

The Nigerian Visual Art Critics: Watchdogs or Pets?

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Abstract

Art critics and criticism are crucial to the growth of art practice. They serve as chaperons to art through the feedback they give on the practice, trend and quality of artworks. The art critic has been described in many ways, with his role being seen as complementary to the development of art. Unfortunately, professional criticism, the type that moulds and goads art practice to attaining the loftiest height possible, is not widespread in Nigeria. Praise singing and vilification are in many cases bandied as art criticism. This paper examines the art critic and criticism in Nigeria, identifies the causes of the low number and quality of art critics and their unprofessional practices. It proffers recommendations on how art critics and criticism can be improved.

Introduction: Art Criticism

Art criticism is a vital part of the practice of art. It involves the appraisal of a work or works of art, based on the knowledge of the critic and factors that contribute to the production of the work(s). Different definitions have been proffered to art criticism. Barnet (2000:7) states that “In everyday language, the most common meaning of criticism is ‘finding fault’”. However, Udechukwu (2006:233) defines it as “a bridge between art and the public”; which according to Hobbs and Salome (1991:311), entails “... systematic description, analysis, interpretation and evaluation of an art work.” While Egonwa (2008:180) sees it as an exercise carried out “to prune performance in art, assess trends, announce breakthroughs and advocate for practitioners for the comfort of the artist in the art ecosystem,” art criticism, states Anderson (1993:199) is:

...talking or writing about art. It is distinguished from aesthetic inquiry in that, although it is informed by and

contributes to aesthetic theory, it is directed toward understanding and appreciating individual art works or event.

In Gotshalk's (1962:173) view, art criticism is "the fullest possible appraisal of works of art as aesthetic objects according to a set of appropriate standards." He explains further that there are procedures and stages within the evaluation process. These, according to him include "the genetic, the immanent and the judgmental." The genetic phase of art criticism, he says, "is a study of the factors that have shaped a work of art". This, he again, subdivides into the "the subjective and the objective." The subjective are "psychological factors such as sensitivity, imagination, personality, taste, aims, the value system and the peculiar experiences of the artists." The objective, he says, are "environmental factors such as materials, physical milieu, traditional influences, social needs and cultural climate of the creator." Gotshalk observes that sometimes the psychological and environmental factors are presented as independent studies on their own merit, not tied to serious interrogation of the works of the artist or his period. These he says result in "biography or history". Criticism, he contends, is attained only when the environmental and the psychological studies are connected to the aesthetic assessment of the work of the artist or his period.

The immanent phase of art criticism, Gotshalk (1962: 174) posits:

Is a study of the major features within the work of art itself... materials, form, expression and function... The aim is sympathetic penetration and vivid adumbration of the actual intrinsic perceptual properties of the public object with a view to making an adequate critical judgment of the work under consideration.

Just as in the genetic phase, Gotshalk argues that it is only when studies in the immanent stage are related to, and are used to support the critique of the work of art do they qualify as criticism, otherwise they end up as mere reporting.

The judgmental phase of art criticism is the third segment of the critical process. This is where knowledge derived from the genetic and

immanent phases are tied with the assessment of the work of art and a conclusion arrived at based on pertinent and acceptable principles. The genetic and immanent phases build up to the judgmental which is the core of the entire critical process (Gotshalk, 1962).

Art criticism is erroneously construed to mean negative reports on art works. While this may be partially true as corroborated by Collingwood (1964:316) who observes that “it has degraded...to the level of personal gossip...,” it will be more correct to state that it entails pronouncements about the artistic merits and demerits of the creative process and products. Mason (2000:123) explains that criticism is a tribute when one is doing his best and the expected. Greatness according to him attracts criticism. It is one of the signs that one is doing something worthwhile. He counsels nevertheless that the creative individual should learn to accept negative criticisms without wasting time responding to the critics.

Art Critic

Art critic can simply be said to be a person who is trained or versed in the knowledge of art and its technicalities, such that he can pass valid judgments, based on acceptable standards. He has also been described as: “a person who is professionally engaged in the analysis and interpretation of works of art” (thefreedictionary.com) ¹ and “a person skilled in forming opinions and giving a judgment, especially on literature, art, music etc.” (Cayne, Bolander, Churchill et al, 1992: 229).

Udechukwu (2006: 221) identifies three categories of art critics on the Nigerian arts’ scene, namely; “Artist Critics, Media Critics and Professional Critics.” The Artist Critics are professional artists who double as critics. It is a widely held opinion that artists are better equipped to become art critics because they understand the process, technicalities and the determinant factors of production of art works. The fear expressed by Udechukwu (2006:221) is the probability of being unable to separate their criticisms from their art because they are first and foremost guided and perhaps limited by their aesthetic taste and preferences. There is another set of artists who like the prefix, “critic”, and are quick to affix it to their names or, wear the tag.

However, they are neither sufficiently published to merit the nomenclature nor are they profound.

Media Critics are art writers/reporters for newspapers/magazines. They are also in categories. Some are trained artists who are engaged full time or part time, while some are trained in the humanities or other fields but with a flair for art and a fair understanding of the field and the language of discourse but they still lack depth of critical appraisal, particularly the non-art graduates whose judgment has been observed to be superficial and lacking in technical insight. Some are just reporters who as a last resort for survival, take to art reporting for the media.

Professional Critics are the trained type, some of whom may have had initial training in the art. They are mostly engaged in the teaching of art in tertiary institutions in Nigeria while they also perform as critics. In other climes though, they may be independently engaged within the art industry. Many of the critics in this category are also self-trained, by reading and aligning with the standards of art criticism globally, and by keeping abreast of developments on the art scene.

Training of Critics

Training of critics is done in schools. Most art schools have courses in which students take turn to appraise works by fellow students under the supervision of the teacher. This is a basic step and training in art criticism in schools. Some universities also offer courses in Visual Aesthetics and Criticism; while the Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria, is famed for having art criticism as an area of specialisation. As stated earlier on, many of the art critics on the Nigerian art scene are self-trained, building on the foundation laid during undergraduate studies. They rely mostly on books, journals, magazines, etc., from countries where art criticism is practiced with the best standards. Another medium of training is through interactions at conferences and workshops organized by bodies such as Pan African Circle of Artists (PACA) and the International Association of Art Critics (AICA) of which some Nigerian critics are affiliated. But of late, Nigeria's impact has not been felt within AICA due to lack of commitment by members and infrequent activities such as workshops and seminars to refresh members locally. ²

Purpose of Art Criticism

Crowder (2006: 76) opines that “for a healthy development of the arts in Nigeria, informed criticism in the press and in books is essential.” This is to keep the artist alive to his responsibilities as a visionary, inventor and pacesetter. Criticisms point out the merits and demerits in his creations, inspire him to attain his creative best and open his eyes to creative possibilities while achieving the overall goals of the development of the society.

Criticism may be along intellectual, creative, cultural, religious or ideological lines depending on the art work, society, age etc. A critic in addition to critically engaging the art work and arriving at a judgment may prod the artists towards certain values that the society holds dear. The critic therefore is a custodian of knowledge and values, a watchdog of some sort.

As a bridge between the art/artist and the public, going by Udechukwu’s (2006:233) definition, criticism is meant to throw light on grey areas, ask questions that open up different dimensions and angles to a work, elucidate in such a way that makes the public understand more, the meaning, context and purpose of such artworks. To this extent, criticism is of great assistance to the appreciation and valuation of artworks.

The State of Art Criticism in Nigeria

Nigeria enjoys a vibrant art culture and practice, which can be improved if the quality of art criticism is raised. There is art in every nook of the country, ranging from the traditional, through the modern, postmodern to the contemporary and even the futuristic; that is, the type foreseeing future developments in the subsector. Since the early sixties, Nigerian universities have consistently turned out considerable number of art graduates who have taken to studio practice, advertising, teaching and administration. Unfortunately, Nigeria has not produced a commensurate number of art critics to complement the number and verve of practicing artists. This inadequacy is because art criticism is offered as an area of specialisation in just one of the Nigerian universities; Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria, and as such, graduate art critics are not sufficient. The vacuum thus created by this inadequacy is filled by art historians,

artists, graduates in the humanities and just anybody who may be lucky to secure employment as an art reporter with any of the teeming Nigerian newspapers.

The result of this all comers approach to art criticism is the dearth of critical, informed and justifiable appraisal of art and art practices in Nigeria. This is not to say that Nigeria is totally devoid of qualitative art critics judging by their contributions in books, journals, monographs etc. But if the avalanche of reports on art, especially from the print and electronic media, which are the commonest and most accessible media for art coverage and criticism are to be considered, then it can be rightfully said that Nigeria is still far from enjoying qualitative criticisms befitting the level of art practice in it.

Critics in the Media and the Academia

It will also be wrong to say that the media houses have not produced self-trained art critics who have contributed meaningfully to the development of art in Nigeria. Names such as Ben Tomolaju, Sereba-Agiobu Kemmer, Jahman Anikulapo, Toyin Akinosho, Demola Babajide, Amanze Obi, Gbile Osadipe, Ozolua Uhakheme, Chuka Nnabuike, Mac Philips Nwachukwu, Maurice Archibong, Okechukwu Uwaezuoke, Sola Balogun, Akeem Lasisi, Toby Madubuko, Tajudeen Sowole and many more come to mind.

From the academia and the art profession, Ben Enwonwu, Uche Okeke, Demas Nwoko, Yusuf Grillo, Dele Jegede, Chike Aniakor, Babatunde Lawal, Rowland Abiodun, Obiora Udechukwu, Nkiru Nzegwu, Moyo Okediji, Kunle Filani, Frank Ugiomoh, Jacob Jari, Olu Oguibe, Sylvester Ogbeiche, Chika Okeke-Agulu, Krydz Ikwuemesi, Babasehinde Ademuleya and many more have proven their worth through critical interrogation of issues and practices on the art scene.

There are many who lay claims to the title, “critic” for the glamour and respect it attracts. Many in this category are not adequately published, and even when they are; their inability to tie the genetic and immanent phases of the creative process/product/personality to the evaluation of aesthetic qualities of the works as observed by Gotshalk (1962) have

reduced their efforts to biographies, histories or reports instead of criticisms. This category notwithstanding, satisfies a need too, because it provides publicity for the artist and his works and offers something to read, but the distinction should be made; separating the wheat from the chaff.

The academia and the art profession have not produced enough critics for the vibrant Nigerian art scene. In other climes where art criticism is more professionally done due to sufficient production of critics, art and the artists enjoy greater visibility, patronage and funding because they are regularly discussed and publicized. Art in these climes are also more dynamic because the artists are kept on their toes and constantly prodded and challenged to do their best, thereby leading to more robust relationship and products.

The Critic as Pet

Though many of the critiques in books/journals by academic critics are inspired by genuine interest to appraise art and the art scene, many more are published to fulfill academic requirements of promotion, barely contributing to knowledge or uplifting the practice of art. This lapse has shifted the onus of art criticism mainly to the critics in the print media particularly. The Nigerian newspapers offer the commonest access to reports/criticisms on the arts and art practices to the public. Most newspapers run weekly columns on art; *The Guardian*, up till 2011 ran daily column devoted to the different genres of art. As stated earlier on, Nigerian newspapers have produced notable self-trained critics who have helped in the development of the arts.

But quite worrisome these days are signs of the declining culture of art criticism or even reports, among media practitioners. A common practice nowadays is for art reporters/“critics” to do review/“critique” in which over ninety-five per cent of the content is lifted straight from exhibition brochures. The reporter’s input can only be seen in the introduction and conclusion of the “review”. Worse still, no credit or attribution is considered appropriate for the original author of such a piece. This category of reporters is usually helpless in situations where brochures or brochures with accompanying critique of works are not provided. The import of this is that we have media “critics” that cannot

engage and do critical appraisal of artworks, they can only report or copy whatever the artist has provided in brochures or programmed them to report. This practice is harmful to the practice of art.

Common to a section of the critics in the academia and media is praise singing. There is a variant of it which Udechukwu (2006:227) refers to as “mutual admiration”, that is, “you confirm me, I confirm you.” This is the practice by which artist critics take turn to write about one another’s works and praise them to high heavens. Also, due to familiarity or inducement, the media critic shirks his responsibilities and proceeds on praise singing. Some media critics flagrantly demand inducements before performing their duties. It is difficult for this class of critics to perform their duties creditably after their indebtedness to the artist.

Closely related to this is the issue of critics who use their privileged position in the media to hack down genuine efforts of artists. It is instructive to note as mused by Tillotson (2013), that “You cannot carve your way to success with cutting remarks. You will never move up if you are continually running someone down.”³ Mason (2000:123) also affirms that “It is a thousand times easier to criticize than create” and that “When you are kicked from behind, it means you are out in front.” The ongoing serves as encouragement to the creative individual, not to be deterred by undue criticisms.

The economic situation in the country has not helped matters too. In an ideal environment, the artist and the critic should be independent of each other. The only meeting point should be the issues raised by their works. It is only through this that the best can be achieved for both parties and the art profession.

Some critics also tend to cower under the stature of established artists and end up, according to Udechukwu (2006), praising everything such artists produce. This is far from the goals of art criticism. Each work should be taken on its own merits and not on the presumed image of the artist. The critics who are found in this category can be referred to as pets alongside those who demand inducement to perform their duties.

Conclusion

Art criticism is a serious business, vital to the growth of art not only in Nigeria but globally. It implies conscious sophistication in the knowledge of the technical, genetic and immanent processes of production of art works. Artists, it has been observed, attain greatness not only because of what they produce but also the amount of discussions about their works. Therefore, critics or aspiring critics should brace up to the challenges, which include extensive reading and familiarization with developments in art globally.

Though the term “critic” is applied freely and broadly to describe art writers, but with the benefit of the points raised in this paper, it can be deduced that many of those referred to as critics are reporters, writers, publicists, biographers or praise singers. It is incumbent upon all stakeholders in the arts to see that more qualitative critics are produced to complement art practice and growth in Nigeria. Critics are bastions of culture and values, and serve as watchdogs to art and artists in the genuine service of aesthetic fulfillment and, humanity. Many practices in the contemporary times however indicate otherwise. It is in the interest of all in the art profession that critics should serve their proper role as watchdogs instead of serving as pets to the artists.

Recommendations

- The Nigerian art curriculum should be reviewed and more universities should be encouraged to accommodate studies leading to the award of degrees in art criticism at undergraduate and postgraduate levels. This will enhance the production of trained critics for the art sector.
- The present crop of art critics should continuously update their knowledge and keep abreast of developments in art globally. This they can do by reading extensively on art and art related issues and by attending seminars, workshops and exhibitions.
- Critics should have genuine development of the arts as their motivation rather than indulging in praise singing or, seeing their position as an avenue to hack down artists. Criticism itself at best is not final but subjective. There abound in history, artworks once derided by critics but which today are among world’s acclaimed masterpieces.

Notes

1. <http://www.thefreedictionary.com/art+critic>
2. This writer is a member of the Nigerian chapter of International Association of Art critics (AICA) and can attest that lack of commitment, particularly; financial commitment is one of the factors militating against active participation and, benefits from the world body.
3. <http://books.google.com.ng/books?id=mrsVjw8wB8QC&pg=PA76&lpg=PA76&dq>

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