# Exploring the Concept of Art Theories and Art Practice in Africa

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***Abstract***

*The adaption of art theories in art practice in Africa has exist long time ago. In recent times, it is becoming an abnormal situation if a contemporary African art practitioner doesn't put theories into consideration before producing an artwork. This is because a lot of art scholars believe that there are lots of benefits in putting art theories into consideration before producing artworks. One important reason for putting it into consideration is because it guides artists to produce their artworks and also helps them effectively interpret them. Thus, to have clear understanding of theory and art practice in Africa; and how the two links and there benefits towards art practice in Africa. This study is designed to focus on the meaning, history and types of art theories. The study also discusses the role of art theory and art practice in Africa. The study finally, made conclusion and recommends that art theories should at all-time be put into consideration in the production of artwork and to interpretation them.*

**KEYWORD:** Art theories, Art practice, Africa

## Introduction

Art practice in recent times especially in the 21st century Africa as observed usually is guided by art theories. Art theories understandably are ideas, principle, suggestion and assumption intended to explain or predict something. While, art is a medium through which an idea conceived are been expressed. Interestingly, the ideas conceived and expressed through art can be suggestive principles and even assumptions that can develop or destroy society if not guided. This shows that art theory and art practice are linked, connected and share same ideology in expressing artists concept and ideas to the society. Busch (2009) states that contemporary art practices are saturated with theoretical knowledge.

In contemporary African art practice theory and art practice are inseparable can't do without one another especially when it has to do with analyzing or interpreting the essence of an art. Theories as observed has help artist to function optimally in their art practice because art theories guides and influence art practice in recent time of our development and growth in Africa. As a matter of fact, they help to express and interprets cultural values and contemporary issues. They also help art practice because most times the visual artworks produced are in abstracted form leaving views with an option to suggest or assume its value, functionality and usage. This situation is theoretical. This brings us to the understanding that theory and art practice go together as far as art practice is concern.

In a simply term art practice is a process of producing artworks. Sullivan (2006) explains that a central feature of art practice is that it embodies ideas that are given form in the process of making artworks. Irrespective of the informing sources, media preferences, or image base, the artist exercise individual control over the creation and presentation of artifacts as forms of knowledge. Further, the images and ideas created have the capacity to not only change the artist's conceptions of reality, but

influence the viewer's interpretation of artworks. Consequently art practice can be seen as a form intellectual and imaginative inquiry, and as a place where research can be earned out that is robust enough to yield reliable insights that are well grounded and culturally relevant.

There are different types of art theories which guide artist to produce or interpret artwork. Some of them which are often use in production, analysis or interpreting artworks are majorly expressionism, formalism, mimesis, minimalism naturalism, institutional, aesthetics, Hegelian, Anti-essentialist, empathy among others. These theories in contemporary art practice in Africa has been of huge benefit to art practitioners because they help to structure the perception of artists to make the right decision in their art practice.

Dapline (2010) discussed art practice by explaining that, the word practice is now used to describe the work that artist "work", and that fell out of favour. Daphine also explained that artist refer to his/her practice, inter-changeably with their work or their art. Thus, sometimes that call it art practice. Deducing from the definitions and explanations made so far it is obvious that art practice is the work artist do in terms of production of artworks for the society to see, appreciate or critic.

One very significant thing about theory and art practice as earlier pointed out is that they help and influence artist to produce and also interpret their artworks. This study is interested in focusing on theory and art practice in Africa.

**Meaning of Art Theory and History**

Theory has a lot of meaning and definitions, but what is important in all the meanings and definitions that has been established is that they all in most cases views theory to mean an idea, principle, suggestion and assumption intended to explain or predict something. According to Business Dictionary (2017) theory is set of assumptions, propositions, or accepted facts that attempts to produce a plausible or rational explanation of cause-and-effect (causal) relationships among a group of observed

phenomenon. Collins English Dictionary (2017) also defines it as a formal idea or set of ideas that is intended to explain something. While, Your Dictionary (2017) view it as an idea to explain something, or a set of guiding principles.

Also, a theory is a contemplative and rational type of abstract or generalizing thinking, or the results of such thinking. Depending on the context, the results might, for example, include generalized explanations of how nature works. Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia (2017). Wikipedia further explains that in modern use it has taken on several different meanings and one of such meaning is that theory guide the enterprise of finding facts rather than of reaching goals, and are neutrals concerning alternatives among values.

The vocabulary.com Dictionary (2017) defines theory as a set of accepted beliefs or organized principle that explains and guide analysis and one of the ways that theory is defined is that it is different from practice, when certain principles are tested. For example, you could be musicians who play well but who doesn't have a lot of experience with the theory of music.

The Oxford Living Dictionaries (2017) also views theory as a supposition or a system of ideas intended to explain something, especially one based on general principles independent of the thing to be experience. History English Oxford Living Dictionaries (2017) state that theory originate late 16th century (denoting a mental scheme of something to be done); via late Latin from Greek Theoria 'contemplation, speculation, from theories 'spectator'. The fact about especially art theory is that most scholars have traced the origin of theory to the Latin Greek. Relatively, Dictionary.com (2017) states that the word theory historical originated from the Greek word Thoros.

Theory of art aims to shed light on some aspect of the project of defining art or to theories about the structure of our concept of 'art' without providing classical definitions, namely definitions formulated in terms of "necessary and sufficient" conditions Wikipedia the Free

Encyclopedia (2017). Also the Free Dictionary (2017) also sees art theory as the branch of philosophy that deals with the nature, expression and perception of beauty, as in the fine arts. Deducing from the definition given it is clear that art theory deals with the practice and principles guiding production and interpretation of art or any suggestion, assumption or rules that involve art practice.

**Art Practice in Africa**

Art practice in Africa has existed long time ago. African artworks which are produced in course of Africa art practice are symbolic because most of the artworks produced are representation of their culture, tradition and religions believes. Interestingly, their artworks are also philosophical, which mean their artworks have theoretical content inherent in them.

African art can be described as the historical painting, sculptures, installations, and other visual culture from native or indigenous Africans and African continent. Blief (2015) suggest that there are some unifying artistic themes when considering the totality of the visual culture from the continent Africa. African art includes ancient art, Muslim art of North and West Africa, the Christian art of East Africa, and the ritualistic art of art of these and other regions. Most African sculpture was historically in wood as well as most of the wall paintings and decorations. Most Africans art pieces are stylized in an abstracted form. African artworks previously are produced in bronze, terracotta, wood, metal, stone etc. notably, the artworks produced in the past and even in present contemporary days has theoretical and philosophical values.

**The Role of Art Theory and Art Practice in Africa**

Art theory plays very vital role in the practice of art even in these 21st century contemporary African art practice.. According to Boyd (2005) while trying to reminiscent on the role art theories has played in inspiring artist in their art practice explained that, the late 1960s brought us

minimalism, then conceptual art, these upstart movements prophesized an "end to art" as we knew it based on earlier academic models that focused on aesthetic, surface qualities (or "retional art" as Marcel Duchamp like to call it) and subjectivity". The importance of such varied theories as structuralism, poststructuralism, Lacaman psychoanalytic readings and post colonialism to the best art that has been made for the last 40 years is that these theories provided visual artists with an outside. "field of knowledge" that inspired their explorations, investigations and revelations in a variety of new art practices. Boyd (2005) adds that more than mere influence, these theories proved to be an essential intellectual grounding for most of the work that was made then and continues to be made today.

Berland, Straw and Tomas (1998) points out that theory and art practice have everything in common. According to Sullivan (2006), the images and ideas created in art have the capacity to not only change the artist's conceptions of reality, but also influence the viewer's interpretation of artworks. Sullivan adds that art practice can be seen as a form of intellectual and imaginative inquiry and as a place where research can be carried out that is robust enough to yield reliable insights that are well grounded and culturally relevant. As pointed out above the images and ideas created in art by the artist have the capacity to not only change the artists conceptions of reality but also influence the viewer's interpretation of artworks, this statement understandable can be translated to mean that if the artist has a good theoretical base or background the artist will definitely conceive good ideas, suggestions or assumptions to produce interpret artworks and this can possibly be done very well base on the artist background on art theories and how well the artist applies it in art practice. Also, the knowledge of art theory also helps viewers to easily interpret artwork, because it aids their assumption and suggestion about artworks. This facts shows that theory and art practice goes together, therefore in African art practice especially at this contemporary African art practice times a lot of artist and art scholars who

are African's who even resident in Africa do adopt the culture of guiding the production and interpretation of their artworks with theories. Some of these notable artist and scholars are Dr. Charles Omuaru who is a sculpture and a specialist in draftwood, his artwork are been guided and also interpreted with art theories like the institutional and formalism theories, also others like OsitaNdu and Sotonye Allen also base the production and interpretation of their artwork on empathy, expression and institutional theories. Prof. Best Ochigbo is also another good example in that regard, one of his artworks he produced titled "In search of a companion" according Orubu (2015) was influenced by Hegal theory and this is because of the nature of the painting, which have lonely bird in the painting looking for companion. The relation between Hegelian theory and the artwork is that Hegelian theory is built on three stages which are symbolic, classical and romantic. The painting possesses the three stages of Hegelian theory because the painting is symbolic because of imagery, colours, form and abstract to make a statement. Also, the painting is classical because of its style.

Finally the artwork is romantic because the bird is all alone and looking a companion. The brief analysis of the artwork shows that theory and art practice in Africa are compatible and inseparable because it asset artist to produce good art works and also help them to interpret them without so much challenge.

**Conclusion**

Theory and art practice in Africa are inseparable because theory guide art practitioner in Africa to produce or interpret their artworks. There are different types of art theories; each of these art theories has its symbolic and unique theoretical background and bases when it has to do with producing or interpreting artwork. Theory understandably is a suggestion, assumption, idea and principles which may be possibly be correct or wrong. While art practice has to do with the production of

artworks, if it has to do with visual art. Thus, artworks in Africa are produced in assumptions or are suggestions of ideas an artist is trying to express. African artworks especially in the past are produced in abstracted form. This means that to analysis them in terms of interpreting them, a lot of theoretical expertise is required because is usually very challenging. Interestingly, some African art practitioner usually produces their artwork base on theoretical influence. This situation has really help in guiding them to produce quality artwork to express their inward feelings and emotions about the society.

There is no doubt that in Africa art practice adopts art theory in the production and interpretation artworks, this means theory has come to stay. Thus, this study recommends that present contemporary African artist should at all time to be influence by art theories before producing their artworks.

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