

Hidden Harmonies: The Psychoactive Role of Audio-Visual Arts in Traditional Expressions

Author:

¹Emmanuel Ifoegbuike

²May Okafor

³Paulinus Agbo

Affiliation:

^{1,2}Department of Fine & Applied Arts, University of Nigeria, Nsukka.

³Department of Religion & Cultural Studies, University of Nigeria, Nsukka.

Corresponding author:

Paulinus Agbo

paulinus.agbo@unn.edu.ng

Dates:

Received: 18 Feb., 2023

Accepted: 15 May, 2023

Published: 28 Jul, 2023

Disclaimer:

All opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the position of the editors of Nsukka Journal of Religion and Cultural Studies (NJRCS) or the Department at large.

Competing interests:

The author(s) declares that he/she has no financial or personal relationships that may have inappropriately influenced him/her in writing this article.

Copyright:

© 2023. Copyright for this article is retained by the author(s), with first publication rights granted to the journal.



This is an open-access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution license



Abstract

In search of uniqueness and more possibilities in visual representation, some visual artists have created acoustic art pieces that are conceptually charged with meaning. Some of the art pieces are cultural expressions in the sculpture and installation genre. Such art works are not only conceptually representational but, through their physical presence, accentuate aesthetics in their surroundings and produce audio tones that temper sound waves in the natural environment. A lot of artistic exercises with its concomitant art products have been channeled towards this direction but with little scholarly attention. This paper, therefore, discusses efforts of some Nigerian and foreign artists in this regard. It employs the qualitative methods to collect data and analyse sample artworks that are culturally representative and produce sound harmony. Specifically, the research methods for collecting data involved observation, visual documentation, and a review of literature. The descriptive and narrative approaches were then used for data analysis. The aesthetic qualities of such works are also shown as part of the discourse to further reveal the relationship between traditional expressions in visual arts and the science of sound. Ultimately, the study adds to the discourses on the critical appraisal and analysis of audio-visual art in traditional expressions and their psycho effects on the environment.

Key Words: Acoustic Art Pieces, Installation, Sculpture, Audio-visual Art Works, Psycho Effects.

Introduction

The evolution of artistic expression has witnessed a constant search for innovative methods to convey ideas and emotions (Fischer, 2020). From the prehistoric men who created drawings and paintings on cave walls, through ancient cultures and civilizations to the present, more possibilities have been sought in visual activities and experiences (Braidwood 2008; Domingo & Chieli, 2021). One such development is the explorations of audio-visual artworks in traditional or cultural expressions. Such works, sometimes rooted in traditional sculpture and installation, challenge conventional notions of artistic representation by incorporating sound as an integral component.

At mid 20th century in the Western world was greater acceptance of a style of art termed installation. Installation, as an art term, could be viewed from two perspectives. Firstly, it may refer to the positioning, the fixture, composite arrangement, or mounting of art piece(s) in a specified location. Hence, there are installations of public sculpture, installation of works at museums or exhibitions, among others. Secondly, installation may be defined as the use of separate items/objects to form a composite work of art. Ene-orji (2003:13) defines it as "the aggregation of disparate, usually independent units or elements in space to form a composite art work; this art work is usually a metaphor that has to be read for associative meaning(s) deducible from the component units" (also, see Okoro 2023; Boutard 2022). In the context of this paper, both definitions are vital as the paper critically reviews, as regards sound, the works of certain artists who have installed public sculptures and those who have aggregated independent units in space to form a composite work.

This paper explores the efforts of Nigerian and foreign artists in this field, examining how they have utilized traditional expressions to create conceptually charged art pieces that produce both visual and auditory experiences. The term, traditional, in this context refers to cultural narratives and ideas drawn from one's local and immediate environment. The study employs a qualitative research method to collect and analyze data on available audio-visual art pieces that highlight traditional and cultural aesthetics. In doing so, extant literature was reviewed and specific artworks by Nigerian and foreign artists were examined using descriptive and narrative approaches. Analyses of the artworks focused on their conceptual underpinnings, materials, and the audio tones they produce.

By analyzing the aesthetic qualities of these works and their psycho effects on the environment, the paper aims to demonstrate the interrelationship between sound, culture and visual art, particularly installation. The paper argues that the contributions of visual artists in creating acoustic art pieces that are psychoactive still years for adequate attention in literature. The paper, therefore, focuses on installation, sculpture and other genres of visual aesthetics and their relation to sound production.

Literature and Discussion

Sound, as an obscure language, can be subject to lots of meanings and interpretations. Apart from visual narratives and expressions, sound interpretation is another mental exercise that is both dependent upon, and influential on the hearer's psychological state (Gerstgrasser, Vigl & Zentner 2023). When a sound is produced say by a cymbal, guitar or any other equipment through friction, its acoustic waves is bound to be subject to different meanings and interpretations and can influence (positively or negatively), the psychological state of the hearer. Gerstgrasser, Vigl and Zentner (2023) have argued that the musical expertise, personality dispositions, mood state and other similar emotions of the listener contributes to the interpretations of sounds, more so when accompanied with visual elements.

Some visual artworks especially installations are known to produce sound in their process of movement. Such artworks are designed to incorporate motion through any mechanical means like electricity, water flow, wind or manual activation. They are classified as kinetic art (Lee & Kim 2017). Kinetic art involves a wide range of techniques and styles. Although there is paucity of literature as regards the relatedness of artworks and sound, review of works have shown that almost every kinetic artwork produces sound. A remarkable historical example is the spinning *Bicycle Wheel*, an installation by Marcel Duchamp in 1913. The artwork is regarded by art historians as the first kinetic artwork and, by extrapolation, could not have spun without that distinct sound (however minimal), typically produced by bicycle wheels especially when they are suspended upwards as in Duchamp's work. Duchamp's *Bicycle Wheel* was created as part of Dadaist revolt against technology and everything that was formal. Designed to be propelled by manual activation, the wheel spins around at one spot. According to the artist, the image was more or less a mimicry of technology (Song 2021). Gregory Barsamian, Robert Rauschenberg, Wer-Ying Tsai and Yaacov Agam are among subsequent artists who are known for their motion sculptures (Chen, Lin & Fan 2015). In fact, these artists, including Duchamp in his latter works incorporated mechanical means of introducing motion to their works; and that could perhaps increase sounds produced by such works.

At the home scene, Omeh Matthew was more traditional in his own exploration on motion sculptures. *Kinetic Masquerade* (1993), his Master of Fine Arts (M.F.A.) project that was installed, for several years, in front of Ben Enwonwu building in the Department of Fine and Applied Arts, University of Nigeria, Nsukka is worth mentioning. The work was made of various metal forms and sheets arranged in strips with 'izere' (round metallic objects that produce sound, traditionally used by masquerades) knotted at the borders of each strip of metal. A central pipe was provided at the middle to serve as the shaft over which various parts of the work rotate. Round about it are conical forms that depict the roundness of some Igbo masquerades (See fig. 1). As if in a struggle, the metal strips clasp and sways, touching one another once activated by the wind. This movement produces melodious tunes which the sculpture piece appears to be dancing to. Three triangular forms that face different directions are at the top, with large empty plate as crown. The general sound produced by this sculpture is like subtle beats used during masquerade outing and similar cultural events particularly in southeastern Nigeria. The sound produced by the kinetic movement of the work is regular and its tune is low.

Strategic display of fountains at junctions, hotels, public places and residential houses does not only heighten the aesthetics of such environment but also produce an audio-presence which results in unrestrained poetic melodies. The soft drops and tattering of water through different channels of these fountains which, in themselves, are monumental sculptures, are creative constructs of artists made in accordance with the principles and elements of art production.

Instances of such works are fountains created by Chijioko Onuora at Okwara Osonwa's place, Ebem Ohafia, and another by Cyril Nwokoli along Bisala Road, Enugu.



Fig.1: Omeh Matthew, *Kinetic Masquerade*, photo by M. Okafor 2013



Fig.2: Fountain at Enugu, by Cyril Nwokoli, Enugu. Photo by M. Okafor, 2013

Again, swaying curtains made of beads (both wooden and plastic) that are usually displayed at restaurants provide us with another experience of clapping melodies in visual creations. They serve both as beautifications and as blinds. As one makes contact with these curtains, they dangle and swing in all directions clapping and producing subtle sound experience. Some artists have also devised more interesting materials for this kind of art by introducing harder objects like bottle tops, which provide greater clapping tunes. An instance of such works is the *Beaded Blind* in Figure 3 below. Produced by a young aspiring artist for his mother's commercial bar in Nsukka, the colourful, dramatically vibrant installation auditorily signals waiters when a customer steps in or out of the bar.

Apart from the aforementioned instances, it is pertinent to mention that in the traditional African society, especially Nigeria, production of musical instrument was part of the distinguished specialties of visual artists. Among the Igbos for example, while the potters produced *udu*, blacksmiths were responsible for *ogene* and *izere*,

wood carvers created *igba*, *ekwe*, *oja* and *ikoro*, and other craftsmen produced several other instruments like *jchaka*. It needs mention that these artists produced these items not only as musical instruments but as whole works of art with keen accuracy on the principles and elements of art. Similarly, the same is the case for Western/modern instruments. Some of them, including guitar, trumpet, violin and viola, are wood works and cast objects, which are within artists' creative domain too.



Fig.3: George Odo, *Beaded Blind*, bottle tops, variable dimensions. Photo by M. Okafor, 2013



Fig.4: Chijioke Onuora, *Sonic Statement*, metal 2010; 2.5 x 1.6 meters. Photo by M. Okafor, 2013

Beyond outright activation of these musical instruments, more interestingly, they could evoke musical feelings (according to the tunes they produce) when beheld in their static forms. In traditional Igbo society, the *ikoro* is known for its deep echo when beaten. Aniakor & Cole (1984: 87) wrote that it "speaks in an abbreviated tonal language to announce festivals and emergencies." Hence, even in its static form, the *ikoro* still evokes deep tonal sounds in the minds of its viewers. This fact also extends the place of the contemporary artist as painters and sculptors. Innumerable artists have created images of musical instruments. Among them is Chijioke Onuora's monumental sculpture, *Sonic Statement*, at the Federal Secretariat

Abuja (Fig.4). This luminous metal sculpture is produced with strings and resonators attached to it at both sides so that there will be audience participation in activating the lyrical qualities of the work. Even without a touch, the lyrical lines created on the sculpture provokes melodious movement and sensitivity as one admires the work. The luminous texture of the work is charged with emotive feelings that can always stand as a form of lullaby. This fits into what Aniakor (2014:vi) describes as "lines acting as constituents of image making, at once sensuous, at once lyrical and musical."

Several scientific research works have been carried out to analyze and understand direct and indirect effects of sound as it affects both psychological and physiological balance (Bartel & Mosabbir 2021; Kenwright 2020; Deng et al. 2020; Kryter, 1970; Cohen and Spacapan, 1984; Jansen and Gros, 1986; Turrero, Zuluaga and Santisteban, 2001; Scherer and Zentner, 2001). The two broad categories of sound (music and noise) have, of course, been significant in these analyses. However, there have been mixed views on the effects of both music and noise on listeners. It is not surprising, therefore, that mixed judgment and reactions are always given to sounds that come from motion art pieces. Nevertheless, while Scherer and Zentner (2001:361) noted existent opposing views of "emotivists" and "cognitivists" as regards music, Aluede (2006) stresses the therapeutic aspects of musical sounds to human and its applications right from the ancient cultures of African societies, especially Nigeria.

More so, for several years, regular sounds that may be considered unwanted in the environment did not form main focus in sound research. As Kryter (1950:6) observed, "there has been a tendency to overlook the rather innocuous effects of noise that have become a 'regular' part of one's environment, and to emphasize the drastic effects of the blast of an auto horn or an unexpected bang of a door." Although Kryter's study on that discourse attempted to experiment on regular noise as found, say in industries, it did not pay attention to sounds in lower tunes such as that from a fountain, which are usually regular and could form part of the environmental soundscape too. More recent empirical findings have, however, proven that individuals "with attentional problems, rather than being distracted (as generalized results had suggested), actually benefit from environmental noise presented with the concurrent target task" (Söderlund & Sikström 2012:232). Söderlund and Sikström's experiment showed that at a particular noise level, the general classroom performance of attentive students could drop while that of inattentive students increased. The authors, therefore, suggested that for adequate cognitive enhancement to be achieved, the provided noise level should be moderated. It needs mention that this kind of noise moderation is evident in audio-visual art pieces as discussed above and thus, could positively affect learning and performance.

Finally, creative efforts of Rainer Tautenhahn, a German artist deserves attention. He is known for his creative translations of sound waves (including very harsh ones) into colourful visual imageries. He achieves this by recording sounds using an ultra-sensitive microphone and processing them using computer software. High sounds appear in red, deep tones show in blue and every other distinct tone draws from his vast palette. Rain's art images could be appreciated both as pictures and as videos. Through this artist, families from different parts of the world continuously document visually, sounds of the first cry of their babies among other noises. Other trivial sounds like that of a rolling rubble could also be translated (Fig.5) by the artist to be a source of awe and much fun. Hence, instead of becoming a nuisance to the environment, such noises are artistically harnessed as priceless moments to capture and be appreciated for very many years.



Fig.5: Rainer Tautenhahn: *The sound of a Russian ruble rolling across a desk*. Source: Daily Mail, 2012

Conclusion

Art forms that produce sound, catapult the two sensory organs of sight and hearing into instant action. Audio-visual artworks in traditional expressions, particularly, represent a significant development in the field of contemporary art. Through such works, art can be so creative and narrative a practice that gives a language to those whose ideas give energy and aesthetics to the environment. The incorporation of sound adds a new dimension to these expressions, allowing artists to engage with the viewer on multiple sensory levels. Sometimes, viewers may not be interested to look at some visual images, but because of the sound those images produce they are attracted to them. Hence, the aesthetics of these images and soundscape produced by them provide a soothing environment for relaxation, meditation, and an arena for social dialogue. The public places where these art works are stationed are no longer empty and alone, but are filled up with regular psychoacoustics for cognitive enhancement. Therefore, we consider to say that art has always assumed a trans-functional scope because of its relationship with other disciplines. The mysteries of sound are, thus, unfolded through the production of some kind of art works that have acoustic qualities in them.

References

- Aluede, C. O. (2006). Music Therapy in Traditional African Societies: Origin, Basis and Application in Nigeria. *Journal of Human Ecology* 20(1):31-35.
- Aniakor, C. (2014). Linear Harvests of the Creative Imagination: Drawings as Rhythms of Visual Sounds. An Introduction to the Exhibition Catalogue, *Chijioke Onuora: Akala Unyi*; held at The National Gallery of Art, 1 Temple Avenue, Enugu, July 2014.
- Aniakor, C. C. & Cole, H. M. (1984). *Igbo Art: Community and Cosmos*. Los Angeles: Museum of Cultural Studies.
- Bartel, L., & Mosabbir, A. (2021). Possible mechanisms for the effects of sound vibration on human health. In *Healthcare*. 9(5):597. MDPI.
- Boutard, Guillaume et al.(2022). Review of Contemporary Sound Installation Practices in Québec. *Resonance* 3, 2 p177-193
- Braidwood, R. J. (2008). *Prehistoric men*. Chicago: Natural History Museum
- Chen, G. D., Lin, C. W., & Fan, H. W. (2015). The history and evolution of kinetic art. *International Journal of Social Science and Humanity*, 5(11):922.
- Cohen, S. & Spacapan, S. (1984). The Social Psychology of Noise. *Noise and Society*. In D. M. Jones and A. J. Chapman (ed.s). *Noise and Society* (221-245). New York: John Wiley and Sons Ltd.
- Daily Mail Reporter (2012). *How a Screaming Baby can Actually be Soothing: The 'Sound Artwork' that Turns any Noise into a Piece of Art*. In Mail Online, Science. <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/sciencetech/article-22179959/How-screaming-baby-actually-soothing-The-sound-artwork-turn-noise-picture.html>. Retrieved September 24th, 2014.
- Deng, L., Luo, H., Ma, J., Huang, Z., Sun, L. X., Jiang, M. Y., ... & Li, X. (2020). Effects of integration between visual stimuli and auditory stimuli on restorative potential and aesthetic preference in urban green spaces. *Urban Forestry & Urban Greening*, 53, 126702.
- Domingo, I., & Chieli, A. (2021). Characterizing the pigments and paints of prehistoric artists. *Archaeological and Anthropological Sciences*, 13(11):196.
- Dorigatti, E. (2024). Exploring Sound (in) Tangibility Through Interactive Interfaces. In *Proceedings of the 2024 International Conference on Advanced Visual Interfaces* (1-3).
- Ene-orji (2003). *New Departures in Contemporary Nigerian Ceramics: The works Chris Echeta, Tony Umunna and Ozioma Onuzulike*. An Unpublished Bachelor of Arts Thesis, University of Nigeria, Nsukka.
- Fischer, E. (2020). *The necessity of art*. Brooklyn: Verso Books.
- Gerstgrasser, S., Vigl, J., & Zentner, M. (2023). The role of listener features in musical emotion induction: The contributions of musical expertise, personality dispositions, and mood state. *Psychology of Aesthetics, Creativity, and the Arts*, 17(2):211.
- Jansen, G. & Gros, E. (1986). Non-auditory Effects of Noise: Physiological and Psychological Effects. In A. L. Saenz and R. W. B. Stephens (ed.), *Noise Pollution* (225-248). New York: John Wiley & sons Ltd.
- Jordan L. (2016). "Sonic Placemaking: Three Approaches and Ten Attributes for the Creation of Enduring Urban Sound Art Installations," *Organised Sound* 21(2):147-59.
- Kenwright, B. (2020). There's more to sound than meets the ear: Sound in interactive environments. *IEEE Computer Graphics and Applications*, 40(4):62-70.
- Kryter, K. D. (1950). The Effects of Noise on Man. *The Journal of Speech and Hearing Disorders*; Monograph Supplement 1. Illinois: American Speech and Hearing Association.
- Lee, I., & Kim, H. (2017). Spatial magnetic field visualization: Interactive kinetic art installation driven by the invisible forces of magnetic fields. In *Proceedings of the 25th ACM international conference on Multimedia* (571-573).
- Okoro, M. N. (2023). "Breaking away from Conventions in Ceramic Production by the Nsukka School, Nigeria." In *Chitrolekha Journal on Art and Design*. 7(2):1-14.
- Scherer, K. R., and Zentner, M. R. (2001). "Emotional effects of music: production rules," in *Music and Emotion: Theory and Research*, eds P. N. Juslin and J. A. Sloboda (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 361-392.
- Shahid, M. A. K. & Bashir, H. (2013). Psychological and Physiological Effects of Noise Pollution on the Residents of Major Cities of Punjab (Pakistan). *Peak Journal of Physical and Environmental Science Research*. Vol. 1 (4), pp. 41-50.



- Song, H. (2021). Nomad Thinking Implied in Duchamp's Readymades. *The Journal of the Convergence on Culture Technology*, 7(3):215-222.
- Söderlund, G. & Sikström, S. (2012). Distractor or Noise? The Influence of Different Sounds on Cognitive Performance in Inattentive and Attentive Children. In J. M. Norvilitis (ed.), *Current Directions in ADHD and its Treatment*. <http://www.intechopen.com/books/current-direction-in-adhd-and-its-treatment/distractor-or-noise-positive-influence-on-cognitive-performance-in-inattentive-children>. Retrieved October 7th, 2014.
- Turrero, A., Zuluaga, P. & Santisteban, C. (2001). Joint Effect of Noise Personality and Environmental Factors on the Intelligibility of Speech. *Methods of Psychological Research Online*, 6(2):175-197. <http://www.dgps.de/fachgruppen/methode/mpr-online/issue14/art4/Turrero>. Retrieved October 3rd, 2014.

Author Biography

Emmanuel Ifoegbuike is a sculptor and an art educator. He is interested in the broader societal impacts of art, focusing on how it can provoke thought and inspire change.

May Okafor is a visual artist and a researcher. Her work often reflects a deep engagement with social issues, using various mediums to challenge perceptions and provoke thoughtful dialogue.

Paulinus Agbo studied Religion and cultural Studies. His works reflect cultural revival in the global South.