art, which engages with the contemporal or immediate [9]. That is art produced at the moment influenced by the circumstances of the NOW – it refers to art which in form, style and content exist as a result of the event of the present. The discourse of contemporary art denotes art which mirrors contemporary culture and society, such works are a dynamic combination of materials, methods, concepts, and subjects that defies easy definition, and are distinguished by the very lack of a uniform organizing principle, or ideology, only giving to the varied and changing cultural

landscape of identity, values, and beliefs. Twentieth Century Nigerian art is narrated using this framework; the early proponents of this discourse place overarching emphasis on looking at art created from the 1900s as a product of the events of that period lacking a unified principle, rather than studying the higher contextual, ideological and aesthetic implications of such creative endeavors and their possible philosophical impact on society. Also, the discourse of contemporary Nigerian art is further defined in historiography. In this context, it involves providing detailed genealogical accounts of the development of modern art by discussing the major aesthetic paradigms given rise to during that period. It provides details of the artistic transition from traditionalism to modernity, that is from pre-modern abstractionism to idealized realism in Nigeria. This theoretical framework is identified in core essays on the subject matter for example, Godwin Iriwieri's *'An Appreciation of the State of Visual Arts in Nigeria 1900 – 1970'*. In it, Iriwieri provides a comprehensive historiography of art development in Nigeria. He traces the origin of modern Nigerian art starting with Chief Aina Onabolu, then proceeds to discuss the impact of Kenneth Murray as the stimulator of cultural parity and pride to the arts and cultural heritage of Nigeria. The author identifies two distinct phases in the development of visual arts in Nigeria, "1900-1938 the beginning of formal art training and 1939-1970 the period of creating identity and promotion of Nigerian art" [10]. Although his historical account provides great insight into the development of modern Nigerian art, it falls short in analyzing the ideological/philosophical underpinnings that inspired the identified aesthetic paradigm shifts beyond stylistic concerns, and how such art engaged modern Nigerian society and polity. This historiographical approach is also evident in Chukueggu's *'Modern Artistic Tendency in Nigeria: its Influence on the Creative Development'*. The author also observes that the development of modern Nigerian art experienced two major stylistic changes. He categorizes the major periods as *Neo-Traditional Expression* and the *Colonial or European Academic Realism*. Unlike Iriwieri, Chukueggu traces the origin of modern Nigerian art to the activities of Benin traditional artists who as early as the 13<sup>th</sup> Century influenced by the Portuguese began creating works with European influences, thus, crediting them as the pioneers of neo-transitional or quasi-modern artistic expression in Nigeria. He refers to the second phase as *European Academic Realism* of which he credits Onabolu as the founding father [11]. He concludes that the activities of the Zaria Art Society in the late 1950s was a basic continuation of Murray's *Cultural Revivalism* ideology at the apotheosis of the second phase of *European Academic Realism*, the Zarianist he postulates "sharpened and refocused the art tradition based on the initial creative efforts of the Neo-traditional artists, Aina Onabolu and the Murray School" [12]. Chukueggu's essay exemplify modern Nigerian art literature framed in historiography with reference to stylistic and formalistic analysis of art, and also highlights some of the ambiguities associated with such contemporary art narrative alluded to earlier. Namely that it is exemplary of the contradictory accounts of who pioneered modern art and when it actually started in Nigeria. The cited articles also constitute a narrative in which the beginning of each aesthetic paradigm is connected to contact with Europeans (missionaries, colonizers or traders), thus, using that contact to define the emergence

of modern art as a reflection of a new kind of contemporaneity. In other words, these writers narrate modern art as an aesthetic reflection of the immediate society, polity and culture. This is why Irivwieri ties modern Nigerian art to imperialism while Chukwueggu frames the origin of modern Nigerian art as a product of Portuguese trade contact, colonial introduction of formal education and the advent of Murray. These theoretical approaches are framed in Hans Belting's theory of the contemporary which in his book *'The End of the History of Art 1983'* defines contemporary art in relation to its context, societal changes and contact, as art which not only violates the frontiers of aesthetic autonomy and repudiates the traditional experience of art but one that also seeks renewed contact with its own social and cultural environment, resolving thus celebrated conflict of life and art [13]. The adoption of this theoretical framework to articulate Twentieth Century Nigerian art in the discourse of contemporary Nigerian art is very insightful because of its interweaving of modern life, cultural change and artistic expression, but it focuses on historiography as a superficial recording of artistic transition informed by transiting culture. Modern Nigerian art from the 1900s envisioned in this context is defined as reactionary aesthetic manifestations informed by periodic immediate societal happenings, without any corresponding reference to the underlying philosophies, conceptualism and ideas that inspired the creation of such influenced art. Whether this is intentional or a deliberate exclusivism is not ascertained.

The dominant discourse of *Contemporary Nigerian Art* is also characterized by attempts to define Twentieth Century Nigerian art as a distinctive form of subversive/bohemian art different from that of the West. Nkiru Nzegwu offers insights into the rationale for charting such theoretical departure by many scholars of African descent;

Throughout this century, in the visual arts, modernism has been the cartographic lens through which global visual creative expression is framed. Its distorting assumptions about visual creative production ignore the fact that modernism's privileging of art and visuality obscures the multiple trajectories of cultural development...shaped within a particular cultural location, this provided the requisite basis for preserving the centrality of the Eurocentric vision of art in the age of colonialism and for curtailing the transformational force of competing creative visions [14].

What Nzegwu alludes to is an attempt to break European hegemony especially in the Eurocentric construction of art history to the exclusion of the *'Other'*. Modernism discourse the theoretical framework for modern art history in Europe and America further extends Eurocentrism in the age of colonization and postcolonialism by framing all modern artistic expressions outside Europe as mimesis. Bothered by Europe's continued artistic hegemony, that is its Eurocentric vision of art, African writers have resorted to creating alternative narratives to debunk Europe's dismissal of the artistic merits of the African *'Other'*. Herein lies the inspiration for the originators of a variant of the discourse of *Contemporary Nigerian Art* who derive impetus from this contested terrain, hence their analysis and construction of Twentieth Century Nigerian art as a localized form of bohemian expressionism invented to foster the battle for emancipation from colonialism. In this sense well-articulated essays have emerged that establish links between the invention of modern

art in Nigeria from the 1900s, colonial politics and nationalism advocacies. These generation of writers adopt a philosophical interpretation of the contemporary that alludes to Terry Smith's ideologies of contemporaneity in the history of art. in this sense contemporary is seen as the name of an art movement that succeeded modernism like a form of neo-modernist expressionism in between modernism and postmodernism. Contemporaneity is thus, seen as pointing to a multiplicity of ways of being in time. In a more general or historical sense as a contemporaneous state or condition, that occurs at any place or time, and experienced, presumably, at any scale by individuals, groups, and entire social formations, being immersed, utterly, in a world marked by an unprecedented diversity and depth of difference, by the coexistence of incommensurable viewpoints, and by the absence of an all-encompassing narrative [15]. Such readings of the present imply multiple, proliferating futures in modernist, and pluralistic views, and relationships contingent not the base-superstructure dialectic but that rather occur without predetermination. This sense of the interrogation of the temporal in art bellies a deeper philosophical meaning as it preens artistic expressionism as part of cultural interrogation of society, life and existence as well as the impact of art in that cultural context. This approach defines the second variant of the thesis in writings on Contemporary Nigerian Art one I must quickly state, holds the epistemological premise on which the new narrative provided in this paper is anchored.

Sylvester Ogbechie is an example of African scholars who advance this writing genre. In his monograph on Ben Enwonwu, Ogbechie argues that,

Nationalism was an undeniable aspect of political and cultural development in Nigerian art and an integral aspect of its emergent modernity in the Twentieth century...the idea of a radical social change underpinned the most important political and cultural movements for independence in Africa. In Nigeria it brought about a commensurate interrogation of cultural practice in an effort to reconstitute a sense of indigenous identity disrupted by colonization. This aesthetics of radical politics defines specific focus on material culture within this process of political transformation that embodied the post-colonial aspirations of the country [16].

Ogbechie's text demonstrates a paradigm in contemporary Nigerian art discourse that moves away from concerns with historiography to focus on the analysis of art as a product of societal transformation and local/foreign cultural and aesthetic interaction, especially in Nigeria as a product of intense local politics and anti-imperial sentiments. This theory is corroborated in Olu Oguibe's *'Appropriation as Nationalism in Modern African Art'*. In this essay, Oguibe fosters the narrative of Nigerian art from the 1900s as an intellectual artistic reaction to colonialism and cultural imperialism. He argues that, the imperialist imposed colonial mimicry in order to keep Africans within primitive representation, and this resulted in civilized Africans drawing inspiration from their colonial conditioning to invent a kind of modernist art to defy colonial restrictions and debunk imperial text/stereotypes of the colonized *'Other'* [17]. What Oguibe and Ogbechie achieve in their respective essays is a deeper contextual analysis of the temporal in which the invention of modern arts in Twentieth Century Nigeria is analyzed to have existed

within and independent of colonialism by assuming a bohemian positioning to oppose imperialism. Both scholars, thus, define a discourse within Contemporary Nigerian Art history that frames Twentieth Century Nigerian art as a unique juxtaposition of modern creative tendencies with societal concerns and political aspirations to foster a nationalist vision of freedom from colonial subjugation through a new emergent art formalism. This succinctly alludes to a modernist expressive sense of art creation that drew impetus from socio-political activism in colonial Nigeria, but does not fully articulate such art forms in modernist terms as an expression of modernism in Nigeria. Their theories opens possibilities for this line of discourse which this paper will further expound as a new proposed alternative narrative for Twentieth Century Nigerian Art, defining how such forms used semiotic devices to advance anti-colonial sentiments as a form of modernism.

#### **4 Contemporary Discourse and the Partial Articulation of Modernism in Twentieth Century Nigerian Art**

The analysis of the discourse of contemporary Nigerian art indicates two theoretical approaches - firstly the discourse defines the origin and development of Twentieth Century Nigerian art as a reaction or representation of the contemporal. Ulli Beier in his book *'Contemporary Art in Africa 1968'*, began this theoretical framing of modern Nigerian art as an involuntary aesthetic colonization - that is a product of colonial benevolence and western experiments. His narrative centered on the works of workshop trained artists, thus, defining Twentieth Century Nigerian art as a spontaneous indigenous movement, based on a carefully calculated planned culture change inspired by enculturation and imperial colonial impact, European anthropologists and expatriates [18]. His thesis authenticated Nigerian art as modern based on the aesthetic framework of indigenous-primitivism and as a form of reactionary aesthetics. Initially this framing was damning because it implied such art forms were devoid of intellectuality and conceptualism but that has been actively debunked by writers after him some of whom are referred to in this piece. For Beier and others who advance this discursive framework, Twentieth Century Nigerian art constitutes art developed with characteristic features of primitivism as an extension of traditional art with a touch of borrowed European modernity (materials and techniques). Kunle Filani's *'Of Assumptions and Realities: Critical Perspectives in Contemporary Nigerian Art'*, corroborate this theory; making reference to Frank Willet, Filani categorizes Twentieth Century modern Nigerian art as "the continuing relevance and viability of particular traditions together with emergence of novel practices", he proceeds to assert that "the story of contemporary Nigerian art should be told within the context of colonial history" [19]. in this sense, Filani extends the narrative Beier and Willet constructed for Twentieth Century Nigerian art history tied to colonialism and primitivism. This theory of involuntary aesthetic colonization based on the enthusiasm of semi-civilized artists carried away by their contact with Europeans, de-emphasises the philosophical potency of modern Nigerian art from the 1900s by denying it any sound conceptual, intellectual or avant-garde



underpinning. This has resulted in writers such as Rasheed Araeen dismissing the works of Aina Onabolu and other Nigerian modernists as basic mimicry of Western realism, unable to interrogate imperialism or liberate the African image [20]. The rationale behind such misleading dismissal of modern Nigerian artist has come about because of the problematic constructing of modern Nigerian art as reactionary aesthetics and product of colonial benevolence, thus, inadvertently reducing it to mimicry devoid of any form of rationality and bohemianism. This is so because it implies that modern art was superficially contemporary in its interaction with the immediate and lacked the quality to engage and enforce change as is the philosophy of modernist art elsewhere in Europe and America during the same timeframe. Thus, what the discourse of contemporary Nigerian art in its early phase especially framed as reactionary aesthetics has done is develop a compass for viewing the entire gamut of Twentieth Century Nigerian art as a product of artistic enthusiasm rather than fully analyzing it as a philosophical expression of intellectual and artistic conceptualism/bohemianism. Although this argument has been fully contested in more recent writings certain grey areas still exist.

The discourse of contemporary Nigerian art also poses a distinct theoretical ambiguity because of the attempts to define Twentieth Century Nigerian art as a unique expression of cultural artistic radicalism set apart from Euro-American modernism, thus, unwittingly framing it as a mimetic movement. What this means is that modern Nigerian art is analyzed as a movement that occurred after Euro-American modernism and not parallel to it. This is done by a sense of articulation of contemporary art as the art-space between modernism and postmodernism in which modern African arts is located. This fully manifest in the emphasis on the *Zaria Rebels* of the late 1950s whose 'avant-gardism' only occurred at the crescendo of nationalism politics long after modernism had reached its full articulation in Europe five decades earlier. The heightened sense of anti-colonial artistic expressionism at the apotheosis of *Nationalism* movement is thus, believed to have been inspired by modernist ideologies from Europe only ferried to Africa as part of imperial civilization of the primitive '*Other*'. The framing of this discourse results in a time-lag articulation of Twentieth Century Nigerian art as a mild-spinoff of European modernist art that had since reached its full articulation. These views subscribe to, and fosters Eurocentric ideology of mainstreams and the Eurocentric vision of art in which the West is seen as the superior culture which '*Other*' cultures must mimic artistically. The intension to construct modern Nigerian art as a unique expression of a Nigerian-specific avant-garde intersection of art and indigenous resistance is genuine but the approach as a time-lag needs rethinking as it does not effectively capture and articulate the local and international impacts of the works of Nigerian modernists such as Onabolu, Enwonwu, Okeke, Onabropkae, Lasekan and others who were modernist in every right as Picasso, Duchamp, Breton, Ray, Tatlin, Pollock, Warhol etc., were in Europe and America. This attempt at differentiation is ineffective in trying to address the exclusivism of Western art historical narratives in which Africa and '*Other*' cultures are ignored and their cultural products dismissed. As Ogbechie points out, "Africa occupies a negative space in the

occidental imagination and serves merely as a backdrop to the narrative of European cultural supremacy. The art-history discourse offers two stark choices: absorb modern African art into European narratives; or create a separate discourse of modern African art" [21]. African writers have chosen the latter to create an alternative narrative to address Eurocentrism in world art history especially that of Twentieth Century art. The discourse of contemporary Nigerian art appears therefore, as an attempt to define an Afro-specific modernist discourse not accounted for in Euro-American art discourses but requires constant interrogation to effectively define the subversive and avant-garde potentialities of what transpired in modern Nigerian art-space from the 1900s. The view that, creating a separate discourse for modern African art validates a separate and equal idea of art history, which in turn reinforces the tendency to locate Africa outside of contemporary historical timeframe, has created a kind of Nigerian-specific modernist art history outside of Euro-American historic timeline. This has not fared scholarly well in its early conceptual framing beginning with Beier by its time lag reactionary aesthetic structuring and narrative.

In its earliest form, the discourse of *Contemporary Nigerian Art* blurs the rich potentialities of Twentieth Century Nigerian art by framing it as an extension of European modernist ideologies, thus, problematically glossing over the intense artistic interaction with colonial politics and nationalism that took place in Nigeria. This impedes a sophisticated understanding of modernist art in Nigeria which as opposed to being a mere involuntary aesthetic colonization, was actually a complex display of avant-garde creative juxtaposition of art, intellectuality and indigenous anti-imperial activism, that contributed immensely to Nigeria's modernity and decolonization. However, this culture-specific adaptation of the subversive powers of art, which is akin to what defines and categorizes art as avant-gardist and bohemian is largely under-researched, except for few authors such as Oguibe, Enwezor, Ogbechie and Okeke-Agulu who have interrogated the early framing of the discourse of contemporary Nigerian art to provide new meanings and understanding that forms the core of new writings on which the proposed modernist perspective for Twentieth Century Nigerian art is advanced herein

## **5 Towards a New Modernist Theoretical Perspective**

The aforementioned ambiguities in existing literature suggest that Twentieth Century Nigerian art history requires some rethinking and a new narrative especially since the current discourse is a mono-narrative that does not fully articulate modernist ideologies that inspired modern artistic expressionism in Nigeria. Defining a new theoretical perspective framed in modernist narrative will effectively account for the philosophically charged works created in Nigeria from the 1900s, and bridge the identified gaps in existing literature. This is premised on the fact that there are evidences that proves the manifestation of modernism in Nigeria even suggested in the works of Onuchukwu, Chukwueggu, Iwirivwi, Oguibe, Ogbechie, Okeke-Agulu, Nzegwu and others.

These writers provide insights into the existence of underlying modernist philosophies as the ideological inspiration for art created in Nigeria from the 1900s. Their texts points to the fact that Twentieth Century modern Nigerian art was linked to indigenous anti-colonial activism and drew impetus from the battles against imperialism and 'Thingification'. Irivwieri for example observes that modern artistic tendencies in the country was invented to reject western derogatory stereotypes about Africans in order to deter the negative colonial narrative that no black man was capable of drawing or painting like Europeans [22]. Ogbechie in '*Ben Enwonwu: the Making of an African Modernist*' provides one of the richest resource that opens up theoretical partway to viewing modern Nigerian art in modernist perspectives; he observes that, "modern African artists appropriated European conventions to create a space of representation within which the negative colonial discourse could be challenged on their own terms..." [23]. Ogbechie's theory corroborates that later postulated by Irivwieri in suggesting that modern Nigerian art was not a mere contemporary reactionary aesthetics rather an intellectual creative activity in which art was used to foster a philosophical war aimed at liberating Africans from colonial subjugation. Ogbechie's book links the emergence of modern arts in Twentieth Century Nigeria to intense indigenous politics, as an interrogation of imperialism through artistic form. This ideology was alluded to in a preceding piece by Nkiru Nzegwu who posits that, "modern Nigerian artists devoted enormous attention to the politics and the multiple sites of operation of colonialism...aware of the power of visual representation in illuminating, distorting, or erasing people's realities and emancipatory struggles, they directed their art to combating, in a non-propagandist way, the psychological effects of colonialism and racism" [24]. Nzegwu's essay which focuses on the 1950s nationalist art as an expression of decolonization is an example that makes reference to the Zarianist *Natural Synthesis Manifesto* as a modernist declaration of anti-colonial and anti-European advocacy to foster the battle against imperialism and loss of the Nigerian-self. Twentieth Century Nigerian art is thus, in this sense articulated beyond the representation of mere contemporary events but rather as defined by the conceptual and philosophical task of juxtaposing artistic expressionism with nationalism, patriotism and radicalism, to foster the pan-African crusade against imperial rule [25]. This theoretical paradigm represents a new variant of the discourse of Contemporary Nigerian art that is most succinctly advanced in Okeke-Agulu's '*Postcolonial Modernism: Art and Decolonization in Twentieth-Century Nigeria 2015*' and '*Reading the Contemporary: African Art from Theory to Marketplace 1999*' by Oguibe and Enwezor. Both books engage a new sense of the contemporary in Contemporary Nigerian Art discourse, one that analyses Twentieth Century Nigerian art in perspectives that tilt towards modernist discourse and avant-gardism. Specifically, Okeke-Agulu's book, which as its title reads, suggest the need to move away from the epithet contemporary when analyzing Nigerian art from the 1900s. These texts provide inspirations for the postulation in this essay that modern Nigerian art of the Twentieth Century should be looked at in modernist perspectives away from the dominant contemporary narrative.

Besides references to the aforementioned scholars, the testimonies of the artists who flourished at the turn of the Twentieth Century offer primary sources that further valorizes the existence of an uncovered modernism in Nigeria. Recounting the inspiration for their art during the 1930s, 40s and 50s, Enwonwu posits that, “we were all so conscious of the battle for liberation from colonialism...if we painted any picture, composed a song or like Senghor recite a poem, we philosophized” [26]. Enwonwu’s submission proves that their invention of modern art was conceptual and subversive rather than merely reactionary. Enwonwu, in this sense points to an indigenous modernism directed towards the battle for liberation and definition of the African self, post-independence. His theory is further valorized by Okeke as the main inspiration for the formation of the *Zaria Art Society*;

The Zaria art society was inaugurated out of the political ferment and desire for self-rule and national independence...the formation of the society was engendered by the nationalism political movement...majority of the lecturers were British and came with their own project...we doubted that there must be a monolithic approach to engaging what was aesthetically good, we disliked the imposition of European ideas on Nigerians and Africans as a whole...[27].

This extract from Okeke the philosopher king of the Zaria Rebels indicates clearly that modern Nigerian art was driven by ideologies akin to those of avant-garde artifactuality rather than an expression of involuntary aesthetic colonialism.

Therefore, based on this analysis, it is my view that what transpired in Nigeria from the 1900s to the late 1960s is a manifestation of indigenous avant-gardism that constitutes a parallel Twentieth Century Nigerian Modernism that if properly investigated will contribute to the understanding of modernism as a dynamic multifaceted phenomenon with multiple avant-garde canterers beyond Europe and America, Nigeria being one. Modernism is a philosophy of art, thus, an analytical tool for interrogating art produced during the Twentieth Century and if the theories of modernism used for classifying avant-gardism are applied in interrogating Twentieth Century Nigerian art, it will valorise the basis for the argument put forward in this research that art created in Nigeria from the 1900s constitutes an expression of modernism rather than a superficial reaction to contemporaneity. In *'The Theory of the Avant-garde 1984'*, Peter Burger states that modernist art is art that rejects historicism in search of the New. Peter Childs in *'Modernism 2007'*, developed the theory that modernist or avant-garde art is art that draw upon the subversive powers of art to interrogate and overturn various notions of power. Terry Barret in his essay *'Modernism and Postmodernism: An Overview with Art Examples 1997'*, establishes that what constitutes modernist art, is an expression of rebellious attitude drawing upon bohemian culture to rebel against institutions, authorities and restrictions. Neil Cox in *'Cubism 2000'* theories modernist art as the criticism of society, history, traditionalism and bourgeois social order etc.; While Partha Mitter views avant-garde and modernist art as that defined by radical experimentation and transgression of established aesthetic conventions. These surveyed theories summarizes modernist art as the expression of anti-institutional, anti-authority sentiments and the bohemian

use of the subversive powers of art to alter various notions of power in order to enforce societal change. This is exactly what transpired in Nigeria yet Twentieth Century Nigerian art has never been interrogated as a manifestation of modernism. Detailed analysis (conceptual, contextual and stylistic) of the *Political Realism* of Onabolu, the *Hybrid Aesthetics* of Enwownu's art of *Radical Cultural Politics*, and the rebellious anti-European manifesto of *Natural Synthesis* by Okeke and the Zarianist reveals, a conscious intellectual intersection of experimental art with indigenous battles for liberation to foster decolonization and the re-imaging of Nigeria. This reflects a sense of indigenous modernism as a visual re-invention of anti-authority and anti-institutional activism in the form of the rejection of colonial oppression, subjugation and stereotypes as well as rejection of imposed cultural imperialism. This avant-garde tendencies in Twentieth Century Nigerian art can be analyzed on equal framework as the anti-bourgeois and anti-institutional sentiments fostered by artists such as Picasso, Breton, Duchamp, Matisse, Warhol and others, in Europe and America during the same period. Yet this modernist tendencies in modern Nigerian art which should be explored as a manifestation of a parallel modernism, are blurred by the early narratives of the discourse of contemporary Nigerian art, thus, impeding a sophisticated understanding of the avant-garde concepts, ideologies and philosophies of Twentieth Century Nigerian art. Against this backdrop this research contends that the current history of modern Nigerian art from the 1900s requires urgent rethinking and reconstruction in modernist perspective to fully appreciation the contributions of Nigerian avant-gardes to the local and global *Artworld*.

## 6 Conclusion

This paper subjected the current history of Twentieth Century Nigerian art to critical analysis which then revealed that the widely celebrated discourse of '*Contemporary Nigerian Art*' falls short in fully articulating the complex intersection of modern arts with local politics to overturn colonialism as a culture-specific avant-gardism that constituted a variant of modernism outside Europe and America. Although insightful in a historiographical sense, the earliest construction of the discourse of Contemporary Nigerian Art defined it in a time-lag as a movement after Euro-American modernism just before postmodernism. This approach creates an aura of mimicry as reactionary aesthetics around Nigerian art from the 1900s, which is scholarly, ambiguous. The crux of this paper has been to interrogate these ambiguities, as well as review more recent writings, which provide a modernist approach to reading such art in order to draw impetus for proposing a new theoretical perspective. This paper contends that, to fully understand Twentieth Century Nigerian art, a new history is required, one constructed in modernist perspective. This is because the political realist works of Onabolu and Lasekan, the cultural revivalism art of Enwonwu and workshop trained artists, as well as Okeke/the Zarianist's anti-colonial/nationalist art, were all defined by avant-garde ideologies, thus, constituting a unique Nigerian modernism parallel to that of Europe, America, India, Mexico etc., which all flourished at the turn of the

Twentieth Century. The findings of this research open up a new theoretical perspective on Twentieth Century Nigerian art by drawing impetus from the theories of scholars such as Ogbechie, Okeke-Agulu, Oguibe and Enwezor to bridge the gaps in literature and address the problematics in the discourse of *Contemporary Nigerian Art*. If the current history of Twentieth Century Nigerian art is rethought along this new theoretical and conceptual framework of *Nigerian Modernism*, it will provide a good resource for a sophisticated understanding of courses such as *Modern African Art* and *Contemporary African Art* which currently are confusedly intertwined in the curricula of institutions of higher learning in Nigeria.

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