



Poignancy of art practice and ethos of post-pandemic realities in Nigeria

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Abstract

This article x-rays the poignancy of art practice and ethos of post-pandemic realities in Nigeria. The Covid-19 pandemic presumably has come and gone with its debilitating effects on livelihood, commerce, health and economy of nation states and businesses. Art practice as a source of livelihood was not spared the tsunami of destruction, lost opportunities and economic downturn. The severe short-term disruptions of art practice is felt by the artists, art galleries and the entire web of art practice conundrum in Nigeria. To this end, the paper seeks to examine how the pandemic unfolded to exacerbate the poignancy and ethos of art practice in post-pandemic realities, rethink art practice more broadly, and evoke career navigation transition. This was made possible through both historical and participatory approach of data gathering. The findings indicate that agility, resilience and being agentic are key factors of attainable growth beyond the pandemic. Adaptability, innovation and transformation form the core of sustainability of art practice in post-pandemic reality in Nigeria. It is recommended that art practitioners should redefine post-pandemic realities in order to sustain art practice with a mind-set to future proof art businesses collectively.

Keywords: art practice, post-pandemic, innovation, ethos, poignancy

Introduction

Art practice and ethos of post-pandemic realities in Nigeria assumed a virtual recluse situation as most artists appear extemporaneous. This is occasioned by the effect of the pandemic with its immediate and lasting imprints in the creative industry. Covid-19 pandemic as we are aware has wrought economic destruction, surging job losses, skyrocketing bankruptcy cases, and looming economic global recession. It has thrown masses of businesses into tailspin (Carnell, 2011). Covid-19 pandemic brought nations and economies to their knees. There is therefore, an urgent need to examine how this pandemic unfolded the way it did to bring about poignant art practice in post-pandemic realities and for rethinking art practice more broadly.

Pivet and Boivin (2021) ^[7] reviewed major pandemics that have affected humanity throughout history to include; Plague, Cholera, Influenza, and Corona virus disease. Some of the notable pandemics include: the “Bubonic Plague”, “Black Death”, “Spanish Flue” and “Corona Virus”. Biblical evidence of plagues abound especially the plagues recorded in the Book of Exodus. Maul & Malloy (1996) ^[4] asserts that the Pharaoh of Egypt accepted to let the children of Israel leave Egypt after the plagues. The pandemic of 2019 to date, not only jeopardized art practice, it has impacted artists especially studio-practicing artists and patronage. It has caused major (and likely unequal) interruptions in art practice, disruptions in exhibition opportunities, and steady flow of artist-clientele relationships. The severe short-term disruptions of art practice is felt by many artists in Nigeria, both practicing and those in the academia. The lack of frequent exhibitions and art fairs is not only a massive shock to artists productivity, but also to art gallery operations and art patrons. Art sales are moving online, on an untested and unprecedented scale. This brings about a lot of trial and error and uncertainty for everyone. Importantly, these interruptions will not just be a short-term issue but can also have long-term consequences for the affected art practitioners (cohorts) and are likely to increase inequality.

We would rely on certain theories to guide our discussion as the pandemic brought about vast gaps. The theory of adaptation by Charles Darwin which deals with an organism’s ability to adapt to changes in its environment and adjusts accordingly overtime, cited by Ochigbo and Ukim (2022) ^[5], as stated by King (2018), is considered relevant to our discourse. Similarly, transformative theory as propounded by Kitchenham (2008), which focuses on the idea that learners can adjust their thinking based on new information, in this case new experiences gained from the aftermath of the Covid-19 pandemic which brings about critical reflections and dialogue helps artists to adapt to new realities is apt. this would help practicing artists to orient their practice towards being agentic, inclusive and open. This will help artists to think about how to adapt to new realities and develop opportunities for the post-pandemic challenge. Some of the challenges include: material cost, finance, patronage, engagement platform like private galleries (some of which have folded up or shrunken), and social media platforms replete with issues of plagiarism.

To this end, it is important that artists value and model critical reflection and dialogue with environmental realities. Hence, it is pertinent to ask the following questions:

- How might we encourage artists to understand post-pandemic art practice and their present state and assumptions about the challenges posed?
- How might we challenge our assumptions of art practice at such critical times so that we can learn and adapt other ways of doing art business?

It suffices to say then, that Charles Darwin's theory of adaptation which states that "individuals with traits that enable them to adapt to their environments will help them survive" is key. This theory is sometimes described as "survival of the fittest", but that characterization can be misleading, as in this case it is the ability of distinct artists to practice with survival in view.

This article discusses what can be done to mitigate the negative impacts of art practice in post-Covid 19 pandemic, with a view to minimize loss of income for the artist and gallery operations, increase public awareness of risk of doing art practice in a post-pandemic, and to reduce risks and effects of practice and non-practice of art, and most importantly how practicing artists can survive in post-pandemic.

Observations have shown that the impact of the pandemic on art practice was significant, it widened pre-existing opportunity and achievement gaps, hitting historically disadvantaged studio artists and art galleries (even our National Gallery of Art is not left out) so hard. The crisis had an impact on not just artists in practice but also the broader art community. The fallout from the pandemic threatens to depress artist, gallery management's prospects and constrict their opportunities far into appreciative growth in art business. The ripple effects can be better imagined. It is no secret that the deep-rooted challenges of art practice in Nigeria predate the pandemic. Although it is too early to fully assess the poignancy and ethos of post-pandemic art practice, the scope of its effect is already vivid. The immediate imperative is to not only continue the practice of art in its present state but also reimagine art practice for the long term. Across all of these priorities it will be critical to take a holistic approach in uncertain times and terms. The pandemic was a uniquely challenging period for artists, art practice, promoters and art gallery managers, and it is no surprise that it has left its mark on artists, and other agents of art connoisseurship. The impact is broad and huge. Moving beyond the plethora of the issues sparked by Covid-19 pandemic, this discourse offers a critical, theoretical grounded contribution to what we may term post-pandemic art practice ethos, considering the implication for art practice assumptions beyond the pandemic. This is essential in this moment of rethinking art practice.

Interrogating the Issues of Post-Pandemic Art Practice

As we entered into 2022, barely two years from the outbreak of the pandemic, quite a few artists, it appears were awake to pick up their materials for art practice. Art materials' prices skyrocketed and traditional tools and materials became scarce for obvious reasons arising from the Covid19 restrictions. Artists oscillated between traditional mediums to hybrid models of expression and virtual practice, as avenues to balance the need to keep art alive. Artists were faced with web designs as they struggled with glitch internet connections and zoom fatigue, given our epileptic power supply. The beginning was a uniquely challenging year for artists and art gallery operators, and it is no surprise that it has left its mark on art practice and artist well-being. An accurate assessment of the gap created by the pandemic will reveal the depth and extent of the absurdities in Nigeria. This will help the artist to move past the pandemic and into a successful art practice.

Post-pandemic art practice is transformatory. Why do we say so? There has been a lull in practice during the pandemic. The act of transformation always requires creativity and imagination, and sometimes it also demands great technical skill derived from long practice (Pekarik, 1992). It is obvious that the lockdown provided a good number of artists the opportunity to improve on their skills while the pandemic lasted. Depending on which side of the divide, the transformation can be complete and dramatic, or the noticeable changes in an artists' practice can be small and subtle. Let us remember that the pandemic came with a wave of destruction in its trail, and the destruction was holistic. In the post-pandemic destruction, the artist sees the destruction as the road to reinvent his creation. Art practice today is more aggressive because of lost grounds occasioned by the pandemic.

It is evident that post-pandemic art practice has brought about a lot of curiosity and willingness to adapt to new situations like changing paths completely. Quite a good number of art practitioners have followed their passion and worked out what motivates them to actualize their dreams instead of giving up after the trail left by the pandemic, ditto gallery operatives, managers and patrons. In specific terms, art practitioners felt the pandemic impact most directly. There were incidences of massive loss of revenues not only for artists in practice but also the entire art chain. For the artist, studio practice slowed down and demand for artworks dwindled due to sharp decline in revenue.

All these happened for fear of the unknown which exacerbated economic impacts as art collectors with ostensibly stable income limited their purchases due to cases of financial after shock. This adversely affected galleries and other sales outlet for artists. This has caused a severe crash in art practice values and established channels. The toll exacted by the pandemic on art practice has been significant, its effect on the art industry will be difficult to predict what the ultimate impact will be in the long run. The pungency and pervasive presence of a post Covid-19 pandemic affects every facet of life, hence art practice cannot be isolated. Art practice is an all-encompassing venture that cut across production, exhibition, marketing, management, promotion and other gamut of engagements.

Coping with Pandemic Uncertainties

The arts are integral to the social, civic and economic wellbeing and vitality of any nation. The arts encompass a broad range of industries and occupations. The arts and cultural sector is made up of various components like: film, visual and performing arts. Gilbert and Hyder (2021) ^[2] observe that the arts and culture is supported by administrations, promoters, accounting and finance which facilitates its economic stability. Post-pandemic art practice serves as a tool to reawaken such tragic events. Artists like John Sargent, Edward Munch (1918-19) as well as Edward Hopper (1940-50s) produced paintings that captured in real time what it looks like to be stricken by a pandemic. Experiences of the Covid-19 pandemic are mirrored through the lens of artists in varied mediums of expression for the society to revalidate their emotions for emotional and psychological relief. Through pictorial evidences created by artists after the pandemic, historical visual records are recorded to be remembered and foreshadowed by works of art which are visually striking.

Prior to the pandemic, visual artists, performing artists and musicians often make efforts to secure long-term or remote income, epitomizing the gig-economy. The post-pandemic setback for art practice has been that of chronic vulnerability and financial burden occasioned by the closure of art galleries, museums, art fairs and auction houses. Gurry (2020) ^[3] reiterates that the visual art sub-sector largely relies on big events, fairs and biennales, however, that the pandemic restrictions had profound negative effect on both local and international visual arts market and its related ecosystem. Visual artists were greatly impacted as they lack possible income from exhibition sale and resale. This led to some artists abandoning their practice to seek alternative sources of income and reduced artistic activity to a mere hobby. A shift to digital online revenue from art proved insufficient compared to offline revenue from sales. Added to that was the high risk of plagiarism and unauthorized uses, as works could be downloaded from the internet and printed.

This paper showcases both theory and praxis of art in post-pandemic art practice as it acts as a transformation catalyst, accelerating the implementation and adoption of changes in critical interventions. The transformation would not be possible if it is not associated with practical modules and strong theoretical foundation and innovations. It is our opinion that this article will present the desired outcome as envisioned. This is a major step in the right direction.

A cursory look at the art and culture sub-sector reveals how the sector has been affected and how we as creative practitioners have continued to evolve in medium, style, technique; school of thought and expression. It is almost impossible for anyone to miss the overarching impact of artists and art interventions in the post-pandemic era. The survival of artists and art practice in post-pandemic is a given, because art is innate in man. In the words of Cabacenco (2020) ^[1], “the energy of creation will never exhaust, and it is what helps to create the balance”... in times like this. “Art will survive through every disaster and people will survive along with it.”

Mitigating Art Practice in a Post-pandemic Era

The Covid 19 pandemic which appears to be easing out in some climes, is still prevalent in some other countries. Whether it is safe to admit that the pandemic is over in Nigeria still remains subject of debate. However, for the purpose of our discourse, assumptions have been made for post-pandemic art practice. The pandemic has been a catalyst for changes in art practice, sometimes challenging, and on the other hand positive. To survive in this era, artists and their collaborators need to react rapidly and develop alternative and more resilient ways to function in order to evolve ways to remain relevant in the business of art. Action required is the resolve to carry on art practice beyond the pandemic. Art practice in this season should be based on experience building as an important part of career journey. It is a transition, hence it is important for art practitioners to clearly identify their WHY? Why do they have to make a change in today's art practice and why now? It is important to note that art practice in a post-pandemic is a career transition process. When the process seems daunting, motivation is required to move on by recognizing the need to upskill and self-assess to see what gaps may exist. This is definitely the time to navigate career transitions.

There is a season for transitioning because it is a post-distress condition. No doubt certain things must have been missing and there is need to re-align potentials. Pre-pandemic contacts should be paramount as they remain a relevant factor in career growth. Get in touch with them and create networking conversations to let them know you are still in practice, especially those in areas of potential interest. Art practice in a post-pandemic comes with untrodden ground. The fear of failure and doubts makes many art practitioners hesitate to embrace new opportunities. Just take the bull by the horn and make the bold move and navigate your career transition.

Conclusion

Art gallery managers are gearing up simultaneously with artists to capture art practice opportunities that arise in the post-Covid-19 economy. Their priorities have not altered significantly, but there is a clear sense of urgency to take action and redefine post-pandemic realities. Sustainability, digital transformation and talent are top priorities for art galleries that face preparing for their next wave of growth beyond the pandemic. Agility, resilience and being agentic proves to be key factors for success that can help those in art business to fuel growth in post-pandemic Nigeria. The ability to switch from the pandemic quickly, and open new ways of working, as well as new business strategies, will sustain art practice in a post-pandemic economy. An agile mindset and a resilient business of art practice should futureproof art businesses collectively. Adaptability and innovation are the life wire of art practice today and these must be adopted going forward to preserve a holistic art practice operations.

As we transition into a post-pandemic art practice reality, a silver lining for artists, gallery operators, connoisseurs and patrons as a whole is that of diversifying existing supply chains.

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