

Art and Artist in Pandemic: Four Notable COVID-19 Precipitated Virtual Art Exhibitions in Nigeria

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Abstract

COVID-19, the code name of the disease caused by a Coronavirus, was first announced in December 2019 by China and declared a world pandemic in 2020. Among several measures to curb and eradicate the disease was the enforcement of a lockdown. Lockdown impacted the socio-cultural and economic lives of people worldwide. The internet became the only space where everyone connected. Many professionals and entrepreneurs responded by finding alternative avenues to enable the sustainability and survival of their professions. Among these that were grossly affected are artists worldwide, who responded to the demands of the times in different ways. One aspect of art practice that was affected was gallery-based art exhibitions which led to the emergence of increase in virtual art exhibitions. This paper documents and reviews four selected outstanding virtual art exhibitions from the numerous that took place and were precipitated by COVID-19 lockdown. From observation of fifteen notable exhibitions, four exhibitions were purposively selected for study for this paper. The parameters for the selection of the four were: the types of technologies used for the exhibitions such as CUDA-X, Multi-Instance GPU (MIG) and platforms such as EGX Platform, Virtual GPU, Jetson, GeForce, RTX and NVIDIA Drive; the variety and geographical spread of the locations of both the participating artists and viewership; the media used for the execution of the artworks and areas of specialization of the artworks (painting, sculpture, photography, multi-media and digital); the professional status of the organisers and curators and artists; only group not solo exhibitions and only exhibitions originating from Nigeria. Apart from observation, the methodology for the investigation carried out for this study included interviews with the curators and some of the exhibiting artists and the critical examination of the artistic components, features, technologies and platforms. The effects of these virtual exhibitions and their possible impact on contemporary art in Nigeria were assessed through the participants and viewers data collected from the organisers and literature search online. The study revealed that the launch of virtual art exhibitions is a gain for art and artists worldwide, Nigeria inclusive. Such achievements are in artistic ethics, art education, art practice, patronage, art technology and information. The data collected on viewership showed that virtual art exhibitions will enlarge the borders of Nigerian contemporary art and artists internationally by their recognition, increase in patronage and promotion. The exhibitions also opened extensive explorations into advanced technologies that are highly beneficial to the development of Nigerian contemporary art. The direction of the art vis-a-vis forms, styles, genres, media and movements is one aspect to watch out for in the aftermath of COVID-19.

Keywords: Artist, COVID-19, Lockdown, Nigerian Art, Pandemic, Virtual Art Exhibition

Introduction

Pandemics are not everyday occurrences; they are so rare that the last world pandemic was recorded in history about 100 years ago, the Spanish Flu Pandemic (1918 - 1920). Several other pandemics have been recorded in history. Crawley (14), Samal (2014, pp.165-169), Qui et al. (2017, pp1-11), Pudsey (2017), Snyder and Sanjana (2018, pp.410-415), Jarus (2020), and pandemic historian Howard (2016, pp.402-404) are some of the authors who documented various pandemics from pre-historic times. COVID-19, another disease responsible for current world pandemic was first announced on 31 December, 2019. First detected in Wuhan, China, the disease outbreak was declared a public health emergency and a pandemic by the World Health Organization (WHO) on January 20, 2020, and officially named COVID-19 on February 11, 2020. COVID-19 pandemic being global required a global and holistic approach in containing and controlling the spread, to eradicate it eventually. Some responses for the prevention and ultimate eradication of the disease, included worldwide lockdown, social distancing, travel restrictions, self-quarantine, mask-wearing and extreme body cleansing. COVID-19 affected many societies' culture, lifestyle, language, economy, health, and governance. New approaches are explored and invented by different professionals and entrepreneurs to carry on despite the disruption created by the pandemic.

For art and artists, things changed rapidly since the outbreak of Covid-19 in 2020. Artists responded massively to the pandemic with street art, public images, informative graphics, communication arts, educational videos, comics and virtual art exhibitions. On the international scale, Magnum Photos, an international photographic company based in New York, London, Paris and Toronto, received a groundbreaking number of thousands of submissions from photographic artists in just ten days of a call for COVID-19 photo images (<https://www.magnumphotos.com/arts-culture/images-solidarity-community-times-covid-19-pictet/>). A Smithsonian magazine special report by Jennifer Billock (2020) recorded that Graffiti artists, street artists and muralists took over public spaces during the pandemic lockdown, using their art forms to express beauty, support and dissent. The “viral paintings” of artist Marc Quinn (<https://www.anothermag.com/art-photography/12575/marc-quinn-viral-paintings-lockdown-in-conversation-jefferson-hack/>) are torrents of paintings inspired by his isolation in his London Studio during the lockdown as revealed in a conversation with Jefferson Hack (2020). Niyi Akinmolayan, a Nigerian filmmaker, produced graphical cartoons to teach children how to survive COVID-19 (Salaudeen, 2020)

Edewor (2020, pp. 5-7) reminds us that artworks and art exhibitions depicting the realities of times are firstly visual documents of history and, secondly, inspirations for artistic revolutions. Historical records by pandemic historian Howard (2016, pp.402-404) reveal that the oldest of the most impactful pandemics recorded is the prehistoric epidemic (C.5000 B.C) evidenced in a village in China by artefacts and fossils. The Chinese archaeological sites now called Hamin Mangha and Miaoziyou, both located in the northeast of China, show that these sites' fossils and artefacts suggest and support that an epidemic ravaged. In more recent art history, Edvard Munch (1863 – 1944), the Norwegian Painter painted *Self Portrait with the Spanish Flu* (1919) and *Self Portrait after the Spanish Flu* (1919), which were paintings of his experiences in contracting and surviving the 1918 Spanish Flu and pandemic. Some other artists such as Egon Schiele (1890 – 1918), Gustave Klimt (1862 – 1918) and Morton Shamberg (1881 – 1918) unfortunately died from the Flu. According to *Time* magazine (<https://time.com/5827561/1918-flu-art>), these paintings characterised Munch's obsession with the existential drama of the pandemic and spoke to the feelings of trauma and despair that were widespread amid the pandemic. Munch's painting "The Scream" has become one of the most iconic images of world art and recorded history. (Kambhampaty, 2020)

Artists as creative people quickly adjusted to the demands of the new social order. Many artistic activities advanced online, with the internet sphere being the new world space during the 2020 lockdown. Art exhibitions previously domiciled in physical art galleries have now been enabled on 3D virtual realities. Many online art exhibitions were staged worldwide in 2020, especially during the lockdown. Nigerian art galleries, independent curators, artists and art lovers joined the online train. According to Adegoke (2020), the founding Director/Chief Curator of BLOOM Art Studio and Gallery, Lagos and one of the curators, several obstacles had to be overcome to launch online exhibitions. Firstly, it overcomes the belief that an online display does not convey the same message as a physical exhibition. Adegoke, who reluctantly joined the online exhibition, believes that viewing art has so much to do with the space and the interaction between the space, object and the viewer, also the energies that come through in the moment of viewing. Agreeing with her, Ugwuode (2020), an art critic, also believes that viewing an artwork virtually on a phone, tablet, or laptop can take away part of the experience of being in the same physical space with the artwork. According to him, standing in front of an art piece or engaging with an art installation affords the observer to navigate the spatial arrangements and physical entities of the art forms, materials/medium, textures, colours, size and solidity. Though art forms such as film or digital art are suited for

virtual reality, and virtual viewing cannot diminish their appreciation. Another obstacle mentioned by Adegoke was the searching for the right tool to use to achieve whole 3D reality. Monumental biennales and triennials in Europe, America, and Africa and Nigeria, such as the Venice Biennale, Paris Triennial and ArtX in Lagos, have made art exhibitions a nearly out-of-body experience when encountering artworks, hence creating an augmented reality therefore, required the best technology. The inability of the online viewer to purchase and keep a print copy of the exhibition catalogue was also considered a problem. Among the numerous online solo and group art exhibitions organised by individuals, art associations, galleries and corporate bodies, the following four exhibitions, purposively chosen, are the focus of this study. Vilsquare's *Exploring COVID-19 through the Lens of Art* (May 26 – June 7, 2020) exhibited the works of 25 artists from all over the globe on a proprietary 3D virtual gallery. Some other exhibitions that were instant responses to COVID-19 and that are examined in this study include: *Sculpture Beyond Lockdown* (April 25- May 30, 2020) by the Sculptors Association of Nigeria (ScAN); *Defiance: Creativity in Times of Crisis* (June 12 – August 26, 2020) by Breath of Hope Africa Gallery and *A Moment in History* (August 19 - 26, 2020) by the House of Zeta. These were very engaging 3D online tours. Even though the online viewing of the art exhibitions did not give the physical feeling of encountering a powerful work of art, especially sculptures and installations, they offered more viewing time, space away from the usual gallery crowd, opportunities for slow and repeated looking and absence from aggressive salesmanship.

Methodology and Conceptual Framework

This study is art-historical and was dependent on a qualitative research method. Purposive selection was used to determine the field (the virtual exhibitions under study). The data sources were participatory observations, surveys, interviews and literature reviews. The COVID-19 pandemic had confined everyone indoors; therefore, the field investigation was conducted online through the internet and over voice calls. Several internet platforms and software applications such as webpages, Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, and Zoom were used to observe and collect information and art images from the virtual exhibitions. Interviews were carried out over voice-calls, Skype, WhatsApp, Messenger, and LinkedIn with. Photographs, used for analysis, were downloaded from the internet with permission from the organisers, curators and several artists' personal social media pages and photo transmitting internet engines such as Google and Pinterest. Review of relevant literature contributed to a large part of this paper, especially in historical and archival records. Nine out

of the fifteen virtual exhibitions observed, originated from Nigeria. Four of the exhibitions were purposively selected for this study. The parameters considered for the selection of the four exhibitions were: (i) the types of technologies used for the exhibition such as CUDA-X, Multi-Instance GPU (MIG) and platforms such as EGX Platform, Virtual GPU, Jetson, GeForce, RTX and NVIDIA Drive, (ii) the variety and geographical spread of the location of both the participating artists and viewership, (iii) the media used in the execution of the works and areas of specialization of the artworks (painting, sculpture, photography, multi-media and digital), (iv) the professional status of the organisers and curators and artists, (v) only group not solo exhibitions, and (vi) only exhibitions originating from Nigeria. The objective of this paper was to critically examine each virtual art exhibition with the intention to document them for historical purposes and to evaluate their impact on the future of art exhibitions and art practice in Nigeria. Therefore, the paper critically examined the goals, processes, features, technologies and effects of these virtual exhibitions and their impact on contemporary art in Nigeria.

The conceptual frameworks for this study were Marie Forgeard's *psychology of post-ecstatic growth* and David Kessler's *sixth stage of grief*, used by Courtine Greigoire (Kaufman and Greigoire, 2016). Forgeard (2013, p.245), a foremost researcher studying the link between post-traumatic growth and creativity, showed that the link between extreme life challenges and creative achievement is not accidental. Forgeard, who studied the lives of famous artists and creative minds through history, documented a consistent pattern of suffering from several crises as motivation and inspiration to create. In her study in 2013 that involved 300 participants, she recorded that the more trauma or challenges they experienced in their lives the more their creativity was enhanced. This she concluded was due to the concept of psychology of post-ecstatic growth. Creativity and the power of the arts can also be adapted for problem- solving at such times. Greigoire (2016) tags the meaning-making function of art as the "sixth stage of grief" where art seeks to make sense of everything by helping to process and come to terms with things in life that cannot be controlled or explained. His study of the phenomenon of art born out of adversity showed extremely high correlation between creative achievement with experiences of loss and hardship. Many artists produced their best works during or following personal loss, trauma and crisis. Major artistic movements emerged after social upheavals such as war, conflicts and pandemics. Hence artists' response creatively and promptly to the COVID-19 pandemic is an expected reaction. In the same vein, Astrinaki (2017) believes that creativity can be cathartic and can unlock an

internalised power in times of crisis. According to him, many times when there is a crisis, “beyond the depressing headlines, a bright spot has emerged; a burst of artistic activity in response to the crisis”. This view is supported by Staniforth (2012), who experimented with several groups of vulnerable people by giving them opportunities to create during a crisis. Staniforth asserts that when human beings are at their most critical state, their most creative abilities can be activated. The artworks created at such times express the changes that are happening in the artists’ lives and their surroundings.

Findings and Discussion

Four notable COVID-19 precipitated virtual art exhibitions are the focus of this paper. All the four virtual exhibitions originated from Nigeria. Three of the exhibitions displayed works that were medium-specific (painting, photography, sculpture) and one was a generalized one. The discussions cover the general description of the virtual exhibitions that includes the titles, themes and their meanings, types of art, forms and their iconographical representations and symbolisms, the mediums and materials of art production, and the artistic styles. The participating artists and the audience are also discussed. Conclusions are made after an analytical review of the technologies and platforms used in the exhibitions and an assessment of the impact of the different exhibitions on the audience and artists.

(1) Exploring COVID-19 through the Lens of Art

Exploring COVID-19 through the Lens of Art was an online virtual art exhibition launched by Vilsquare Global Resources Limited from May 26 to June 7, 2020, and was one of the earliest virtual art exhibitions related to COVID – 19 pandemic. The exhibition was curated by Yemisi Ola-Afolayan, a first-class graduate of Sculpture from Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife, Nigeria. The exhibition featured forty-nine artworks from twenty-five artists who responded to a global call for participation. The platform of a proprietary 3D virtual gallery was a technology developed by Vilsquare, a tech-based company. The technology created a virtual gallery that a viewer could enter by clicking some icons and navigating through the various display rooms. There was also an avenue for interaction between the viewer and the artists to discuss their works and for patronage. However, there were limitations in the software in the aspects of the inability of showing sculptures in-the-round, and the videos on display had to be opened on an extended platform. It was coordinated by Eventbrite. *Exploring COVID-19 through the Lens of Art* had artists participating from worldwide even though about 90% of the artists were of Nigerian origin.

A viewership of 4,462 people was recorded, who registered from 58 countries and 240 cities on five continents. *Exploring COVID-19 through the Lens of Art* was an exhibition with diverse purposes and impacts. The forty-nine artworks were of various sizes made up of drawings, paintings, sculptures, textiles, photography, videos and mixed-media art, including digital art. Despite the diversity of forms, colours, idiomatic expressions and meanings, the works thematically focused on the general interests of the COVID-19 experience. The medium used by the artists encompassed all types of contemporary materials such as Acrylic, Gouache, Water Colour, Charcoal, Oil Colour, Ink, Photography/Photoshop, Coloured Pencils, Metals, Terracotta, Resins, Plastics, Cotton Cloth, Threads, Digital Graphics/Painting and Video. These media represent modern, durable and experimental materials found globally. The tools employed in the production of the works range from simple manual ones such as pencil, pen, brush and palette knife to very sophisticated technology like Photoshop and digital pads and cameras. The techniques varied from age-long scribbling, scrolling, pointillism, impasto, modelling and welding to more contemporary digital multi-media representations and digital painting. Stylistically, the exhibition displayed a wide collection ranging from naturalism in photography and realism in more than 50% of the works, especially drawings and paintings. Several paintings showed the monotonic deep hues of romanticism to depict the mood of the pandemic. Some works were bold expressions of modernism (Cubism, Abstract Expressionism, Dadaism) by distortions, stylizations and bizarre and simplistic colours. Thematically, the exhibition addressed the subject of COVID-19. The exhibition's goal, to capture and record the history of COVID-19 visually, was shown in the displayed artworks, which captured the elements and *lexicons* of COVID-19 such as facemasks, social distancing, death, life and the emotional heights and depths of reality. Man is represented as a number in space; one moment, he is there, and the next moment, the space is empty. These metaphoric identities were common with many of the works on display. Most of the works were multi-layered with iconographic and symbolic meanings from different art genres, generations of artists, schools of thought and art movements. Two major figures are indispensable in the history of COVID-19, which are the human being and the coronavirus. The human figure was prominent in twenty-eight artworks on display, presented as a whole human figure, fragmented body parts or outlines. The use of the human figure in art has been for ages, however, in this exhibition, it symbolised that the COVID-19 story is about the invasion of human space and how humans defend their territory and survive. The coronavirus was the subject of several works, such as a mixed media abstract painting by Godwin Tom Sunday

titled *The Virus*. In *Bennu Birds* (Plate 8) by Baba Shabu, the virus is compared to fiery flames of destruction where the virus spells danger and fatality for the human race. The imposing death by the virus is captured in three works: *A Suicide Mission* (Plate 5) by Alade Ifeoluwa, *Sick is the Scary Word for Alive* by Eric Gugua, and Nissi Odewumi's *Going to the Bank*. Exploring the subconscious, Ifeatu Nnaobi's artistic videos; approach and unveil the existential in the pandemic saga by using the intersection of colours, shapes and sounds. According to Nnaobi (2020), her videos titled *Taking Space*, *Pink Flower*, and *Pink and Dot* symbolically narrate a story of an invading and life-threatening virus, expanding to occupy human space and obliterating their pink flowers. Meanwhile, the world fights the virus, focusing on maintaining the colour of life (Pink in the videos) and the minutest dot. Nnaobi's art is a step into the future of art, which is multidisciplinary, advanced and engages all the faculties and senses of the human audience. One prominent icon of the COVID-19 is the facemask. The facemask was also a popular visual element in the exhibition. Sixteen artworks depicted the facemask as a common visual representation featuring in the new normal. Symbolically the mask connotes safety, protection, compliance, defiance and resistance in the face of an invading virus. The masks featured in the artworks show different expressions from artists who approach the wearing of masks perceptively. The masks in the exhibited works represent the impact of masks, wrong usage of masks, fashionable masks, cultural masks, symbolic masks, medical masks and comical masks. The works depicting masks were *Heal the World, Ebofin* (Plate 3), *A Suicide Mission* (Plate 5), *Unbroken*, *Keeping Safe*, *Heal the World 2*, *Now We Mask*, *Safe and Cultured (Ife Head)*, *Safe and Cultured (Benin Head)*, *Smart Choice* (Plate 6), *Going to the Bank*, *The Spaces*, *In Our Hands*, *Social Distancing*, *Love is Hope* and *Man's Best Friend*. *Man's Best Friend* (Plate 4), a photograph of Catherine Njeri, an informal worker in Kenya with her mask-wearing dog, was significant. It was indicative that all inhabitants of the earth, including the animal world, are vulnerable to COVID-19. In response to the negative effects of the virus, eleven works in 2D and 3D comprising paintings, photographs, graphic designs and sculptures addressed the safety measures required to protect the human body and the environment from the dreadful COVID-19. These works interrogated the safety, extremities, shortcomings, psychological impacts, gains and losses of such measures. The works in this category were: *Heal the World* by Akintayo Akintobi, *Imu Nika* by Yewande Oseni, *Keeping Safe* and *Heal the World* by Nkem Odeh-Ifeyinwa, *Education is the Key* by Chidinma Okwuonu, *Smart Choice* by Joy Tomtom, *Agemo (Chameleon)* by Yusuf Ayokunle Dongo, *Stay Home* by Nissi Odewumi, *The Spaces* by Olachi Opara, and *Vibrant*

Femininity and *Mother and Child* (Plate 7) by Otonye Bille Ayodele. Spirituality as a necessity in the quest for human domination of the terrestrial sphere was explored by three works of Oil on Canvas, showing the spiritual measures taken to prevent the spread and devastation of COVID-19, like petitioning the creator, sacrifices, offerings, rituals, prayers, penitence and contrition. These works were *We Pray Thee* by Mary Funmilola Onidare, Olalekan Adeyemi's *Ebofin* (Plate 3) and Ezekiel Afolayan's *Prayer*. Lockdown of human activity has been declared the most effective and recommended measure that has been adopted all over the world to fight COVID-19 and was shown in this show. The emotional, physical, lifestyle and psychological characteristics and effects of lockdown such as quarantine, self-isolation, restriction of human and vehicular movements, border closures, staying indoors and social distancing, pressures on human sanity, endurance and physical health were adequately encapsulated in the works of Bashir Kabir Rabi (*Weight of Depression*), Mofoluso Eludire (*The Held-Back Days*) and Eric Gugua (*Sick is the Scary Word for Alive*). Others in this category were the works of Olotu Onome Daniella (*Now We Mask*), Taiwo Adeboye (*Safe and Cultured-Ife Head* and *Safe and Cultured- Benin Head*) and Yemisi Ola-Afolayan (*Far from Home*) One lesson from the COVID-19 pandemic that in the quest for survival, there is no race, colour, creed, ideology, religion, status, class or gender. The coronavirus levels everyone. In the face of danger and external threats, humans unite to face a common enemy. In this fight, the individual does not exist; rather, the world as one entity combats collectively. At this point, all differences are submerged in the paramount desire for survival. In this exhibition, the works of Mary Funmilola Onidare titled *Outcasts*, Alade Ifeoluwa's *Love is Hope*, and *Frozen Gesture* by Prosper Shittu capture the evenness, leverage, uniformity, equality and commonness of all humans during the COVID-19 experience. Since the beginning of the pandemic, the needful to be done in the face of a world crisis such as COVID-19 is to be courageous, resilient and hopeful. These virtues are expressed in the works titled *Sense of Hope* by Mary Funmilola Onidare, *Shelter* by David Olatoye, *Smile* by Ezekiel Afolayan, and *Unbroken* by Baba Shabu. The other works by Baba Shabu in the thematic group are titled *Kupigana Ngumi*, *Bennu Birds* (Plate 8), *Journey*, *Young Night Birds Singing*, *Fragments of Our Culture* and *Leopard at the Gate*.

From observation and the responses from the organisers/founders of Vilsquare (Obialunanma Nnaobi and Obasegun Ayodele), and the curator, the exhibition achieved its goal of exploring all facets of COVID-19 and its effects in 2020 through diverse types of art, media, styles and forms. According to Ayodele (2020), it even exceeded their expectations.

(2) A Moment in History (A photography Exhibition)

The House of Zeta located in Lagos, Nigeria, put up a virtual photography exhibition titled *A Moment in History* to celebrate World Photography Day on August 19, 2020, and continued until August 26th 2020, starting from noon daily. The entrance to the exhibition was <https://bit.ly/2POT8WJ>. In Nigeria, the lockdown had been relaxed a bit at this period, however, the show still went online because according to the curator Chirera Muoka (2020), online exhibitions were already in vogue, and the technology was available. The digital platform for the exhibition was software called Artsteps. Artsteps allow independent curators or galleries to create virtual exhibitions by using existing templates or self-constructed templates made from scratch. Artsteps was launched by a software development company, Dataverse Limited. This software is easy to use so The House of Zeta set up the exhibition by themselves. However, the result was not totally satisfactory because many viewers complained that they could not move around the display seamlessly, even though the reality was a 3D effect. The in-app that was supposed to facilitate chats between visitors and the curators, to help purchase, was not very functional. Despite these setbacks, the exhibition recorded 1000 viewers, and significant sales were achieved. Photographs and artworks had been pre-licensed to enable online sales. The theme of the exhibition was Art, Beauty and Documentary. The goal was not focusing on COVID-19 but was general; however some works addressed the effects of the pandemic. It featured famous photographers in fashion, documentary and editorial such as Anny Roberts, Lex Ash, Tobbinator, Badman Tej, Rachel Saidu, Nengi Nelson and Sope Adelaja. All the works were still two-dimensional photographs and videos.

Anny Roberts exhibited a work titled *Line and Color*, which depicted a re-imagination of the black body as art. The work aimed to show the black body's diversity in its form and skin colour. The work showed very superior skills in its rendition with very clear lines, sharp and defined colours and strong juxtaposition of forms. Lex Ash exhibited a collection of photographs titled *Obscuris*. These works expressed the identification of human vision as warped based on individual choices or projections imposed by society. The artist tried to proffer solutions to adverse human reactions when others do not see life from their perspectives. Nengi Nelson's work *The Artist Named Kadara Enyeasi* was a creative exploration of a Lagos-based artist's life and practice. Tobbinator exhibited *Perspectives*, a body of work to change the narrative of Nigeria and Africa in the eyes of the rest of the world. Rachel Seidu presented several works narrating the world around her. Her series of works summarised *The World Around Me*. Sope Adelaja, also known as Sope Works, was the only artist that directly addressed the issue of the COVID-19 pandemic in the exhibition. The

work titled *Once Upon A Lockdown* was a photo documentary that showed the effects of a compulsory lockdown due to the COVID-19 pandemic. All the works were naturalistic and realistic in their diverse appearances.

The viewership was not recorded because the technology used did not activate the recording facility; however, because the exhibiting photographic artists were internationally recognised, there was extensive publicity given to the exhibition, also it received many international reviews, even long after the show had closed.

(3) Sculpture beyond Lockdown (A Sculpture Exhibition)

Sculpture Beyond Lockdown was an exhibition mounted by the Sculptors Association of Nigeria (ScAN). It was one of the earliest art exhibitions to come online because the association was already planning a national physical exhibition before a lockdown was declared. The decision to go online with the show was the only option to keep the date slated for the exhibition's opening. The all-sculpture exhibition was to mark the 2020 World Sculpture Day on April 25, 2020. The earlier planned show was tagged *Now Sculpture* and covered all contemporary Nigerian sculptures; therefore, the *Sculpture Beyond Lockdown* stayed within the same theme. According to the Curator of the exhibition Dr Uwa Usen (2020), the exhibition's intention was not to defy lockdown but rather to prove that the artist's creative spirit continues unabated and is resilient even under the pressures of pandemic and lockdown. The exhibition did not however, focus only on COVID-19 or the lockdown. The exhibiting artists were all members of the association and represented different generations of Nigerian artists. Thirty-seven sculptors exhibited their works in various media. The exhibiting artists were Oladapo Afolayan, Bruce Onobrakpeya, Ken Okoli, Shola Kukoyi, Kehinde Badaru, Nsikan Ekwere, John Adenle, Ayandepo Ayanladun, Antonia Okogwu, Otonye Ayodele, Nelson Edewor, Sullayman Taiwo, Ebong Ekwere, Pedro Akande, Ijeh Robinson, Iyke Okeniyi, Uwa Usen, Tirisimiyu Oladimeji, Musa Tijani, Tony Emodi, Omiobor Emmanuel, Eric Okar, Olusegun Aina, Clifford Nwana, Abdulrazaq Yusuf, Clement Adesanya, Omodamwen Eguasa, Tonie Okpe, Pius Eboreime, Ato Arinze, Itohowo Iyang, Olu Amoda, Yinka Fabayo, Adeola Balogun, Idowu Sonaya, Muraina Akeem and Okay Ikenegbu.

The display approach was the production of a forty-seven page, full-colour catalogue with a cover page in soft copy. The PDF catalogue was then uploaded on the association's (ScAN) WhatsApp, Facebook and Instagram platforms, for the duration of the exhibition. Each page containing the biography, artist statement and photograph of each exhibiting artist and their work was featured for 24 hours every day on the three platforms, which means that

the display lasted for thirty-seven days. The first week was for general display. Altogether the exhibition lasted for six weeks. The shortcoming in this approach was that despite the show being all three-dimensional sculptures, the works were displayed in two-dimension.

The sculptures were of high quality and skill. The works ranged from life-size objects to miniature. A total number of forty works were displayed that can be classified into three major styles; naturalism (15 works), abstract (17 works) and stylizations (11 works). The medium was varied and displayed all sculptural media. Sixteen works were in Metal of various types such as Bronze, Steel, Forged Iron and Aluminum. Other traditional mediums were Wood (6 works), Cement/ Concrete (3 works), Terracotta (1 work), Stone (2 works) and Plaster of Paris (1 work). Eleven works were rendered in more contemporary exotic media such as Plastics, Resin, Fibre Glass and various found objects. Thematically, the works were diverse; however some pieces addressed the COVID-19 pandemic and the lockdown, such as Shola Kukoyi's *A New World* (Plate 9), Ayandepo Ayanladun's *Leveler, Eclipse* (Plate 12) by Iyke Okenyi, *Akwa Ibom Lockup 2020* (Plate 10) by Uwa Usen, *Our Handicap Is Our Strength* by Tirisimiyu Oladimeji, *Eche Ija* (Plate 11) by Tonie Okpe and *Wuhan* by Emiobor Emmanuel. The exhibition's curator was Dr Uwa Usen (who incidentally died shortly after the exhibition); Technical Adviser was Professor U.N.O. Edewor, and the catalogue concept and the editorial works were by Nsikan Ekwere and Dr Shola Kukoyi, respectively. Apart from being an online exhibition, this was the first all-sculpture show of that magnitude in Nigeria, considering the diversity of the displayed works and the professional status and calibre of the exhibiting artists.

(4) Defiance Creativity in Times of Crisis (A Painting Exhibition)

Defiance: Creativity in Times of Crisis was an exhibition organised by Breath of Hope Africa Gallery, a new gallery that came into existence during the COVID-19 lockdown. The gallery assembled twenty contemporary Nigerian artists from two generations. All the artists were Nigerian artists with a large percentage of them living and practising in Lagos. One major advantage therefore of this online exhibition was the exposure and promotion of Nigerian –based artists globally. According to the curator and director of the gallery Adebimpe Adebambo (2020), the exhibition called for the artists to express their heartfelt reactions to the crisis in the year of a pandemic. She also informed that the number of artists, 20, represented the symbolic year 2020. The artists were a mix of masters and up-coming artists and the exhibition consisted of only two-dimensional works such as paintings, drawings and graphics. There were no three-dimensional works such as sculpture or

ceramics. The artists that exhibited were Abiodun Olaku, Edosa Oguigo, Adekusibe Odunfa, Bolaji Ogunwo, Ibe Ananaba, AdebANJI Alade, Austine Uzor, Adebimpe Adebambo, Tolu Mustapha, Tolulope Olamide, Akindele John Damilola, Brian Olaolu Wilson, Elizabeth Ekpetorson, Femi Morakinyo, Godwin Akpan, Mala Iwa Gbado Ikaleku, Mathias Aragbada, Omotoyosi Ogunlende, Olamide Ogunade and Sylvester Aguddah. Each artist exhibited three works, which brought the total number of works displayed to sixty. The curator explained that the number 60 was significant to represent the number of years of Nigeria's independence from colonialism since 1960. Also significant was the date of opening the exhibition, June 12, 2020, which had been declared as Democracy Day in Nigeria. The exhibition went on till September 12, 2020.

The Virtual Reality Technology (VRT) that was used was developed and mounted by Kugali Media, a company that had previously practised virtual comics, animation, augmented and visual reality. The technique of coverage of the artworks was simple, because all the artworks were placed side by side on the walls and filmed. The room was then displayed as a rotating 3D platform. The technology was limited in many features, for example, it did not provide a pop-up effect to enable the labels of the artworks to be readable neither could the works be zoomed up nor maneuvered by the viewer. The technology was also limited in the aspect of user/viewer interaction with the exhibition and so could not also record the number of viewers except the viewers on the social media platforms. However, the exhibition had some unique features such as the duration of three months instead of the traditional two or three weeks of most physical exhibitions. The exhibition also featured segmented revelation of the works, which means that not all the sixty works were displayed at the same time. The display rooms were revealed one at a time monthly. The first room with sixteen works was revealed on June 12, 2020, under a sub-theme titled *Emotions*. These works were deep expressions of the artists in response to the challenges, disorientation and confusion that was suddenly thrust on society due to the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdown. The remaining works were revealed under subtitles of *Reactions* and *Defiance*. The exhibition also extended its scope by creating the possibility of viewing the virtual rooms on social media platforms such as Facebook, YouTube and Instagram.

The exhibited works ranged across various art styles which were majorly naturalistic, few stylizations and abstracts. Naturalistic works by masters like Abiodun Olaku, Edosa Oguigo, Bolaji Ogunwo, Matthias Aragbada, Ibe Ananaba and Adebimpe Adebambo showed high dexterity and mastery over their forms and medium, for example, Edosa Oguigo's *Black*

Princess (Uvbi Ne Khui), a pastel work showing strong strokes of hatched lines contrasting with a smoothly finished naturalistic face. Abiodun Olaku's *Sources of Peace* (series) showed naturalistic and romantic paintings in oil, which depict serenity in chaotic environments with elements such as still rivers, sunset and boats. The medium used in the production of the works were Oil colour, Pastel, Charcoal, Water colour, Acrylic, Mixed-Media, Digital Painting and Photography. Several naturalistic and stylized works depicted their subjects wearing facial masks showing the effect and state of the COVID-19 pandemic, such as the pointillist portrait in Oil by Bolaji Ogunwo titled *Make -Over* (Plate 1) and Olamide Ogunade's Charcoal and Graphite, naturalistic work titled *The New Normal* (Plate 2).

The founder of Breath of Hope Africa Gallery and the curator of the exhibition is a graduate of Painting from Yaba College of Technology in Lagos, Nigeria. The exhibition received many newspapers, print and online, reviews.

Conclusion

The future of art virtually is being uncovered especially with the extraordinary creativity and originality emanating from the use of Artificial Intelligence (AI) as a tool, collaborator and muse. Presently in use are products such as EGX Platform, Virtual GPU, Jetson, GeForce, RTX and NVIDIA Drive. Technologies such as CUDA-X, Multi-Instance GPU (MIG), and software such as CUDA-XAI, Deep Learning Frameworks, NGC Catalog and Industry Frameworks are also in use in Nigeria.

Adegoke (2020) considers the long term of the digital experience a worthwhile investment because it becomes a digital archive and a digital catalogue. Virtual exhibitions also help as a marketing tool whereby only those who really want to view and purchase the art visit the site. The virtual experience can also be used as preliminary viewing before arriving physically to see the work in the gallery, especially for those not in the immediate vicinity of the artwork.

Several positive changes in the art world have been accelerated by the COVID-19 Pandemic experience and may come to stay to define art in the future. Noticeable among these changes is, the rise in online consumption of culture. This is one advantage of an online exhibition, because its viewership is extensive, accommodates a larger audience at the same time and is truly global. The audience can revisit the exhibition as many times as possible without restrictions on movements. The exhibition is also accessible from every location without barriers and borders. An example is an exhibition like "*Exploring COVID-19 under the Lens of Art*" which had worldwide participating artists and viewership of 4,462 people from 58 countries and 240 cities on five continents. Such attendance to an art exhibition would never

have been possible for a physical exhibition. Another change is the ethical gains from the wider accessibility to the artworks online, there is less elitism and therefore art may soon be acquired by more people from different social strata. More people now have more opportunities to identify, understand, value and acquire Nigerian art. This creates more exposure to contemporary art education through online classes, discussions, trainings and exhibitions. There are some advantages for the Nigerian artist; firstly, there is more art practice expected from more available time during lockdown and available technology. However, there is a high possibility that the quality of artwork may drop because artworks seen online may not be as great physically. Secondly, is the internationalization of locally-based and up-coming Nigerian artists. Online exhibitions have enabled many contemporary Nigerian artists to participate in international exhibitions without travelling; also Nigerian-based curators can now mount international exhibitions. The outlook is very encouraging.

One aspect to watch out for is the direction of art styles, genres and movements. In 1918, the Flu pandemic and other then-emerging world situations created social chaos, hopelessness, meaninglessness, and despair of that period which were the inspiring themes of new art movements of modernism. Dadaism (which was nihilistic in its approach), Bauhaus and Abstract Art are some of the art movements that emerged, post- 1918 pandemic. The world art scene in a similar fashion may experience a wave of new art movements motivated by the experiences and dialogues of COVID-19. Already the United Nations Education, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) has launched the Resili Art Movement which among other things will consist of a series of global virtual debates with renowned artists and draw support for the cultural world throughout the COVID-19 crisis and after.

Art and Artists in Pandemic



Plate 1

Artist: Bolaji Ogunwo

Title: *Make-over*

Medium: Acrylic

Size: 101cmX105cm

Photograph: Breath of Hope Africa Gallery (2020)

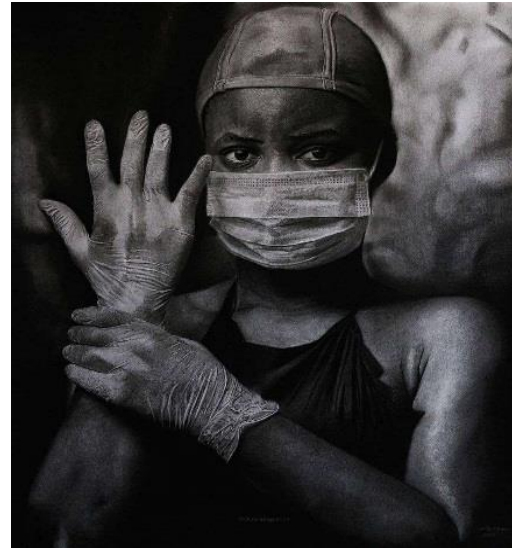


Plate 2

Artist: Olamide Okunade

Title: *The New Normal*

Medium: Charcoal & Graphite.

Size: 105cmX105cm

Photograph: Breath of Hope Africa Gallery (2020)



Plate 3

Artist: Olalekan Adeyemi

Title: *Ebofin (Accepted Sacrifice)*

Medium: Oil on Canvas

Size: 106cmX 127cm

Photograph: Vilsquare (2020)



Plate 4.

Artist: Michael Khateli

Title: *Man's Best Friend*

Medium: 2D Art/ Photography

Size: 52.1 inches X 49.1 inches

Photograph : Vilsquare (2020)

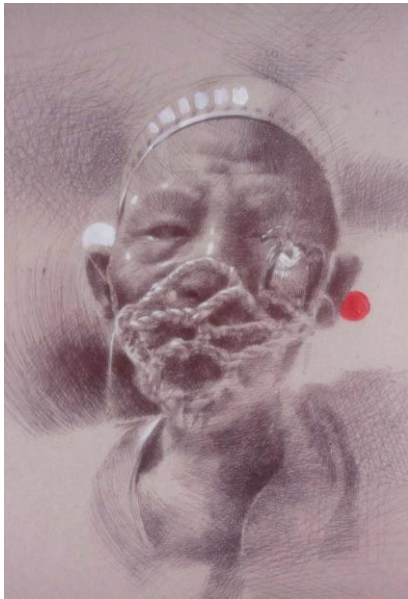


Plate 5

Artist: Alade Ifeoluwa

Title: A Suicide Mission

Medium: Pen and Acrylics on paper

Size: 50 inches X 41.7 inches

Photograph: Vilsquare (2020)



Plate 7

Artist: Otonye Bille Ayodele

Title: Mother and Child

Medium: Terracotta

Size: 15 inches X 17 inches X 10 inches

Photograph: Vilsquare (2020)



Plate 6

Artist: Joi Tomtom

Title: Smart Choice

Medium: Photography

Size: 27 inches X 19 inches

Photograph: Vilsquare (2020)



Plate 8

Artist: Baba Shabu

Title: Bennu Birds

Medium: Acrylic/Mixed Media on Canvas

Size: 35 inches X 26.7 inches

Photograph: Vilsquare (2020)

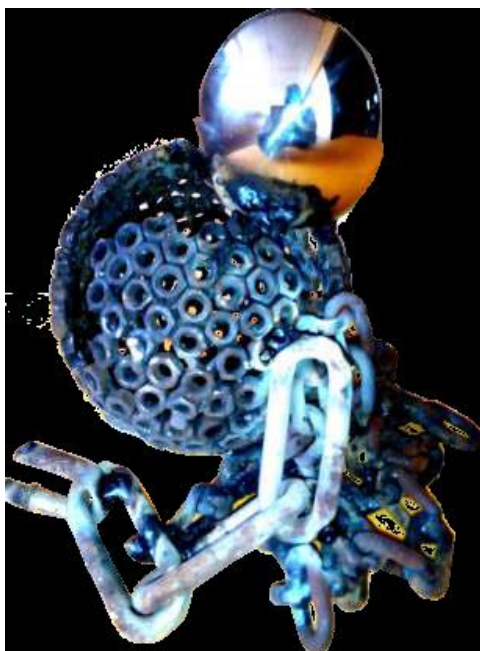


Plate 9

Artist: Shola Kukoyi

Title: A Mew World

Medium: Ferrous Metal

Size: 20cm x 20cm x 20cm

Photograph: Sculptors' Association of Nigeria (ScAN) (2020)



Plate 10

Artist: Uwa Usen

Title: Akwa Ibom Lockup 2020

Medium: Stainless Steel

Size: 47cm x 35cm x 25cm

Photograph: Sculptors' Association of Nigeria (ScAN) (2020)



Plate 11

Artist: Tonie Okpe

Title: Eche Ija

Medium: Steel

Size: 46cm x 47cm x 60cm

Photograph: Sculptors' Association of Nigeria (ScAN) (2020)

Plate 12

Artist: Iyke Okenyi

Title: Eclipse

Medium: Wood

Size: 121.5cm x 152cm

Photograph: Sculptors' Association of Nigeria (ScAN)

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