

**Women's agency in the Nigerian art world: modernist legacies and
contemporary moves across African art networks**

by

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Abstract

This thesis focuses on powerful Nigerian women who have in recent years influenced and shaped the global contemporary African art scene. It explores a vibrant art scene populated by successful female art curators and administrators who power the burgeoning global contemporary African art industry from the continent. The research considers art networks and the wider art infrastructure as cosmopolitan arenas in which women's agency is formulated, debated, contested, and exercised. Drawing on rich ethnographic fieldwork conducted in art institutions and at art events between 2018 and 2022, as well as interviews with art administrators and artists, the study explores ideas around agency and empowerment. The conclusions argue for the importance of Nigerian women in debates around contemporary art from Africa and its shifting position internationally, particularly in the context of mobility, identity, belonging and opportunity in the art world and beyond.

The conceptual and methodological approach of this thesis draws on social anthropology to examine the field of contemporary African art. In doing so, it makes a novel intervention in conceptualising women's agency in the creative visual arts. Building on this, the research considers the agency of the artwork itself in building social relations. It is crucial that women are written into art-historical contexts in meaningful ways. Female art creators and producers have been erased or ignored in both anthropological and art historical scholarship. By centring women, this thesis offers new perspectives on cultural production: It demonstrates the relevance of Nigerian women who have used their agency to create, connect and shape contemporary art worlds, whilst also contributing to understandings of gender and power in Nigeria. Finally, it proposes new directions in research on art within anthropology and the benefits of thinking 'art anthropologically'.

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Chapter one: Introduction



Figure 1.1 Vice President of Nigeria, Professor Yemi Osinbajo visits ART X Lagos 2019. With (from left) Chief Nike Davies-Òkúndáyé, Tokini Peterside, N'Goné Fall (behind Osinbajo) and Sandra Mbanefo Obiago (behind Fall). Image courtesy of BellaNajja.com

Two hours prior to the grand opening of ART X Lagos art fair 2019 at the five-star Federal Palace Hotel on Victoria Island security helicopters circled overhead and a convoy of bullet proof SUVs sped through the gates. Professor Yemi Osinbajo, Vice President of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, had arrived with his substantial entourage.¹ Osinbajo was welcomed on the red carpet by Tokini Peterside, the

¹ Stacey Kennedy research notes, Lagos, 31st October 2019

founder and director of this acclaimed international event. Peterside's vision and drive had resulted in this fourth edition of what is celebrated as 'West Africa's premier art fair'. In 2019 the *New York Times* (Mitter 2019) proclaimed that: 'Tokini Peterside, the founder of ART X [is] one of the energetic arts entrepreneurs — *predominantly women* — powering the [art] scene (my emphasis)'. As Peterside escorted the Vice President on a private tour of the art fair she was accompanied by these 'female arts entrepreneurs' who power the art scene: acclaimed Senegalese curator, N'Goné Fall; founder of SMO Contemporary Art Gallery, Lagos, Sandra Mbanefo Obiago; and artist-entrepreneur, Chief Nike Davies-Òkúndáyé (figure 1.1).

ART X Lagos is a commercial operation, set within a carefully constructed cosmopolitan space which featured a celebratory Nigerian aesthetic throughout. The VIP Alara lounge served glasses of champagne to wealthy art collectors and celebrity guests in surroundings which showcased contemporary African interior design and the craft of *adire* fabric. A special augmented reality project proclaimed 'This is Lagos' to celebrate the city in all its complexity. Twenty-two galleries from across Africa and Europe had been set up in temporary booths, having arrived to sell their finest modern and contemporary artworks by artists based on the African continent or across the African diaspora. On the day of Osinbajo's visit the fair was about to open its doors to more than twelve thousand guests over three days — local and international visitors from all corners of the world. Osinbajo appeared to enjoy his visit and later tweeted his appreciation: 'I was truly privileged to see what @TokiniPeterside is doing with ArtX Lagos' [sic] (Osinbajo 2019). This high-profile visit and Osinbajo's public endorsement of the art fair and its founder, signalled the artistic agency wielded by Peterside and her female art colleagues, an agency by which they access structures of political power in Nigeria.

This vignette introduces the creatives who are responsible for shaping contemporary African art worlds, the women about whom this thesis is written. Peterside, Obiako, and Òkúndáyé are involved in the spectacle of Osinbajo's visit because they assume prominent positions as art administrators and curators in the arena of visual art. They claim space in the international art world, which continues to be dominated by Euro-American, patriarchal perspectives (Désir-Davis 1997). These art entrepreneurs are savvy social agents, characterised by their affluence, education, professional qualifications, and ability to access the investment and patronage required to build art institutions which enrich visual art infrastructure across Africa. Sharing a commitment to being based on the African continent, but regularly travelling between cities — Lagos, Paris, London, Bamako, New York — these wealthy and elite women drive the contemporary African art scene globally. Their presence challenges what Oyěwùmí (2005:50) condemns as the 'appallingly one-dimensional construction of the African woman'.

Peterside and her colleagues successfully navigate interlinked art worlds to build influential, cosmopolitan art networks. The concept of the 'art world' helps to make sense of these complex and interconnected relationships.² These women affect change locally, for example, as income generating owners of successful art

² I use the term 'art world' to draw attention to the importance of the context, institutions, and historical factors which underpin the production and reception of art. Danto (1964) introduced the concept of the 'artworld' in his philosophy of art, emphasising the institutional and philosophical aspects of art's definition and interpretation. He suggests that artworks are not defined by their inherent qualities, but by their status and positioning within the 'art world'. Taking a sociological approach, Becker (1982) refers to the 'art world' as the sociological processes and interactions which comprise the institutional framework and context in which art is presented and interpreted. I explore different periods in art history, taking place in varied geographical locations, which have distinct social dynamics, interactions, and collaborative processes. Each 'art world' possesses its own distinct conventions, but different 'art worlds' have been historically judged by the narrow conventions of the Western art world canon. Attention to the sociological aspects of 'art worlds' highlights the roles of various actors, the establishment of conventions, the influence of gatekeepers, and the interplay between art and society (see Alloway 1966).

businesses they wield economic agency as they create employment and contribute to enhancing Nigeria's growth in the formal economy. In addition, they attract visitors to globally recognised art events which enhance the country's cultural reputation, particularly Lagos's status as an art capital (Kennedy 2021). Here the global, (understood as international art worlds) and the local (framed as the different art worlds in Nigeria, Abuja and Lagos primarily) intersect, because contemporary African art is exhibited, bought, and sold across the world as material cultures of art objects circulate across nodes and networks.³ These networks operate like Deleuze and Guattari's (1972,1987) metaphorical 'rhizomes' — forming a matrix with multiple entryways where any point of the network can be connected to another. The transnational zones of transaction which characterise these contemporary art networks mean that the art scene in Lagos may be as well connected with London, New York, or Bamako as it is with other parts of Nigeria.

The work of contemporary women such as Peterside, Obiagio and Òkúndáyé follows an historical lineage of Nigerian art educators, administrators, and entrepreneurs who built networks and institutions across the same transnational zones of transaction. Women artists, curators and administrators working throughout the twentieth century, such as Clara Ugbodaga-Ngu, Afi Ekong and Colette Omogbai, played a foundational role in shaping contemporary, commercial art practice (see

³ Contemporary African art is debated in journals which respond to the hegemony of Western art history such as *Nka: Journal of African Contemporary Art*, *Third Text*, or *Critical Interventions: Journal of African Art History and Visual Culture*. New web-based journals often have more content about contemporary African art, such as *Artthrob*, *SAVVY: art.contemporary.africa* and *Contemporary And*. They expand the discursive networks of the field, although writing about women is still disproportionate to the focus on male artists. *African Art* has published articles which address the work of Zanele Muholi (Salley 2012) or critique the curatorial input of Bisi Silva (as an obituary) (Sanwo 2019). Exhibitions accompanied by theoretically rich catalogues have become important sources for information about women artists. A recent publication to accompany *museum global microhistories of an ex.-centric modernism* exhibition included an essay (Malz 2018) about Colette Omogbai and Clara Ugbodaga-Ngu.

chapter two). However, their work, and the work of many more women before them, has been obscured or erased by the biases of a Western dominated and androcentric written art history (Salami and Visoná 2013). As Lazreg (2005) reminds us: the silence of women is not synonymous with absence of talk or action.

My study highlights the ways in which contributions by women have been silenced in art history, even though generations of women have wielded influence to shape the Nigerian art scene. In line with scholars such as Visoná (2021) or Corrigan (2018), who demonstrate the efficacy of African women across the continent, my research shows that Nigerian women have opened galleries, founded art centres, supervised museum collections, and launched curatorial projects that have made an impact on the global art market. Their work has led to the exponential growth and visibility of female African artists based on the continent or across the diaspora (see Silva 2013; Layiwola 2013). Examples of such successful artists include Toyin Ojih Odutola (figure 1.2) and Njideka Akunyili Crosby (figure 1.3).⁴

⁴ Crosby's 2017 painting *Bush Babies* sold for \$3.4 million USD in 2018, far exceeding previous auction records for a Nigerian woman artist.

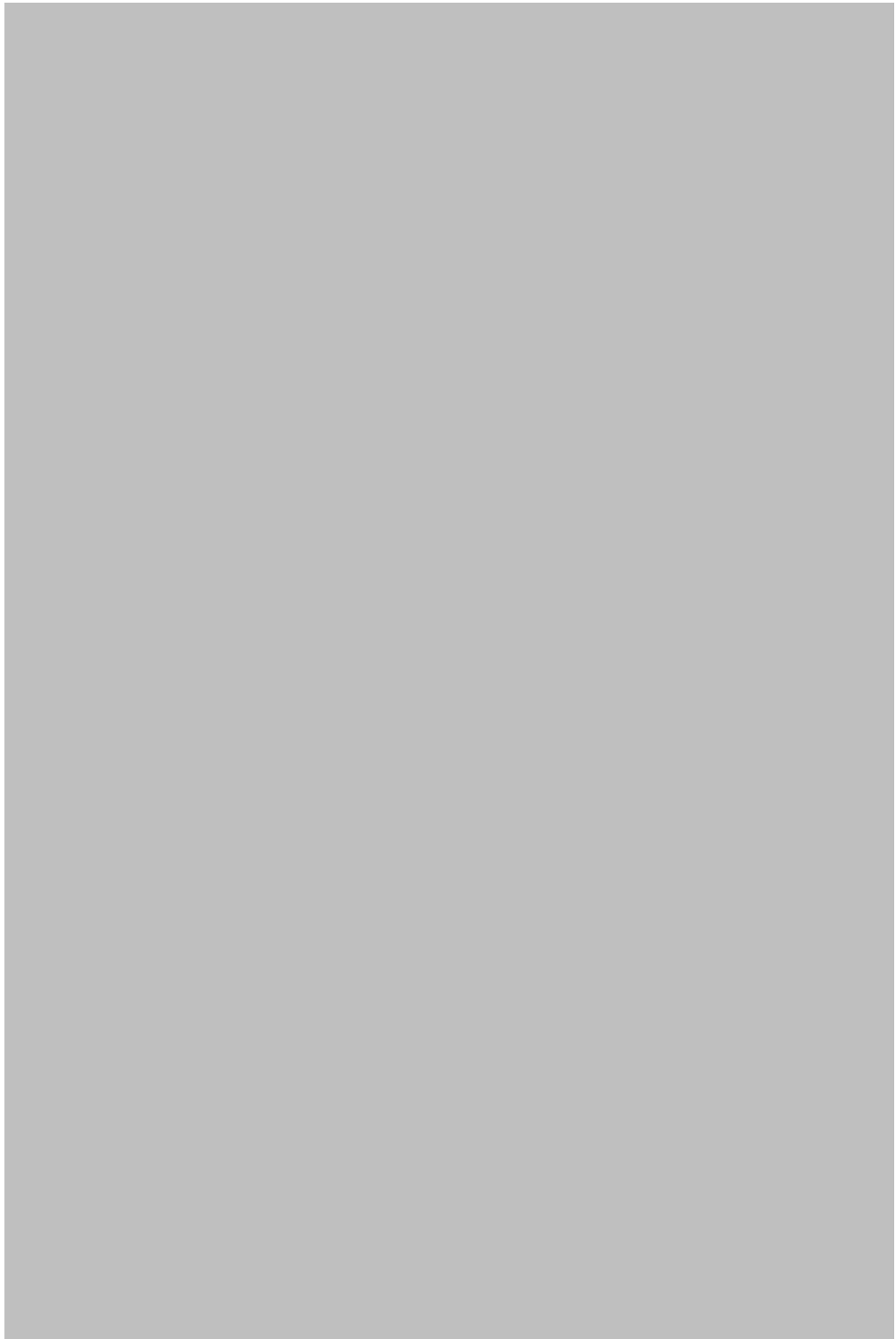


Figure 1.2. Toyin Ojih Odutola (2020) *A Countervailing Theory* exhibition, Barbican, London. Image courtesy of the artist.

It was the work of Odotola and Crosby which drew me into the world of contemporary African art. I became interested in studying Nigerian women's contribution to this art scene during professional visits to 1-54 Contemporary African Art Fair in London, where I observed a prevalence of women running this art world. 'Contemporary African art' is a growing sector which includes Africa based artists and those from the diaspora (Enwezor and Okeke-Agulu 2009). Museums and galleries exhibit and validate contemporary African art in the West, however, there is crucial growth on the continent, through the development of events such as ART X Lagos (Corrigall 2018). Art X builds upon long standing continent-based events such as The First World Festival of Black Arts (FESMAN), (Festival Mondial des Arts Nègres) which took place in Senegal, 1966; The Second World Black and African Festival of Arts and Culture, (FESTAC) which was held in Nigeria, 1977; the Bamako Biennial, Mali (the Rencontres de Bamako, originally named the Biennale africaine de la photographie) which began in 1994; or the Dakar Biennale, or *Dak'Art* (Biennale de l'Art Africain Contemporain), which was established in Senegal in 1989. Today African women are visibly driving the growth of the ecosystem and advancing independent arts organisations on the African continent and beyond. Their work is key to strengthening art infrastructure in countries with little government support for contemporary visual art.

This is a marked contrast with mainstream Euro-American contemporary art worlds, which scholars argue continue to reflect an art history dominated by patriarchal power and privilege, gender disparity and the neglect of women (see Broude and Garrard 1982; Reilly 2018). My research therefore shines light on an art scene where African women are visible, successful agents of change, and considers the

implications for art history when African women's art production is pushed into the shadows.

The artworks which circulate across the nodes and networks of contemporary African art frequently take gender relations and women's empowerment as their theme. They become visual expressions of female power. Figure 1.2 is a drawing by Nigerian artist Toyin Ojih Odutola, from her 2020 solo show *A Countervailing Theory* in London. The show talked of social relations in a mythical Nigerian world, where society was dominated by a ruling class of *Eshu* women. In the catalogue Smith (2020) describes how the women in Odutola's artworks subvert patriarchal narratives of African women's inferiority: 'A woman stands in an otherworldly landscape, looking out [...] Here the sublime is African [...] She seems assured both of her mastery over this land and her natural right to it [...] The script has been flipped'. The 'script is flipped' in two ways, the woman is an empowered *African* subject, and an empowered *female African* subject. The notion of empowered women is echoed by curators who build exhibitions around themes of women's equality and liberation, for example *Like a Virgin* (2009) by Bisi Silva at Centre for Contemporary Art Lagos (CCA Lagos) (chapter four), or *I Am... Contemporary Women Artists of Africa* (2019) at the National Museum of African Art, Washington (figure 1.3). *I Am...* took its name from a 1970s American feminist anthem *I am Woman* by Helen Reddy.⁵ The museum announced it would 'reveal a more contemporary feminism that recognizes the contributions of women to the most pressing issues of their times' (National Museum of African Art 2019). 'Feminism' as a useful lens in this setting will be explored later in the introduction.

⁵ *I Am Woman* was a number one hit for Helen Reddy in late 1972. It spoke to a time when women in music were speaking out against the notoriously sexist music community of the time, for example Joni Mitchell, Carole King, Carly Simon, Suzi Quatro or Patti Smith.

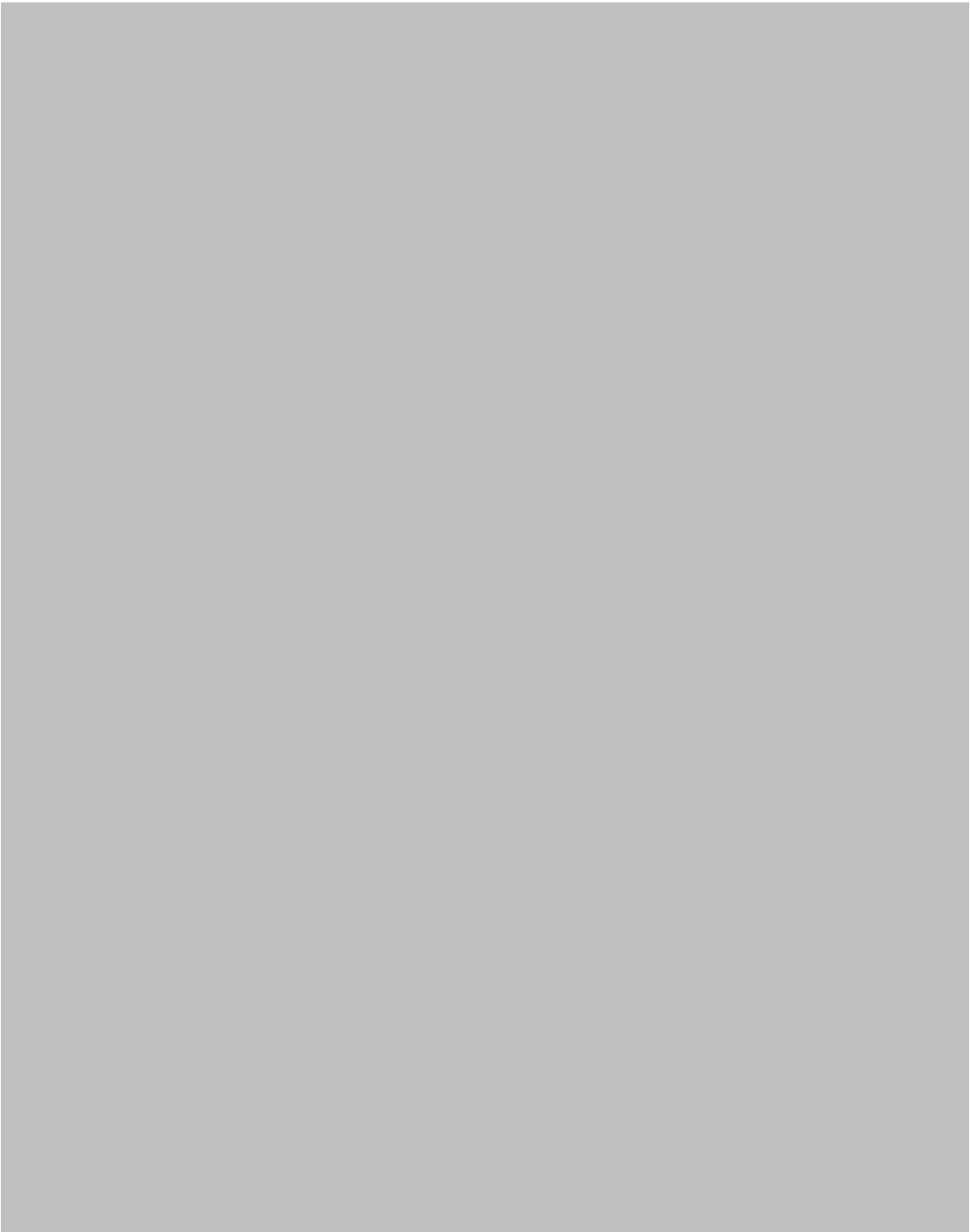


Figure 1.3 Image from the promotional material for *I Am... Contemporary Women Artists of Africa* (2019) at the National Museum of African Art, Washington.

Njideka Akunyili Crosby (2016) *Wedding Souvenirs* © 2016 Njideka Akunyili Crosby

These artworks, exhibitions, and the visible authority of African art world women prompt three questions which frame the study: How do female Nigerian artists and curators become powerful agents? What are the forms of agency which they exercise? How is their agency connected to the rhetoric of women's empowerment which emanates from artists, art administrators and curators as they critique gendered power relations across African art worlds? The research responds to scholars who suggest that writing African women into art-historical context is a huge task (Adésànyà 2021). To respond in a meaningful way, the study places an exploration of gender, agency, and networks at the centre of a narrative arc which moves between the representation of Nigerian women in art history to a contemporary Nigerian art scene which exemplifies women's success.

Historical and contemporary perspectives

In 1971 art historian Linda Nochlin critiqued the very foundations of art history with the provocation 'Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?'. In doing so, she offered a framework to consider how art subjects are constructed in ways which see women frequently reduced to a footnote in the record. Nochlin, as an American art historian, was not necessarily thinking about *Nigerian* women artists, but her work drew attention to a false understanding of art making which establishes the white, Western, male viewpoint as *the* viewpoint of the artist and art historian. Nochlin argued that institutional power structures made it impossible for women to achieve artistic excellence, or find success, on the same footing as men. Contemporary revaluations of Nochlin's position build on her original question to examine how the processes of sexual differentiation are played out across the representations of art and art history (Tickner 1988). Scholars such as Parker and Pollock (2013:24) warn of the pitfalls of a 'liberal optimism' in the academic analyses of art, suggesting that such a narrow

approach can only offer a corrective recovery of women artists to leave the structures of art history unexplored.

In the Nigerian context, art historian Itohan Osayimwese (2019:77) hypothesises that 'one of the reasons academic art history has failed to identify "great" Nigerian women artists is because we have been looking for the wrong thing in the wrong places'. She calls for a reemphasis on the work and agency of individual women artists by identifying the agency of specific women, highlighting the subversive power they actually exercised, and acknowledging the unremitting disruptive pressure that their agency has exerted upon culture (Osayimwese 2019:67). In her own research she employs the methods of feminist oral history to challenge the principle of objectivity promoted in positivist research and highlight the subjectivity and intersubjectivity of the researcher and subject. This, she argues, offers a 'basis for a potential paradigm shift in art history that enables us to finally see [African] women artists' (ibid). My research methodology is influenced by Osayimwese, as I have chosen to focus upon oral narratives and first-hand interviews with women working on the art scene. Recording their experiences illuminates the structural interventions which women have made on the contemporary African art scene as curators and arts administrators in the latter half of the twentieth century. Exposing the structural representations of art and art history will, to some extent, allow us to attribute 'greatness' (as Nochlin understands it) to female artists from Nigeria,

Historically, studies in African art were considered fields related to anthropology and were disregarded within the field of art history (Simbao 2020). The discipline of anthropology, having been founded in the late nineteenth century, was rooted in a period of scientific knowledge construction which created dominant paradigms linked to early European imperial expansion. At the turn of the twentieth century, in Europe,

looted or stolen art objects from Africa were offered as material evidence of 'premodern' societies. Anthropology was shaped by, and shaped, the imperial imagination. This imperial imagination obscured the realities of African societies, in which wooden craftsmanship and other forms of artistic creation were continually evolving aesthetically. Distorted representations of Africa are linked to the complex history of how Europeans have not only conceptualised and represented Africa/Africans but also how they have treated African objects and people (See Comaroff and Comaroff 1997, 2003, 2012 and Mudimbe 1988). The reason to mention these broader processes in history are because they have historically structured African realities and the study of Africa. Scholarly emphasis on the canon of African art, well into the 1980s, was spurred by a salvage anthropology mentality to safeguard the remnant of the authentic art forms and practices that had yet to succumb to 'marauding modernisation' (Siegenthaler *et al.* 2018:243). African art was seen as subordinate to the Western model and became feminised: 'widely seen to stand in relationship to Western art as woman to man' (Blier 1993:149).

As the intricacies of creative practice were obscured and mistranslated through the lens of anthropology, it was difficult to account for the nuanced historical narratives of African women who made art (Makhubu 2020). Women's creativity could not be imagined through an anthropological model which ordered the world in a male idiom. The systemic distortion of the role of African women in creative production is partly a result of these biases inherited from social anthropology, as well as a sexist flattening of complex social realities and artistic histories (Nzegwu 2000). The marginalisation of women within Western hierarchies of art placed African women artists in a relegated position within a 'metonymic chain of otherness' (Nfah-Abbenyi 2005:272). Reilly (2018) describes this as the 'double colonisation' of African women — who are

rendered unseen by an art system steeped in bias which privileges male creativity *and* by the forces of empire. The taxonomical gulf between Western art and African art played a major role in the 'othering' of the continent, which postcolonial scholars have critiqued as the West's obsession with difference (Bakare-Yusuf 2008; Mbembe 2001). It is difficult to locate women in this complex web of 'othering', when art history is layered over with gender ideologies and the input of African women to creativity is obscured by translations of art through the biases of anthropology.

Writing on African art production has been profoundly affected by the complex realities of the post-colonial world. Fabian's (1983) concept of the 'ethnographic present' has been widely adopted by scholars of African art, both art historians and anthropologists (see Kasfir 1992; Sanjek 1991) to expose the myth of 'the other' which denies the same modernity for all contemporary people. Analytical work by Geertz (1990) and Clifford (1986/1988) on cultural determination and representation of other people and cultures has been relevant to both art historians of Africa and anthropologists. This emerging discourse has created space for the interventions of scholars and artists who are women, formerly colonised 'others' and members of minority groups in Western Nations (Phillips 1995). New art history and postmodern anthropology have been strongly influenced informed by these reflective and historicist approaches to representation. They address the ways in which older discourses of art and artefact inscribe colonial and sexist systems of power relations.

Although women have been obscured in Western art historical writing, there is a long and complex history of gendered spaces and gendered roles in African art production, for example ceramicist Ladi Kwali (1925-1984) came from Northern Nigeria where pottery was an indigenous occupation among women (see chapter two). Scholars such as Ruth Phillips (1995) have carried out critically important work on

African women's art productions (see for example, 'Representing Woman Sande Masquerades of the Mende of Sierra Leone'), yet recent interventions in the art historical literature of Nigeria make only passing mention of women artists. For example, *Ben Enwonwu: The Making of an African Modernist* (Ogbechie 2008) evaluates a male, Nigerian artist operating on a transnational stage. Okeke-Agulu's (2015) *Postcolonial Modernism: Art and Decolonization in Twentieth-century Nigeria* positions the Zaria Art Society artists (who he presents as all male, this is disputed in chapter two) centre stage within a globalising postcolonial discourse. These works reflect the fact that academics have, thus far, been mostly concerned with reinstating male artists as active agents in the history of Nigerian modernity. A criticism of these texts comes from Lenssen (2018:56) who notes that artists appear in these narratives 'as primarily singular figures, with no families and hardly any affective bonds'. Their stories play out firmly in the mode of 'allegorical exegesis' that Geeta Kapur (2000) has identified as a requirement of the Third World artist, wherein the tasks of subjectivity otherwise left unresolved are bridged by establishing equivalences between nationhood, modernity, and self.

As my chapters unfold, it becomes clear that female Nigerian art producers substantially raise the quality of knowledge creation and improve the way art is received, framed, and understood. Literature on art world production — about the curators, the gallery owners, the art fair directors— is sparse (see Thornton 2012; Bydler 2004) and almost non-existent in relation to African women. But it is such women who are taking the initiative to produce artistic knowledge and publish texts about women artists. Major contributions to the field, and to knowledge production from the continent, have been made by Bisi Silva, who wrote for international publications such as *Art Monthly*, *Untitled*, *Third Text*, *M Metropolis*, *Agufon*, and for

Nigerian newspapers such as *This Day*. Serving on the editorial board of international feminist art journal *n.paradoxa*, Silva guest edited the Africa and African diaspora issue (2013) and her major contributions include a monograph of J.D. 'Okhai Ojeikere (2014) and 'Àsìkò: On the Future of Artistic and Curatorial Pedagogies in Africa' (2017) (see chapters four and five). Long overdue scholarship on women artists has begun to emerge: *Engaging Bata Mi A Dun Koko Ka: A Biography of Nike* (Adeleke 2020), or *Ndidi Dike: Discomfort Zones* (2022) by iwalewabooks. That this work offers the first-ever art monograph on a female Nigerian professional artist living in Lagos is indicative of the gaps in art historiography.

Contemporary Nigerian art producers challenge historical frameworks, to debunk the idea of 'greatness' as code for a subjective Western, male-identified position which has long benefited from the constructs of modernism and masculinity. For many of my respondents, a crucial part of rejecting these frameworks involved rejecting a narrative of women as ineffectual player, paralysed within and by an abstract system of social relationships and representational constructs under monolithic patriarchal control. Contemporary art producers often embrace the idea of difference, critiquing the idea of difference as something which can empower rather than constrict. This has been reflected in new ways of thinking about art from Africa, marked by events such as *Africa Remix: The contemporary art of a continent* (2004-2007). The exhibition was described as 'a declaration of cosmopolitanism' and the 'twentyfirst century-ness' [sic] of contemporary African arts' (Colard 2020) (see appendix for a timeline of contemporary African art). Following Colard, I suggest that the complexities of Nigeria's pre- and post-colonial histories, multiple modernisms, and contemporary art production (shaped by women such as Ekong or Peterside) resonate with Appiah's (1997,2006) formulation of cosmopolitanism. The lens of

cosmopolitanism is useful in understanding the agency of women across Nigerian art scenes based on the local and global networks of communication, connection, exchange, and circulation which come to light in this research. A cosmopolitan framework makes sense of the ways in which contemporary artists and art producers pick up on themes of difference, but also of commonality.

Cosmopolitan art networks

Respondents such as Director of Retro Gallery in Abuja, Dolly Kola-Bagolun, tell me that they challenge the centring of Western and androcentric thinking, theorists, and methodologies, preferring to assess movements from their locations, histories, and present conditions rather than in relation to the Western art canon (chapter four, figure 4.7).⁶ What Kola-Bagolun suggests is that art spaces in Nigeria are better considered against the backdrop of the postcolonial, to claim the agency of Nigerian women in generating new forms of artistic practice and presentation attuned to their social realities. Cosmopolitanism, as a frame of reference, has the capacity to join multiple contexts of action and understand the formation of common horizons. Rather than categories such as North/South, local/global or man/woman being set as oppositional and incommensurate, a cosmopolitan framework offers a way to understand the agency of women along points of connection or distance, among and between, artistic communities. This avoids formulating agency in terms of discrete and disconnected social groups and nations, instead allowing us to frame agency *across* the borders of nation (Mohanty 2003).

Across Nigeria artists and curators throughout the last century have developed creative institutions in their locality whilst connecting with, drawing from, and

⁶ Interview between Stacey Kennedy and Dolly Kola-Bagolun, Marrakech, 25th February 2019. Note that all interviews referred to throughout the thesis are referenced and listed in the appendix.

contributing to international art networks. There is a history of cosmopolitanism which characterises art spaces across Nigeria, and although the research focuses on Lagos and Abuja, this is not to suggest that these are the only metropolises which possess important histories of modern or postmodern art production. At Nsukka, The Department of Fine and Applied Arts at the University of Nigeria has become renowned for exploration and experiment around the implementation of cultural memory and aesthetics through which to confront existential social issues. Founded in 1961 by European and American expatriates who created a short-lived program based on naturalism, until the Nigerian Civil War (1967–70) drove them away, the department regained momentum in the early 1970s. The University turned to indigenous professionals to run its art programme, led by the artist Uche Okeke. Okeke appropriated *uli*, a traditional style of design used in body- and wall-painting by the Igbo women of Southeastern Nigeria, as part of its contemporary art lexicon. Having been part of the arts movement at the Nigerian College of Arts Science and Technology around the time of Nigerian independence, Okeke was an activist who continued to evolve his philosophy of ‘natural synthesis’ to coalesce local ideas with elements of Western art (see chapter two).

Building on these rich Nigerian art histories, Women-run institutions such as Retro Gallery, CCA Lagos, or *Female Artists Association of Nigeria* (FEAAN, chapter three) exercise strategic agency by adopting the globalising neoliberal logic which foregrounds the emergence of new art nodes, to build these spaces as platforms where this logic can be contested and critiqued. Kola-Bagolun is committed to Abuja as the base for Retro Gallery but undertakes a relentless schedule of travel across Europe and America to promote her artists at all the major contemporary art fairs (chapter four). Silva insisted on the independence of CCA and prioritised creating

impact in local contexts, whilst leveraging funding and support from the international art system and sending her mentees 'out into the world' (chapter five).⁷ Akande promotes the woman artist through art shows in Abuja, but garners funding from international development agencies to send artists to China for cultural collaborations (chapter three). Interviews with young women in Lagos confirmed the central importance of access to local art institutions and gatekeepers, through which they would attempt to penetrate contemporary art networks of patronage (chapter four). It emerges that women like Kola-Bagolun, Silva and Akande have built their success through forging strong networks which connect international art networks from a resolutely African base and are distinctly cosmopolitan in character.

Women working on the art scene, past and present, are invested in presenting Nigeria as worldly, urbane, and internationally oriented in ways that are not equated with the West. Kola-Bagolun and Peterside are characteristic of my interlocutors when they talk passionately about their commitment to a pan-African agenda, and their determination to create a fair and equitable community for all people. This echoes Appiah (2004,1997), who suggests that through dialogue with others we define ourselves, by contrast with them, but also through shared projects and understandings. Here Appiah acknowledges what difference and connectivity can do for those in a related network. This explains how the cosmopolitanism voiced by Kola-Bagolun or Peterside, through which they situate themselves as a 'citizen of the world', can be combined with a national and pan-African identity.

A 'rooted cosmopolitan' outlook (Ackerman 1994; Beck 2003) makes sense of partial inclusion across numerous art worlds by claiming national membership but not being bound to this. Peterside and her colleagues are firmly connected to their local

⁷ This tension was the basis of a discussion with the theme *Where is there? On the Global and the Local* organised by CCA in 2011.

art scenes, to rebuff the idea that post-colonial elites are rootless (Werbner 2006). This was expressed in a talk at ART X Lagos 2019 about the advancing Nigerian art ecosystem, where cultural producers asserted: 'We are our own Sun'.⁸ The rooted cosmopolitanism expressed by artists and curators in Nigeria brings to light a framework of strategic agency which centres them as actors and does not depend on outside validation, thus moving away from the more troubling frameworks of anthropology and art history.

As simultaneously rooted and transnational agents, Nigerian art world women fashion themselves as subject within a cosmopolitan frame of reference. Certain participants point to cosmopolitanism as an orientation, even a performance, as they describe exercising strategic agency to frame themselves as Nigerian cosmopolitan subjects to appeal to global art world funding opportunities or garner support through NGO or international development agencies. This demonstrates that there is not one way to be a cosmopolitan: as Abu-Lughod (1997:132) suggests, 'plural cosmopolitanisms' are embedded in 'particular configurations of power education and wealth in particular places'.

The force of Nigerian female art administrators should not be underestimated. Peterside's political leverage was demonstrated when she hosted the Vice President's visit to ART X in 2019 (opening vignette) or President Emmanuel Macron's visit to Lagos in 2018 (chapter six). Peterside draws power from the cosmopolitan art networks through which she operates. As artists, curators and art administrators repeatedly told me, art networks are strong because they do not exist in isolation but are embedded within, and connected to, other structures and 'ways of doing things' in

⁸ ART X Talks: We Are Our Own Sun, Cultivating An Art Ecosystem. The line references a quote by Ousmane Sembene: 'We are not alone in the world, but we are our own sun. I do not define myself relative to Europe. In the darkest of darkness, if the other does not see me, I do see myself. And surely do I shine!' (Sembene, Cannes, 2006).

Nigerian society. Women-led art networks emulate a model of patronage outlined by Joseph (1987) which typifies the activity of men in Nigerian business, political and social systems — but in this instance women are the patrons (or perhaps the matrons).

Women are rarely referred to in the analysis of client systems and are virtually excluded from commentary on networks (see chapter four). Studying the contemporary art world injects texture and nuance into contemporary network approaches which have the tendency to gloss over the enormous diversity, complexity, and fluidity of institutions. Meagher (2010) suggests network theory should consider institutional content and the history of specific networks, and I therefore trace the development of specific networks in the chapters of this study. Network optimists represent social networks as embedded solutions to Africa's otherwise intractable problems of state and market failure, drawing on Scott's (1985) 'weapons of the weak' to emphasise the triumph of local organisational solutions and agency (Hansen and Vaa 2004; Tripp 2000). My data appears in line with an optimistic outlook, emphasising the role of trust, solidarity, common values, shared ideas, and embedded local institutions. Female run art networks show that Nigerian social networks are not always plagued by logics of parochialism and predation as network pessimists would suggest (Sverrisson 1997; Schmitz and Nadvi 1999).

Peterside is a high-profile example of a woman creating and navigating successful systems of access to political powerholders. Working through patron-client systems and networks offers a mode of effective and collective organisation, where agency can be exercised through connection with existing power holders to achieve one's goals. Organisations which lift and promote women's art activity such as FEAN (chapter three), or *Àsikò Art School* (chapter five) demonstrate how experienced women intentionally insert young or early career artists into their networks and thereby

connect them to potential opportunities. There is benefit for the patron in these relations, which can further their status, reputation, and connections to powerholders across the interconnected networks of life in Nigeria. The reciprocal nature of these relations is addressed in chapter five.

Nigerian women such as Ekong, Peterside, Òkúndáyé or Kola-Bagolun are therefore in influential positions to wield transformative social and political power which can create new standards for women's rights. Across the contemporary art world, artists, curators and art administrators make efforts to resist patriarchal cultural hegemony. They demonstrate a mutual respect for the histories and practices of others: a dimension of cosmopolitanism which takes an allegiance 'to the moral community made up by the humanity of all human beings' (Nussbaum 1996:7). Adopting a commitment to treating all human beings the same within a global frame — whilst working to resist the hegemonic Western art world which has attempted to silence non-Western art production — Nigerian art world women promote ideas of equality. Here cosmopolitanism helps to explain how the multiple local and global dimensions around the idea of 'women's empowerment' or 'women's rights' play out across the nodes and networks of contemporary art.

The complexities of 'feminism'

The discourse which circulates across art nodes and networks is based upon ethical, collaborative, and transformative creative activity (chapter six). A cosmopolitan tolerance, and even celebration, of equality allows anyone working on the art scene, whatever their gender identity, to lean into what could be described as 'feminist' positions whilst maintaining a reflexive distance as they see fit. Certainly, the artwork which circulates across contemporary African art spaces frequently deals in narratives about women's lives or women's empowerment (figures 1.2, 1.3 and 1.4). This reflects

a comment by Nigerian artist Peju Alatise, who states: 'The kind of society I live in, it would be difficult for any woman not to be a feminist' (Garber 2017:76). Organisations which promote the rights of women declare themselves to be feminist, for example, the 'African Feminist Charter' (2006) states: 'By naming ourselves as feminists we politicize the struggle for women's rights [...] We are feminists. Full stop'.

However, 'feminism' is a concept which must be used cautiously due to its problematic Western bias and repeated exclusion, misrepresentation or ignorance of the specific issues faced by women of colour (Carby 2009). Intersectional feminist theory has brought about a radical shift in understanding the relationship between systems of privilege and oppression, including sexism, racism, classism, homophobia, and ableism, as feminists worldwide drew attention to different forms of oppression outside of a white, heterosexual middle-class experience (see Crenshaw 1989). Feminist scholars have criticised the colonial lens through which women's issues have been theorised in Western scholarship and point out that not all women share the same histories. Lazreg (2005) points out the double standards by which American feminists view their own culture compared to others, arguing that an objectification of 'the other' reinscribes the privileges of dominant groups and leads to multiple forms of silencing women.

Scholars, including African anthropologists and historians, add to these debates, showing that women on the continent mobilised against oppressive forces long before 'modern feminism', as defined and imagined by the West, came into being (Mama 2005). They contribute to debates around the ideology of biological determinism, for example Oyěwùmí (1997,2005) argues that the narrative of gendered corporeality dominating Western interpretations of the social world is a cultural discourse which cannot be assumed uncritically for other cultures and is certainly not

universal. Amadiume (1987,2005) is critical of classical anthropology, drawing attention to the pitfalls of imposing Eurocentric paradigms which struggle to theorise patriarchy as the form taken by precolonial African structures. Nzegwu (2012) questions how feminist perspectives can assist in understanding family relations in Africa and traces the problem of understanding gender in an African context to European colonial policies which have led to a patriarchal consciousness in which the subordination of women is taken for granted and assumed to be culturally rooted. This lends support to the characterisation of African societies as historically oppressive to women, a claim rejected by African feminist academics (Amadiume 2005; Oyěwùmí 2005). Since Ortner (1972) wrote 'Is Female to Male as Nature Is to Culture?', the idea that women's subordination is universal, or looks the same across different cultures, has been rebuffed (MacCormack 1980). Scholars offer crucial theoretical tools to challenge the narrow frameworks that have constrained and dominated much research on African women, pointing to dimensions of women's subjectivity that are obscured in mainstream Western academia. African feminist thinkers identify patriarchal bias in the construction of knowledge, whilst being mindful of the connections between Eurocentric bias and patriarchal bias.

Whilst my research points to what could be described as a 'feminist' rhetoric echoing across the networks of a contemporary African art scene with women at the helm, any simple reading which adopts a Western liberal model of 'feminism' as a significant ideology structuring gender discourse should be avoided. Feminist scholarship and theory may have the effect of reifying existing power structures, often producing an elaborate justification of the status quo (Broude and Garrard 2005). It is possible to understand the agency of women in contemporary art worlds and critique

gendered power relations in Nigeria without leaning heavily on the lens of feminism as a theoretical framework (see methodology).

Contemplating art nodes, networks, and individuals as cosmopolitan highlights the connections, communications and exchanges from multiple sources, directions, and routes, (including local ones) which emerge from this research. I draw on the concept of agency to pay attention to the work of women and engage with the idea of a feminist expression grounded in women's real-life experiences.

Africa, agency and women

Agency is an individual's 'ability to "cause events to happen" in their vicinity' (Gell 1998:16). Ahearn (2001:112) suggests agency to be the capacity for effective social action that has the transformative capacity to make a difference and is therefore powerful: 'agency refers to the sociocultural mediated capacity to act'. This indicates the importance of socially significant action to transform a structure, change a situation, or influence an outcome. Ahearn (2001:113-17) warns against monolithic notions of agency as resistance, manifest in struggles against colonial or patriarchal domination, because 'oppositional agency' is only one form among many. This invokes Ortnner (2001:79), who addresses the oppositional agency of power within the more quotidian 'agency of intentions - of projects, purposes, desires'; or MacLeod (1992:534) whose idea of 'complex and ambiguous agency' confounds stark oppositions between collaboration and resistance. Ethnographies which nuance the concept of agency in African contexts include: Comaroff and Comaroff's (1997) study of colonisation in nineteenth century Bechuanaland, which uncovers an intricate mix of visible and invisible agency situated in public contexts; Kratz's (2019) writing about the complex agency of multiple actors in Okiek marriages in Kenya; and Shaw's (2000)

study which draws attention to the secret agency of hidden and indirect action in the Temni arts of sorcery and divination.

Duranti (2004:453) understands agency as ‘the property of those entities [...] that have some degree of control over their own behaviour, [...] whose actions in the world affect other entities [...and] whose actions are the object of evaluation’. The suggestion that ‘entities’ can be individual or collective; persons or institutions is important to my own understanding of agency in the setting of the contemporary art world, as it emerges that women exercise agency in simple ways independently, or in more complex forms through networks, patronage, and institution building. What is key is that agents — whether individual, institution or art object — are autonomous and become implicated in webs of sociality because their actions are evaluated by others implying forms of recognition and reflexivity (Apter 2007). Throughout the thesis it becomes clear that agency can be generative and does not necessarily always resist structural power.

Women’s agency in Africa is often identified in agricultural settings, for example Bogos women farmers (Banoum 2005), or in conflict situations which valorise strategising in challenging circumstances (Chuku and Aham-Okoro 2020; Jacobson 2006). Scholars have highlighted the agency of individual Nigerian women such as ‘Baba of Karo’, (whose oral testimony forms a written ethnographic source on the Hausa) (Smith 1981), or Ahebi Ugbabe, who rose from sex worker to village head in the nineteenth century (Achebe 2011). When female livelihoods in the city are addressed, African women are frequently framed as situated players working in the informal or low paying service sector and battling the ‘double burden’ of productive and reproductive labour (Zezeza 2005). My research contributes to scholarship around the experiences of middle- or upper-class urban African women, where academics

such as Kristin Mann (1985) have written about marriage, status and social change among the educated elite in colonial Lagos. This has been followed by recent scholarship on the agency of urban women, such as Dosekun (2020) who investigates the agency of wealthy and empowered Lagosian women as global consumers who fashion subjectivities to create, what she argues, to be a postfeminist display of power. Gilbert's (2015) study of Nigerian beauty queens argues that young women consider winning a crown as being given a voice, despite not being respected as equals by men, to complicate any simple view of women's empowerment through gender equality.

Ethnographies of women's experiences in religious settings further complicate understandings of how agency and empowerment operate in women's lives. They show that acting in ways that accord with religious principles may render women subordinate to men but offer the means to navigate the complex lived experiences of patriarchy (Soothill 2007). Mahmood (2005) illustrates the agency held by women in Cairo's Muslim piety groups and Abu-Lughod (1990,2015) highlights the multiple devices employed by Bedouin women to simultaneously subvert and comply with patriarchal power. While the lavish, monied, consumer driven contemporary art world is far from a religious setting, these scholars call attention to the ways in which women exercise agency by choosing to play certain roles in a variety of situations. Their focus on how new subjectivities form through action illuminates important themes in this research regarding agency, resistance, and notions of the self.

My interviews suggest that women artists, curators and art administrators feel empowered even when they remain bound by patriarchal systems that disadvantage them, and that they exercise agency by using strategies of resistance *and* compliance with structural power. Apter (2007) demonstrates that not all forms of agency result in

opposition — such as revolution — but all forms of agency, however seemingly complicit or ambiguous, work against the social and political grain to some degree. From Ekong and Ugbodaga-Ngu in the 1950s, to contemporary women such as Peterside or Òkúndáyé, forms of agency are displayed which operate through renegotiating their relative proportion and maximising agentive power within the cloak of legitimate authority to make their desired difference. Ekong exercised agency within the colonial art system, working through its structures to affect change; Peterside works within the international or global art world order, but challenges its hegemonies and hierarchies. Women exercise agency by choosing to play certain roles in a variety of situations. It is the point at which women ‘violate the rules of the game’ — challenge the structure of patriarchy or the accepted order of the contemporary art scene for example — which represent the limits of their power to ‘rewrite the rules’ (Apter 2007:6).

The agency exercised by women on the art scene sits within a neglected trajectory of African women’s contributions to ‘rewriting the rules’. Across Africa, women have affected change through political action, collective resistance, and contributions to nation building (see Awe 1991; Kolawole 2002; Mba 1982). Scholars argue that women were not passive observers in precolonial Nigeria (Amadiume 1987; Oyěwùmí 1997). Amadiume (1987) describes how women in pre-colonial Igboland drew power from male-female relationships and a flexible approach to gender hierarchy to achieve positions of wealth and authority. She introduces the idea that gender roles were not as rigidly defined in eastern Nigeria as they were in British society, and that Nnobi women exercised a high degree of agency, able to take on the same responsibilities, rights, and privileges as men. Oyěwùmí (1997:165) argues that Yorùbá women did not experience social divisions along gendered lines and that

'anatomical distinctions in Yorùbá society [were] incidental and [did] not define social hierarchy, occupations, or functions'. She contends that 'social relations derive[d] their legitimacy from social fact, not from biology', because social organisation was based on seniority and chronological age (2005:13). Lindsay (2007) paints a picture of women's autonomy in precolonial Nigeria, calling attention to the long history of Yorùbá women's economic agency based on their careers in market trading. These scholars point to women's status being undermined by the advance of hypermasculine colonial politics and neo-colonial structuring which placed males at the top of the social sphere.

Disruptive as the colonial imposition was, it did not always preclude the agency of women (Leacock and Etienne 1980). As Apter (2007) suggests, when power comes from 'below' it can be exercised 'from above' when it transforms authority by revising its strictures and changing procedural rules. Nigerian women were active in challenging colonial power through networks of dissent, for example, the 1914 Ogidi palaver saw women voice dissonance against British and Nigerian men for not including them in decision making; in 1929 Igbo market women protested British taxation in what became known as the Aba 'women's war'; and from the 1920s women formed an effective lobbying group known as the *Lagos Market Women Association* (LMWA) (Matera *et al.* 2011). In each of these instances, women leveraged their associational networks and channels of communication to assert their rights and resist the imposition of colonial and patriarchal power on their lives.

However, not all forms of agency result in opposition. There were groups of women who maintained or improved their own status by engaging with the frameworks of colonial or neo-colonial regimes, especially as members of the newly created elite. A generative concept of agency shows how actions are initiated by subjects as they

make meaning, which then deliver structures that become the conditions of action while also being its product. In Togo, women textile traders known as the 'Nana Benz' businesswomen came to reflect economic agency within the setting of the colonial and post-colonial economy. Nana is a hypocoristic of *na* (or *ena*) to mean 'mother' or 'grandmother' in Mina and 'Benz' stands for the Mercedes Benz cars they drove. These powerful fabric-traders were self-made women who positioned Lomé as a regional centre of textile distribution to dominate the trade in wax print (Toulabor 2012).

In a post-colonial Nigerian context, Mama (1995) outlines the 'first lady phenomenon' whereby wives of politicians gain strategic agency through connections leveraged from their husband's position. She argues that 'femocracy' claims to exist for the advancement of ordinary women but is a thoroughly patriarchal structure with women at the helm, reliant on the maintenance of existing systems of power. The 'femocrats' draw on existing social relations to support forms of patron-client relations which assist them in achieving their personal goals. They exploit a structure which attempts to disadvantage them by navigating and manipulating systems of constraint. This brings relative short-term advantages for a minority but builds no long-term status for women as a group. Both the 'Nana Benz' and the 'femocrat' are examples of women acting to affect change and their actions show that agency is complex and multifaceted.

What women in pre-colonial times, or women defying the colonial imposition, have in common with the 'Nana Benz' or the 'femocrat' is an ability to exercise agency across existing power structures through building networks and systems of support. This is mirrored on the art scene, where contemporary women describe forming professional and informal connections to drive the creation and maintenance of productive artistic relations. In her discussion of gender and feminist theory in post-

colonial writing, Nfah-Abbenyi (2005:272) observes that: 'women-to-women bonding, and networking has been specific to African women's existence and agency for millennia'.

Chapter three offers a case study of FEAAN, an association formed by women to professionalise their art practice, provide important forms of patronage, and provide leadership for the art community (see Visoná 2021 on women-led associations in Africa). This fits into a broader pattern in Nigeria, where numerous associations cover a wide spectrum of affairs, to offer support, enterprise, education, apprenticeship, protection, and membership. Women adopt these models to their advantage as vehicles to assert their agency in Nigerian society. The lived experiences of interviewees highlight the value of FEAAN as an association which is important for identity making and forming gender ties. The members of FEAAN regularly engage with development agencies and employ a persona of 'African woman' to secure funding and visibility, utilising a form of strategic agency to fulfil their artistic goals. Here the art world becomes a site of global self-making, at once a language and a set of conditions through which to articulate globally recognisable forms of agency and subjectivity within transnational relations of power. The members of FEAAN, the 'Nana Benz' and the 'femocrat' are both actors and acted upon.

Contemporary female artists, curators and art administrators in Nigeria navigate structural constraints to create productive ties and link members nationally, regionally, and continentally (chapters five and six). It cannot be contested that patriarchal attitudes dominate in Nigeria (see Nwaolikpe 2021). The legacy of the previously militarised Nigerian State was to view women's exclusion as the norm (Johnson-Odim and Mba 1997; Chazan 1989). Although the country now experiences its longest phase of uninterrupted civilian rule, political instability and police brutality

continues to haunt the civic space which has been ‘rigged against reason and rhythm from its very conception’ (Adebanwi and Obadare 2010:379). Art entrepreneurs such as Obiago, Kola-Bagolun or Peterside work within a context of disorder and patriarchy to forge art networks and build institutions which stand for accountability in the context of the Nigerian State. Their businesses’ —SMO Contemporary Art Gallery, Retro Gallery and ART X Lagos — are indicative of their influence, reputation, and access to formal power constellations and decision makers. In short, these institutions are a measure of their agency. Their capacity to create art institutions is partly due to their ability to engage with and work through the structures which exist in Lagos or Abuja, for example using members of the local business community to leverage support and visibility (chapter six). These women demonstrate that structures can be at once constraining *and* enabling, not dichotomous variables but interrelated and often productive phenomena. While Nigerian women tend to be represented as overburdened by structural constraint and operating without agency, Obiago, Kola-Bagolun and Peterside are powerful artistic, economic and political agents at the helm of an international art scene who work effectively with the resources available to them.

The agency of art

The cosmopolitan art networks of the contemporary African art scene are characterised by a celebratory aesthetic around women. The idea of ‘women’s empowerment’ is *created* by the social relations and agency of players such as artist and art administrator and *performed* at variously located art spaces and through artwork. The agency of people and art object are entangled. Scholars outline how objects are embedded in a social world and possess agency (Harvey 2017), to describe the mutual relations between people and object — in this instance art administrator/artist and artwork. For example, when women artists work with FEAAN

they foster new alliances and modes of patronage which alter the frameworks of their social art world relations. They receive support from development agencies who encourage artists to take 'women's empowerment' as a theme for their artwork, by funding images that transmit a message which aligns with their campaigning, for example so-called 'women's issues' of breastfeeding or child marriage (chapter three). Centring a woman focused narrative which highlights subjugation or emancipation in their artwork can influence the way women know themselves and others, shaping their identity and ability to participate in frameworks around human or women's rights (Okin 2000; Jaggar 2000). Figure 1.4 is an example of an artwork which offers an overt message relating to women's rights, calling for consideration of women's importance and value. This transmits a specific meaning, which affects how the viewer of the artwork sees themselves and others. In this way the art object is active and not simply reflective.



Figure 1.4 Clara Aden (2016) *Vote for Women* Image courtesy of FEAAN

The art object is therefore a potentially active agent in social life, past, present, and future and the artist and curator are implicated in the construction of ways of thinking, understandings of identity, and forms of representation (chapters three, four and six). As artworks travel and are viewed in different locations, the notion of women's empowerment is advanced by the social relations and agency of artist *and* artwork.

Gell (1998) offers a framework to theorise the agency of humans played out through networks of social relationships in the vicinity of art objects. His thinking helps to understand the visible manifestations of the contemporary African art scene — such as the FEAAN exhibition at which Aden's (2016) *Vote for Women* (figure 1.4) was shown in Abuja, Silva's *Like a Virgin* exhibition at CCA Lagos, Odutola's *A Countervailing Theory* at the Barbican in London or the events at Kola-Bagolun's Retro Gallery in Abuja — as a set of relationships linking people, objects, and institutions which spread out in networks across the world.

In this formulation, relationships between people and objects create agency, and meaning comes from the specific ways in which objects are created, explained, and understood. ART X Lagos or 1-54 art fair (chapter six) for example, form material and social assemblages (see Ong and Collier 2008) where complex networks of people act to create and classify the art object as worthy of inclusion and exhibition. Whilst art fair directors Tokini Peterside and Touria El Glaoui (see chapter six) are important actors in creating these assemblages, equally they, their colleagues, and the art public would have no meaning without the agency of the object. As the chapters unfold, the art object as an index of social agency through which ideas (in this study ideas of gender and women's empowerment specifically) are enacted and understood will emerge more fully.

Methodology

My research is interdisciplinary and multi-stranded, so much of the literature which bolsters my enquiry has been highlighted in the previous discussion and will be referenced in this section. The project offers a productive exchange between anthropology and art history, to move away from the idea of a singular community located in a bounded space for a particular time. Instead, I conduct an empirical exploration of art worlds which connect people, places, objects, concepts, and agencies. The contemporary Nigerian art scene is a rich site for such empirical research as it mediates lived experiences, in contrast with art historical and anthropological approaches of the past which were prone to containing and contextualising.

Although a growing number of anthropologists have written about contemporary art, a purely aesthetic approach to understanding art objects (see Price 1989; Coote and Shelton 1992; Morphy 1991) is described by Gell (1998:5) as an 'anthropological dead end' due to its overt focus on form. Conversely, scholars who have taken a more anthropological focus on the circulation, reception and understanding of non-Western art in the West (see Thomas 1999; Steiner 1994) engage less closely with the applied aesthetics of the object and do not address contemporary artworks. This thesis therefore finds a gap between anthropological understandings of how material culture expresses and mediates human and social relationships, and art history's close attention to the art itself and its historical context.

As the research prioritises the social relations of artistic production, it is not wholly dependent on understanding the visual language of art. The project owes an interpretative debt to Barber (1987,2018), who states that whether the researcher's aim is to approach social reality through the arts, or to approach the arts through their

social context, in either case the arts cannot be 'read' without both comprehending their nature as aesthetic constructs with their own principles and conventions and locating them in the specific social universe which is the grounds of their existence. Artistic production is embedded in art worlds shaped by complex sets of social relationships and an art anthropological approach helps make sense of this (see appendix).

My research plan comprised of three elements:

1. Attending relevant contemporary African art events (talks, art fairs, gallery visits and so on) across Europe and the US over the duration of my field work period (2018 until 2020)
2. Undertaking a work placement with ART X Lagos art fair in Nigeria (working for the organisation for four months and spending six weeks in Lagos, October-November 2019 to deliver the art fair)
3. A second field visit to Nigeria to build on my connections and carry out in depth interviewing.⁹

In each element my methods were ethnographic, primarily based on participant observation to allow connection with a wide range of people and art objects, undertake formal analysis of artworks in various art world settings, and gather valuable oral testimony from key artists, curators and arts administrators. Adopting the tools of ethnography offered a multi-perspective method, suitable to understanding the way art and people move through the world, form networks, collaborate, gather meaning and exercise agency.

⁹ This fieldwork was carried out pre COVID-19 lockdown in October 2019.

For the first tranche of the fieldwork (element one), I attended art fairs, biennials, workshops, gallery talks, shows, open studios and auctions — anywhere that contemporary African art worlds became manifest across Europe and the US. I travelled to New York and Marrakech to visit 1-54 art fair, and Venice for the Biennale. Testament to the mobile art worlds which unfold over subsequent chapters. Encountering the same group of art world players at each location and was able to sketch out the networks for exploration. A central part of my strategy lay in identifying key players, understanding how they are connected, and identifying potential respondents for interview. At each location I took notes and recorded observations, examined the artwork on display, collected information from catalogues and press releases, made contacts, and was often able to conduct structured and unstructured conversations and interviews.

The second element of fieldwork was my work placement with ART X Lagos art fair. I had contacted Director Tokini Peterside and agreed a volunteer role as a front of house assistant, but as the event drew nearer, was asked to take on a management role covering a maternity leave. The job involved overseeing the guest relations and customer facing aspects of the fair, a highly responsible position. I carried out planning and administration tasks for a month before flying to Nigeria, working for six weeks solidly in Lagos (which culminated in the delivery of the event) and connecting remotely on my return to the UK to wrap the fair up. This post enabled me to work alongside Nigerian artists, curators, and art administrators and to experience the art scene from within a Lagosian based arts organisation.

In my time with ART X I came to occupy a position as both an insider (part of the commercial art networks connecting Lagos to international contemporary art worlds), and outsider (to the local event infrastructure). This meant, for example, that

I knew the high-profile names from institutions such as The Tate and Bonhams, who arrived in Lagos from the UK to visit — but that finding a local company from whom to hire cocktail tables presented a challenge. I worked hard to deliver the mission of ART X, managing to carve out a small amount of free time to visit the Lagos Biennial and local art galleries, make studio visits and connect with the local art scene. From a methodological point of view, it was satisfying to bring my skills and labour to the exchange, where many gains in understanding can be made through collaboration (Barber 2012). My close engagement with the Lagosian art scene allowed me to respond to scholars who call for art historians to connect with ‘the decentred perspective of connected stories, [and] help to identify actors and circulations that the canon has so far masked’ (Marchant 2014). Strengthening my own connections and networks helped me to gather interviews, although forming personal relationships required continual scrutiny of my own partiality and objectivity (see appendix for participant information).

The third element of my field work was disrupted and made impossible by the arrival of COVID-19 in early 2020. Travel was out of the question and my return visit to Nigeria had to be cancelled. Alongside this, the physical manifestations of contemporary art ground to a halt across the world. Whilst the effects of the pandemic on academic research are now being investigated (Higgins *et al.* 2020) Nigerian ‘art worlds’ as research sites quickly gained momentum in the digital realm. Therefore, to keep to my research plan and move forward with my work I had to adapt to a changing world. My study had already shed light on technologically competent, youthful, and well-connected art worlds, which were frequently inhabited by individuals who were nimble and able to respond quickly to changing circumstances. Making adaptations to the new reality of a world with COVID-19, art fairs moved online, artists created work

responding to the pandemic, curators mobilised to collaborate and support one another, projects were conceived on social media and the connectedness of art worlds was exposed. Art networks were illuminated in the digital realm.¹⁰

Faced with this now uncertain timescale of any return to a functioning physical art world, my research had to be adapted to these changed circumstances. This involved continuing my line of enquiry and pursuing interviews by contacting artists, curators and arts administrators directly online. Artists and curators were frequently carrying out live chat sessions on Instagram, so I created a page dedicated to contemporary African art which allowed me to facilitate deeper engagements. I had to gather and rely more upon secondary material from published interviews and social media platforms, and on interpreting the available historical sources, (or conversely the lack of historical sources), to build up a picture of Nigerian women in art history. Working in the virtual realm presented a significant challenge to my ability to build relationships and trust with respondents, and as such I was unable to interview many of the key players who I had hoped to speak to.

As an ethnographic researcher I am aware that my own life experiences and personal characteristics shape the way I interact with the world and the way the world interacts with me. In the second part of my field research, in Lagos, I was made aware of my differences and my limitations as an outsider. As a middle-aged, non-African, British educated woman, in the context of the young, hip, Nigerian contemporary art scene in Lagos, I was a markedly different demographic to my respondents, even those with whom I shared an identity as a woman. Neither did I fit comfortably in the circles of the wealthy Nigerian elite, who navigate Lagos in their chauffer driven, air-

¹⁰ The COVID pandemic was a difficult and challenging period for many people across the world. I am very aware that many individuals struggled through the pandemic, in Nigeria and beyond. The success of contemporary artists who transitioned to online formats is not typical of the experience of all.

conditioned SUVs, while my minimal budget saw me arrive at high profile art events hot and bothered from long journeys navigating the congested roads on the back of a motorcycle taxi. At times throughout this project, I have felt uncomfortable engaging with the challenge of writing history within the very disciplinary conventions I question. Do I perpetuate colonial practices and discourses by bringing the frameworks of Western academia to investigate individuals who, although they have been generous with their time and consideration towards my research project, have not requested this intrusion or courted this kind of representation?

To reconcile these concerns, throughout my research women, as far as written conventions allow, speak for themselves. As such I have been led by the way my interviewees discussed their individual thoughts, feelings, and experiences, respected their various positions, and spent time reflecting with them on what concepts such as feminism *mean* to them, as well as what women's support may *do* for them. To ensure that the research contributes to the work of those I am researching, and as far as possible, to produce an account which responds to, and reflects, the views of those that it is written about. The voices centred are therefore the creatives I worked with, because my goal is to address their work, motivations, and intentions. Throughout this study I respect the wishes of my respondents to be named or to remain anonymous, using names when respondents were keen for me to do so, or a more general identifier if they were more reticent. When quoting my informant I do, however, always indicate where and when the data was gathered. An additional bibliography, which offers a complete listing of all my interviews, is found in the appendix.

I acknowledge that the category of 'woman' can stand for multiple identities across geographical regions and is culturally produced and specific (Kopytoff 1980). Marion Arnold (1996) argues that, in South Africa, the notion of a 'woman' artist is not

a semantically stable concept, but is highly variable according to race, class or ethnicity. I adopt Sara Ahmed's (2017:14) terminology to explain that this study is concerned with all those who 'travel under the sign "women"', to understand individuals experiencing life 'as a woman'. Demonstrating that gender category membership must be viewed in the context of structured relationships, I nevertheless argue that there is collective political agency in the dynamic and shifting category 'woman'.

Writing women's histories through the collection of oral narratives is an empirically and theoretically exciting act, with the potential to deconstruct mainstream historiography. I follow suggestions for alternative frameworks of understanding, such as Zeleza (2005:226) who writes about addressing gender biases in African historiography. He notes that critical frameworks have the potential to 'pivot the centre', (the 'centre' being the androcentric nature of how the past is evaluated and interpreted) and advises that oral history is one way to recover women's voices because it creates new material, validates experiences, enhances communication, discovers roots, and develops a previously denied sense of continuity (ibid:219).

Although it may be argued that a Nigerian scholar would be best placed to write about Nigerian women in the art world, the structural marginalisation of such voices continues to occur. My work attempts to illuminate this issue rather than perpetuate it. By joining art networks, offering my labour to the art fair as a volunteer, undertaking close engagement with those working on the art scene, and reflecting on my position as insider/outsider, I have been able to better understand the ambivalences, complexities, challenges, and opportunities of creating and selling contemporary African art in a globally connected world. This brings to the fore questions of my own agency as a woman 'making' the contemporary African art scene, addressed in the conclusion of the thesis.

Chapter outline

Chapter two commences with an historical purview of the Nigerian art scene. The discussion is built on three case studies of women artists dating from the 1940s who worked under the colonial system as teachers or arts administrators: Clara Etso Ugbodaga-Ngu (1921-1996), Afi Ekong (1930-2009) and Colette Omogbai (1942-). All were practicing artists as well as arts administrators. Ekong opened Nigeria's first contemporary art gallery, laying the foundations for Nigeria's contemporary art market (Okeke-Agulu 2015); Ugbodaga-Ngu was an educator of note, influencing the Zaria Art School during her time at Nigerian College of Arts, Science and Technology (NCAST); and Omogbai reworked disparate signs, forms, and themes to convey powerful messages through her art and essay writing. Historical narratives omit serious consideration of their activities, yet artworks by these three women persist even as they have been 'erased' in the written art history of Nigeria —their agency can be detected in the disturbances they left in the material world. This chapter sets the scene for the development of social spaces and social domains in which art circulates and locates artistic output by women both overcoming, and engaging with, the social, political, and historical contingencies of their lives. I conclude that the presence of women artists, curators and art administrators, and their ability to form productive and supportive art networks, is not a new phenomenon.

Chapter three introduces the Female Artists Association of Nigeria (FEAAN). Interviews with the founders and leaders of FEAAN, such as Ngozi Akande and Juliet Ezenwa, bring to light the pressures and constraints on women. These echoed those set out in chapter two. Respondents told me that women's roles as wives and mothers, combined with the demands of their multiple job roles, hinders their artistic practice. The support of FEAAN offers ways to navigate structural forces, which do not always

involve resisting them. The chapter focuses on the strategic agency exercised by women, which may involve forming relations with non-governmental organisations (NGOs) through which to garner funding and visibility. This encourages artists to pursue particular themes in their art, therefore imbuing the art object with an agency to transmit certain ideas to a wider audience, often around the themes of women's empowerment. I begin to interrogate how the agency of art world women becomes interwoven with the agency of art object. Linking back to Gell's (1998) theory makes sense of how the artwork produced both responds to and reinforces FEAAN's goals of centring women and here I explore whether women's empowerment is 'feminist'. The chapter concludes that women in the early 2000s responded to the structural forces which limited female artists, to create FEAAN as a national organisation whose success in supporting women lies in its organisational foundations built upon networking and patronage.

Assessing the cosmopolitan nature of networks in practice, chapter four begins with the pivotal moment at the turn of the new millennium, when Western art history — which previously had little interest in African art — moved towards a more 'global' purview. Silva and her collaborator N'Goné Fall maximised this new enthusiasm for the globalisation of contemporary art, to build art networks which developed the contemporary African art world from the continent. A detailed study of Silva describes her arrival in Nigeria with a dedication to gender equality and a commitment to new methodologies. Silva was committed to carrying out her work from a base in Lagos, from where she worked at the forefront of the intersection between new art history, feminism, and the discourse of multiculturalism. Connecting with the idea of rooted cosmopolitanism, I explore how Silva's outlook allied with Appiah's (2006) ethical and outward looking ways of viewing the world through two case studies: the institution

Silva founded, CCA, which has become a vital hub in contemporary art networks, and a critical overview of one of her curated shows *Like a Virgin* (2009). Building on this the chapter closes with a case study of artist Nengi Omuku, whose artistic practice illuminates these ideas of rooted cosmopolitanism. The chapter argues that Silva and Fall brought artists and artworks into a broader latitude of social relationships, which drew women into wider social fields of engagement. It concludes that rhizome like networks connect actors and institutions across the global reaches of the contemporary African art world.

Chapter five furthers the discussion of networks, to show in detail the central place which women have played in rhizomes of connection and spheres of influence, by returning to Fall and Silva's work as example of effective network construction and relationship building. The discussion develops the idea of patronage and mentorship of women, by women, through a case study of *Àsìkò*, the professional training and support programme which Silva founded and ran. Alongside Silva, the patronage of artist and businesswoman Nike Òkúndáyé is explored through the ideas of Appiah (2006), who proposes that a cosmopolitan identification enjoins the individual in morally and emotionally significant communities whilst espousing notions of tolerance and openness to the world. The chapter shows that the client (early career artist or curator for example) gains exposure, support and an introduction to local and global art networks and connection which can shape their career trajectory. In addition, the chapter sets out what the patron may gain from these relationships. It concludes that women-led art networks emulate a patron-client model of 'getting things done' in Nigeria. However, on the art scene, *women* are the patrons, in contrast with the typical masculine, 'big man'.

Chapter six shines a light on the professional women driving the contemporary African art scene through the delivery of two international art fairs. ART X Lagos and 1-54 art fair are institutions which serve as gatekeepers and tastemakers, influencing the direction of the contemporary African art scene. I interrogate the nature of the networks in which these art fairs are embedded, to demonstrate that they are characterised by 'emotive' or 'family like' connections which strengthen ties between participants. These values are part of a cosmopolitan outlook, for example, an egalitarian approach to LGBTQI+ rights plays out in a celebratory fashion within ART X. This is contrary to oppressive Nigerian state regulations on homosexuality and the patriarchal values which exist beyond the physical and ideological boundaries of art institutions. This chapter helps to locate the subjectivity, agency, and identity produced and reproduced by such 'performances' of art. It offers a case study of Tokini Peterside as an agent with the ability to 'speak to power' and interrogates how the agency of art world women becomes interwoven with the agency of art objects. It will argue that ART X creates networks which draw Western art world attention to the continent and forms a cosmopolitan contemporary art world node where Western liberal ideas of equality and fairness are performed.

Chapter seven draws the research to a close, to summarise the empirical, methodological, and theoretical contributions made by this research, discuss the implications of the project for anthropological and art history thinking, as well as how the work progresses the possibilities of art anthropology. This thesis concludes that art networks and the wider art infrastructure are cosmopolitan spaces and arenas in which women's agency is formulated, debated, contested, and exercised. It demonstrates the importance of Nigerian women in debates around contemporary art

from Africa and its shifting position internationally, particularly in the context of mobility, identity, belonging and opportunity in the art world and beyond.

Chapter two: The Female Modernists

Introduction

The obvious had been invisible all this time. I wanted to make the invisible visible, because it had always been here

Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o (Gibson 2022)

The quotation above by Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o refers to his ambition to explore the contributions to American modernity by indigenous writers. He suggests that creative production by African people has been marginalised by mainstream Western scholarship, thus rendering written and visual output by African people invisible (Mudimbe 1988). This chapter contributes to 'making the invisible visible' by discussing three female pioneers of the Nigerian modern art scene: Clara Etso Ugbodaga-Ngu, Constance Affiong (Afi) Ekong and Colette Omogbai. Firstly I focus on Ugbodaga-Ngu and Ekong, who were part of the colonial art establishment, then turn attention to Omogbai, whose story complicates the idea of 'erasure'.

As well as working as artists, all three women took on additional roles in administration, curation, and education, to shape the art scene in 1950s/1960s Nigeria, the period which art historian Okeke-Agulu (2015) calls postcolonial modernism. The legacy of Ugbodaga-Ngu, Ekong, and Omogbai persists within the Nigerian art community, as demonstrated by contemporary artist Ngozi Akande's pictorial tribute, *The Icons* (figure 3.0, chapter three). Yet, there is sparse information about womens' lives or works in the academic art historical literature. This is the paradox which began this research journey: if Ugbodaga-Ngu, Ekong, and Omogbai are celebrated and seen as being significant by those engaged in Nigeria's

contemporary art scene, why is their contribution obscured in the record? And where are all the other women like them in art history?

The fact that Western scholars are unaware of the work of these artists reflects what Reilly (2018) describes as the widespread historical discrimination against women and the persistent historical erasure of their artistic production. As Malz (2018:238) states, 'most works by female artists of Nigerian modernism are not presented in collections and have been almost completely edited out of art history'. The biographical information, social and historical contextual points made in this chapter are therefore drawn from the sparse sources which exist: unpublished conference proceedings, seminar papers, postgraduate theses, and conversations with other researchers and scholars. I build on these sources by offering detailed visual analysis of artwork and by drawing on my interviews with art workers in Nigeria.

Malz compares the ways in which Ugbodaga-Ngu's artistic accomplishments have been recorded to those of her male contemporaries, such as the artist Ben Enwonwu:

Both [Ugbodaga-Ngu and Enwonwu] studied in England, exhibited internationally, and developed an idiosyncratic artistic language pervaded not only by European art traditions but also by African motifs and forms [...] While Ben Enwonwu is recognized as a pioneer of Nigerian modernism [...] Clara Ugbodaga-Ngu is practically not acknowledged in art historiography and her works are not visible in collections (2018:239).

Enwonwu's contribution is amply documented in the literature. Frequently celebrated as the Nigerian 'master' of fine art, he has been the subject of an extensive and acclaimed monograph and his artworks are highly visible on the global art market. The chapter will argue that Ugbodaga-Ngu, Ekong and Omogbai played no less of a central

role as creators, and producers of African visual art, and that their work laid the foundation for current artistic practices and art entrepreneurship by women in Nigeria. As artists and administrators, they were able to navigate the power structures of the colonial and postcolonial era, to affect change within the developing Nigerian art scene. As Thiong'o suggests, African creative producers have always been active, the issue is how and why they have been made invisible.

Women in Nigerian art history

The rich art history of Nigeria is too vast to address in full, so for brevity a short synopsis of women's participation in the visual arts from the beginning of the twentieth century onwards, which focuses primarily on Lagos and Zaria, is offered. In the early 1900s modern art thrived in the cosmopolitan, market driven context of Lagos. Ironically, in Europe, African art was becoming de-historicised as the material for avant-garde artistic movements and the source of objects for consumption by European modernism (Tiampo 2011; Harris 2011). Artwork and sculpture created on the African continent between 1900-1920 was named 'traditional', even as contemporaneous work by European artists was being labelled 'modern' and the well documented appropriation of African aesthetics by European artists such as Picasso and Braque was celebrated, whilst any 'counter penetrating' (Mazrui 2001) contribution to modernism by African artists was largely ignored. Reflecting the patriarchal tendencies of art history, Aina Onabolu, who began his practice around 1905, is recognised as the 'father of modern Nigerian art' (Nzegwu 1998). Women who were working alongside, or prior to, Onabolu are not given consideration. In the thriving West African photographic scene at the turn of the century Carrie Lumpkin and Tejumade Sapara-Johnson were working as photographers in Lagos, with Lumpkin opening a photographic studio on Victoria Island in 1908 (Gore 2015).

Although this is not a straightforward comparison with Onobolu's artistic output, it is certainly harder to find information about early women artists, photographers, curators or educators than their male counterparts.

In 1927 Kenneth Murray was sent from Britain to oversee art education in Southern Nigeria alongside Onobolu. The two men differed in their approach, with Onobolu arguing for formal art training based on a categorical break with African art traditions, and Murray claiming that knowledge of indigenous African art form and practice was necessary for the development of modern African art. These conflicting visions, and the nature of Nigerian art education, are relevant to understanding women's participation. Murray's curriculum brought imported Victorian and Christian gender biases about the role of women in society, and in line with British colonial educational policy, he prescribed the study of domestic crafts to female students to prepare them for their expected future role as housewives. Offoedu-Okeke (2012:38) claims this is responsible for any 'paucity of females making modern and contemporary art today'.

By the late 1950s the art scene in Nigeria was flourishing, centred around colleges and universities. Two main schools of artistic expression had emerged: the Zaria School based in the Nigerian College of Arts, Science and Technology (NCAST) and the Osogbo school under the tutelage of Susanne Wenger and Ulli Beier (Falola and Heaton 2008).¹¹ NCAST was the birthplace of the Zaria Art Society, an ideological group who looked beyond what was happening in Europe and America to develop a hybrid art-making practice based on their own visual traditions.¹² This creative and

¹¹ Chief Susanne Wenger MFR (Adunni Olorisha) (1915–2009) was an Austrian-Nigerian artist who permanently relocated to Nigeria and created an artist cooperative in Osogbo partnered with local artists to redevelop and redecorate the Osun Osogbo Sacred Grove.

¹² I refer to NCAST at Zaria. NCAST started in 1953/54 at their Ibadan branch, and in 1955 the art programme became a full department and relocated to their permanent site at Zaria, in northern Nigeria, with 16 students (see Ndubuisi 2017).

conceptual framework became known as 'natural synthesis', which merged Western and Nigerian traditions, forms, techniques, and ideas to create fresh, innovative artwork. The male artists of the natural synthesis movement rejected the ways in which their predominantly male British art lecturers, such as David Heathcote, directed their attention to art movements in London or New York and away from Nigeria or Africa. They looked to local or regional forms of visual expression, not taking any one art form but merging and mixing many to create hybrid new forms of artistic expression. Importantly, they created art which Nigerian audiences could relate to and respond to.¹³

Although evidence shows that Ugbodaga-Ngu taught the members of the Zaria Art Society, she is unconnected to them in the literature. This is an important oversight, because the Zaria Art Group were pushing back against a British led art education team, and as a Nigerian, Ugbodaga-Ngu's appointment was significant. This oversight demonstrates a neglect by scholars which marginalises women and leaves the art historical record incomplete. Art historian Okeke-Agulu (2015) claims that the Society members were the pioneers of postcolonial modernism in Nigeria and integral to the development of the national art canon, whereas Ogbechie (2008), contests the extent of the Zaria Art Society's influence, and argues for the place of artists excluded by this narrative such as Ben Enwonwu. The point is that both perspectives omit the female artist. How can postcolonial modernism be fully theorised when it omits key contributions by women?

Nzegwu (2000) outlines the way in which women's erasure in art historical discourse has been secured by assigning creative initiative to men through a set of disciplinary assumptions about art and gender relations, using the practice of *uli* as

¹³ Thanks to Dr Charles Gore for his helpful discussion on this point.

example. *Uli* is a set of painting practices found in the Igbo speaking south-eastern region of Nigeria, historically carried out by women who painted on the female body and on buildings. In the 1940s, *uli* design was adopted by artists in Nigeria who were painting on paper on canvas, and its visual language began to feature as decorative device or the central emphasis in paintings. The principal agents of change were male artists, who moved *uli* from bodies to canvas, and from community murals to individually credited works. Ben Enwonwu, who had studied *uli* designs from women in Umuahia as a schoolboy, reproduced these motifs as designs on bodies of dancers in his work. His realistic style of representation portrayed women from the Igbo-speaking region, decorated by other women in fine cloth which portrayed *uli* patterning, dancing in beautiful masquerades. *Uli* was therefore prominent in his work. Uche Okeke, who had been taught *uli* by his mother, appropriated the technique in the 1960s (Sanders 2013). Therefore *uli*, an art form practiced by women, has become the aesthetic and conceptual mantra for a litany of contemporary male Nigerian artists (Ogbechie 1997). Although *uli* is not the concern of this research, it is an example of the neglect within the literature to theorise gender dimensions within the changing artistic practices of the period.

Curators and art historians challenge the repercussions of this gendered African art history into the present day, calling for a radical reordering. Nzegwu (1998,2000) conceptualises this ‘grotesque’ and systemic distortion of the role of women in creative production in African societies as ‘gender transmogrification’. Although she condemns women’s marginalisation in the process of historical narration, Nzegwu (2000) demonstrates that African women artists have ‘transgressed’ to overcome obstacles in a society that assigns well defined personal and professional roles and abilities to women (Silva 2013). This ‘transgression’ occurs through the

vibrant artistic output by women, and through the work of women who lead and shape art worlds from Nigeria.

Clara Etso Ugbodaga-Ngu (1921-1996)

Clara Etso Ugbodaga-Ngu was born in Kano, 1921. She taught art in mission schools in the North between 1945 and 1950, before receiving a scholarship from the colonial administration to study art in London. Ugbodaga-Ngu gained a National Diploma in Design from the Chelsea School of Art and an art teacher's diploma from the London Institute of Education to become a highly trained artist and educator. On her return to Nigeria in the late 1950s, she became a drawing teacher at NCAST, making her the institution's first Nigerian *and* first woman teacher. The department was subject to heavy criticism from Nigerian artists for being slow to decolonise, due to its continued recruitment of teachers from Europe who had little or no knowledge of Nigeria. Ugbodaga-Ngu's appointment is therefore noteworthy, as it placed a Nigerian woman at the heart of one of the key art institutions of the time. *Nigeria Magazine* described her as a 'gifted sculptress' (1966:138) and a woman who 'left behind an essential contribution to Nigerian contemporary painting as Shakespeare did in the realm of poetic couplets' (1967:125).

It was during Ugbodaga-Ngu's time as a teacher at NCAST that the Zaria Art Society was formed. As discussed above, the members of the Zaria Art Society are viewed by scholars, both Western and Nigerian, as the pioneers of postcolonial modernism. They are viewed as integral to the development of the art canon. Ugbodaga-Ngu taught the students who formed this art society, and thus played a part in shaping their artistic practice and ideology. *Nigeria Magazine* (1968) stated that she 'taught most of the leading Nigerian contemporary artists' and Ugbodaga-Ngu herself noted: '[the] majority of the young men who were my students are Nigeria's main

source of manpower in institutions of higher learning, museums, industries and [the] private sector [sic]' (quoted in Akande 2019). To ignore Ugbodaga-Ngu's pedagogic influence in the recorded art history of Nigeria is a case of patriarchal bias which renders her invisible. In this way African women artists become fated to practice unacclaimed under the long shadow of masculine discourse (Makhubu 2020).

This oversight runs throughout the literature: Ugbodaga-Ngu's position as teacher is rarely theorised and is frequently overshadowed by metanarratives of male artists. Nigerian art historian Offoedu-Okeke (2012:20) argues that 'artists who also work as teachers encourage scholarly interest in academic adaptations of local idioms, lend their support to the development of new canons and encourage younger generations of creative artists'. Here he could be describing the work of Ugbodaga-Ngu and her influence on the Nigerian art canon through her teaching at NCAST, but Offoedu-Okeke makes no mention of her in his account. Instead, he focuses on Ben Enwonwu, who was never a teacher.

Osayimwese (2019) hypothesises that art education has been considered an inferior form of art practice and this accounts for the absence of art teachers in the historiography of Nigerian art. In the British colonial imagination, teaching was figured as a female occupation, but even so Ugbodaga-Ngu faced biases which placed male teachers as superior. Ugbodaga-Ngu may have failed to make as much of an impact as an artist as her male colleagues *because* she became an art teacher. That Ugbodaga-Ngu proved herself to be an influential educator may in fact account for her diminished influence as an artist, as when women are discussed, teaching art is read as a sign of unfulfilled potential. This is in stark contrast to Aina Onabolu, whose place in art history as an artist and educator of note is secure. The members of the Zaria Art Society went on to play founding roles as the teachers of later generations of artists,

for example, Uche Okeke founded the influential Nsukka school and Yusuf Grillo founded the Yaba school. None of these male artists were seen as inferior artists because of their work in education, and in fact their work as educators is celebrated. Scholarship on the Nigerian art canon would benefit from a more extensive perspective if the influence of Ugbodaga-Ngu was fully theorised and afforded the same consideration as male artists of the period.

An analysis of Ugbodaga-Ngu's oeuvre demonstrates that her artistic interests, approaches, methods, and strategies may well have influenced the political and artistic project of the Zaria Rebels. Lenssen (2018:87) argues that natural synthesis 'named a robust mode of synthetic experimentation by artists who claimed the right to evaluate and appropriate the best of all traditions — old and new, indigenous, and European, and functional and aestheticist — without coercion, injunction, or fear of otherness'. This could describe Ugbodaga-Ngu, who was defiant against the processes of 'othering', which marginalised her as a colonial subject and as a woman.



Figure 2.0 Clara Etso Ugbodaga-Ngu (1960) *Abstract* Image courtesy of RCC at University of Birmingham

Abstract (figure 2.0) is an oil painting on hardboard from 1960, the year in which Nigeria gained independence from Britain and the period Ugbodaga-Ngu was teaching at NCAST. The materiality of this work, its thick, textured application of oil paint created using a palette knife, suggests the painting took time to construct and was thoughtfully executed. Although most of the shapes are angular and the architectural composition is complex, there is an upward movement towards the top left corner of the work and some of the shapes taper to a point in that direction to propose a forward motion, a layering of past and present, not a static abstraction frozen in time or space. Under the Western art historical system painting is privileged and classified as 'fine art', functioning as an index of high social, economic, and aesthetic value. *Abstract*

therefore sits within the familiar structures and preferred medium of Western art history. Reacting to this work, contemporary artists in Nigeria told me that they felt that deeply gendered and racialised understandings of who could, or should, be an artist in 1960 meant that for a Nigerian woman to be working in this way was a rebellious act imbued with political agency.

Given our understanding of the ideologies that were present at the time, it is likely that Ubdodaga-Ngu's artworks and rebellious spirit served to satirise the British colonial educator's hegemonic belief in Western art techniques and methods. Certainly, she rejected any elevation of the Western art canon above Nigerian art and artistry. As Nicodemus (1993:32) notes: 'any claim from an African to be a modern artist [in the eyes of the West] was unthinkable and impudent'. Ugbodaga-Ngu's title proclaims the painting to be 'an abstract', and even such an obvious naming reads like a provocation which speaks directly to the modern art movement implicit in the title. While it is most certainly a visual portrayal of bold symbols simplified to abstraction, the name appears to stand for abstraction more generally — not '*an* abstract' but '*the* abstract'. Ugbodaga-Ngu adopts a rich approach to colour, the hues of the interlocking forms are varying shades of brown, red, yellow and grey, and darker black structures lurk behind the more colourful elements. These 'earthy' tones once again hint that Ugbodaga-Ngu is being satirical with the work, perhaps drawing attention to the European modernist fascination with 'primitivism' and constructing African people as closer to nature.¹⁴

¹⁴ This painting sits within 'The Danford Collection' at The University of Birmingham, having been donated by a collector in the 1990s. I was able to spend time working with it first-hand. In 2021 it was displayed in the imposing setting of the Vice Chancellors corridor at the University. Viewing an artwork by a black Nigerian woman from 1960 hanging in this setting was a deeply profound experience. I presented a conference paper and a talk as part of Black history Month about this artwork and a paper with Third Text is forthcoming (2023).

For Ugbodaga-Ngu to paint in an abstract style defied the expected output of Nigerian artists, as abstraction was viewed by the Western academy as a sophisticated technique emanating from Europe to be used by male artists. *Abstract* can be read as a defiance of the one-point perspective or formal representational approach adopted by earlier modern artists in Nigeria, such as Aina Onabolu. It clearly does not fit the forms typically associated with colonial schooling, nor nativist reinvention of tradition. Art produced in modernist styles, materials, and genres by indigenous people under the shadow of colonialism were often regarded as mere provincial copies of work from the 'art centres' of the West, but *Abstract* is no blind derivation or mimicry. As an expression of Nigerian modernity, it exposes and disrupts the authority of art historical discourse based on geographical and temporal centring of Europe and America. Ugbodaga-Ngu may well have developed this painting to show that Nigerian artists could, and would, work with the language of modern art and abstraction. This was echoed by members of the Zaria Art Society, who blended styles whilst rejecting the idea that such European techniques were superior. Ugbodaga-Ngu plays with the politics of artistic decolonisation by highlighting Africa's sculptural gifts to Parisian modernism. Her work demonstrates political agency, because a black Nigerian woman making such a work of art in 1960 could be read as a subversive act (see Cohen 2020).



Figure 2.1 Modern Nigerian artists in the Harmon Foundation, art images by Ugbodaga-Ngu. Image courtesy of Fisk University Galleries.

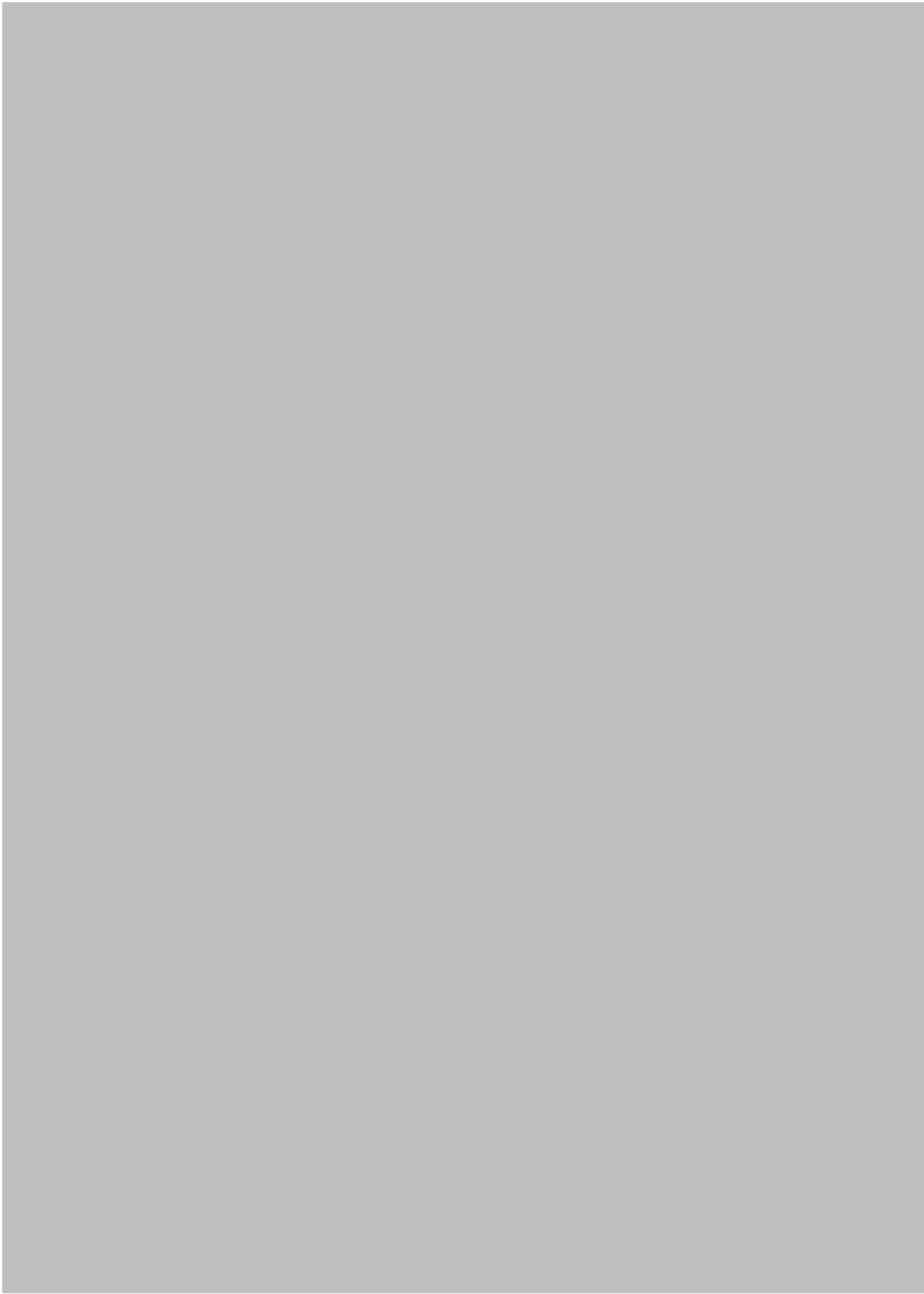


Figure 2.2 Clara Etso Ugbodaga-Ngu (1963) *Beggars* black and white image from National Archives Catalog U.S. National Archives and Records Administration Harmon Foundation Collection. Image courtesy of Fisk University Galleries.

Ugbodaga-Ngu's work is frequently politically charged, as she experiments with form, genre, and style. In *Beggars* she utilises sharp edges, flattened surfaces and geometric elements to depict three men who form an inward-looking, familiar group (figures 2.1 and 2.2). Two men are facing, and one stands side on, two of the men carry jaunty bags decorated with a simple motif which are casually looped over their arms, and two wear informal wide brimmed hats. All are dressed in loose clothing or long tunics. Most noticeably they all have their mouths wide open, perhaps singing for money as the figure on the right appears to be tapping or stomping his foot. This surface joviality masks the probable hunger and sadness of men whose lives are reduced to begging due to their limited life chances, poor employment prospects and low income.

In 1963, labour strikes to protest unsatisfactory working conditions and minimal wages led to widespread unrest in Nigeria. The euphoria of independence was fading and divisions between north and south, as well as tension between Hausa, Igbo, and Yoruba people — divides which had been constructed and exacerbated by the British colonial policy of indirect rule — were becoming evident. Against this backdrop, *Beggars* reveals the fragility of the postcolonial transition. Perhaps Ugbodaga-Ngu's three men represent Hausa, Igbo, and Yoruba ethnopolitical divisions, or what Makhubu (2020:16) describes as the 'precariousness of postcolonial nationalism as well as the social, economic and political predicament of an elusive independence through the image of dispossession'.

For Ugbodaga-Ngu to focus on the social context of Nigeria's independence period by depicting people going about their daily lives marks the power to observe. She sought verisimilitude through the illusionistic portrayal of the transformations in social life, ushering in new ways of seeing as a means of making painting and sculpture which was meaningful to people in the newly emerging State of Nigeria. The 'ordinariness' of her subject matter is in fact an illusion and her work is distinct because it depicts the social realities of the time. Nigerian modern artists of the period were often preoccupied with creating symbols of the new nation, particularly of postcolonial rebirth and a romanticised precolonial past which fetishised the trope of woman as 'Mother Africa'.

Like women in the arts, the role that women played in achieving independence was obscured by male-dominated narratives of nationalism, pan-Africanism and Négritude (Falola and Aderinto 2010). By bringing a post-cubist aesthetic to her work, Ugbodaga-Ngu once again subverts the idea of what type of art women 'should have been making'. She was able to observe and translate the social realities of Nigerian life, to comment upon her social milieu. She exercised a level of artistic and political agency, which was difficult for women to achieve under colonial rule, and this is imbued in her artwork.



Figure 2.3 Clara Etso Ugbodaga-Ngu (1963) *Man and Bird* oil painting colour image from National Archives Catalog U.S. National Archives and Records Administration Harmon Foundation Collection. Image courtesy of Fisk University Galleries.



Figure 2.4 Clara Etso Ugbodaga-Ngu (1963) *Man and Bird* black and white image from National Archives Catalog U.S. National Archives and Records Administration Harmon Foundation Collection. Image courtesy of Fisk University Galleries.

Ugbodaga-Ngu experimented further with post cubist aesthetics in *Man and Bird*, to develop the two characters into an abstracted representation of symbols and shapes (figures 2.3 and 2.4). The bird may be a reference to Yorùbá religious art, which associates birds with the spiritual realm. She adopted a similar colour palette of purple and peach as she had used in *Beggars*, to create tension between light and dark. *Man and Bird* evidences the development of Ugbodaga-Ngu's idiosyncratic artistic language, as she synthesised European art traditions with reference to African motifs and forms. Once again this type of blending was echoed by the Zaria Art Society.

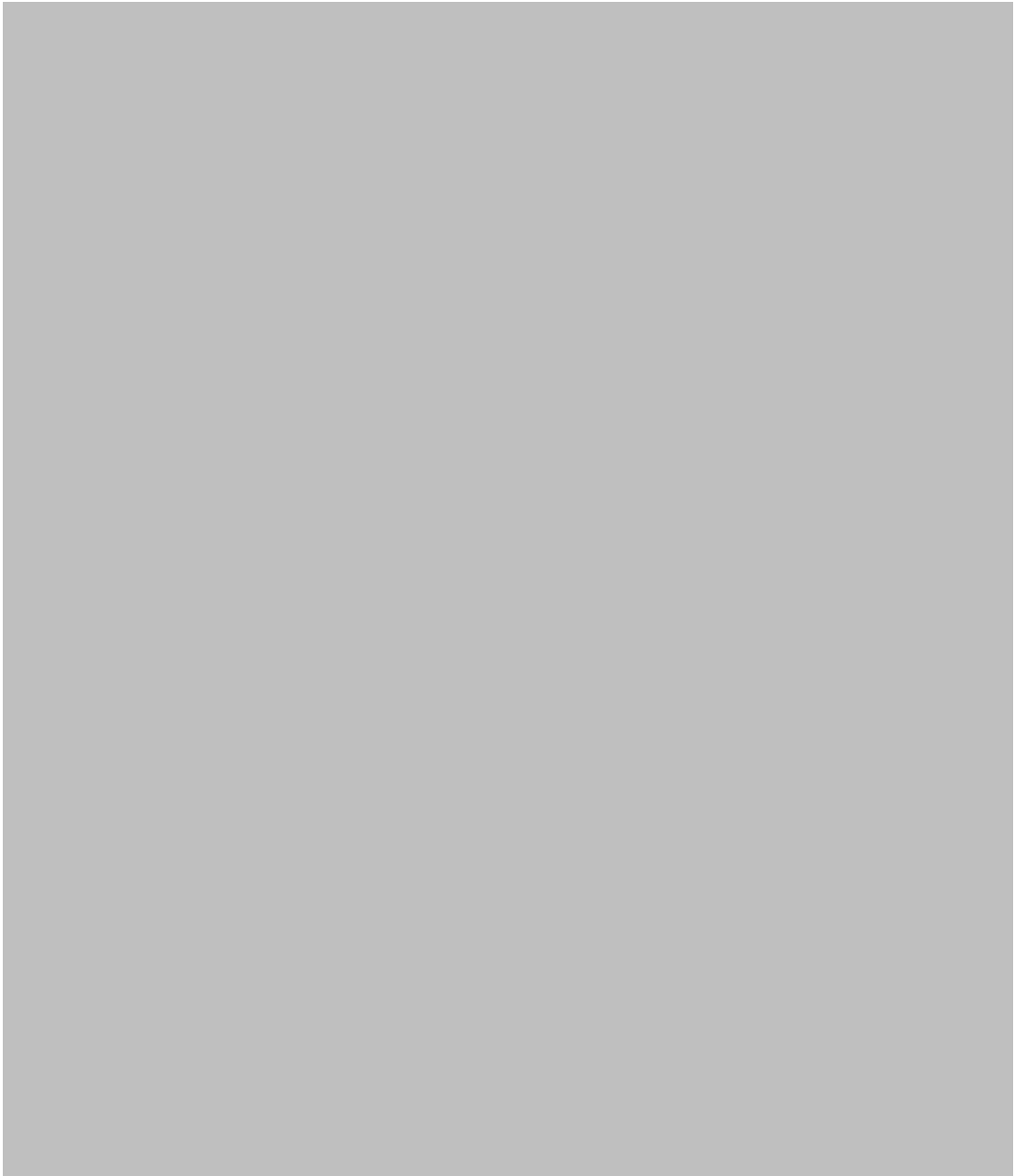


Figure 2.5 Clara Ugbodaga-Ngu (1961) *Market Women* colour image from National Archives Catalog U.S. National Archives and Records Administration Harmon Foundation Collection. Image courtesy of Fisk University Galleries.



Figure 2.6 Clara Ugbodaga-Ngu (1961) *Market Women* black and white image from National Archives Catalog U.S. National Archives and Records Administration Harmon Foundation Collection. Image courtesy of Fisk University Galleries.

Ugbodaga-Ngu took women as her subject and portrayed them working in the spheres where they wielded influence. *Market Women* (figures 2.5 and 2.6) represents not the well-researched Yoruba market women (see below), but three Hausa/Fulani women

tending cows and bringing products to market. A large proportion of market traders were Animist or Muslim, therefore veiled to access the public space of the market. She painted them with poise and stature, in control of their lifestyle and occupied with their task. The contours constructed by the figures demonstrate Ugbodaga-Ngu's characteristic geometric diamond shaping — confident open postures which may denote success and allude to their achievements and independent material comforts. Ugbodaga-Ngu would have witnessed such women trading in Zaria and Ibadan and been aware of their engagement in political action and ability to influence governance.

Market Women highlighted suppressed social narratives and challenged the notion that 'modern' women were a reason for social concern (see Lindsay 2007). The painting visually demonstrated the crucial role market women played in gaining independence in the transition to postcolonial governance. While the power of market women may have been an everyday reality, this was not the narrative about women's livelihoods in Nigeria which emerged throughout the colonial era. Ugbodaga-Ngu's work portrayed a social and historical context in which women were independent and possessed the ability to shape their own lives. She challenged the patriarchal notion that 'modern' women should be a cause for social anxiety.

Ugbodaga-Ngu's provocative approach and use of Nigerian motifs and iconographies achieved a synthesis with, rather than a renewal of, Nigerian artistry. This is principle that has often been used to distinguish the Zaria Art Society. As I have argued, the Society emerged around the time at which Ugbodaga-Ngu was teaching at NCAST, and it is likely that she taught, or influenced, those artists. As demonstrated, her bold embrace of modernist techniques combined with local visual art traditions, her appropriation and experimentation, and her defiance against processes of 'othering' were markers of a visual language shared by the Zaria Rebels.

Art historian Malz (2018:239) notes that: '[Ugbodaga-Ngu was] held in high esteem for her terracotta works and painting, belonging to a generation [which] played an important role in the development of modern art in Nigeria'. She was well respected in her time, *Nigeria Magazine* (1968) described her as a 'doyen of the artists'. Ugbodaga-Ngu's work has undoubtedly since been under-valued, due to her being a woman in a system which elevates the male artist (see 'Search and Research' section to follow). The National Archives in the US hold The Harmon Foundation collection of contemporary African art. This collection of images was gathered between 1922 to 1967 with the goal of fostering an awareness of African art in the US. The same number of images of Ugbodaga-Ngu's paintings sit in this collection as by Uche Okeke or other well-known male artists from Nigeria in this period. Ugbodaga-Ngu's work was therefore clearly visible and valued alongside her male contemporaries in her own lifetime. She possessed agency in her own milieu and her lack of representation in the records can only be one of erasure. Ugbodaga-Ngu demonstrates that social, political, and creative agency is context dependent and historically situated — her work went against the structural grain of the system in which she was embedded. Her agency unfolded through artistic strategies and tactics, as well as the power to pass on knowledge and shape the lives and careers of others.

Constance Affiong Ekong (1930-2009)



Figure 2.7 *Afi Ekong At Work* Nigerian artist and arts promoter Afi Ekong paints on a canvas, Lagos, Nigeria, January 1962. (Photo by Pix/Michael Ochs Archives/Getty Images)

Contemporary artists in Nigeria describe Ekong as a pioneer who paved the way for their own achievements (figure 2.7). Ekong was a descendant of the royal house of the Obong of Calabar, her parents were of Efik and Ibibio heritage and her father-in-law was the Atta of Igbirra. Ekong's family ran a successful trading business in rubber and palm oil, and 'own[ed] a large acreage of landmass, the Fiekong Estate in the choice area of Marian Road, Calabar'. They were well-off and elite, which 'symbolizes the artist as landed gentry' (Ecoma 2013:43). Like Ugbodaga-Ngu, she was awarded a scholarship in 1951 by the colonial government to study fashion at Oxford City Technical School, followed by a diploma in fine art and the history of costume at St Martin's School of Art. After graduating, Ekong returned to Nigeria and began her

career as a practicing artist. In 1958 she became the first woman to hold a solo exhibition in Nigeria, at the Exhibition Centre in Lagos. In 1960, alongside Ugbodaga-Ngu, her work was shown in the *Independence Exhibition* and visited by Nelson Rockefeller (Former Vice President of the United States) who bought one of her paintings.

Ekong worked as TV presenter, art gallery owner/director, and executive board member of Lagos Art Council (secretary for the Lagos branch and subsequently as national secretary 1961–1966). Taking on multiple job roles is very typical of women in the Nigerian art world (see chapter three). Respondents told me that this reflects a situation whereby men can more easily become dedicated full time studio artists than women, who are frequently forced to make their art practice a part-time occupation. Women often work in two or more jobs to achieve financial stability, contribute to their households, and shape their own lives and ambitions. Ekong and Ugbodaga-Ngu demonstrate that this was as true in the 1950s as it is today. Although this makes it challenging for women to commit to full time studio practice, one outcome of women taking on multiple roles in administration or education is that they are placed in positions which can influence and shape the lives and ambitions of others. Historical and contemporary women can become more effective agents of influence on the wider art scene as they combine the structural management of the art scene with their art practice.



Figure 2.8 Afi Ekong (1957) *Life Drawing of European Woman* Image courtesy of The Bronze Gallery

Ekong worked in a range of styles, both abstract and realistic, to create still lifes, landscapes, portraits, and group scenes which demonstrate the same political agency identified in the work of Ugbodaga-Ngu. In *Life Drawing of European Woman* Ekong portrays the naked form, an act itself that can be read as subversive (figure 2.8). Nochlin (1971) described how life drawing in Europe was prohibited to women until the turn of the twentieth century, and only men were therefore able to master the depiction of the unclothed or clothed body crucial for producing the grand historical or religious imagery demanded by the nineteenth century art market. Ekong's access to the naked form is significant. Additionally, the power dynamics between artist and subject are inverted in a provocative way, as the unnamed, white 'European woman' is objectified by a black, female colonial subject. The European woman looks away from the viewer, she does not meet the gaze of the artist or the voyeur and appears somewhat uncomfortable and vulnerable. Although her pose is open, it is guarded. This articulation of vulnerability, power and powerlessness challenges the ubiquitous 'ethnographic gaze' through which the (clothed) western, male anthropologist collected staged or artificially constructed photographic images of (often undressed) African people (Comaroff and Comaroff 2003).



Figure 2.9 Afi Ekong (1961) *Fadeke and Ada* Image courtesy of The Bronze Gallery

In contrast with the vulnerability of the unclothed European woman, Ekong painted Nigerian women to claim their dignity and distinction and challenge the ‘ethnographic’ anthropological gaze that stripped African people of individual identities. *Fadeke and Ada* (figure 2.9), for example, references two *named* Nigerian women — in contrast to *European woman*, who is unnamed and marked only by her geographical origin. *Fadeke and Ada* represent two different ethnic groups, as Fadeke is a Yoruba name

and Ada is an Igbo name, yet the women appear close and comfortable together.¹⁵ Ekong focuses on the linear folds and texture of their *gele* and colourful attire, using pleasing, bold colour combinations to highlight their vibrancy and harmonious societal integration. The reference to a Nigerian identity echoes a nationalism typically identified with the Zaria Art Society, but like Ugbodaga-Ngu's work, does not adopt the idea of 'traditional' woman as emblem or symbol of the new nation. Instead, Ekong paints an 'everyday' image of women which portrays strength, composure, and confidence. Fadeke and Ada look away from the camera at something in the distance, these are young women engaged in an activity of their own choosing. They do not perform for the viewer's gaze and Ekong portrays her subjects as autonomous.

These artistic choices by Ekong and Ugbodaga-Ngu can be read as a form of artistic decolonisation, their artwork a resistance to the encroaching hegemony of the Western canon which attempted to subsume and devalue modernism emanating from anywhere but the perceived art 'centres' of Europe and the US. Sculpting and painting were seen as the domain of the male artist in late 1950s/early 1960s Britain and Nigeria, therefore Ugbodaga-Ngu and Ekong's status' as practicing artists in a colonial society made a direct challenge to the linear and patriarchal base of Western art history. As artists they demonstrate their own agency and that of other women, and by offering visual representations of women's purpose they challenged the structures which pressed upon them. The nature of these structures and the agency which women were able to enact against, or in collaboration with, the formal colonial art economy are unpacked in the next section.

¹⁵ With appreciation to Suleh Ameh James for this note about naming. Ugbodaga-Ngu is a Yoruba name, but she was born in the north. This reflects the fact that Nigerian life was not static or stuck in place and people were mobile.

The developing art scene and the formal economy

During the colonial period, employment in the formal sector was highly limited for all Nigerians and the art scene reflected this. In 1950 only thirteen percent of the population of Lagos earned wages (see Lindsay 2007). Although Nigerian men were encouraged to access wage labour, including educational and skilled government positions, the continual reinforcement of racialised identities and hierarchies meant that higher level managerial jobs were reserved for the expat colonial community even after independence (Ray 2015). Gender, as McClintock (2013:7) argues, was ‘from the very onset fundamental to the securing and maintenance of the imperial enterprise’. Under indirect rule it was primarily men who were educated and became chiefs, later being declared leaders of the anti-colonial struggle and the emerging political structures of liberation. The forces which brought about the institutionalisation of a new set of formal agencies in the public arena ‘were marked by their male complexion’ (Chazan 1990:186). The changing nature of wage labour meant that the colonial state preferred to hire men, even to carry out work more familiar to women (Lindsay 2007:241). Furthermore, the imposition of colonial structures promoted Victorian ideals of womanhood and introduced restrictive gender prescriptions which kept Nigerian women largely outside the formal political and economic sphere.

As women, Ugbodaga-Ngu being employed by the British controlled art education system and Ekong working for the British controlled art council was unusual. However, by the 1950s, British administrators were preparing for independence, and had to bring Nigerians into key institutions. Ugbodaga-Ngu and Ekong’s ability to penetrate the formal art economy was accentuated by their personal, economic, and social circumstances, and is evidence that colonial restrictions did not necessarily hold elite African women back. Both women had been educated to a high level within the

British system and were placed in an advantageous position to navigate tensions between the colonial expat community, who continued to dominate the mission and identity of the art council, and the Nigerian artistic elite who called for full decolonisation. There were various factions. Firstly the British serving and former government officials, for example Kenneth Murray, Michael Crowder and Nora Majekodumni; secondly, the Nigerian political and social elite who were committed to supporting the arts as part of investment in the new nation, for example Chief Kolawole Bagolun (council chairman) and Mrs Aduke Moore; thirdly, influential and established artists and writers, for example Ben Enwonwu, Aina Onabolu, Cyprian Ekwensi; and finally, the younger artists of the independence generation who were eager to assume control of structural power in the arts (Okeke-Agulu 2015). Ugbodaga-Ngu and Ekong were able to access the developing Nigerian art societies and art movements, navigating formal and informal art world structures. Their ability to network and form connections played a key part in their influence.

I suggest that their entry into the structures of art administration was partly due to the gendered ideology of the British, which more comfortably imagined women in roles relating to the arts or teaching. In 1960s Britain fewer than one in ten women went to university, most studied the arts and humanities, and few were able to seek out employment in colonial administration abroad. Yet white expat women, often the wives of colonial officers or Nigerian political elite, were employed across the British colonial and emerging Nigerian art and educational institutions in the late 1950s and early 1960s. For example, Nora Majekodumni, the Irish wife of the Nigerian Minister for health, was the chair of the Lagos branch of the art council, editor of *Nigeria Magazine* and 'arguably the most influential figure on the Lagos art scene' (Okeke-Agulu 2015:301). Her position of influence, arising from her husband's political post,

echoes the way Nigerian first ladies assume positions of power through connection to patriarchal structures (see chapters one, three and five).

The intersections of race and gender were highly complex and unstable in a colonial Nigerian setting, and gender became an articulation of racialised power. As the council remained mostly inaccessible to the male artist, even the artistic elite, Majekodumni was resented for 'high-handedness' by artists such as Uche Okeke and Demas Nwoko' (ibid). Okeke wrote to Evelyn Brown in 1960 to say that 'Mrs. Majekodumni cannot judge or value my work. They are different from what she understands' (ibid:231). Whilst Majekodumni's elevated position in the colonial art administration may have been problematic, such complaints are commonly made about women in positions of power. Rarely would 'high handedness' be viewed as a negative attribute for men in managerial roles, instead he would be described as 'assertive'. Nevertheless, Ugbodaga-Ngu and Ekong were able to penetrate art structures which were closed to Nigerian men, perhaps because the British believed that their gender suited work in art and education. In addition, the colonial administration feared handing over too much power to Nigerian men and was consistently hostile to their demands. Colonialism's racial prescriptions may have played a part in keeping men out of managerial arts roles, whilst simultaneously the gendered nature of women's work meant that Nigerian women, in this instance at least, were able to work as arts administrators and teachers.

This is not to downplay the achievements of Ugbodaga-Ngu and Ekong, who were able to exploit opportunities and navigate the constraining forces of colonial and patriarchal ideology which still limited women's ability to act and transform their circumstances. Their achievements must be conceptualised in relation to the entrenched power hierarchy in Nigeria at that time, configured as it was by relations

of social class, race and ethnicity. Their achievements are mighty when situated in relation to the racialised and gendered barriers which precluded the entry of most Nigerians to the British run management of the arts. They employed tactical agency to negotiate the trajectories travelled by the weak, like Scott's (1985) notion of the 'weapons of the weak'. Weak in this context relates to their position as female colonial subjects, not as a pejorative term. They demonstrate that agency is not something you possess or do not possess; it is something you maintain in relation to a social field inhabited with other social actors and is thus highly dependent on specific social situations. Elite urban women in 1940s Nigeria formulated a vision of modern Nigerian womanhood in which education was a means to economic, political, and social participation and effective citizenship. Ugbodaga-Ngu and Ekong utilised their privilege, education and access to channels of communication with power holders at different institutional levels to overcome structural obstacles, make their voices heard and assert themselves as full citizens in society.

Ugbodaga-Ngu and Ekong are examples of women with the ability to negotiate colonial restrictions. Furthermore, they are characteristic of a longer trajectory of women working successfully in the formal wage economy which predates colonial imposition (Mba 1982). Yoruba women have long been successful entrepreneurs, trading in goods such as palm oil, dye, ceramics, and textiles locally and across long distances, with the ability to control market spaces and use them to maintain and perform their power in society (Falola 1995). Market trading was an occupation which provided leadership opportunities and political representation as women were able to participate in decision-making processes. The self-determining Nigerian woman trader wielded socio-economic power and was able to access public life and the market became a place where women's voices and views were heard in society (Osayimwese

2019). Yoruba, and other southern Nigerian women used these routes to financial independence and self-determination as effective platforms for political action. Within this setting women could become extremely wealthy and advance their political and social status (Ogbomo 1995; Kriger 2006). Their activities significantly shaped the face of Nigerian politics in the run-up to independence. While the movement to a cash crop economy and the implementation of colonial rule changed the dynamics of gender relations, women remained active in commodity retail trade in the markets through the colonial period and into independence.

In interviews, artists told me about the strength of Nigerian women, and often reflected on market women as models of resilience and female solidarity.¹⁶ Contemporary artists frequently represent the strong matriarchal figure of the female market trader in their artwork (figure 2.10).

¹⁶ This was a common reflection, see appendix for list of respondents.

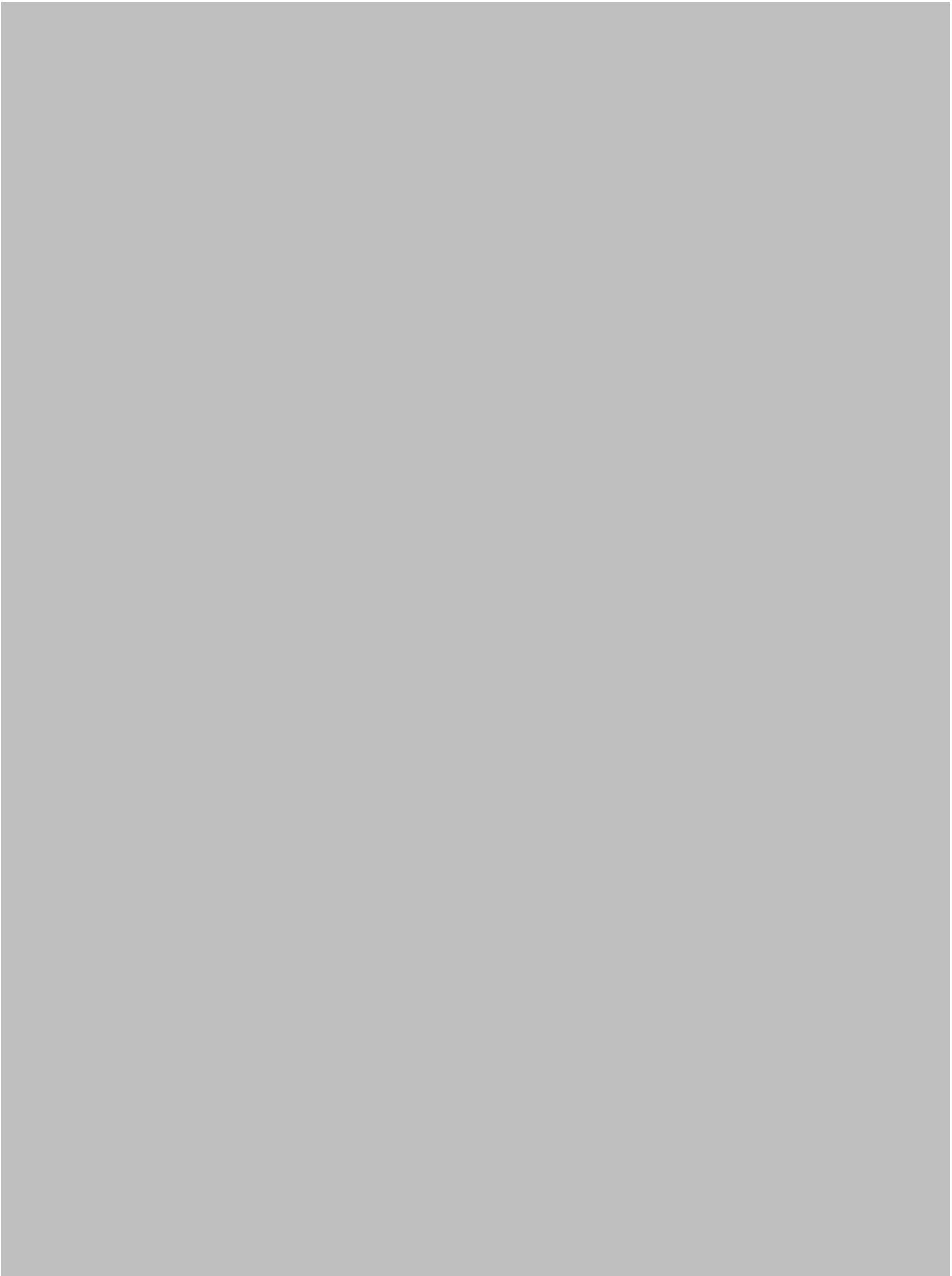


Figure 2.10 Naoimi Oyeniya (2018) *Market Women* Image courtesy of FEAN

The power of commonality, solidarity, and networks of support which women developed as traders is an example of effective and strategic organisation. Ugbodaga-Ngu and Ekong followed this lineage of female changemakers, and they reached elevated positions in the formal economy of the developing art scene. In turn they have inspired the next generation of women after them.

Emerging networks

Ugbodaga-Ngu and Ekong built effective and collaborative networks of influence. Their access to the diverse players across the art scene meant that their activities formed and connected art networks — commercial, social, and pedagogical — to shape the developing art ecosystem. The strength and quality of Ugbodaga-Ngu and Ekong's social ties allowed them to access resources, as social network analysts remind us, having many connections is not the same as being well connected (Berrou and Combarrous 2012). Ugbodaga-Ngu connected influential actors on the art scene across Nigeria, she was a 'node' in the art network with the ability to create and strengthen artistic ties. For example, she invited artists Ben Enwonwu and T. A. Fasuyi to the department at NCAST to lecture on Nigerian art, and characteristic of the cosmopolitan woman artist as agent circulating in global art networks — who we encounter repeatedly throughout the thesis — Ugbodaga-Ngu formed relational ties between the art worlds in Nigeria and internationally. In 1958 she held a solo exhibition at the Commonwealth Institute Art Gallery, London, the first solo art exhibition by a Nigerian woman artist in the UK. She and her artwork travelled internationally, including a solo exhibition in Boston, USA (1963) and group shows such as *Contemporary Nigerian Art* (1968), London. Her work was shown at *Independence Exhibition* (1960), Lagos and *FESTAC '77* (1977), Lagos. Of the sixty-three artists that participated in the Nigerian visual arts exhibition for FESTAC, she was one of only

seven women. The image below highlights her connections to the elite social circles of the time, she is photographed at a high-profile art event in London with the Nigerian Federal Commissioner, Matthew Mbu (figure 2.11).¹⁷



Figure 2.11 Clara Ugbodaga-Ngu with her self-portrait and Nigerian Federal Commissioner Matthew Mbu, London 1958. (Photo by John Franks/Keystone/Getty Images)

¹⁷ Note that the other painting by Ugbodaga-Ngu (which is partially shown in this photograph) is *Abstract* (figure 2.0).

Like Ugbodaga-Ngu, Ekong was well connected nationally and internationally, with a formidable reputation as a savvy art market operator, promoter of modern art and ‘the first female curator in Nigeria’.¹⁸ In 1960 the art council established Gallery Labac (Lagos branch of the Arts Council) — the city’s first commercial art gallery, with Ekong as its director from 1960 until 1967. Gallery Labac was heavily criticised by Lagos based artists, who felt there was too much emphasis on crafts and indigenous performance. In response, in 1965 Ekong opened The Bronze Gallery on Lagos Island to showcase a different, more experimental set of artistic talents, and ran both concurrently for several years. These connections and spheres of influence demonstrate her agency as part of the establishment *and* as individual operator. Bronze Gallery was the first private art gallery in Nigeria and is still operational on Ekong’s estate in Calabar.

The establishment of Bronze Gallery allowed Ekong to work autonomously, and exhibit works by Nigerian modernist innovators. She ‘used her exhibitions [...] as an instrument of social mobilization for the art, by pulling the deserving presence of very important dignitaries’ and supporting emerging artistic talent, ‘not only us[ing] the exhibitions to promote her works but most importantly as a medium to project younger artists’ (Ecoma 2013:43). The Bronze Gallery made modern Nigerian art visible, and respondents tell me that this directly motivated a younger generation of artists. The Gallery formed an early node in the developing Nigerian art networks, as an important cultural centre where artists could connect with each other (Visoná 2021). As a hub of cosmopolitan activity, Bronze Gallery was a precursor to contemporary institutions such as CCA Lagos (see chapters four and five).

¹⁸ Bea Gassman de Sousa and Iheanyi Onwuegbucha in conversation at 1-54 FORUM, London (2019).

Ugbodaga-Ngu was one of the artists shown at Ekong's gallery, evidence of her determination to support female artists. From 1962 Ekong ran *Cultural Heritage*, a Nigeria Television programme, to promote Nigerian art. She invited individuals from her networks to appear on the show: for example, Yusuf Grillo, Solomon Wangboje, Uche Okeke and Simon Okeke from Zaria, and Eraboh Emokpae, Lamidi Fakeye and Akeredolu (Ekong 1997). This demonstrates Ekong's elevated position in society, which meant that she was more likely to mix with the male artists of her social milieu such as Ben Enwonwu, than with female artists outside of her elite social world. Importantly, Ekong created and strengthened influential art networks, enabling numerous Nigerian artists exposure and connection to wider contemporary art worlds. One example is Erabor Emokpae, whom Ekong introduced to the Lagos art scene and then went on to support him as he developed his career. Attention to such patronage makes an inversion to art historical narratives, which traditionally attribute only men as patrons of the arts (see chapter five).

It is of note that Ben Enwonwu sculpted a bust of Ekong in bronze (figure 2.12) and painted her portrait (figure 2.13). These artworks fell outside of the way in which Enwonwu typically portrayed women, whereby he adopted the language of Negritude described by Ajayi (1997) as constructing an image of an idealised African woman and the archetypal Mother Africa. His painting and sculpture serve as visual metaphors which indicate Ekong's influential place in society, she was an early example of a shrewd 'social influencer'.



Figure 2.12 Ben Enwonwu (ca. 1959) *Head of Afi* Image courtesy of Sotheby's

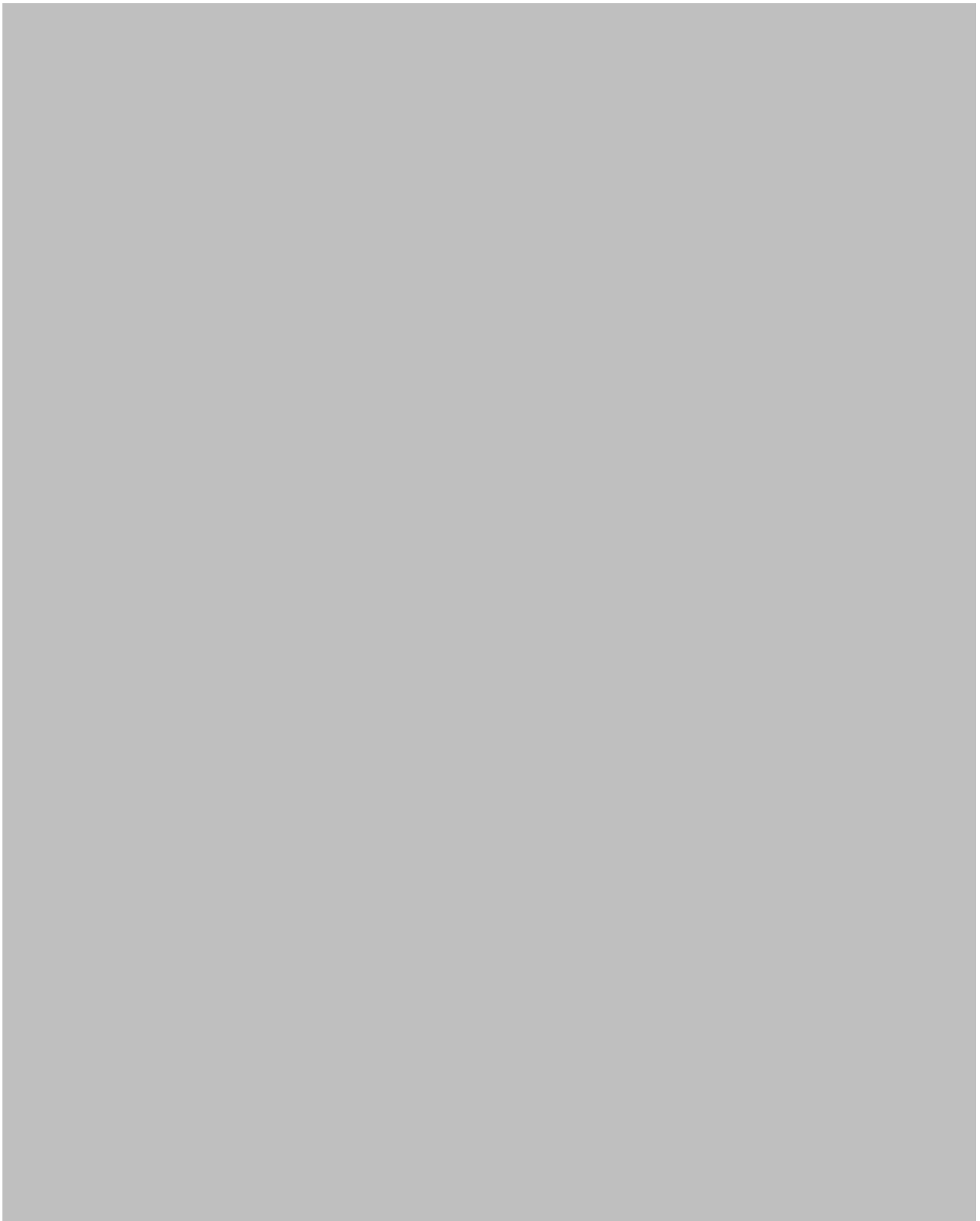


Figure 2.13 Ben Enwonwu (1962) *Portrait of Constance "Afi" Ekong* Image courtesy of Sotheby's

In 1963 the *New York Times Magazine* described Ekong as the 'new African woman', and Enwonwu portrays her as this independent and carefree individual (figure 2.13). Enwonwu was sceptical of the 'independent and materialistic' modern African woman, who he believed 'threatened the dominance of men in African societies and was a major source of social anxiety' (Makhubu 2020:104). He exemplified widespread fears around the changing social world under colonialism where women's behaviour and conduct frequently became the focus of male anxiety (ibid). This portrait of Ekong thus moved away from his tendency to feature the idealised (pre-colonial) African woman as a gendered trope of motherhood or national pride. It is testament to the unique and respected position which Ekong held in society that Enwonwu celebrated her as a vibrant autonomous woman.

They will fight you, but do not give up

Ugbodaga-Ngu and Ekong were examples of African women with the ability to affect change, despite the marginal roles and positions imagined for them by colonial policymakers. They were entrepreneurs working in the orbit of colonisation, who created and utilised associational platforms and networks to achieve prominent positions. As outlined, they followed trajectories of African women such as the market traders or 'Nana Benz' businesswomen, who were able to maintain or better their precolonial social standing. Ugbodaga-Ngu and Ekong were able to create effective networks, and gain access to power, which carved out a place for Nigerian art and artists. However, they were forced to operate within the discriminatory structure of a society under colonial rule and to take into consideration iniquitous social values and regulations. They demonstrate that agency can be regressive as well as progressive.

Bayart (1993) suggests that institutions such as public administration or the school were nurseries in which a 'moral subject' was planted and tended. The

practices of these new subjects were to become constituents of a new 'public culture', and the emerging ethos was expressed in terms of collaboration with the coloniser as much as it was in terms of nationalist resistance or negotiation. As educators and public administrators, Ekong and Ugbodaga-Ngu were salary earners, a group who were instrumental in creating the foundations of the class which is dominant in Africa and their practices contributed to the formation of the social strata who would constitute the elite class. They demonstrate what Bayart calls a 'theory of action', as they built their agency on the 'subtle interactions between the circles of domination and subjection' (ibid:15). The networks which they began to construct were based on employing strategies of extraversion to mobilise resources from relationships. Using networks to mobilise resources and alignment with the available structures of power to achieve results is characteristic of the art networks which have developed. That this may strengthen a repressive system, even in the short term, demonstrates the complex nature of agency and that relations of power are always complex.

The bargaining strategies developed by Ekong and Ugbodaga-Ngu did not necessarily overtly challenge colonial authority. An emphasis on agency assumes that women are active, rational subjects who desire autonomy and self-realisation by struggling against the dominant norms and institutions that oppress them. Yet, this belies the reality that women actively adopt norms that systematically constrain their options for strategic personal or collective gain. Ugbodaga-Ngu and Ekong worked within the structural framework of the time and were highly successful. As they carved out high level careers in the arts they reproduced the hegemonies of the colonial art establishment and the social stratification of an emerging class-based system founded on wealth and access to education. However, whilst there was undoubtedly personal

and professional gain in their position, there is evidence that they were driven to initiate change and bring Nigerian control to art institutions.

Did Ugbodaga-Ngu or Ekong create any meaningful change for women? Although they did not work against the colonial system there was evidence that they fought the imposition of patriarchal values which attempted to limit women. Ekong extended her support to all artists, but interviews reveal that she offered specific advice and encouragement to younger women. One of my respondents, Ngozi Akande, stated that Ekong was her patron and mentor when the two worked together at the National Council for Arts and Culture and offered her a great deal of support and guidance: '[Ekong] told me a lot about her experiences with the men counterparts in the profession. She mentioned that a lot of them betrayed her and told me, "When they realize you are hardworking, they will fight you, but do not give up"'.¹⁹ This interviewee described developing 'kin like' connections with Ekong, she said: 'When I went for my postgraduate studies in 2006, I researched her for my master's degree thesis, she was quite friendly and took me as a daughter' (see chapter six for a more detailed discussion on networks described in terms of kin). Akande described Ekong as an 'Amazon of modern Nigerian Art' and 'a mentor to the first generation of Nigerian modern artists'. She credited Ekong with 'exposing her to international exhibitions', evidence of the social relations and networks which Ekong constructed.²⁰ This points to Ekong as an advocate who was able to bring women into supportive networks and use her own agency to help women find success.

As was common practice for elite women, Ekong took on voluntary positions and carried out charity work through her extensive network connections. She was 'part of many organisations dedicated to improving the lives of women and children'

¹⁹ Interview between Stacey Kennedy and Ngozi Akande via email July/ August 2020

²⁰ Interview between Stacey Kennedy and Ngozi Akande via email July/ August 2020

(Boram-Hays 2017:240) and made 'significant contributions [to] and positively influenced the image of the African woman, the unheard voices of the rural women, and the unseen intellectual stamina in them which probably had been suppressed by benevolent sexism or gender inequality' (Ecoma 2013:46). Ekong was the chairperson of the National Council of Women's Societies standing committee on arts and craft in 1964, and she organised the first Council of Women in Art exhibition in the same year. Her work was acknowledged in 1962 when President William Tubman of Liberia awarded her 'The Star of Dame Official of the Human Order of African Redemption' for her promotion of art and women's education in West Africa. Ekong was therefore an example of a woman responding to existing norms and rules that ground women's subordination, using her influence through her networks and status to support other women.

Erasure: Colette Omogbai (1942-)

In 2018 Iwalewahaus, University of Bayreuth and Centre for Contemporary Art, Lagos collaborated on a joint artistic research project titled *Women on Aeroplanes: Looking for Colette Omogbai*. Curated by Annett Busch, Marie-Hélène Gutberlet, and Magdalena Lipska, the research took place across the UK, Nigeria and Germany, reflecting the international art networks which underpin the Nigerian art scene. The curators identified an 'erasure' of Nigerian modern artist Colette Omogbai, who was a contemporary of Ugbodaga-Ngu and Ekong. They stated that she:

became a frame, a thread, a cause. She triggered the questions of and for research [...] Once the decision is made to go sideways — not to look for central figures but for their collaborators, the ones who were and are active alongside, who are involved but don't get the attention — once that shift is made, the historic narrative becomes interwoven with a plurality of characters potentially

hiding in the archive....*And all of a sudden so many female names pop up, and it is no longer a complaint about their going missing but the question, what is it that makes us not see them?* [my emphasis] (Busch and Gutberlet 2018)

According to the curators, Omogbai represents a legion of 'unseen' women, her story 'pervades the trajectory of many female artists across the continent' (ibid). Her story offers insight into the idea of female agency and erasure.

Although Colette Omogbai (1942-) was younger than Ekong and Ugbodaga-Ngu, she worked alongside them in the Nigerian postcolonial modernist period. In 1963, while still an art student at NCAST, Omogbai was invited by Ulli Beier to participate in an exhibition at Mbari Ibadan, an exhibition which caused a sensation for the dramatic power of her imagery as well as the clarity of her artistic vision (Okeke-Agulu 2015). The Mbari Club was a centre for cultural activity by African writers, artists and musicians that was founded in Ibadan, Nigeria, in 1961 by Ulli Beier, with the involvement of a group of young writers including Wole Soyinka and Chinua Achebe. Mbari, an Igbo concept related to 'creation' had a broad membership including: Christopher Okigbo, J. P. Clark, Ezekiel Mphahlele, Frances Ademola, Demas Nwoko, Mabel Segun, Uche Okeke, Arthur Nortje and Bruce Onobrakpeya. Omogbai was one of only three women whose work was shown at Mbari, the others being European women, Susanne Wenger and Georgina Beier (Ulli Beier's ex-wife and wife). She was the only Nigerian woman who was presented, even though Ugbodada-Ngu and Ekong were actively working. The show exposed Omogbai to transnational art networks and the social relationships cultivated by artists and writers across national borders. Her work was well received by the cosmopolitan Mbari art public, who enjoyed her radical ideology as she pushed the boundaries of what was expected, or possible, for women in this period.

Omogbai found the academic style taught at NCAST to be boring and her work avoided any mimetic, narrative realism as she embraced experimental and surrealist modes of execution. Her inclination to evoke a spiritual subconsciousness resonated with the Osogbo school's folklore tendencies, and this may well have been what drew Beier to her work. Under Beier's guidance, Osogbo artists usually based their work on myths associated with traditional Yoruba religion and were discouraged from undertaking formal European art training. Omogbai's work connected with this dreamlike focus from Osogbo, whilst being viewed as radical by her contemporaries, who considered her to be working at the forefront of the avant-garde. Her rejection of the status quo, independence and nonconformity may explain why it is so difficult to find information about her in the records.



Figure 2.14 Colette Omogbai (1963) *Agony* Courtesy of Iwalewahaus, Universität Bayreuth

The artwork which was shown at Mbari was *Agony*, a vigorous, surrealist, expressionistic work close to abstraction (figure 2.14). This rich impasto oil painting

portrays dark and sombre shapes punctuated by bright and bold twisted forms. To turn a psycho-analytical lens on Omogbai's work would reveal an intense internal state of mind. *Agony* is a painting which depicts a strong range of human emotions, the nightmarish, haunting scene of dismembered, scattered bodies and body parts is initially concealed by the disarmingly cheerful vibrant blocks of colour layered on top. Like members of the Zaria Art Society, Omogbai devised a way to 'translate nature into strictly personal language to portray mood, intensity, feeling and emotion'.²¹ *Agony* resonates with a description by curator N'Goné Fall (2007:12), who describes African women artists as: 'Vigilant, they exhume demons, hunt down preconceptions, scatter taboos, and are unafraid to reveal our darker fears. Their art is a metaphor, an ongoing transgression of all that is forbidden'. Fall's description resonates strongly with Omogbai's work.

Omogbai's work was said to 'translate nature', but she made a decisive break with any idea that women, or women's artistic inclination, was 'closer' to nature. Before Ortner (1972) questioned 'Is Female to Male as Nature to Culture?', Omogbai had rejected prescriptive models of femininity to bring 'a new resoundingly feminist dimension to the discourse of modern art in Nigeria' (Okeke-Agulu 2015:253, see chapter one on feminism). While her radical approach and innovative art practice appealed to the visitors at Mbari, others within the Lagos art establishment were more reticent. Art critic Babatunde Lawal reviewed her work for *Nigeria Magazine* (1963) and declared that she painted in a style that lacked a 'feminine touch', having taken a premature flight into abstraction without first demonstrating the mastery of mimetic representation. This criticism prompted a response from Omogbai in the form of a feminist manifesto, 'Man Loves What Is Sweet and Obvious', published in *Nigeria*

²¹ Colette Omogbai's brochure for show at Mbari Ibadan 1963 (in Ulli and Georgina Beier archive Sydney).

Magazine (1965). In her essay, Omogbai confronted assumptions about what constituted 'feminine art' and was accepted as tasteful in post independent Nigeria. She challenged the tastes of 'generic man' and was robust in her defence of abstraction, and of herself as a woman pushing the boundaries of artistic practice.

Omogbai referred to the value placed on her fellow male surrealists Emokpae and Eze and insisted on the female artist's individual right to experiment, to question tradition, to innovate and to challenge societal norms — strongly pushing her artistic agency against a paternalistic and patriarchal societal structure. This attitude was perceived by some on the conservative Lagosian scene as irreverent, undoubtedly more so because of her gender. Omogbai marks a radical rupture in ideas around the styles and forms Nigerian women were able to adopt and the mediums they were capable of utilising. She showed that producing 'feminine' art was not the concern of all women, who may wish to produce disturbing or challenging work which breaks down the tropes associated with women in society and the woman artist.

Omogbai trained in London at the Slade School of Fine Art, after which she returned to Nigeria to co-found the Olokun Gallery with Chief Ovia Idah. There is evidence that she worked with, or attempted to work with, Ekong: 'Omogbai invit[ed] Afi Ekong to Olokun Gallery in Benin City where Omogbai worked as secretary in 1965' (Onwuegbucha 2018). It is probable that she met, or worked with, Ugbodaga-Ngu whilst at NCAST or in her subsequent post with the Nigerian civil service as an art teacher and administrator. In 1976 she obtained a doctorate degree in art education from New York University, but beyond her 1963 exhibitions at Ibadan and Lagos, and the 1965 'Manifesto', little is documented of the artist or her subsequent art practice.

Institutional, societal, and academic amnesia may account for Omogbai's absence in the literature, but she expresses a desire to erase *herself* from the history

of Nigerian art. Having been contacted by one of the curators for the *Women on Aeroplanes* project she stated that she did not want to participate — communicating through family that she wanted her artistic past to be erased because it is associated with traditional belief systems in opposition to her current spiritual path (Kalichini 2019). This adds to the complexity of Omogbai's erasure, as she demonstrates agency in writing her own narrative.

Institutional amnesia or erasure is apparent in the gaps where women are missing from the written record — in the time where research has shown they were active participants. An example of women's erasure from institutional history at NCAST is the artist Josephine Omigie, who Osayimwese (2019:72) argues was a member of the Zaria Art Society, but 'has gone completely unremarked in existing scholarship'. This 'invisible Zaria Society woman' is frequently the 'only female student depicted in photographs of Art Department events' where 'she appears self-assured and at ease among her male colleagues' (ibid). She was the only woman to graduate from the Fine Arts Department at NCAST in the first five years of its existence and as such, like Ugbodaga-Ngu, would have been a key figure in the history of the art department. Once again her absence calls into question the way that the Zaria Art Society has been theorised. There are other woman artists who had studied art in Zaria and other tertiary institutions in the 1960s: Agboola Oshinowo, Chinwe Abara, Wunmi Buusuyi, Betty Bassey, and Mario Pate, but information on them is difficult to find (Akatakpo and Ubani 2004).

Omigie, Omogbai, Ugbodaga-Ngu and Ekong were well known and active in their artistic milieu. They were not 'lesser' artists at the time in which they practiced, nor were they inconsequential figures on the post-independent art scene in Nigeria. Webb (2003) notes that, over time, we are deprived of the works of women artists by

numerous acts of silencing: their works are excluded from the canon, deaccessioned from institutional collections, destroyed, or denied admission; their autobiographies unpublished; their journal entries ravaged. *Agony* sits in the Iwalewahaus Collection, University of Bayreuth, the only artwork by a woman in their extensive collection of modernist Nigerian paintings (figure 2.14). Sigert, previously the deputy director of Iwalewahaus, says it is therefore 'special by virtue of being rare'. Similarly, Ugbodaga-Ngu's painting *Abstract* (figure 2.0) sits within the Danford Collection at the University of Birmingham and is one of the only artworks by a named woman artist in the collection. Only recently, in the context of a new interest in the history of modern African art, have curators revisited these artworks, in shows such as: Okwui Enwezor's *Postwar: Art Between the Pacific and the Atlantic, 1945-1965* at Haus der Kunst, in Munich (2016-2017); *Women on Aeroplanes* at Centre for Contemporary Art in Lagos (2018-2019); and *Into the Night: Cabarets and Clubs in Modern Art*, Barbican Centre, London (2019-2020). The curators of these shows raise fresh questions about the identities of Nigerian women artists, which points to a growing awareness of their erasure.

Institutional neglect may account for the way African modern artists have been previously obscured. The challenges of researching artists on the African continent has contributed to the problems of (in)visibility and erasure of all artists over time. Record keeping can be patchy and neglected, and many archives and artworks were destroyed in the Nigerian Civil war. However, even considering these factors, the virtual absenting of women artists signals that they have been institutionally ignored in ways which have obscured or erased the significant facts of their presence, which Frederickson and Webb (2003) call 'disappearing'. Institutional amnesia accounts for women's erasure, where art history is gendered to favour men as innovators even if

the participation of women was side by side with progressive men (ibid). Nochlin (1971) suggests that preconceptions and stereotypes have allowed the canon's exclusion of women, not by conscious definition but by systematic marginalisation from important institutions, opportunities, and societal roles. Even when information about African artists has been archived, collected, or recorded, it is sparsely published due to colonial and neo-colonial structural power that dictates what, and who, the art public are interested in focusing on. When books about African art and artists are published there is always an inherent value judgement in who becomes excluded and who is included (see chapter seven, conclusion). Exposing women's erasure and paying attention to their overlooked political agency is a potent tool in understanding the shape of the contemporary art world and the legacies of exclusion and inclusion which women respond to. The following example comes from my own experience working on this art scene.

Search and Research: Ugbodaga-Ngu at auction

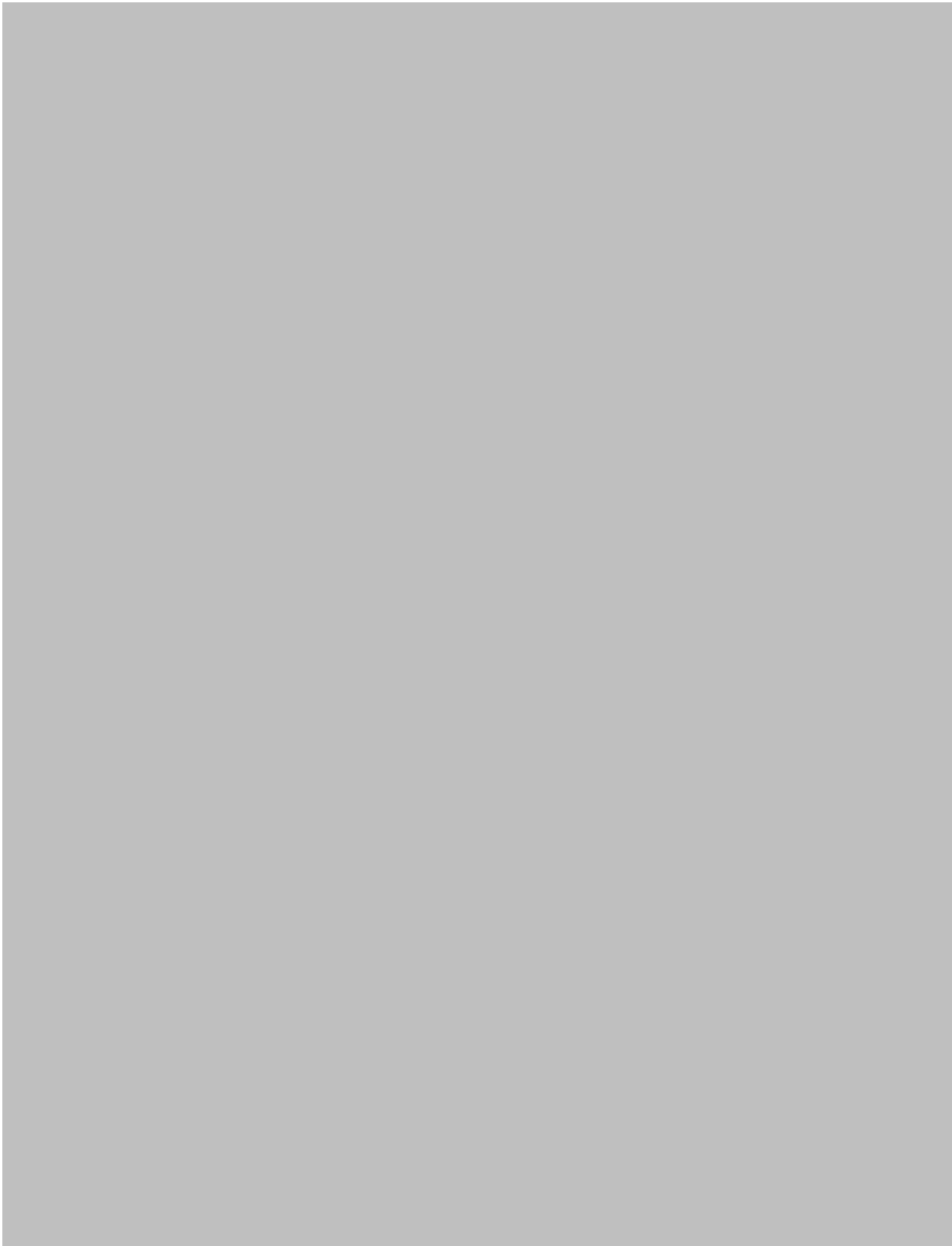


Figure 2.15 Clara Etso Ugbodaga-Ngu (1965) *Dancers* Image courtesy of Bonhams.

Over the course of my fieldwork, I experienced an event which illuminated the institutional production of knowledge about women in the Nigerian art world and the value systems by which their work is deemed important for study. Presenting a paper for *Black History Month* in October 2021 at the University of Birmingham, my topic was a celebration of Clara Ugbodaga-Ngu. Her painting, *Abstract* was on display in one of the central campus buildings (figure 2.0). An individual from the US sent me an image of the painting *Dancers* by Ugbodaga-Ngu (figure 2.15) searching for more information about Ugbodaga-Ngu. He had seen my talk advertised online. We exchanged emails and he asked me about its possible value. I advised him to contact Bonhams or Sotheby's in London for a valuation, the two auction houses being the leading UK sales platforms for Nigerian modern and contemporary art who would be interested in the painting. Ugbodaga-Ngu works are rare and there had never been a sale on the secondary auction market platform.

A few months later Giles Peppiatt, the Director of African Modern and Contemporary art at Bonhams (my contact from previous research), contacted me to say that the client had consigned the Ugbodaga-Ngu painting to them for sale in their upcoming auction. He was thrilled with the consignment and commissioned me to write an essay on Ugbodaga-Ngu for the sales catalogue. Bonhams is the market leader in the sale of African modern and contemporary art. Their marketing repeatedly valorises the work of the Nigerian male modernists, particularly members of the Zaria Art Society such as Demas Nwoko, Yusuf Grillo, Bruce Onobrakpeya, and Uche Okeke; as well as the auction favourite, Ben Enwonwu, who dominates this market. These works by male artists are simply more plentiful in supply. Bonhams make these artists visible and create a positive marketing cycle, when the work of these artists is sourced,

promoted, and sold time and again it raises their profile and draws more artworks by them onto the market.

Auction houses establish the monetary value of art and underpin the commercial gallery system, whether the sales take place in London, Lagos or Cape Town. Peppiatt and I discussed the possible value of the painting, which was difficult to set as Ugbodaga-Ngu had no history at auction and therefore no reliable market estimate. On the day of the sale the painting far exceeded the top guide price estimate, to sell for £47,750 (including premium). Thus Ugbodaga-Ngu's work was validated on the secondary art market by a high-profile institution and her name was established. Although the extent of Ugbodaga-Ngu's output and factors such as the destruction of artwork in the Biafran civil war (1967-1970) make it hard to foresee what may yet be uncovered, this sale will prompt more of her artworks to reach the market. Bonhams and Sotheby's scour the continents for works to consign, however, their record on selling work by women is dismal and Nigerian female artists account for only a tiny proportion of revenue at their African Modern and contemporary art sales. This sale of the Ugbodaga-Ngu painting is therefore very significant. Bonhams were reticent about disclosing who had purchased the artwork but did confirm that it was an institution not a private individual. If this was a large art establishment such as the Tate, Ugbodaga-Ngu will enter the 'top level' Western museum and gallery circuit of 'fine art'. Further status will be imbued on her if the institution is planning to display the artwork.

This event illuminates many of the themes which this chapter has addressed. It demonstrates art networks in operation, which connected Ugbodaga-Ngu with Bonhams and then a new institution. Birmingham University and myself were nodes in the network who facilitated the movement of artwork from the US to an unknown location. It demonstrates the production of knowledge whereby my position in the art

networks (as scholar) provided the context for the artist and artwork, my catalogue essay setting out why Ugbodaga-Ngu's work is of value and should be recognised within the canon of modern art. With this occurrence I therefore played a role in the construction of value and validation of Ugbodaga-Ngu, and this chain of events is testament to the power of the networks written about in this study. It also illuminates my own elevated position in relation to art world or academic hierarchies (see methodology, chapter one). Finally, it demonstrates that artists leave behind physical material evidence — their artwork — which accounts for their presence even when they have been obscured or erased in the written record. Through the physical emergence of *Dancers*, Ugbodaga-Ngu exercises an agency which presses upon the contemporary global art market. The artwork becomes another agent operating across the art networks alongside human associates, and historical women can be 'remembered' by the material traces of their agency they leave behind.

Conclusion

This chapter has shown that women's artistic output and contributions were visible in their time yet have been made invisible over time. It has shown how and why this has occurred. It has argued that Ugbodaga-Ngu and Ekong were important agents in the development of modernism at the dawn of an independent Nigeria and that they shaped the foundations of the contemporary Nigerian art scene and contributed to the networks which underpin the art scene today. Women artists were not prisoners of a collective destiny and were able to maintain a space of freedom for themselves. Despite the marginal role assigned to women under colonial structures, they were able to exercise agency, affect change and create artwork which contributed to the canon of Nigerian modernism. They illuminate the complex nature of agency at the intersections of economic and social privilege, race, and gender. They pushed the

boundaries of their own artistic practice to exercise autonomy in their careers, influence the careers of others, and shape the structural growth of the Nigerian art scene. Ugbodaga-Ngu, Ekong and Omogbai utilised their artistic agency to portray and envision their own tangible social value, and to engage with their rapidly changing social surroundings. These, and other women, have played a significant part in the creation of the Nigerian art canon and created channels of access to international markets, influential individuals, and creative opportunities. These modernist artists were part of a rising social strata, whose relationship building offered them agency in mobilising resources. In doing so they established the networks which contemporary women continue to build upon.

Structural forces can be both constraining and enabling, multifaceted and interrelated. Ugbodaga-Ngu, Ekong and Omogbai were both *actors* and *acted upon*, examples of women whose outputs have been subject to revision or deletion in the historical record. They demonstrate that agency is differently exercised in varying social and political contexts, and that, by definition, includes inevitable ambiguity, since it is context-specific and involves contradictory aspects that cannot easily be disentangled. Agency can sometimes be progressive, sometimes conservative, and sometimes even regressive. Ugbodaga-Ngu, Ekong and Omogbai worked within the power structures of their time, they did not attempt to overhaul them. Despite their agency — and no matter how well acclaimed their artistic output was in their own era — social and historic forces which undermined the contributions of women came to bear upon their legacies. Since the 1970s, western feminist scholarship on anthropology and art history has highlighted the exclusion of African women in the historical representation of social and economic life, which could be described as participation portrayed as exclusion (see introduction). Published critical analysis of

Ugbodaga-Ngu or Ekong's artworks is sparse, an oversight which renders art history incomplete and distorts any meaningful picture of the emergence of Nigerian modernism.

Although having been erased or made invisible from the written record, there is a growing academic interest in recovering women artists from history. As art historians turn a fresh spotlight on the emergence of modernism across the world, the artists discussed in this chapter are undergoing somewhat of a renaissance. Ugbodaga-Ngu, Ekong and Omogbai are now valorised in both popular discourse and by scholars as 'the' important women artists, not merely of their period or style, but as '*the* female artists of Nigeria'. This 'hypervisibility' prompts a serious methodological question about the category of 'exceptional woman', an accolade which points to the relatively few examples of comparable women artists. 'Pioneering' women artists are revered in the popular imagination of the public, across the world they become 'hypervisible' due to a global art world which has historically framed the 'grand masters' as male. For example, the recent upsurge of interest in, and exhibitions dedicated to, iconic figures such as Frida Kahlo, or the outpouring of grief when Kenyan artist Rosemary Karuga (1928-2021) died.²² Yet there is a small percentage of research focus or exhibition space dedicated to women artists compared to men. As Frederickson (2003) asks, how many more women have to be introduced as 'exceptional' before the trope of singularity can give way to a more contextualising rhetoric?

What lessons do contemporary women learn from Ugbodaga-Ngu, Ekong and Omogbai? Akande, one of the founders of *Female Artists Association of Nigeria* (FEAAN) works hard to keep the memory of their accomplishments and contributions

²² Rosemary Karuga was born in 1928 in Meru, Kenya and was the first woman student at Makerere University's School of Fine Art in Kampala, Uganda. She has a powerful reputation, and it is often said that the history of women's art in Kenya starts with her.

alive, she teaches young artists about the modernist artists and FEAAN dedicate exhibitions to them. How such individuals set up institutions to prevent the ongoing erasure of women, specifically the work of FEAAN, is the focus of the next chapter.

Chapter three: *Female Artists Association of Nigeria (FEAAN)*

Introduction

A river that does not know its source will soon run dry

Nigerian proverb

The previous chapter argued that female Nigerian modernist artists and arts producers — Clara Ugbodaga-Ngu, Afi Ekong, Colette Omogbai — have been subject to an erasure in the art historical literature, despite being successful and visible in their time. This chapter shows that they are celebrated by contemporary artists and curators, who refer to Ugbodaga-Ngu and Ekong's legendary status as forebears and situate these artists (and themselves) in a lineage of successful women in Nigeria. Respondents honoured these pioneers and expressed generational loyalties which strengthened network connections between women past and present. The chapter presents a case study of *Female Artists Association of Nigeria (FEAAN)*, an organisation founded in 2001 by a group of women artists who took inspiration from past women art pioneers as ancestors or elders. FEAAN is an example of women taking inspiration from their predecessors to empower contemporary women artists and form creative networks of social relations and affiliations which resist the marginalisation of women on the art scene.

The chapter develops the ideas of my interlocutors, who expressed the importance of looking to the past as a source of creative inspiration for their work. To make this point, one artist quoted the Nigerian proverb above, 'A river that does not know its source will soon run dry'.²³ Art historians of Africa make the case that the accomplishments of contemporary artists and curators in Nigeria are not

²³ Interview between Stacey Kennedy and OA, Lagos, 16th October 2019

unprecedented.²⁴ Referencing a well-known Yoruba proverb, ‘Every generation stands on the shoulders of those who came before them’, Boram-Hays (2017:240) states: ‘If we stand tall it’s because we stand on the shoulders of many ancestors’. Okediji suggests that a clear line can be traced back from today’s most successful female artists to the ‘grand lady [...] women artists in Nigeria’ (2017:32). Certainly, in interviews, contemporary female artists asserted that Ugbodaga-Ngu and Ekong were the ‘grand’ women artists whose accomplishments were to be emulated.

The social and historical settings of this chapter move from the time of Nigerian independence to the turn of the twenty-first century, as women have built institutions in response to the social and historical challenges undermining their contribution to the artistic landscape. What emerges is a contemporary art scene where women are frequently beset by similar challenges to those faced by their predecessors. In response, the founders of FEAAN built an institution that centred and promoted women’s artistic output and voiced collective concerns by identifying practical solutions to the common issues faced by women artists. Osayimwese (2019) suggests that a ‘gender-conscious’ rather than ‘gender-centric’ perspective may assist in making sense of women’s neglect in Africanist art history. I respond to Osayimwese, by working ‘gender-consciously’ to take a critical approach which decentres Western feminist theorising on marriage and motherhood and instead draws on feminist perspectives from African scholars to contextualise the agency of women.

²⁴ Bea Gassman de Sousa and Iheanyi Onwuegbucha in conversation at 1-54 FORUM, London (2019).

The Icons



Figure 3.0 Ngozi Akande (2020) *The Icons* acrylic and discarded fabrics on canvas.
86 cm x 131 cm. Image courtesy of the artist.

I begin this chapter with an artist 'remembering' the past as a source of creative inspiration in their work. *The Icons* is a painting by contemporary artist Ngozi Akande which pays tribute to Clara Ugbodaga-Ngu and Afi Ekong (figure 3.0). This demonstrates that the contemporary art community celebrate and remember these women. Akande explains that her painting 'depicts three renowned visual artists who have impacted the development of modern art in Nigeria'.²⁵ In Akande's painting Ugbodaga-Ngu is represented by her artwork *Beggars* (figures 2.1 and 2.2, chapter two) on the upper left-hand side of the image, evidence of the relevance and importance of her artistic output. Ekong appears as a ghostly figure to the bottom left of the image with her back to the viewer, her head is not a physical presence but a mere shadow or outline. Her outstretched right hand paints *Ori-Yoruba Masquerade* and a second work, *Old Lagos Yacht Club 11*, floats in the space where her head should be. Akande's inclusion of Ugbodaga-Ngu and Ekong's artwork hints at its permanence, suggesting that the material artwork is more tangible than the artists themselves. The image of Ekong in *The Icons* was lifted from a painting which Akande had previously made of Ekong at work (figure 3.1) which in turn was taken from a photograph (figure 3.2). This is a celebrated image of Ekong, recognisable by members of the Nigerian art scene. Akande often takes Ekong as the subject of her art, paying tribute to a woman who she regards as a mentor and supporter of her artistic career.

²⁵ Interview between Stacey Kennedy and Ngozi Akande via email July/ August 2020



Figure 3.1 Ngozi Akande (2014) *Untitled* Image courtesy of the artist.



Figure 3.2 Afi Ekong painting. Image courtesy FEAAN.

Dr Nike Òkúndáyé is the third 'icon' portrayed, appearing towards the top right of the image. Known as Chief Nike Òkúndáyé-Davies, or Mummy Nike, she featured in the opening vignette with Tokini Peterside and the Vice-President of Nigeria at ART X Lagos 2019 (figure 1.1, chapter one). Òkúndáyé hails from the generation following Ekong and Ugbodaga-Ngu and is an internationally well-known textile artist who owns and runs the biggest art gallery in Nigeria: Nike Art Gallery, Lekki, Lagos. She is the most fully formed character in the work, wearing her large trademark *gele* (head tie), conspicuous beaded jewellery, and clothes made of Nigerian fabric and print. Her attire and accoutrements form an iconic and well recognised silhouette (figure 3.3). Any member of the art public perusing this image would more than likely be familiar with Òkúndáyé, who has gained an iconic status in the art-historical imagination of Nigeria as well as farther afield (see chapter five for case study of Òkúndáyé).



Figure 3.3 Chief Nike Òkúndáyé-Davies, image courtesy of thisdaylive 2019

A visual analysis of Akande's painting suggests that she chose to represent these three women as 'the icons' to challenge the absence and invisibility of Nigerian women in academic art history. Her artwork draws attention to their erasure: Ekong is portrayed as a shadow, a ghost, her artwork is imprinted on her fading person; Ugbodaga-Ngu is not physically present, and her artwork is all that remains; Òkúndáyé is faceless, obscured, her mouth represented by symbols which suggest she is unable to speak, or to be heard. This suggests that Akande has made a conscious choice to paint the women in this way, she makes them her subjects and draws attention to the deleterious effects of art history, whilst celebrating them as agents. *The Icons* is therefore a visual demonstration of the complexity of women's agency, even as Akande portrays women as agents she highlights how they have been acted upon. Because they were exceptional women, they can become the subject of art history and their stories are open to interpretation — including by this research. Akande weaves the complexities of these positions across the canvas.

The Icons is at once a visual representation of women's erasure in art history, a celebration of their artistic legacy, and a reminder of the importance of remembering them. *The Icons* forms a visual and material representation of a female artistic genealogy which stretches back in time and includes the modernists and present-day female artists. Responding to, and locating themselves, in this genealogy forms a crucial part of how Akande and other women situate their own practice. Inspired by this legacy, and by the continued exclusion of the female artist, FEAAN was initiated in 2001 during an exhibition of women's art to celebrate the 41st anniversary of Nigerian independence. The leaders of FEAAN situate the institution firmly as a part of this lineage of powerful female agents in history, both in the art scene and across

society more widely. There is a long history of women organising and association forming in Nigeria (see chapter one, introduction and chapter two).

Art associations

Across Nigeria numerous associations cover a wide spectrum of religious, political, economic, and artistic affairs. Their importance is reflected in the substantial literature on this topic; scholars have written about hometown associations, indigenous knowledge and development in Nigeria (Honey and Okafor 1998) and women's associations more specifically (Deji 2005), where they explain that group membership offers the benefits of patronage, enterprise, education, apprenticeship, and protection. *Society of Nigerian Artists* (SNA) was created in 1963 to promote Nigerian artists and break away from the previous colonially controlled character of the art scene. The inception of the SNA was preceded by formal and informal consultations, negotiations, and planning meetings between the various arts producers working within the Nigerian art scene at the time of independence.

Ugbodaga-Ngu and Ekong attended the gatherings and recognised the need for a locally based, Nigerian run art society. Ekong became one of the founders of the SNA and played a key role in its promotion through her television programme which was used to publicly campaign for the radical restructuring of the art council. Ekong and Ugbodaga-Ngu were not the only women involved, Omigie (the overlooked female member of the Zaria Art Society), was also an early contributor to the founding of the SNA (Osayimwese 2019). There would have been others, yet women are almost completely obscured in its historical retelling. This is an example of institutional amnesia and the history of the inception of the SNA has therefore become another narrative in Nigerian history which centres male actors as the creative agents of resistance and change. The 'amnesia' around the involvement of women contributes

to an androcentrism which runs through the political, economic, social, and artistic institutions of Nigeria.

In theory the SNA was open to both men and women, although it developed a reputation as a male dominated organisation linked to ongoing western patronage. Akande explains: 'in this association [SNA] the women did not feel comfortable because of the men's dominance, the women were not participating in exhibitions as much as men'. This was characteristic of all associations and institutions of the time, a situation which has seen little change into the present day. The complex political history of Nigeria following the civil war (1967-1970) was characterised by rule by military dictatorship, and the patriarchal legacy of such regimes shaped the social realities of generations of women in the arts. By the 1980s a multitude of art associations were forming, but female artists continued to be excluded. For example, AKA circle, established in 1986, included academically trained artists affiliated to the Nsukka School of art, yet even successful women artists, such as Ndidi Dike or Chinwe Uwatse, were not a part of the association.

FEEAN leader Juliet Ezenwa explains the ongoing patriarchal character of artistic associations across Nigeria: 'I am the current vice president for the Guild of Fine Artists for Nigeria. There are only two females there, me and Ndidi! It is not unusual'.²⁶ Charity Ide is the representative for SNA in Port Harcourt, and she notes: 'There are three men and two women organising [...] sometimes in a meeting you may be the only female, many of them are mothers and so they don't have time to come to meetings'.²⁷ These kinds of statements are frequent refrains, which account for the need for FEEAN as an organisation for women.

²⁶ Interview between Stacey Kennedy and Juliet Ezenwa Pearce, video call, 6th July 2020

²⁷ Interview between Stacey Kennedy and Charity Ide, video call, 30th July 2020

The first documented women's economic associations in Nigeria date back to the beginning of the twentieth century, although scholars have suggested that associations were present in the country long before the colonial period (Awe 1977; Amadiume 2000). These pre-colonial associations gathered women in various community trades with the objective to preserve their economic interests and to improve their profits (Mba 1982; Denzer 1994; see chapter two on Yoruba market women associations). From the 1940's onwards, women's associations became an omnipresent social actor in southern Nigeria, and despite the constant change in Nigeria's political and economic situation, women have continually founded organisations to lobby for their collective interests. In history, as in the present, women have faced gendered expectations which construct their opportunities — but have always worked towards exercising their agency by collective action and organising (see Visoná 2021 on women-led associations in Africa).

Female Artists Association of Nigeria (FEAAN)

FEAAN was conceived by a group of women artists and curators to overcome these gendered barriers to participation in the art world and to create independent systems of support which did not rely on male dominated associational art networks. Milbourne (2021) claims that it is women who have so often identified these gaps when it comes to who is not being recognised and how and where structures need to change — a pattern which can be repeatedly observed across the Nigerian contemporary art scene. FEAAN may have co-opted the model of the male dominated art associations which excluded female participation, but as suggested above, they firmly situate themselves in a genealogy of assertive women stretching back to the female modernists and earlier. They also joined the legions of other women's associations

which exist in Nigeria (see Deji 2005), where one is able to find an association for almost any collective event or experience.

One of FEAAN's founders, Ezenwa, says that it was the challenges faced by her generation (born in the post-independence/post-civil war era) which prompted them to confront the inequities of the art world. She describes the founders of FEAAN as 'pioneers' because previously there had been 'more opportunities for women artists under the colonial regime'.²⁸ As noted in chapter two, both Ugbodaga-Ngu and Ekong received grants to study in the UK. Ezenwa elaborates: 'we were not the lucky generation who had all kinds of sponsorship from Europe, all kinds of grants to study, by the time it got to our turn all of it had been expended', (although it should be noted that only a very small number of women ever received such opportunities).²⁹ Nevertheless, Ezenwa and her colleagues responded to the post-colonial situation of women in the arts as Nigeria emerged from decades of military rule in the late 1990s. The new democratic government had initiated positivity among Nigerian artists and provoked a renewed belief in the power of contemporary art to express their lives and concerns, which Nwafor (2021:64) argues to have been an auspicious moment for women artists whose 'creative ideas aligned with the 'ample liberty' in contemporary art' (see chapter five). Ezenwa says that from the outset FEAAN was a collaborative endeavour based on collective agency, the founders saying: 'Let's begin to train the generation coming behind us to see if together we can do our little bit for changing society for the better'.³⁰ From the initial twenty participants FEAAN has grown to a membership of over 200.

²⁸ Interview between Stacey Kennedy and Juliet Ezenwa Pearce, video call, 6th July 2020

²⁹ Interview between Stacey Kennedy and Juliet Ezenwa Pearce, video call, 6th July 2020

³⁰ Interview between Stacey Kennedy and Juliet Ezenwa Pearce, video call, 6th July 2020

The mission statement of FEAAN (2022) reads: ‘to identify talented Nigerian Female Artists [to] bring positive social change in society’ and ‘foster a sense of pride and achievements among female creative professionals’. The association raises the profile of artists and professionalise the art scene, by organising training workshops and seminars for their members that take place inside and outside of Nigeria. For example, specialist art training workshops are held with the *Bruce Onobrakpeya Foundation* (an artist led NGO initiated in 1989 by artist Onobrakpeya). An important part of FEAAN’s mission is to stimulate the sale of artist’s work, through sponsoring participation in art exhibitions which facilitate promotion of artwork. Akande and Ezenwa identify women’s participation in exhibitions as key to developing collector patronage — which they claim to be central in establishing a successful art practice. Akande notes: ‘I will not say its equitable, because men always get the best patronage and the best jobs [...] the association was born out of the women not coming out for exhibition alongside their men counterparts’.³¹

According to Akande, exhibitions bring creative freedom and visibility to Nigerian women artists. FEAAN leaders encourage artists to engage in these competitive activities to obtain sales, and as such the women are in contest with each other and the wider art community, including male artists, to sell artwork. However, a spirit of collaboration underpins FEAAN’s art exhibitions, which includes garnering support from, and working with, men. Although being in competition with male artists to build their own private client base, FEAAN hold art competitions in which everyone is invited to take part. An early career artist, who is an active member of FEAAN tells me:

³¹ Interview between Stacey Kennedy and Ngozi Akande via email July/ August 2020

the men have also come to realise and appreciate us, because they've worked with us and recognise that, we know what we're doing, we are organised to the level, and they would like to collaborate with us because they've seen what we have done. We are not biased in our processes, we make sure that we are open.³²

Fostering good working relationships across the membership body and forging these relationships with male artists is a key part of FEAAN's mission. FEAAN avoid any radically exclusionary position which would alienate men, instead choosing to work collectively alongside male artists and male power holders to achieve their goals. Associations are an aspect of collective sociality and are frequently highly gender differentiated, this is an acceptable way of doing things in a Nigerian context. Here we once again witness evidence of strategic agency at play, a tactic of alignment rather than confrontation. The leaders of FEAAN say that men enjoy coming to their exhibitions to support women artists and are happy for their success. Akande elaborates:

In any major exhibitions we always have a male guest artist, especially upcoming artists. They have achieved great success through our exposure. Male artists look forward to FEAAN using them as guest artists. We have enjoyed great support from men who appreciate what we are doing for women artists in Nigeria.³³

It is notable that Akande flips the narrative here, to describe male artists seeking exposure through collaboration with the women artists of FEAAN and inclusion in their art networks. FEAAN collaborate with various partners, including the SNA, for example in March (2022) they presented an exhibition together at the National Gallery of Arts,

³² Interview between Stacey Kennedy and OE, video call 17th July 2020

³³ Interview between Stacey Kennedy and Ngozi Akande via email July/ August 2020

Abuja. A common refrain from FEAAN's members was voiced by their Executive Secretary Abigail Nnaji: 'there is strength in having movements, in artists coming together to push, change happens more effectively when we work together'.³⁴ Nnaji offered another example of this collaborative and supportive approach with men:

During the coordination [of an exhibition] there was a guy who was supposed to submit three works but the third work was yet to be completed. We live in a community, we support each other, we want everybody to grow together, we are not going to grow alone, we're going to grow together. I encouraged him, I made sure he finished the work. Even past the deadline, I had to plead on his behalf to allow him to finish. He finished the work two days before the exhibition and it happened that the work was the one chosen as the centrepiece for that exhibition.³⁵

This is where the real power of FEAAN lies, in the ability of its members and leadership team to foster constructive social relations and build networks. The social relationships which are created among men and women unfold and are performed through physical events, such as FEAAN's art exhibitions and workshops. Artist Charity Ide says:

In all aspects you need that connectivity from people out there so that you learn new things. You cannot remain at the same point you have to work, it helps your mind, to build yourself and build relationships and connectivity which are key. We all need each other. Some of the persons I have met, we are still friends until now, we are connecting and looking out for better opportunities and encouraging each other, just growing together.³⁶

³⁴ Interview between Stacey Kennedy and Abigail Nnaji, video call, 14th January 2022

³⁵ Interview between Stacey Kennedy and Abigail Nnaji, video call, 14th January 2022

³⁶ Interview between Stacey Kennedy and Charity Ide, video call, 30th July 2020

FEAAN undertake rigorous women to women mentoring, which focuses on building and developing the interpersonal relationships between elders of the association and junior artists. Young or early career artists receive solid guidance from the older, more experienced women artist leaders of the organisation who act as mentors. Being a member of FEAAN offers women social and political benefits, as they enter a network of support which can lobby on their behalf, and a platform for them to amplify their voices collectively. The members enter an occupational association, whereby the shared characteristics of life as a woman create a distinct and exclusive sense of group solidarity. These commonalities mean that through group membership alone women can expect their network to offer support in times of hardship.

FEAAN is a highly organised and socially cohesive association. The organisation carves out a narrative which highlights women's capacity to manoeuvre for their own interests and amplify their voices. FEAAN offers women a way to valorise their situation through group solidarity and positive rhetoric. As Akande says: 'With the confidence the association has instilled in the female artists, none of them give the chance to any man to pull her down'.³⁷ The focus on collective agency bolsters participants and encourages members to share and overcome challenges and obstacles to build a better life through art. One FEAAN member told me:

being in the association, it's helped because you see what other people are doing. You tend to get an idea of Okay, let me do it this way, or you are you're seeing that bad way, and then you get to meet them and ask them or how do you do this. Or what do you think I can do better, so it creates a community of

³⁷ Interview between Stacey Kennedy and Ngozi Akande via email July/ August 2020

artists basically female artist, because we share the same similarities and our strengths and our challenges.³⁸

Akande states that FEAAN was created in part to honour the legacy of women artists' who had come before. It was one of the leaders of FEAAN who quoted 'the river that does not know its source will soon run dry', discussed at the start of this chapter. As an organisation, FEAAN values the accomplishments and contributions of women such as Ugbodaga-Ngu and Ekong: '[t]he young female artists know about these modernist artists; they are studied in schools and FEAAN have dedicated exhibitions to them. I personally [include them] in our exhibition catalogue[s]'. This conscious 'remembering' may account for the fact that Ugbodaga-Ngu, Ekong and Omogbai live on in the popular imagination of the art community, even though they are overlooked in the academic record. They are actively contextualised and recontextualized as important and worthy of study by Akande and the other women in FEAAN. Without this 'remembering', claims Akande, the artistic community has no record of women's achievement and young women have no role models.³⁹

Women and wives and mothers

Interviews with members of FEAAN point to the fact that normative expectations and beliefs shape society's thinking around the role of women. Amarachi Odimba explained the 'limitations' placed on her because of her gender: 'you mustn't be too loud, mustn't be this way, it doesn't ever stop, constructing society that is really unfair to the woman'.⁴⁰ Women build their professional life around social expectations, which often mean they are unable to become full time studio artists, or even to pursue their art production in any meaningful part time way. This is due to the gendered

³⁸ Interview between Stacey Kennedy and OE, video call 17th July 2020

³⁹ Interview between Stacey Kennedy and Ngozi Akande via email July/ August 2020

⁴⁰ Interview between Stacey Kennedy and Amarachi Odimba, video call, 24th November 2020

expectations on their lives which place primary importance on fulfilling the roles of wife and mother. Younger artists are more critical than older artists about the effects of marriage upon women, and many spoke passionately against girls being forced to marry young, or contrary to their wishes. One artist told me: 'social, cultural factors [impact women] so you have women needing, for example, to be married at a certain age. It limits us. It limits all of us'.⁴¹

Interviewees suggest that a woman's ability to live life as an autonomous agent, able to freely pursue her own goals, is curtailed by society's expectations. Peju Alatise, an artist based in Nigeria whose work has been shown at 1-54 art fair, ART X Lagos and the Venice Biennale, strongly advocates for the rights of women and girls. Alatise is an outspoken campaigner for women's rights, engaging with debates around marriage, childbearing, and childcare responsibilities (see chapter one, introduction and chapter six on Alatise). Alatise (2018) outlines the pressure on women in Nigeria:

Nigeria is a place where being single is worse than cancer. People want to pray for you or exorcise the childless demon in you. It is unthinkable to be unmarried without children and worse still, to choose to be unmarried without children. Being an artist does not come without prejudice either. There are confrontations almost every day.

The challenges of marriage and children are no new phenomenon for women in Nigeria, or indeed for women across the world, where such pressures have constricted women's art making in Europe and America for centuries. Fall (2007:71) claims that women are able to 'pursue professional careers as long as this [does] not interfere with their duties as wives and mothers'. She goes on to explain that '[u]ntil the late 1980s being a female artist was supposed to be a part time diversion [...] when they

⁴¹ Interview between Stacey Kennedy and OE, video call 17th July 2020

did paint, they were supposed to produce pretty canvases to be hung in the home of the local bourgeoisie. No questions, no provocations' (ibid). Ugbodaga-Ngu voiced the same limitations in the 1950s:

The repressive context of art making in Nigeria and other parts of Africa has made it difficult for women to produce art. It adversely affected my work because women are expected to marry, raise children, and become domesticated and subordinate partners in marital relationships (quoted in Okediji 2017:35).

Ugbodaga-Ngu was able to navigate a successful career as a married woman, but this is certainly not the case for all. Osayimwese (2019:69) suggests that Omigie (the only woman Zaria artist, see chapter two) was displaced from consideration as a serious artist by her role as a wife and mother. Osayimwese (ibid) states that: 'a woman's social status was closely aligned with her reproductive power. These ideas still exerted a strong influence among educated urban men and women in the 1960s and beyond'.

As Osayimwese suggests, women's contributions to art history are frequently framed around gendered roles. For example, Ecoma's (2013) biography of Afi Ekong attributes her career progression to Abdul Azziz Attah, who she married two years after her graduation:

The marriage enabled her geometric progression as a lone female careerist, in a male dominated profession, and at a time she had no female predecessor in Africa

It is unclear on what basis Ecoma (ibid) claims that the marriage 'enabled' her 'progression'. The author is inconsistent, he goes on to note: 'She was a well-trained artist equipped with the necessary theoretical background to the practise and demonstration of her arts profession', and that her success was due to 'her position in

society, public visibility in terms of professional image, and economic leverage' (ibid:56). Why then Ekong required her marriage, or leant on her husband for progression, is not clarified. This is typical of a lazy representation of women which attributes women's success to a male patron (see chapter five).

Ekong's success was aided by her family wealth and socially elevated background as an Efik women benefitting from a system of bilateral inheritance where all children inherit from their parents regardless of their gender. As a woman of independent means, Ekong was educated, well-travelled and socially well-connected from the outset. She possessed abundant social agency in her own right and was forging her own career path before her marriage. Ecoma may be correct that art making was a male dominated profession at that time, but to disallow the possibility that Ekong found her success on her own merit is a pervasive trope which frequently recurs in the writing about women in history.

The Christian practice of marital name change — so that the wife takes on her husband's family name — is an element of the nuclear family ideal promoted by European missionaries in Nigeria and is a practice which erases women, or at least makes them harder to find in history. In Nigeria, as elsewhere, marriage took on different meanings in different regions over time. Colonisation brought English laws to Nigeria whereby marriage naming practices became associated with the patriarchal concept of woman-as-property, heavily impacting the ability of women to claim personhood. This contravened Yoruba customary laws, which recognised the right of married women to own property. Furthermore, it did not automatically endow a single wife and her children with the right to inherit a man's possessions upon his death. In Nigeria, as in Europe and North America, the perceived legal and social impact of marriage on women's identities has often made it difficult to write their histories.

Returning to Omigie, Osayimwese (2019:69) claims that she lost her identity in marriage:

It is at the moment of marriage and childbirth that Osayimwese Omigie's art historical biography goes awry. Her first child, a son, was named Ikponmwosa. It is telling that her name, "Josephine Ifueko," has somehow been supplanted by her son's name in some published sources. While the slippage might be attributable to a simple typographical error, it also illustrates the dynamics at work in her exclusion: in the minds of some of her male colleagues

Osayimwese therefore claims that marriage and childbirth may account for losing trace of Omigie in the archive and highlights the dynamics and mechanisms of exclusion which confront women artists. Akande and the other leaders of FEAAN tell me that marriage is one of the most pressing concerns of the organisation, because so few women visual art graduates from the academic institutions of Nigeria practice the profession after they are married.

Alongside marriage comes the pressure to have children, as one young female artist said: 'You know, you need to bear children, you need to do this soon after marriage'.⁴² Respondents expressed how having children could reduce their time and attention spent on their work, for example: 'sometimes the children get in the way, you have to get it done in one week and they end up doing it in two weeks, because the child keeps getting in the way or sometimes you actually want to do something and then the child is sick'. When questioned whether the father could help out more at these times, the answer was that things are simply 'as they are':

⁴² Interview between Stacey Kennedy and OE, video call 17th July 2020

The husband can do that, but it's like a basic routine you know, the woman is not going to an office, a few of them have a studio elsewhere, but even then they go with their children.⁴³

This brings up another common issue for women, the idea that they are solely responsible for looking after the home, or that their 'place' is in the home. An artist stated that: 'you need to look after your husband and do all of those things he needs you to do'. For women artists, the central place of the home as their domain limits their ability to retreat to their own studio and work in solitude. The workplace is an important aspect of mothering because it determines the availability of the mother to perform her mothering role, or conversely, her professional role.

The members of FEAAN use their art to represent women's lives in all their complexity. Artists may reproduce the ubiquitous 'African woman with baby on her back' trope, see figure 3.4, which indicates a woman working in two jobs: mothering and carrying out productive (primarily agricultural) labour. In figure 3.5 the women appear well dressed and confident, enjoying a discussion together, yet the focus of their talk centres upon the baby. This image appears to suggest the community aspect of mothering and childcare, women relying on their friends and community to support them with their children. Although women continue to rely on mothering networks-of-care to support their activities, shifts in kinship bonds due to an increased split between family and workplace environments, as well as increasing geographical mobility in women's employment, have made it more difficult for women to access support. This is where an association such as FEAAN is able to make an impact, as its members can offer a caring network of social relations based on understanding, similar experience and practical advice.

⁴³ Interview between Stacey Kennedy and OE, video call 17th July 2020

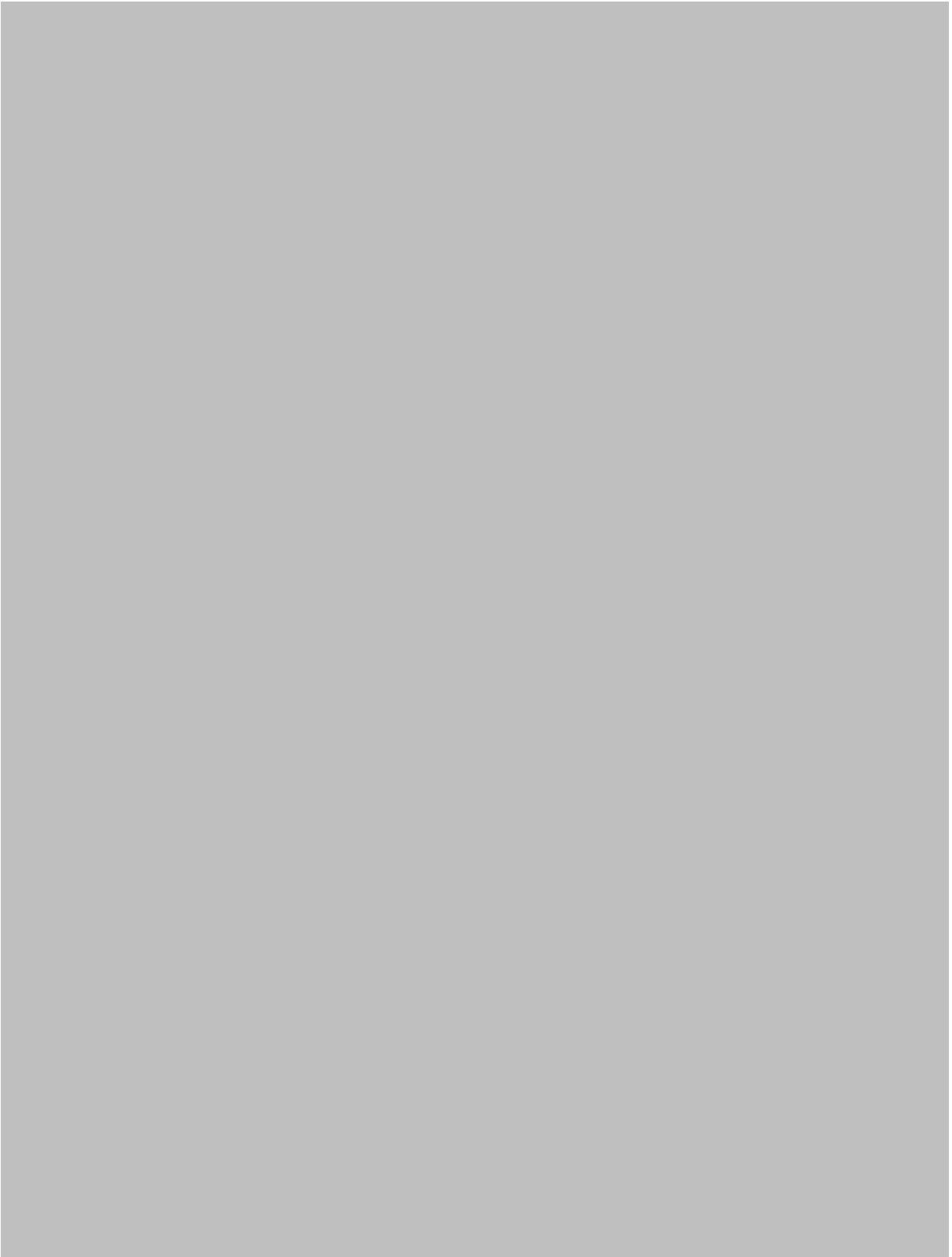


Figure 3.4 Artwork portraying 'motherhood' Baby on the mothers back (From FEAAN's website, artist clarification sought)



Figure 3.5 Artwork portraying 'motherhood' Three women looking at a baby (From FEAAN's website, artist clarification sought)

In addition to looking after husband, children and home, the leaders of FEAAN informed me that women are expected to engage in multiple job roles across the formal and informal sector. As in history, where Ugbodaga-Ngu was an educator as well as artist, writer, and art administrator and Ekong was able to make an independent living from art because she took on additional work to support herself, across the art sector women work as artists *and* curators, gallery owners *and* media personalities, arts administrators *and* wives, mothers, mentors *and* philanthropists. Interviews suggested that young women may not even view themselves as working in multiple roles, but instead consider their activities as part of their artistic career 'package'. I asked artist Amarachi Odimba if she had to take on a second job to maintain her artistic practice and this was her somewhat perplexing response:

No. I am a full-time studio artist. But I actually teach from time to time, but I don't have a regular job. No, I don't. Yes, I'm a full-time studio artist. I do it [the paid work], part time, I am a part time art coordinator, at the *Institute de Francais de Nigeria*.⁴⁴

Interestingly, Odimba went on to list various other jobs she had, including running 'art classes in her house'. She noted that 'there might be a time where the art isn't paying' [when she has to] 'fill my art with something else'.⁴⁵ Being a full-time artist is therefore not always a woman's only full-time occupation. This artist did not see herself as working more than full time, she appeared to understand a full-time studio practice as involving other top up art activities. While male artists often shared similar experiences — the concept of 'hustling' for work and taking on multiple roles a common notion in Nigeria — the pressures of combining productive and reproductive labour appeared to bear more heavily on women artists.

Women's experiences of motherhood and marriage are influenced by multiple layers of intersecting factors such as race, gender and class, political changes, and social, economic, and geographical mobility. FEAN identify and tackle common issues pragmatically to offer practical support and guidance, which is appreciated by their members. An early career artist stated that: 'As a woman, we need an association [...] you can't deny the challenges of the female artist that is why FEAN is there'.⁴⁶ Leaders and mentors at FEAN have experienced life as a woman and the challenges which younger women face. They can therefore provide practical help and encouragement to allow artists to continue making, promoting, and selling their art and thus develop their careers post-marriage. Of primary importance is encouraging

⁴⁴ Interview between Stacey Kennedy and Amarachi Odimba, video call, 24th November 2020

⁴⁵ Interview between Stacey Kennedy and Amarachi Odimba, video call, 24th November 2020

⁴⁶ Interview between Stacey Kennedy and OE, video call 17th July 2020

married women to continue taking part in exhibitions locally and internationally, where mentors go to great lengths to offer practical support and prepare their mentees for art events. Akande, for example, actively encourages enrolment in art exhibitions, helps artists to complete forms and offers references, checks up on her mentees prior to the event, and often goes as far as transporting women and their artwork to the shows:

I have personal relationships with the members. If members don't participate in exhibitions, I contact them to find out why. I personally go to pick up works of artists for exhibitions.⁴⁷

Ezenwa explained that it is necessary for her to help her mentees to prepare for art exhibitions because younger artists can be unaware of the demands of the art market. She said: 'I decided to form that group [Art Alliance 51] as there were a couple of younger artists who were looking up to me and asking me all the time, what do we do next, how can we do this, can we do this can we do that'.⁴⁸ To help them experience the demands of the commercial art world she decided to 'rent a space and have a group exhibition and do it in the style in which art fairs are done, so that each artist has a corner and when art enthusiasts come you talk to them, you pitch your art, and it will prepare you for international art fairs'.⁴⁹ This offered artists the chance to develop their confidence when talking to clients and 'to create a platform on which they can have first-hand experience right here in Nigeria so that they are very prepared internationally'. This helped artists and curators learn how to put on an art event, take pride in organising events to a high standard, and become professional in their activities:

⁴⁷ Interview between Stacey Kennedy and Ngozi Akande via email July/ August 2020

⁴⁸ Interview between Stacey Kennedy and Juliet Ezenwa Pearce, video call, 6th July 2020

⁴⁹ Interview between Stacey Kennedy and Juliet Ezenwa Pearce, video call, 6th July 2020

FEAAN allows us to coordinate the exhibition, and we did a fantastic job, everybody was impressed because [it was] so well organised, everything was neat, and professionally done.⁵⁰

This kind of preparation, confidence building and professionalisation of the art world was cited by FEAAN members as key to their progress on the art scene, for example one mid-career artist said: 'I did not really understand how to navigate art fairs, or even art exhibitions, until I connected with FEAAN, my mentor came to my house, helped me to prepare and talked me through the kind of questions which I would face at the exhibition. It is good to not feel alone'. She continued:

I mean there are so many things we learned from the association, you know they taught us how to create works, how to make sure you have art readily available for sale, because if a client comes and says, I want to buy three works, do you have three works to show? So that's helped train us to have works in storage.⁵¹

Practical advice and guidance regarding what to produce and how much to produce demonstrates how FEAAN support women with the everyday decisions that affect their work and life. Artists cited many of these kinds of benefits which they enjoy as members of FEAAN, including: how to package artworks, present your work, submit an international or professional submission, crop your artworks, and label your work. Selling art is a demanding venture which demands a level of business acumen, and the mentorship of FEAAN veterans helps younger artists to develop these skills.

By encouraging married women to continue making art, FEAAN then shows, by way of experience, that women can combine a career and a family. The women take

⁵⁰ Interview between Stacey Kennedy and OE, video call 17th July 2020

⁵¹ Interview between Stacey Kennedy and OE, video call 17th July 2020

a conciliatory stance to heterosexual marriage, in fact, some respondents told me that women can become empowered, autonomous, and more effective art agents if they make a good marriage. One of FEAAN's supporters is Susa Rodriguez-Garrido, a European woman supporter of FEAAN. She tells me about a woman who complains to her that *not* having a husband holds her back:

she said to me so many times that obviously she's around 40 years old and she is not married and she doesn't have kids, so she said to me, it's kind of funny, it is still quite difficult for me to make it as an artist because I don't have anybody to support me.⁵²

When I met the artist she had been describing, Abigail Nnaji, we explored this claim in detail. The artist stood by this position, and explained how having a husband would be of benefit to her career:

If the woman is lucky and the husband is taking care of the bills, she may not be so stressed out about how to make money [...] I think basically in Nigeria most men actually take care of their women they're not asking them to go and bring money.⁵³

Nnaji points to a widely held expectation that the primary wage earner will be male, and his financial support is required for women to carry out artistic practice or a career in art. Although not a progressive positioning, this kind of strategic thinking resonates with work by scholars such as Beoku-Betts (1976), who provides examples of African women developing methods to exercise their agency within marriage. Overall FEAAN take a pragmatic and conciliatory approach to marriage which encourages women to

⁵² Interview between Stacey Kennedy and Susa Rodriguez-Garrido, video call, 10th January 2022

⁵³ Interview between Stacey Kennedy and Abigail Nnaji, video call, 14th January 2022

pursue their artistic practice *alongside* functioning as wives and mothers, to make little challenge to the system under which women's lives are framed.

This is an assuaging stance, which acknowledges that women are expected to marry and bear the responsibilities of children. All but one of the leaders of FEAAN are married and no one suggested to me that an aversion to marriage is any solution for women. Although the women involved with FEAAN talk in terms which resonate with feminist discourse (women's empowerment, resisting male domination, women 'on top' and so on) there was little suggestion that things could structurally be any different to the way they are. Rather, FEAAN promotes a narrative which suggests that women can 'have it all' and one of the leaders describes the additional pressures on women to earn money: 'as well as wife and mother the woman also needs to support the family'.⁵⁴ This outlook is what leads to women taking on multiple job roles as described earlier. Akande shares her own story, to demonstrate that combining art making, marriage and children can bring positive benefits to the family: 'Being a woman in the art world is quite encouraging, the first substantial money that came to my family after our marriage was from art sales'.⁵⁵ Hard work is valued and taking on both productive and reproductive labour is encouraged (figure 3.6).

Artwork reflects the contradictory and complex nature of women's lives, demonstrating that there is no 'one way' to be a woman. Figure 3.6 plays to the trope of hard-working rural woman, carrying pots on her head to highlight her strength and resilience. In this sphere women can use their art as a representation of power, they utilise tactical agency to portray themselves as strong, autonomous and career minded. Figure 3.7 shows 'an editor' hard at work, portraying the office-based worker

⁵⁴ Interview between Stacey Kennedy and OA, Lagos, 16th October 2019

⁵⁵ Interview between Stacey Kennedy and Ngozi Akande via email July/ August 2020

at a desk with a laptop and mobile phone. Although this is far from the woman with baby on her back trope seen in figure 3.4, both images show women as strong and autonomous individuals.



Figure 3.6 Ngozi Akande (2019) *My Strength Lies in Hard Work* image courtesy of the artist



Figure 3.7 Abigail Nnaji (2019) *Editor in Chief* Woman working at a desk on a computer - image courtesy of FEAAN

FEAAN is an organisation where women lift other women. Women support their female artist colleagues in meeting the challenges of the art world, by using the tools of collaboration and the professionalisation of art. They provide supportive social relations through networks based on familial bonds and an understanding of the real issues faced by women, where knowledge is passed down from mentor to mentee.

Akande describes the relationship she had with her own mentor, Prof Bridget Nwanze, the pioneer President of FEAAN. Akande says: '[she] taught me accountability, prudence, discipline, selflessness, sincerity, and fair play. When I took over as president of the association in 2011-2018, I consolidated the legacy she left behind.' Akande became the President and Secretary of FEAAN under the leadership of Nwanze, 'us[ing] her art as an advocacy for women rights and empowerment' and 'mentor[ing] younger women, children and artists through her art workshops, art competitions and career exposés'.⁵⁶

A graduate of Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria (previously NCAST), with a masters and PhD in art history from the same institution, Akande is an educated individual (figure 3.8). As well as FEAAN, she has been secretary for the SNA in Abuja and passes her knowledge and experience on to the current FEAAN President, Chinze Ojobo. This highlights a lineage of women who share experiences and invest time and energy in supporting one another. A shared vision fosters a sense of pride and achievement among creative professionals. This was an exchange with one of the FEAAN leaders:

AN- we've learnt so much, I've been with FEAAN for about 20 years, and we have the younger ones who join and we like to train them and tell them how to sell, how to make money, how to break even, how to grow

SK: So you pass it on?

AN- To the next generation, yes that's it⁵⁷

At FEAAN, seniority is the main category influencing a woman's place in the association, the wider network and access to network resources. One has to be a

⁵⁶ Interview between Stacey Kennedy and Ngozi Akande via email July/ August 2020

⁵⁷ Interview between Stacey Kennedy and Abigail Nnaji, video call, 14th January 2022

woman to be part of the association, but seniority trumps ethnicity, education, or class within the organisation. This means that the women who act as mentors understand the pressures that younger women face when trying to forge an artistic career, and the demands made upon them from societal pressures to fulfil certain gender roles. By constructing and developing networks shaped by generational experience, FEAAN reflects the fact that younger women are likely to seek large and diverse social networks which centre a patron as gatekeeper (chapter five explores patron-client systems).

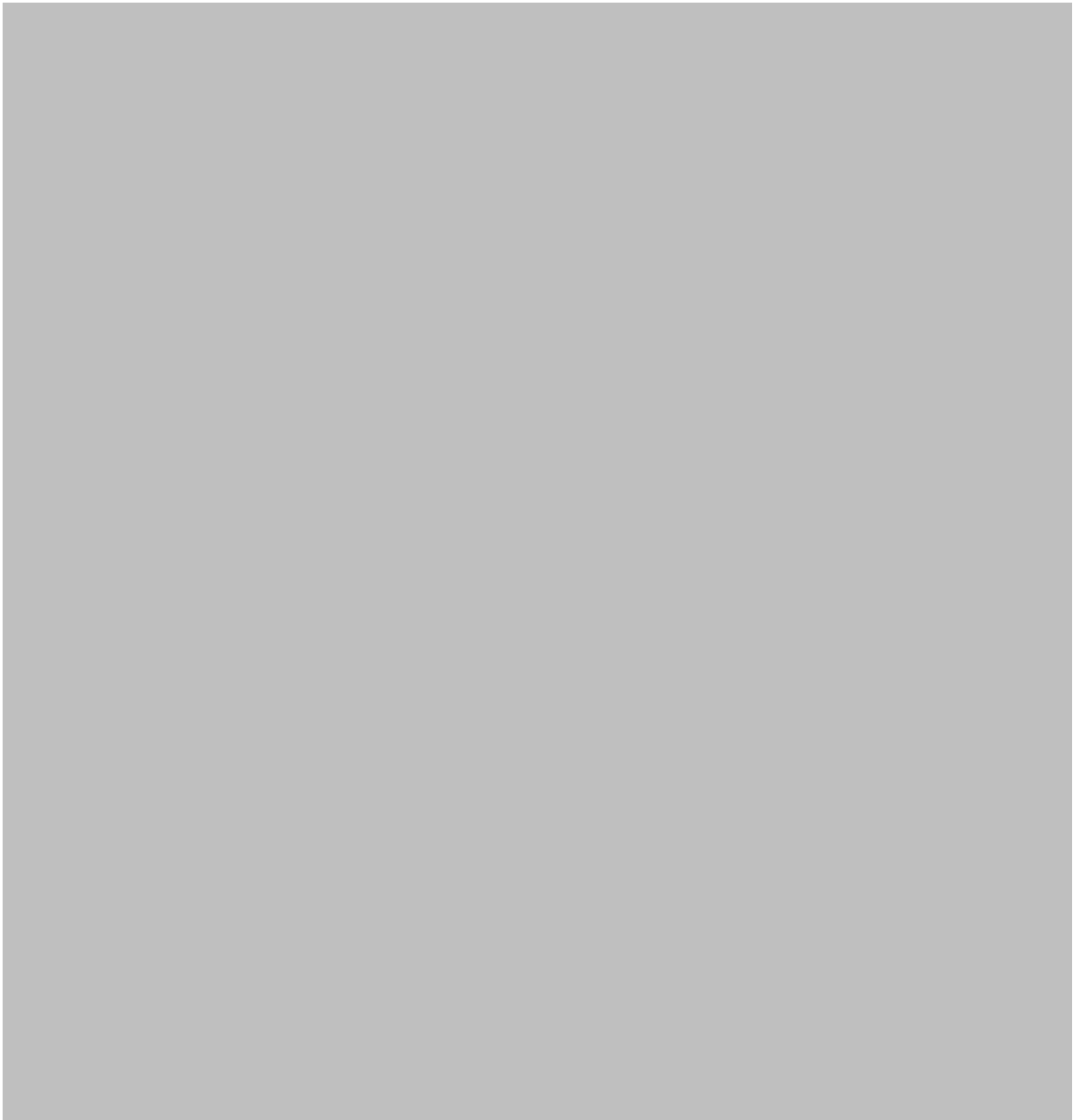


Figure 3.8 Ngozi Akande painting in her studio. Image courtesy of the artist.

FEAAN and funding

The leaders of FEAAN form partnerships with state institutions, international embassies, cultural or diplomatic missions, NGOs, international development agencies, and multinational companies to access funding and profile-raising opportunities for their members. Although not immediately apparent candidates for ‘art producers’, such institutions play an influential and integral role in the postcolonial

setting of the African art world (see Siegenthaler 2018). Ezenwa describes how she was able to exploit these opportunities from the 1980s onwards and was able to 'see what she could get out of it'. She notes:

I began partnering with civil society groups and gender-based NGOs, doing workshops for young people and women especially. I am being a voice, mostly because we are in a society where women are told to shut up all the time, that they are to be seen and not heard, [I began] using my art as a platform, to speak and advocate for women's rights.⁵⁸

⁵⁸ Interview between Stacey Kennedy and Juliet Ezenwa Pearce, video call, 6th July 2020



Figure 3.9 A poster for FEAAN in collaboration with The Mexican Embassy for IWD 2016

FEAAN's base is in Abuja, Nigeria's capital city, which is the administrative centre for many NGO and development agencies. Engagement with organisations which offer global platforms of visibility allows artists to reach an international and monied client base and access opportunities for funding and exposure. FEAAN form partnerships

with a wide variety of institutions, for example collaborating on the exhibition *Pledge for Parity* with the Mexican Embassy (figure 3.9), or *The Beauty of Nigeria* with the Korean Embassy (figure 3.13). Akande states that ‘one of the things [she] achieved as the president of FEAAN was to expose the female artists to the international community [...] [she is] connected to the art scene nationally and internationally’ through international diplomatic channels, agencies, and institutions.⁵⁹ Akande and the FEAAN leadership team have been extremely successful in leveraging financial and other support for projects which benefit their members. Any connections or collaborations which build contacts and can grow the network of an artist are welcome by the leaders of FEAAN. Their primary goal is always to raise the profile of their artists, stimulate sales and identify long term financial streams to maintain their practice.

Akande’s participation in sponsored events has taken her outside Nigeria to work with partners abroad. She is a member of UNESCO *Resilient Artists* and represented Nigeria in the *Art for Peace Camp* (2016), Andorra.⁶⁰ Akande has sourced opportunities for members to obtain scholarships for postgraduate places to study peace and conflict resolution at Nile University of Nigeria, with the goal of helping women to express themselves using their art to promote peace through therapy. FEAAN point out that their membership cuts across all the ethnic groups in Nigeria, an ethical and inclusive position which plays to the ambitions of NGO or development agencies to promote harmony and centre women’s capacity for peace building. This echoes the ethical stance of the cosmopolitan, and Reilly (2016) suggests women’s

⁵⁹ Interview between Stacey Kennedy and Ngozi Akande via email July/ August 2020

⁶⁰ Akande has participated in numerous international events, her artwork *My Culture My Heritage* was selected to represent Nigeria for the United Nations 75th Anniversary celebration in New York (2020); she served as host for the International Child Art Foundation art workshop (2015) at the World Children Festival at the Ellipse Washington and launched the Children Creativity Fair (2019) to mark the *Day of the African Child* celebration.

NGOs and their networks are transnational actors in global forums and can be seen to constitute new forms of cosmopolitan citizenship and a shift to cosmopolitan democracy.

Sources of funding for FEAAN's exhibitions, or for individual members, may therefore come from organisations with vested outside interest in, and agendas for, women's lives and activities. NGO charity or development agencies may be keen to work with FEAAN to encourage universal 'democratic' processes which include the promotion of women, and FEAAN appropriate events such as *International Women's Day* (IWD) as a framework to raise their profile. FEAAN members exercise a strategic agency by aligning with such campaigns. Through such alignment, members can raise their visibility and garner financial sponsorship. They can also maximise leverage through picking up on the discourse of international rights through collaboration with NGO, or development agencies, who speak the language of human, gender, and women's rights. A mid-career artist and leader of FEAAN told me:

when we have exhibitions, we come up with a theme. Because we also use the United Nations International Women's Day which usually has an annual theme, we use their theme to create ours. We say, okay, this is the theme for this, everybody go create an artwork that talks about the theme, and then we have the exhibition and most times you know, luckily we sell. Having a theme that people want to hear, it helps us sell.⁶¹

FEAAN leaders highlight the concerns of their members over 'women's issues' to connect and align with the global celebration of IWD. They engage with the rhetoric around IWD by participating in hashtags, for example *#breakthebias* (against women)

⁶¹ Interview between Stacey Kennedy and OA, Lagos, 16th October 2019

a tag which called for a 'a gender equal world' of 'women's equality' (International Women's Day 2022) (figure 3.10).



Figure 3.10 Poster for a FEAAN exhibition in Port Harcourt, 2022

In addition to funding and partnering with FEAAN on exhibitions, NGO and development agencies seek artwork for use in their campaigns. They require images which will form visual prompts to promote their specific agendas. These representations may send out ideas around the concerns or activities of women, highlight a particular way of 'being' a woman, or promote thoughts around women's empowerment. The artists in FEAAN submit their artwork to competitions run by NGO or development agencies who ask artists to respond to a theme. Or their work may be picked up by such organisations when they are looking for images to promote a certain cause. For example, in 1992 the World Health Organisation (WHO) adopted Akande's artwork, *Life First Food* as the poster for their campaign to promote six months of exclusive breastfeeding for babies in Nigeria (figure 3.11). The artwork is a pastel painting of a breastfeeding baby which centres the child and the woman's breast, her breast being the only part of her that is present. Here the woman is a provider of nutrition, we know nothing about who she is, or her life. Her primary role is that of mother. This image was adopted for a specific purpose with a clear ambition to relay a particular campaign message. Akande gained from this transaction financially, the campaign offered her exposure, and her artwork was seen by a wide audience: the image was used in WHO's campaign for ten years.



Figure 3.11 Ngozi Akande *Life First Food* image courtesy of the artist

There are many gains for an artist who can create or shape a narrative around their artwork which plays to a particular theme and is picked up by an institution which could fund them or buy the rights to the image. One mid-career FEAAN artist told me: ‘as an association growing up, we discovered there was a need for us to write a story. I learned that [for each artwork] you need to write a story, you need to learn how to write the story of [the] work’.⁶² Artists who want to connect with NGOs or development agencies to increase their networks and gain visibility tell me that they are happy to deliver solicited themes. They may even have pre-existing artwork which can be tailored or adapted to meet requirements.

⁶² Interview between Stacey Kennedy and OA, Lagos, 16th October 2019

One artist expands on how she creates a narrative around her artwork to fulfil the thematic requirements of NGO or development agency sponsored shows or competitions:

SK- Do you feel pressure to create work which responds to a certain theme?

AN- You know, most of the time the paintings are related, so irrespective of the theme, once you have a woman in the painting or an abstract that has a figure that looks like a woman it kind of flows with the theme [...] or you create a story around the work.⁶³

The supporter of FEAAN, Susa Rodriguez-Garrido, quoted previously in this chapter is heavily involved with the art scene in Abuja. She suggested that women exercise agency to 'play the system'.⁶⁴ By this she meant that they are savvy in when and where to seek out opportunities. She explained that early career artists use short term strategies to achieve their career goals. They may adapt their work to fit the demands of the development agency or NGO, to seek visibility as they build up their artistic profile. Engagement in such activity also builds their networks of support and patronage. Strengthening their networks ultimately allows them to form a more autonomous career. She elaborated:

They may engage for two, three years then they are able to go and make their own artwork and respond to the issues which they prioritise. This may include gender, or they may move away from this, sometimes the women enjoy these themes, but sometimes then women want to think about other things. There are many other issues in Nigeria to focus upon.⁶⁵

⁶³ Interview between Stacey Kennedy and Abigail Nnaji, video call, 14th January 2022

⁶⁴ Interview between Stacey Kennedy and Susa Rodriguez-Garrido, video call, 10th January 2022

⁶⁵ Interview between Stacey Kennedy and Susa Rodriguez-Garrido, video call, 10th January 2022

Rodriguez-Garrido went on to describe how women can maximise the opportunities of sponsorship or patronage from NGO or development agencies, given the transient nature of staff in these institutions. Postings to Nigeria tend to be short term, so there is a fresh perspective with every incoming staff member who views an artist's oeuvre as if it were newly created. As such, artists do not need to waste time creating brand new works for sponsored shows or competitions. Both Rodriguez-Garrido and Nnaji suggest that artists may recycle old artworks, or adapt them to fit the required theme, which suits the changing priorities of any specific organisation.

Another example of a development sponsored artwork is *Violate* by Clara Aden (figure 3.12). Aden comments on the abuse and silencing of women, and by choosing this subject matter, the artist makes a direct appeal to stop the mistreatment of women. This would resonate with activists across the world who work on domestic violence and women's rights. This image transmits a powerful message and Aden's drawing won the *Global Network for Rights and Development* (GNRD) international art prize, an accolade which was of benefit to her career.



Figure 3.12 Clara Aden (2015) *Violate* image courtesy of FEAAN

As women such as Aden or Akande lift their artistic profile through collaboration with international funding bodies and align with international rights discourses, particular ideologies may emerge and be promoted through their art. Aden's work may perpetuate the idea of 'African woman as victim', silenced and without agency. Akande's image of a breastfeeding baby is framed to suggest that the central role in a woman's identity is as mother, her most pressing responsibility is to her child. As the primary caregiver, she alone is responsible for nurturing the child and providing for its needs. Even the promotional material for FEAAN's collaborative art exhibitions transmit ideas around womanhood. Figure 3.13 advertises a show in collaboration with Nike Art Gallery and the Korean Embassy, the chosen image plays to an idea of women as representing the 'beauty of Nigeria'. This connects an image of the country

with the idea of a beautiful woman, placing the visual aesthetics of women as central. These images do not necessarily promote a progressive idea of Nigerian womanhood.

Female artists maximise the opportunities provided by outside agencies to access funding and raise their profile. Akande and Aden gain from these transactions, as this kind of exposure allows certain artists to work the system for their personal gain. However, Abu-Lughod (2015) critiques the ways in which international agencies impose ideas of what women's concerns should be without properly consulting local women. What she hints at, is that as FEAAN encourage artists to adapt to the themes and concerns of NGO and development agencies this may, in the long term, be counterproductive in developing feminist agendas and realising women's agency independent from partisanship.

As women lift their profile through such collaboration with international funding bodies and align with international rights discourses, particular ideologies emerge. As ideologies are picked up by artists and transmitted into and through their artwork, messages are read by the viewer and will have some affect upon them. In this, the artwork itself is an agent which can transmit ideas to the public who view the work (see chapters four and six). Thus, the agency of artist and artwork is exercised through social relations. If this leads to the circulation of a reductive notion of womanhood, this can be counterproductive in the fight for women's rights. The artwork borrowed for campaigns, and the links with development ideology, may reinforce tropes of women as ineffectual or situated rural players.

However, as an early career artist and member of FEAAN tells me: 'if you don't have a seat at the table, if no one sees your painting, what can you do anyway, how can you change anything if no one sees you?'⁶⁶ For decades women have sought

⁶⁶ Interview between Stacey Kennedy and OE, video call 17th July 2020

visibility and asserted agency by getting their work seen by as wide an audience as possible. Ugbodaga-Ngu and Ekong showed their work at numerous state or Foreign Office sponsored shows and exhibitions, including the British Council, Commonwealth Institute Art Gallery, United States Information Office and the Federal Ministry of Information. The artists in FEAAN mirror Ugbodaga-Ngu and Ekong's way of working within the structures of the time to show their work to as wide an audience as possible and access the resources available to them. This highlights once again the complex interface between personal gain for one woman and collective gain for women as a group, to demonstrate the complexity of agency.

The members of FEAAN do not attempt to overhaul the structures which can define their lives. They take a conciliatory stance on male inclusion in the association's exhibitions and promote conservative attitudes to marriage and childbearing. The way they encourage, and perhaps overstate, the idea of women's agency and choice may actually mask the continued social inequalities which women face. Linking local demands for women's rights with international struggles for rights can move advocacy for women into 'local-global' spaces' (Reilly 2007:115), where women's rights work intersects with global institutional politics and class inequalities. One could say that the collaboration between FEAAN artists and NGO or development agencies demonstrate bargaining strategies, which make no challenge to women's structural subordination. As Charrad (2010) notes, the universalising agenda of 'women's rights' can be counterproductive, if it masks continued inequality to achieve tick box success for donors abroad.

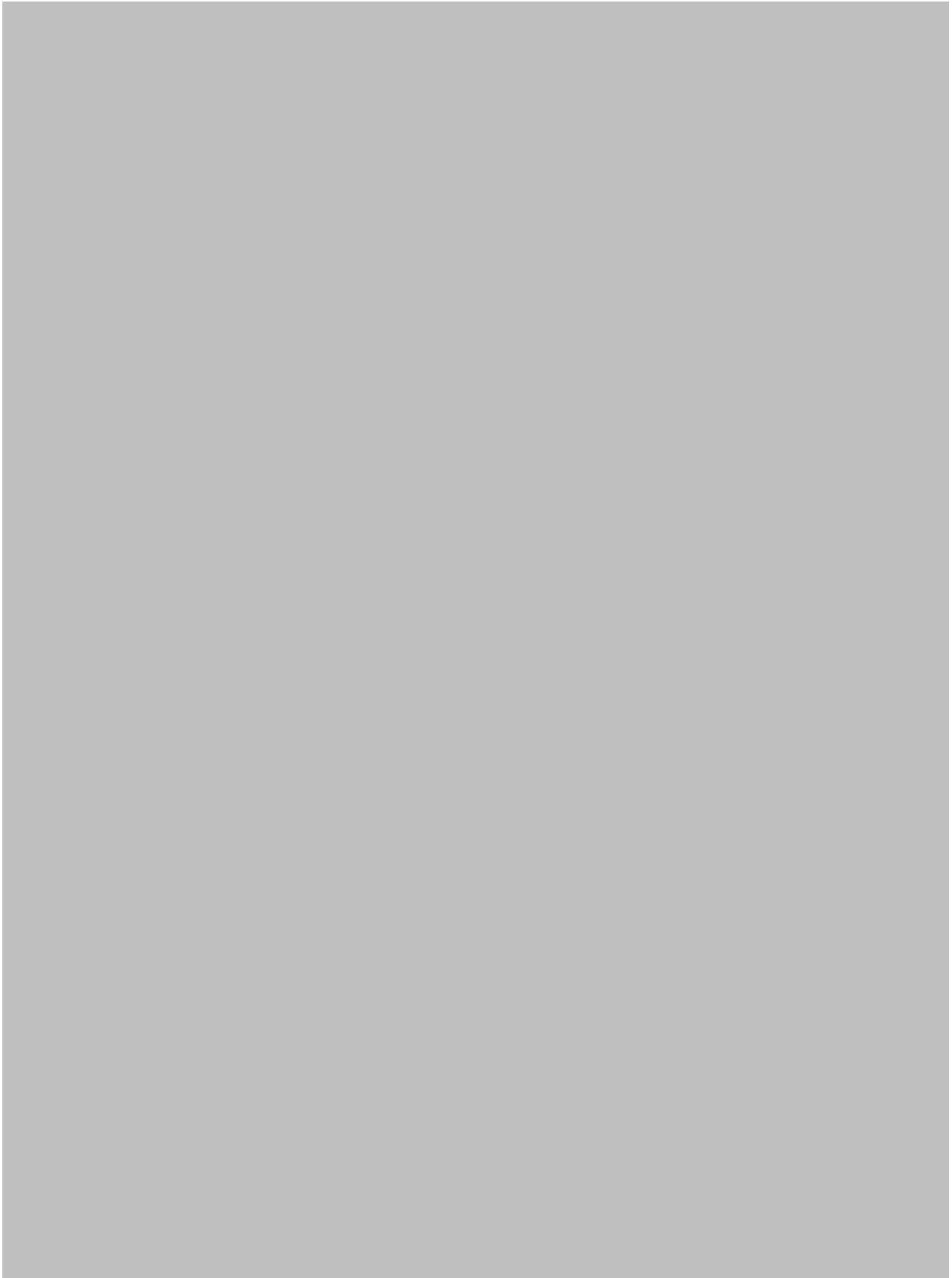


Figure 3.13 Poster for FEAAN exhibition in collaboration with the Korean Embassy,

2022

FEAAN therefore operate like other elite women's organisations in urban areas, who may assume a subordinate or non-confrontational stance to access economic and strategic support through donor money from abroad. Anthropologists have criticised the binds into which people can be placed by the demands of liberal multiculturalism and the way human rights work promotes social distinction, opens career paths, and depoliticises suffering in a world of transnational governance and neoliberal governmentality (Povinelli 2002). In this situation, the subordination of girls and women is allowed to occur more covertly within a framework of ostensible commitment to equality.

In addition, scholars condemn NGO and development agencies for taking women's concerns beyond the boundaries of the State (Amadiume 1987). Amadiume describes Nigerian NGO workers as 'daughters of imperials': professional and elite women who are the inheritors of the postcolonial state and 'partners in corruption' (1987:1,37). She contrasts these 'daughters of imperials' negatively with grassroots social and political activists. Her critique raises important questions of legitimate authority and the structural position of women within Nigeria. Women's feminist organising in 1990s Nigeria was characterised by NGO activity. The focus on women's livelihoods and welfare at that time saw an activism grow out of the global feminist movement and in response to the UN millennium conferences. Maryam Babangida, the First Lady of Nigeria, became a champion for women's rural development, using her husband's wealth and power to found the *Better Life Programme for Rural Women* in 1987. Babangida's goal was to 'mobilise women towards self-emancipation'. However, these aims were hollow, and her work formed the basis for the 'femocracy' which claimed the advancement of ordinary women whilst upholding a thoroughly patriarchal structure with women at the helm (chapter one, introduction).

However, it is clear that FEAAN's engagement with agencies who take an interest in universalising women's agendas can have a demonstrable impact on women's lives and careers. Dialogue with such organisations can be productive in the promotion of rights for women, which are burdened by the often incommensurability between the social imagination of rights and women's everyday lives and realities. There is strategic agency in affiliating with the global discourse of IWD and connecting to institutions who want to celebrate this through partnership. Activists working on human rights in Nigeria, specifically on women and minority rights, often rely upon the legitimacy granted by international organisations when their work conflicts with state law or social ideology. Thus, connecting with the themes generated by IWD is one way of subverting patriarchal values as women can appeal to the language of equality for all in the art world by calling upon universal principles of social justice. In this realm women can utilise channels of transnational discourse and the internationalisation of demand making processes to claim their rights as people.

When I ask one of the leaders of FEAAN if this aligns the organisation with international feminist discourse, she gives an interesting answer: 'It is not to do with feminism, we need strength, we need empowerment women [sic], and we know exactly how and where to get it'.⁶⁷ This suggests that women are using strategic agency to achieve their goals of art making. They do this by accessing available channels of support, but feminism, as a strategy for change, is seen to have little to do with the activity which FEAAN undertakes. Whilst my interviews suggest that the ideology promoted by FEAAN cannot be neatly equated with any specifically feminist consciousness, affiliating with international rights-based discourse opens up multiple avenues for women (Ferree and Tripp 2006; Keck and Sikkink 1998). This empowers

⁶⁷ Interview between Stacey Kennedy and OA, Lagos, 16th October 2019

both domestic and international rights movements. Human rights and women's rights come to the fore as FEAAN push their concerns and demands, supported by organisations who have an interest in furthering these agendas.

Although FEAAN do not directly undertake activism which discursively challenges the State's gender ideology, by encouraging members to align themselves with organisations embedded in international human rights networks with a strong feminist presence and orientation they can be a catalyst for change in other ways. These connections may shape the subject matter of the artists, and ultimately alter their outlook, in alignment with specific discourses around gender and womanhood.

FEAAN and feminism

Whilst in the main, the Nigerian artists and curators who I interviewed expressed support for FEAAN's endeavours, there are some who have reservations. Questioning the value of women only associations, their concerns echo debates which occur globally in relation to identity politics and the insecurities around proportional representation, positive discrimination, quota systems and tokenism. Several young, female early career artists who were based in Lagos stated that they did not see the need for women only exhibitions. One artist expressed that she felt there was little value in women only shows:

I am not in any female association or organisation, it's a thing that provokes me when I hear you want to have all female performances and art exhibitions. I really don't buy the idea, I see the female platform as a means of empathy, and because of this, I've seen some of the all-female arts exhibitions and I was not

impressed [...] maybe people buy your works because you're female [...] I try to break that boundary, I do not get myself involved.⁶⁸

For this artist, exhibiting in an all-woman show would cause her to question whether her work was being read on its own merit or simply through the lens of a group identity. This is a possible negative effect of collective agency: whilst a short-term strategy, aligning oneself with a marginalised group may not be a smart long term business approach for an artist. Promoting oneself through a gender identity may perpetuate the structure of patriarchal network relations which inhibit women from meeting men on equal terms. A handful of artists echoed this sentiment, (interestingly these were mostly artists who had with strong links to America or the UK who were highly mobile internationally) and asserted their autonomy and individualism to fashion an identity which resists restrictive or prescriptive categorisation. However, most of the women (and men) whom I interviewed for this study were keen to champion the work of FEAAN and talked about the value in promoting and empowering women artists. A recognition of issues around gender and an engagement with what could be described as 'feminist' agendas, was a key part of the way artists, curators and arts administrators positioned themselves, and how they wanted others (perhaps including me as the interviewer) to view them.

Those critical of FEAAN also expressed their opinion that much of their output was provincial, that it was not created to challenge the viewer, and that it played to outside agendas. They also noted that FEAAN do not encourage sufficiently research-based practice. It is true that the artists connected with FEAAN are less inclined to take on an experimental format, due to lack of resources or training perhaps, which

⁶⁸ Interview between Stacey Kennedy and TR, Art Gallery, Victoria Island, Lagos 10th October 2019

may lead to this cynicism around their work by certain creatives who view the network as parochial. One artist cited figures 3.4 and 3.5 as depicting an 'outdated' idea of 'motherhood', she went on to criticise these artworks as unsophisticated in theme and execution.⁶⁹

Appiah (1993) is impatient with expected scripts or narratives around larger social categories like gender, which he argues can be detrimental to the development of personal identities. He claims that a fundamental aspect of cosmopolitanism is 'the freedom to create oneself' (ibid 1997:625). Cosmopolitanism offers women the ability create an identity *outside* of the prescribed narratives available to them. FEAAN's activity could be seen as detrimental to women, providing a group identity based on a subordinate position.

Yet there is an outward looking cosmopolitanism enacted through the international opportunities solicited by the organisation. These opportunities do not centre European connections. Abigail Nnaji told me about a trip she made to China via FEAAN's partnership with the Chinese Cultural Centre for training and cultural exchange. She said:

At the time I went I was using acrylics and I was doing my own thing, but in China I learned how to do paper cutting technique [...] So when I came back, I incorporated this into my painting, and then I created my own style, so that was how my style developed.⁷⁰

Nnaji discussed how FEAAN facilitates contact which can stimulate the sharing of ideas to benefit Nigerian women artists and expand their ideas of art and craft, 'when I travelled to China, I met people from different parts of the world from Africa, Cuba,

⁶⁹ Interview between Stacey Kennedy and TR, Art Gallery, Victoria Island, Lagos 10th October 2019

⁷⁰ Interview between Stacey Kennedy and Abigail Nnaji, video call, 14th January 2022

from Panama City, and we got to exchange ideas, we got to learn more about other cultures'.⁷¹ These are cosmopolitan ideas of openness and sharing of ideas. Therefore, FEAAN exhibit a 'rooted cosmopolitan' outlook whereby their leaders and members engage in partial inclusion across numerous forums, but centre local and national action. Firmly connected and committed to their local art scenes, they offer a framework of strategic agency which centres them as actors and does not depend on outside validation. Instead FEAAN members utilise the structures and agencies around them to meet their goals and ambitions.

Most respondents in FEAAN told me that their work was about empowering women and did not offer the term 'feminist' when describing their outlook or practice, unless prompted. When asked directly if they were feminists, artists often agreed, but when pushed to say more did not quantify what this meant and fell back on the idea that their practice was engaged with lifting women, not changing structural conditions for women. Nike Òkúndáyé is a high-profile patron of FEAAN (see chapter five). She describes her joy in providing service for her husband and children, a stance which may irk the more radically minded:

When you look at the development of your child you say, 'Wow I am an institution builder.' I make food for my husband. I make food for my children (Òkúndáyé quoted in Ogunbiyi 2017:179)

Her well documented answer to the question of whether she is a feminist is that she does not consider herself a feminist, yet Òkúndáyé has done a great deal to champion women artists. She has inspired and supported so many women over her long career and is very active and involved with FEAAN. Òkúndáyé and my interviewees show that feminism, agency, and autonomy can look different in different settings. Although

⁷¹ Interview between Stacey Kennedy and Abigail Nnaji, video call, 14th January 2022

the introduction (chapter one) argued that feminism was not a key analytical tool in this work, it is useful to address feminist ideas briefly in relation to the work of FEAAN.

Feminist scholars worldwide have long debated the impact of the institution of marriage on women. Moreover, they have highlighted the political, social, and economic constrictions on women which emanate from gender ideologies, and which are constructed around their perceived primary roles as wives and mothers (Nkiwane 2000). This divide, which suggests women are inherently domestic and nurturing and therefore assigns them a primary role as caregiver, is rooted in expectations around the role of women based on gender as biologically, not socially, constructed. Under outdated but pervasive binaries of nature/culture, women in heterosexual relationships are viewed as being best fitted to look after children, teach children, or carry out employment related to children, and to look after their husbands and homes (see discussion about Ugbodaga-Ngu as educator, chapter two).

Broadly speaking, the women in FEAAN adopt a stance which is in line with ideas of 'motherism', a feminism based on motherhood nature and nurture (Acholonu 1995). 'Motherism' addresses the nurturing role of women and places women's bodies as central. Although primarily theorised in relation to rural women, this approach resonates with the rhetoric of FEAAN, as 'motherism' assumes rather than challenges the identity of woman as mother and wife. FEAAN's stance also echoes Adimora-Ezeigbo's (2015) notion of 'snail-sense feminism', which proposes that women adopt a snail-like approach to overcoming patriarchy, slowly and unobtrusively negotiating obstacles instead of confronting them. These two scholars are African feminists who argue for an inclusive approach to marriage and childbearing which proposes replacing Western feminist critique with 'positive gender concepts' built on 'indigenous African principles' (see also Ikwuemesi 2004; Aniakor 2004; Buhari 2004).

For example, there is no promotion of what could be considered a more 'radical' feminist ideology in FEAAN or from its members. Nothing is suggested as a strategy for women which may subvert the status quo, such as marriage or childbearing being avoided altogether. This is very characteristic of women's associations in Africa, who 'operate cautiously within traditional boundaries articulating the theory of complementary rather than competitive roles in gender relations' (Abdullah 1995:212). Some scholars express discontent with this sort of passive approach, which 'rejects transgressive female behaviour, but rather advocates survival through acceptance and perseverance' (Nkealah 2017:122). The rhetoric adopted by the women in FEAAN does not attempt to *change* the expectations which structure women's lives, but to encourage artistic success *around* the realities of their lives. Nkealah (ibid) proposes that African women should embrace the camel, not the snail, as a symbol of their response to patriarchy, because it is a more imposing, resilient, and courageous animal metaphor: 'Cameline agency is all about the agency of women — the ability of oppressed women to act decisively to change their circumstances and regain control of their lives' (ibid 2017:123). Camels are being understood as able to meet any challenges, they encounter, they are assumed to be strong. To Nkealah, the camel is inspiring and agentive, whereas the snail is not.

FEAAN therefore reflects the argument made by African feminists that Western feminist analysis cannot adequately account for gender relations in post-colonial African contexts. Abu-Lughod (2015) challenges Western activists to identify and understand women's actual day to day concerns — not to merely place upon them a universalising discourse formed in the West. FEAAN's consolatory stance to marriage and motherhood may reflect other concerns which the women believe to be more pressing, for example, on their website, it is stated that their activism involves using

'art to advocate against inequality, rape, genital mutilation, violence, child abuse, sex slavery in conflict areas and adoption' (FEANN 2022). The women who are part of FEANN find ways around the challenges of women's dual roles, their concern is not to question the structural underpinning of gendered lives, but to work with these gendered roles to carve out agency and find success.

Conclusion

This chapter has outlined a lineage of women artists, curators and art administrators from the past to the present, offering evidence that female modern artists serve as inspirational role models for contemporary Nigerian artists. I have demonstrated that, although Ugbodaga-Ngu, Ekong, Omogbai, Omigie and their contemporaries have been erased by the patriarchal biases of written art history through which women's contribution could, or would, be neither theorised nor understood, they have become visible exemplars of women's success in the imagination of Nigerian and diaspora art communities.

Contemporary women are aware that history has minimised the contributions of their forebears, yet the artwork of past women artists is 'remembered' as a reflective materiality which women in the present may draw upon — the creative ideas and output of artist Ngozi Akande evidence of this. By forming an association to offer support to women artists, FEANN is one of the many creative solutions Nigerian women have found to meet the competing demands of marriage, children, and employment under a patriarchal system which marginalises women's art practice. Women can join, and do engage with, the SNA, or other associations which proliferate in Nigerian society. They use all available channels for support and solidarity, but it is the organisational support and personal mentorship by FEANN which they cite as

helping them to navigate the expectations which are placed upon their lives. Their collaborative practices shed light on new forms of structuration.

While a small minority of members of the contemporary art scene take issue with the idea of women only art exhibitions and gender specific support, the inclusion of male artists in FEAAN's strategy rebuffs such criticism. In fact, FEAAN reinforce the idea that men must be part of any meaningful change. Critics point out that not every artwork by the artists in FEAAN achieves the same level of complexity, and that some of the artists may adopt a dated approach to depicting women or overemphasise the representation of women's bodies in their work. Yet the inclusion of both established and unknown names working in a variety of traditional and new media shows a diversity of perspectives from a range of religions, regions, ethnicities, ages, and classes. This is characteristic of a cosmopolitan approach to inclusion and acceptance of difference.

The success of FEAAN is in building network support which draws all women in, whether they are at the cutting edge of professional contemporary art practice or 'Sunday painter' hobbyists. They work effectively at a local level while connecting to wider art or patronage networks to achieve their goals. FEAAN demonstrate that women may employ themes around 'women's issues' such as breastfeeding or equal rights to allow them to access resources by way of funding and institutional support, often from international organisations with agendas to centre 'women' as part of their 'human rights' work. As Reilly (2016) suggests, women's NGOs and their networks are transnational actors in global forums and can be seen to constitute new forms of cosmopolitan citizenship and a shift to cosmopolitan democracy.

In the introduction to this chapter, I cited Osayimwese (2019) who suggests that a 'gender-conscious' rather than 'gender-centric' perspective may assist in making

sense of women's agency. Taking a gender conscious approach to FEAAN's activity brings into question the certainty of Western feminism as a useful analytical model in this setting. Certain African feminist theorists may describe more accurately the values and approaches taken by FEAAN. However, overall, this chapter has opened discussion on the idea of feminism or women's empowerment in relation to women's art. FEAAN do not adopt an activist approach, they build social relationships and initiate art networks which are built on respected elders support and mentorship of younger artists, to show them how to operate. This is characteristic of the contemporary Nigerian art scene more widely. Women exert agency through woman-to-woman patronage, mentorship and network building. The following chapter focuses on network building and chapter five addresses mentorship and patronage.

Chapter four: Emerging Networks

I was trying to build a network, going to these different countries, different cities and trying to figure out, who are the protagonists on the continent, curators, art historians, and who are pushing boundaries?’ This was when I started sending letters to Bisi.

N'Goné Fall 2019

Introduction

The previous chapter outlined the women-led art networks of FEAAN based in Abuja, which are characterised by on the ground action, local impact, and the ability to leverage connections with international institutions through structures of patronage or funding. This chapter moves to the highly transurban world of Lagos, to broaden understandings of women-led art networks by focusing on a professional collaboration between two women: Olabisi Obafunke Silva (Bisi Silva) and N'Goné Fall. These women began working together in the 1990s and, as the chapter shows, became integral to the development of the networks which support and underpin contemporary African art worlds. The chapter provides a detailed case study of Silva, and assesses the impact of the independent art institution, CCA Lagos, which she founded and ran. I explore her activities through the lens of cosmopolitanism, offering a critical engagement with one of her curated shows *Like a Virgin* (2009). The chapter closes with a case study of artist Nengi Omuku, which develops the idea of cosmopolitanism in artistic practice.

Art curators Bisi Silva (who died in 2019) and N'Goné Fall (who remains professionally active) began collaborating in Europe in the late 1990s. This was a time when artistic interests in Europe and North America were ‘turning’ towards a notion of

'global art' which looked beyond the West. The creation of new networks of art production began to enlarge the base of contemporary art (Enwezor 2003) and Silva and Fall were crucial to the development of these new networks. Together they built relationships across many art worlds and creative sectors, working internationally but centring the African continent in all that they did. They developed contemporary art networks whilst strengthening pre-existing, long standing African connections from, inside and outside of the continent (it is important to remember that African social networks involve an older and richer conceptual repertoire, see Mbembe 2007). Silva and Fall possessed a wide sphere of influence and the ability to draw on geographically distant art world connections. They exercised an agency based upon this strong reach beyond national boundaries, combined with their success in creating and working within networks of support and collaboration.

The profound significance of network support is well documented (see Kalev *et al.* 2006; Sajó and Kotkin 2002; Marks and Stys 2019). Silva and Fall developed complex art networks which were successful in connecting and building art worlds globally. These art networks act like Deleuze and Guattari's (1972,1987) metaphorical 'rhizome'; as a matrix with multiple entryways where any point of the network can be connected to another. Rhizomes are not hierarchically organised, but a network of nodes and connecting lines where no part is most important. Bayart (1993) utilises this metaphor in an African context to describe the 'rhizome state', where webs of invisible power structures connect actors and interests below the surface of formal institutions. He describes the rhizome state as not one single thing, there are many individual nodes and connections; but neither is it many things, because everything is connected. This 'multiplicity' is a useful way to think of globally interconnected contemporary

African art worlds and resonates with the notion of cosmopolitanism previously put forward to describe contemporary art worlds.

Bayart (*ibid*) not only states that there are networks beneath formal institutions, but that formal institutions are built through networks that connect the State to the grassroots; so there is no real distinction between the formal and informal in African politics. His thinking is useful in approaching the intermeshing and interdependence of global and local art worlds, where Silva and Fall were so successful in mediating Nigerian and European art worlds through their ability to foster productive, multiplicitous art networks. The potential of thinking about networks like rhizomes therefore helps to contest the binary centre/margin view of reality that is maintained by art history, to demonstrate that repressive structures of power themselves are rhizomatous rather than monolithic.

This chapter connect networks with social and historical processes. It is important that, in Nigeria, the new millennium had brought a shift in the direction of Nigerian politics, and thus in Nigerian society. The arrival of the Fourth Republic in 1999 heralded a new positivity after so many years of state violence and neglect. This was the moment which Silva decided to relocate from London to Lagos. Choosing to situate her practice in Nigeria gave Silva a base on the continent from which to address the multiple local and global dimensions of contemporary African art. She brought a fierce dedication to raise the status of African art and African artists — particularly women — on the emerging global contemporary art scene.

Silva became a pivotal figure in establishing the contemporary Nigerian art scene. She continued to develop dense international art networks which, importantly, centred the African continent. She founded an independent art institution building, Centre for Contemporary Art Lagos (CCA Lagos), and curated bold shows such as

Like a Virgin (2009). As art world individuals and art objects circulate, they share a public presence through events and discourse. This chapter offers case studies of CCA and *Like a Virgin* to illuminate the social relations generated by the presentation and circulation of people and artwork.

Through building social relations, Silva and Fall have developed links between Nigeria and the rest of the world which shatter the idea that Europe is the centre of contemporary art. In addition, they have shaped an art scene in which women are visible, vocal, and valued. Silva demonstrated a 'rooted cosmopolitanism' through which she was able to extend her power and privilege across and outside of the borders of the nation. Silva's agency was not conceptualised as discrete and disconnected, she encouraged all those working on the art scene to actively build and utilise networks to compete for, or share, resources. She was a mentor to many, which will be explored in the following chapter (chapter five).

Crucially, Silva showed that human and material resources may be sourced from beyond the geographical boundaries of city or nation. This has become a fundamental part of organising, producing, and promoting contemporary art in Lagos. Younger artists such as Nengi Omuku, whose work forms a case study in this chapter, can today work through these networks and source support and resources from many directions, synthesising influences and ideas from many different parts of these globally expansive networks.

The Nigerian art scene and the 'global art turn'

The turn of the millennium was a time of rapid social, historical, and artistic change in Nigeria. The nation gained formal political independence in 1960, but was far from economically free, with a continued reliance on European knowledge, connections, technologies, and international market conditions (Falola and Heaton 2008). Under

the shadow of colonialism various military regimes took control in the decades following the civil war (1967-1970) and activists, intellectuals, and artists suffered brutal assaults with many being forced to leave the country (Oyediran 1979; Joseph 1987). For those who stayed, the patriarchal nature of military dictatorship and the oil economy shaped the social realities of the next generations (Khan 1994).

Whereas the buyers of art in the colonial and early postcolonial period were expatriates, by the mid-1980s the Lagos art market experienced an unprecedented boom and Nigerians themselves comprised the greater percentage of patrons. The introduction of the 1987 structural adjustment programme was shrewdly manipulated by the Babangida government to enrich those who worked in the newly established financial institutions, although it brought serious economic difficulties to other sectors. From 1987 to 1993 a handful of individuals were making vast amounts of money by selling their allocations of foreign exchange to 'cash-starved commercial banks and ailing national and multinational industries' (Nzegwu 1998:2). Ironically, this caused a surge in the art business as these newly created executives became art collectors and patrons. This continued until the 1993 banking crisis when the art market once again experienced a sharp decline in sales (Castellote and Okwuosa 2020).

Although serving the financial elite, the regimes of Buhari and Babangida from the 1980s brought severe economic and political decline across Nigerian society and by the mid-nineties the country had become a pariah state under the oppressive military regime of General Sani Abacha. Distrusted by Western creditors, the nation was characterised by corruption, rent seeking, high inflation, shortages of petroleum and the downward spiral of the Naira (Apter 1996; Smith 2005). Nigeria's poor standing in the international community worsened following the execution of the Ogoni nine in 1995 and suspension from the Commonwealth of Nations. Pro-democracy

activists fled to the US, Europe, or other African countries. It was not until 1998, and the death of Abacha, that an intervention came when power was transferred to General Abdulsalami Abubakar. Nigeria was able to democratically transition to the Fourth Republic, institute an elected government and initiate the euphoria of freedom (Nwafor 2021; Falola and Heaton 2008). This 'freedom' connected ideas of development that centred women and women's concerns as key to building a new forward-looking nation.

The years of lack and disarray in Nigerian society left a legacy of impoverished state art institutions and a visual art scene shaped by decades of neglect. Yet, in the new democratic era, art and technology began to flourish as innovations in communication made connectivity and mobility easier (Barber 2018). For example, the emergence of the home-grown movie industry 'Nollywood', which had become successful throughout the nineties, moved onto digital media (Haynes 2016; Krings and Okome 2013). The embedding of the internet and these advances in digital technology brought new attention to modern and contemporary Nigerian art. Artists took inspiration from various 'international artistic approaches, media, and art forms, including conceptual art, installation, new media technology, and performance' (Nzewi 2013:13). As visual artists engendered social and activist concerns, Nigeria followed the pattern of a wider 'media explosion' in Africa across the 1990s, as democracy brought about new forms of media and artistic innovation (Barber 2018). This was an auspicious moment for women artists, whose creative ideas could connect with the perceived new liberty in the developing arena of contemporary art.

In America, Cotter (2002) made the claim that 'nobody knew or wanted to know about modern and contemporary art from Africa' until the exhibition *Magiciens de la Terre*, Paris (1989) 'put contemporary African artwork on the postmodern map'. But

this was clearly an absurd assertion. Ulli Beier had championed a network of exhibitions and gallery support for Osogbo artists across Nigeria, Germany, and America from the 1960s. The Commonwealth Institute in London was founded in 1962 as the successor to the Imperial Institute, (which in 1958 had hosted a solo exhibition by Clara Ugbodaga-Ngu, see chapter two), the goal of both institutions to provide information and education about the Commonwealth of Nations and offer regular exhibitions of non-western artists. Political movements of the late 70s and early 80s called for an urgent redress to the imbalance in the way culturally diverse artists and curators were being represented in the UK, and in response an international, highly influential women-led art network was developing, whose participants shared a firm commitment to promoting internationalism in the arts. These women were managers of influential institutions, such as Chili Hawes who established October Gallery in London, 1979; or Susan Vogel, who in 1984 developed the Center for African Art, New York.⁷² These are only a few examples of the many individuals and institutions who were critically engaging with contemporary African art discourse in Europe and across Africa prior to *Magiciens*.

By 1994 another woman, Gilane Tawadros, was running a small but influential publicly funded art institute named Institute of International Visual Arts (iniva) in London.⁷³ Tawadros was building a considerable reputation for iniva as a centre for postcolonial research and exhibition. A network of theorists, artists and curators had emerged and their founding conference on 'New Internationalism' set the tone for an outward looking organisation which questions global legacies of imperialism and colonialism and works with local communities of British based artists of Global

⁷² Chili Hawes was joined at October Gallery by Elisabeth Lalouschek in 1987, and the pair have become a formidable force on the art scene.

⁷³ See chapter four which discusses the importance of iniva, a small but influential publicly funded art institute with a considerable reputation as a centre for postcolonial research and exhibition.

Majority, African, Asian, and Caribbean descent. At this intersection of academia and curatorship were figures such as Rasheed Araeen and Stuart Hall, who in 1987 had launched the important art journal *Third Text* to rally against the lack of focus on art outside of Europe within Western institutions. The women led international network expanded once more in 1996 when the Prince Claus Fund was established in Amsterdam with Els van der Plas as Director, whose goal was to support, honour and connect artists and cultural practitioners in Africa, Asia, Latin America, the Caribbean and Eastern Europe. These were the international contemporary African art networks into which Bisi Silva, a young Nigerian London based curator, arrived in the 1990s.

Born in Lagos (1962), Silva moved to London aged eleven. As a young woman she travelled to France to study languages and art history, including African art. She became intrigued by African art in the contemporary moment. In the early 1990s she applied to the Royal College of Arts (RCA), London, and was disappointed to be told that 'there was little-to-no focus on African or African diasporic art' (Kinsman 2017). This motivated her to challenge the system by creating change from within. Silva graduated in 1996 with an MA in 'Visual Arts Administration: Curating and Commissioning of Contemporary Art', having researched exhibitions of work by Black artists in England and their 'inclusion' within mainstream art centres. Her conclusion was that Black artists were 'tolerated but not integrated'.⁷⁴ Whilst at RCA, Silva built a substantial network, connecting with institutions such as October Gallery and iniva, to become a figure of influence early in her career. She possessed solid visual art credentials and a timely interest in provoking new discourse. Katy Deepwell (2019) describes working with Silva on a 1996 art history conference at the Courtauld Institute

⁷⁴ Silva's thesis was titled 'Black in(Visibility) in the Visual Arts: Looking Back and Moving Forward'. It traced the journey of the Black Art Movement from Ethnic Arts in the early 1980s to the New Internationalism of the mid-to-late 1990s.

in London, noting that they were interested in and 'able to challenge the institutions who were responsible for writing the history of African art at that time' (Moses 2019).

This was the moment when a 'global art world turn' was drawing academics into fierce debate about the writing of art history from a non-Euro-American perspective (see Casid and D'Souza 2014). These debates were pertinent to Silva's concerns as curator, researcher, and art academic. She worked with *Fourth Dial Art*, a non-profit project dedicated to helping artists form meaningful collaborations with artistic institutions and professionals, evidence of her expansive ethical horizon. Silva's interest in diversity and creativity matched, and would eventually shape, the *Zeitgeist* of the time. Concerned with re-populating familiar narratives of art with obscured marginal players in Nigeria and across Africa, she believed that such omissions rendered the foundational histories of art flawed.

Silva's networks included a close group of friends and colleagues described as the 'cabal' by Gardner and Green (2016), of which Okwui Enwezor was seen to be the figurehead. Enwezor may have become the 'super star' curator most identified with the 'global turn' of art history, but his discussions with Silva were instrumental in his direction and in forming his stance that contemporary globalisation was politically and conceptually related to historical colonialism. For example, his extensive talks with Silva prior to the *Johannesburg Biennale: Trade routes history and geography* (1997) shaped that seminal exhibition. Silva published a paper in 1998 which critiqued the *Johannesburg Biennale* as 'An 'other' stop on the global art trail', her focus falling strongly on the social and political processes of globalisation.

The *Johannesburg Biennale* was followed by *documenta11* which further challenged the structures, meanings and focus of art institutions and sought a more global and decolonised model of art. Both exhibitions are credited with bringing a new,

intense geopolitical challenge to the accepted hegemonies of contemporary art. Enwezor's approach adopted a diffused curatorship model of six co-curators managing five connected forums or 'platforms' in different locations worldwide, a collaborative, networked method to expand art worlds. Although Enwezor was the lead curator, and therefore the name associated with *documenta 11*, his success was based on this rhizomatous approach to curatorship through networks. Importantly, his wider intellectual networks — which included Silva — were instrumental in making this challenge to Western centred intellectual and artistic authority.

Developing the networks: Fall and Silva

Enwezor made a well-documented contribution to the global art turn, but Silva and Fall's collaboration was just as pivotal in establishing and developing the contemporary Nigerian and contemporary African art scenes. Throughout the 1990s art world individuals and art objects were beginning to circulate more widely. Fall describes the 1980/1990s contemporary African art scene in this way: 'People were saying there is no contemporary art on the continent [...and so] the only way to know what was happening on the continent was to be on the continent or travel'.⁷⁵ This statement echoes Cotter's claim (that no-one in Europe believed there to be contemporary art on the continent) but shows that he was incorrect: there were individuals keen to engage with contemporary African art in Europe. At that time, Fall was working as the editorial director of contemporary African art magazine *Revue Noire* and actively sought out connections that shared her interest in art from Africa.

⁷⁵ N'Goné Fall, ART X Talks, Bisi Silva Remembered, ART X Lagos, 3rd November 2019

She identified Silva as an important collaborator towards reaching her goal to raise the profile of contemporary African art.

Fall had studied in Europe, reading architecture at the *École Spéciale d'Architecture* in Paris. Although not an artist or curator, she grew up in Senegal surrounded by creatives and was passionate about the contemporary art scene within Africa. Fall describes a cosmopolitan sociability which characterised her younger years and her exposure to art as a tool for change and progress:

creative people or groups [were] coming from all over the world, making statements via artistic and cultural productions in Dakar [...] I always saw those spaces and places as spaces of freedom [...] The cultural landscape was very, very vibrant in those days [...] So, it's no surprise that I ended up seeing culture as a tool for emancipation and self-determination (2021:60)

Fall understood the importance of interpersonal relationships in creating networks of influence and actively sought out an introduction with Silva, believing that she had discovered someone who shared her vision and determination to rectify notions of 'Africa without contemporary art history'. Fall describes how she was 'trying to build a network, going to these different countries, different cities and trying to figure out, who are the protagonists on the continent, curators, art historians, and who are pushing boundaries?' This was when she 'started sending letters to Bisi'.⁷⁶

Fall was able to access institutional connections in Europe, what she required were connections on the African continent which were harder to come by in the pre-digital era. Elisabeth Lalouschek, artistic director of October Gallery in London describes the early importance of network connections:

⁷⁶ N'Goné Fall, ART X Talks, Bisi Silva Remembered, ART X Lagos, 3rd November 2019

This small support group of likeminded people developed gradually [...] exchanging ideas and information, keeping us apprised of what was happening elsewhere and often carrying and communicating all kinds of messages to other nodes of the network (2021:36)

Lalouschek describes trying to contact Ghanaian, Nigeria based artist El Anatsui, describing how she 'did not yet have access to the internet to do a global search on someone's name. At the time, one just "put out the word," which spread slowly but inevitably from contact to contact' (ibid). The primary methods used by Fall and Lalouschek to connect with contemporary African art networks were travel, communication, and the mobilisation of transnational individuals. This is characteristic of the rhizomatous form taken by African art networks and an outward looking, cosmopolitan sociability as relationships (ties in the network) were forged, renewed, developed, and strengthened.

There have always been historically well established and effective African networks. Mbembe describes the 'worlds-in-movement phenomenon' (2007:27), suggesting that Africa has always been engaged with the rest of the world and this world in movement is not a contemporary effect of globalisation but traceable to an historic African experience of regional and cultural mobility and perpetual movement within and outside the continent. Like a matrix with multiple entryways, Mbembe (2007:28) asserts that 'a part of African history lies somewhere else outside of Africa [at the same time as] a history of the rest of the world [...] is present on the continent'. Confirming the efficacy of the already long-standing art networks emanating on and from the African continent, Fall was introduced to Silva in Paris, 1998, by Amaize Ojeikere, the son of Nigerian photographer J.D 'Okhai Ojeikere.

Fall and Silva became friends and built a professional relationship based on their common values. An early collaboration saw them work together on *Dak'art* (2002), when Fall recruited Silva to maximise her connections with anglophone Africa and fulfil the pan-African vision for the event. The two women drew on their educational credentials and international operational bases from London and Paris, enjoying a mobility which permitted them to connect networks and influence the art scene early in their careers. By the millennium they had succeeded in provoking a growing interest in art from Africa, with long-standing exhibitions such as *Dak'Art*, Senegal; or the *Bamako Biennial*, Mali receiving renewed attention from international contemporary art critics and audiences. Fall and Silva were as much a part of the 'global turn' in the visual arts as Enwezor. Together they were responsible for developing a geopolitical view of exhibition which challenged the accepted hegemonies of contemporary art centring the West.

The collaboration between Fall and Silva placed them in an optimum position to share opportunities with their friends and colleagues. Like the metaphorical 'rhizome', any point of the developing art network could be connected to another and Fall and Silva worked through these networks to mediate connections between individuals. Fall recalls being asked to curate the inaugural contemporary art show at the National Museum of Bamako, Mali and immediately calling women collaborators:

we have so few opportunities as curators to do projects on our continent, we are always doing exhibitions and projects abroad, I want[ed] to share this opportunity with others. So of course, Bisi was the first that I called. I also called another colleague Rachida Triki from Tunis.⁷⁷

⁷⁷ N'Goné Fall, ART X Talks, Bisi Silva Remembered, ART X Lagos, 3rd November 2019

What was important about Fall and Silva's early work was their ability to build platforms which allowed contemporary African art to emerge, become valued, and draw others into the network. Job opportunities typically create a flow of individuals moving across positions, creating social mobility as they generate vacancy chains behind them (Elsby *et al.* 2022). However, the developing contemporary African art scene at the turn of the millennium offered limited formal opportunities to access an art career via established posts or positions. Fall and Silva were key to creating and strengthening art institutions as nodes of connection which encouraged engagement across the sector. Emerging artists and curators were able to access the limited formal vacancies which arose, thus growing the network and recreating the cycle. Of course, by the same logic, Silva and Fall were also gatekeepers who excluded artists who did not fit their criteria.

This 'multiplicity' is a useful way to think of the emerging globally interconnected contemporary African art worlds of the time. As Bayart (1993) suggests, networks develop beneath formal institutions, and formal institutions are built through these networks. Similarly, in the art world, Fall and Silva acted as leaders who developed networks which moulded institutions. Their influence directly encouraged women to take up roles in the developing art scene, through direct mentorship and their status as role models (see chapter five).

In the decades that followed, Fall and Silva built their careers in parallel, leading the contemporary African art scene together. Fall says, 'I was the West African French speaking [woman] from Senegal [...], she was the West African English speaking [woman], [...we were] the two ECOWAS girls and the only ones operating internationally'.⁷⁸ Fall's reference to the Economic Community of West African States

⁷⁸ N'Goné Fall, ART X Talks, Bisi Silva Remembered, ART X Lagos, 3rd November 2019

(ECOWAS) — whose goals were to strengthen ties within neighbouring countries in West Africa over connections with Europe — epitomises their approach. They aimed to establish and unify power among African States and resist reliance on networks of influence emanating from Europe. Their work was key to bringing African art and artists on the continent into the ‘global art turn’ conversation, and conversely, the ‘global art turn’ provided a timely moment which amplified their legitimacy and agency.

The networks that the two women built were bounded, unbounded, overlapping and mutually distinguishable. They were not hierarchically organised to centre Europe or America as the place of primary importance in the contemporary African art scene, but characterised by nodes and connecting lines across Africa and the rest of the world where no part became the most important. Like Bayart’s (1993) ‘rhizome state’, these webs of invisible power structures connected actors and interests below the surface of formal art institutions, often those in the West. Intermeshed and interdependent global and local art worlds are the legacy of Silva and Fall’s mediation of Nigerian and European art worlds. They are evidence of their ability to foster productive, multiplicitous art networks which contested the Western binary centre/margin view of art history. These networks are built upon and strengthened by the work of contemporary women.

Silva in Lagos

Silva visited Nigeria in the late 1990s, at the tail end of the Abacha regime. She was struck by a visual art scene shaped by decades of neglect. The impoverished State-owned art institutions were part of the broader pattern of lack and disarray across Nigeria (outlined above). Despite a lack of institutional support for art production, Silva observed the potential of an art scene where artists worked hard to overcome structural difficulties, demonstrating that artists can still find creative agency under

repressive structures of power. In Lagos she connected with artists who were keen to engage with a new liberty in contemporary art, one which engendered social concerns. It was during this moment — of challenge but immense possibility — that Silva made the ‘logical and at the same time radical choice’ to establish a place for her curatorial practice in Lagos (Kinsman 2017). The universities had been ravaged by the Structural Adjustment Program (SAP) introduced in 1986, as well as the widespread corruption. Lecturers were on low salaries and many academics and artists had left the country to UK or USA. Counter to this ‘brain drain’ of Nigerian professionals leaving for better paid jobs abroad, returnees such as Silva contributed to the ‘expanding cosmopolitan horizon of Lagos’ (Offoedu-Okeke 2012:33).

This cosmopolitanism was enacted through Silva’s experience of the ‘new internationalism’ from London and her ability to drive the circulation of different ideas and positions across contemporary art networks. Soon after her arrival Silva established the Institute of Visual Arts and Culture (IVAC), to stimulate what she perceived to be the missing critical discourse on global contemporary artistic practice (Castellote and Okwuosa 2020). She was able to exercise significant agency as a professionally trained curator with international credentials. Fall states: ‘Bisi was the first of her generation to graduate in curatorial practice. We were all outsiders, I come from architecture, Okwei [Enwezor] comes from political science, Simon Njami from literature [...] Bisi was the first’.⁷⁹ Silva brought artists, curators and scholars from abroad, for example initiating the *Year 2000 Project* in collaboration with Sinmi Ogunsanya, owner of Mydrim Gallery Lagos, to present a series of international guest lectures.⁸⁰ The speakers presented to students at Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria and

⁷⁹ N’Goné Fall, ART X Talks, Bisi Silva Remembered, ART X Lagos, 3rd November 2019

⁸⁰ Speakers included Eddie Chambers and Katy Deepwell (UK), Colin Richards (South Africa), Yacouba Konate (Ivory Coast), William Miko (Zambia), Hiroko Hagiwara (Japan), Gerardo Mosquera (Cuba).

to art professionals at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka. From Nigeria, the programme moved on to England, Japan, Cuba, and South Africa. Silva brought in her collaborator Katy Deepwell as an expert on feminist artistic practice and history, as well as artist Eddie Chambers who encouraged interaction across continents and strengthened connections between the African diaspora and Nigeria.

However, attitudes in Lagos towards contemporary art were not uniform. When Emeka Udemba presented *Floating Calabashes* (1996), a colourful, ephemeral art installation on the Victoria Island lagoon, the work received a mixed response: criticised by some as a 'postmodern intrusion' but acclaimed by others as 'the reappropriation of African artistic strategies of display' (Castellote and Okwuosa 2020). Artist El Anatsui's *New Energies* (2001) exhibition of unconventional artworks by students from the University of Nigeria was created to confront what he described as 'a long crippling syndrome of orthodoxy and conventionalism' and was similarly divisive.⁸¹ However, contemporary art is known for its ability to provoke strong response anywhere in the world, so although some did not appreciate this new direction, by 2002 there was a growing community of practitioners interested in engaging with such frameworks. This was marked by *Cities Under Siege: Four African Cities, Freetown, Kinshasa, Johannesburg, Lagos* (2002) an interdisciplinary conference which examined the complexities of life in African urban spaces. Presented at the Goethe-Institut, this lively conference formed part of the pre *documenta11* programme and was planned to 'reveal how local specificities create new orientations in the global discourse' (Enwezor 2002:4). One respondent who had attended this conference remarked that: 'it strengthened our belief that Lagos was part

⁸¹ Artists Nnenna Okore, Erasmus Onyishi, Ozioma Onuzulike, Joseph Eze, Uche Onyishi, Chika Aneke, Martins Orliam, Chikadibia Kanu, Chiamaka Ezeani, and Chidi Nnadi.

of a global conversation, that people abroad were interested in what was happening in Lagos, that we had something new to offer'.⁸²

Art historian and artist Péjú Láyiwoḷá commented that Silva's approach was welcomed by artists: '[her] entry into the Lagos art scene ha[d] given artists the opportunity to discuss ongoing projects and critically engage the arts in a different fora' (Layiwola 2013:85). In this context Silva's approach to contemporary art was viewed as innovative and vital. She chose to move to Lagos, to centre the continent in her practice, and place herself within the shifting global landscape of contemporary art from a base in Nigeria. This position signified the deterritorialisation of contemporary art, physically and conceptually. Silva's work was therefore crucial to the growing international network of debate and discussion around artistic and curatorial practices, art history, and criticism.

Whilst the artistic and curatorial practice being championed by Silva was in step with developments on the international contemporary art scene, it was initially viewed by some as 'disconnected' from local or national Nigerian concerns (Owen 2013). This was commented upon by gallery director (*arc* London) John Egbo:

She's focusing on the intellectual [...] she's doing a lot of installations, and stuff like that. She wrote an interesting article, about whether painting is relevant any more. In a nation [Nigeria] where there are loads of painters! I think it was just provocative (Owen 2013:160)

However, there is no evidence that Silva attempted to be deliberately provocative. She engaged with the art community in Lagos and beyond, and worked hard to understand local concerns. In an interview from 2015 Silva discussed this: 'I tried to be sensitive

⁸² Interview between Stacey Kennedy and OA, Lagos, 16th October 2019.

to local needs by not trying to “import” ways of doing things from Europe or saying “this is how it’s done” (Grosse 2020). Reflecting this, one of my respondents stated: ‘Silva brought different ideas and ways of doing things, making art, the focus of art. Not everyone liked her new ideas at first, but it was important that we were open to them’.⁸³

Understanding Silva’s position within a cosmopolitan framework allows us to make sense of, and theorise, her local and global points of connection. With no indication of adopting what Appiah (2006) calls a ‘superior position’, and in line with his cosmopolitan notion of ‘recognition and responsibility’, Silva spent ‘three to four years [...] listening learning, reading, talking to people and visiting exhibitions to build confidence’ (Grosse 2020). Over time she built productive relationships with those working on the local art scene due to her open dialogic approach, willingness to form collaborations and efforts to embed her practice in local artistic patrimony. In an interview she stated:

What has been understood as contemporary African art has been articulated from a Western as well as a diasporan perspective and at its worst it has had a tenuous engagement with the local context. My work takes me to several countries across Africa and gives me the opportunity to embed myself in the diverse local cultural, artistic and social contexts for extended and at times repeated visits (Kinsman 2017)

This is indicative of a rooted cosmopolitan position, whereby Silva centred Africa and African artists in all she did. Silva leant towards a simultaneously rooted and transnational position, operating in and through a global art infrastructure. She was highly plugged-in to contemporary African art networks locally, regionally, and continentally, building up her artistic literacy by taking on board differing local values

⁸³ Interview between Stacey Kennedy and OA, Lagos, 16th October 2019

and opinions. But she was unapologetic about the kind of work she wanted to explore and unafraid to challenge conservative attitudes. As a mediator occupying multiple roles — author, interpreter, communicator, administrator, impresario, and diplomat — she became the figurehead of a mode of production based on building valuable social relations. This willingness to engage with the local art scene in all its guises, to centre and value African creative knowledge and practice, as well as Silva's ability to work with, and through people, helped her to gain status as a woman and a newcomer.

Centre for Contemporary Art Lagos (CCA Lagos)



Figure 4.0 CCA Lagos. Photo by Richard McCoy

In 2007 Silva founded CCA (figure 4.0) as a physical home for her Institute of Visual Arts and Culture (IVAC). This was a significant development in the infrastructure for contemporary art worldwide. CCA is a successful independent, non-profit visual art organisation, which in 2023 is to undergo a substantial renovation project (figures 4.7 and 4.8). The building is based in Yaba, a bustling technology hub on the Lagos mainland near the University quarter, purposefully located close to where practicing

artists live and work. Demonstrating the efficacy of art network connections, the building was passed on by the family of Nigerian photographer J.D 'Okhai Ojeikere and had been formerly occupied by the commercial photo studio *Picture Works*.

Remarkably for a city with so many practising artists, CCA was the first curator and research-led specialist contemporary art facility in Lagos (or West Africa). According to Corrigan (2018), building physical infrastructure has become a key part of any curatorial practice on the continent, as the remit of the curator has expanded to include institution building as well as researching, interviewing, debating, writing narratives, exchanging information, building relations, decolonising exhibits and exhibitions, and generating value. Silva became curator *and* art manager, as is characteristic of women taking on multiple roles (see chapter three). Her primary concern with CCA was to facilitate a move towards participatory curatorship based on engaging audiences and encouraging research-based outcomes.

Silva wanted to create an institution that changed *where* African art could be seen and *which* artists were platformed. She wanted to provide alternative exhibition space, break away from commercially driven work and emphasise experimental art and new technologies. Her vision for CCA drew on her experience with iniva in London, whose goals are 'to radically transform the cultural landscape with artists and creative communities *beyond the boundaries of difference* [my emphasis]' (iniva 2022). Art historian Nzewi (2015) suggests that CCA followed in a tradition of independent Nigerian art initiatives, such as The Pan-African Circle of Artists (1991), or the Mbari Club. However, unlike Mbari, with CCA Silva aimed to push local art in new directions and work at the cutting edge of international contemporary art.

Initial funding for CCA came from the Prince Claus Fund. In this Silva benefited from the post 1989 neoliberal institutionalisation of international art and cultural

philanthropy driven by finance capitalism, which had led to the establishment of such private foundations. The politics of the Thatcher-Regan era and withdrawal of support of the state in the west led to a euro-american funding boom in response to the civil disorder and effects of SAP upon Nigeria. New funding was aimed at supporting civil society and art was seen to be an effective conduit through which to channel funding. Silva was able to tap into this support as she was recognised as a legitimate player on the postcolonial art scene in London. The Fund aimed to connect scholars and creatives with academic institutions across the ‘developing world’, to stimulate research and publishing.⁸⁴ The then Director of Prince Claus Fund, Els Van Der Plas (2021:555), states that the mission of the Fund was to support ‘high-quality content, visionary approaches, and daring positions’ with the express intention of growing a network which ‘evolves further and reaches others who link critically to those themes’. This ethos aligned with Silva’s vision and the direction of travel for CCA.

Silva conceived CCA as an experimental space to professionalise artistic and curatorial practice by developing a culture of critique and conceptual rigour, she said: ‘I realized [...] that I would have to start an organization that supported new artistic and curatorial possibilities’ (Bosah 2017:41). From the outset the kind of work promoted by Silva at CCA engaged the immersive and sensory, for example sound art by Emeka Ogboh, or performance art by Jelili Atiku; or was challenging in theme, for example visual imagery by Lucy Azubuike (see *Like a Virgin* below). Silva encouraged ‘lens-based media, photography, video art, performance art, installation art, anything that was experimental within this context’ (Radicate 2016). Her focus on multimedia, conceptual work brought technology and innovation to artistic practice and

⁸⁴ Scholars, creatives, and initiatives connected with the Fund included: Nigerian author and editor Dapo Adeniyi (publisher of *Position*); Okwui Enwezor and Salah Hassan (editors of *Nka: Journal of African Visual Art*); and research-based organisations such as Codesria in Dakar, Senegal.

challenged the status quo. This offered artists the freedom to work through new forms of artistic expression.

Silva's first curated exhibition at CCA, *Democracy* (2007), was a reflection on the Nigerian elections which explored 'the abuse and denial of the democratic process' (CCA 2022).⁸⁵ This signalled her bold curatorial direction. In the catalogue for *Democracy* she stated: 'the electoral process was severely flawed [...] what do we really understand by this ideology called democracy and what kind of democracy is appropriate within the Nigerian context?' (CCA 2022). With this, Silva encouraged engagement with, and critique of, the formal power structures operating in Nigerian society. CCA was to become a place where a sense of shared community could emerge, whether that be the politically minded, or the artist. *Democracy* demonstrated that CCA was to offer a shared space for dialogue between people who may have differing positions but were prepared to respect the possibility for interconnections or perhaps 'agree to differ'. Once again this aligns with what Appiah (2006) describes as a cosmopolitan outlook.

Silva intended CCA to be an open space where fluid identities could be explored within transnational social fields through engagement with others. She wanted to identify or share moments in spaces of what Paul Gilroy (2004) describes as 'conviviality'. Artist Bolatito Aderemi-Ibitola explains how CCA forms a point of connection as a physical and ideological hub which facilitates collaborative work:

[Bisi] let me use CCA free several times to produce work. And for the project *True Talk Naija*, we used the space almost exclusively for rehearsals and

⁸⁵ *Democracy* was made up of four parts, three solo exhibitions, by Nigerian contemporary artists Ghariokwu Lemi, Ndid Dike and George Osodi, and a publication.

gatherings. Yaba [CCA] for me, was a bit of an art incubator [...] really enlivened me as an artist. I met Wura [Natasha Ogunji] at CCA for the first time.⁸⁶

CCA formed a crucial Africa based node of connection across the global networks of contemporary African art as an important discursive node of dialogue and exchange. The diagrams below (figures 4.1 and 4.2) illuminate the complex ties across the Nigerian contemporary art world. They illustrate the central place of Silva and CCA in this network of the contemporary African art scene. Although in figure 4.2 only the strong network connections are highlighted, Silva and CCA are at the centre because they are connected to all of the other individuals and institutions on the graph.

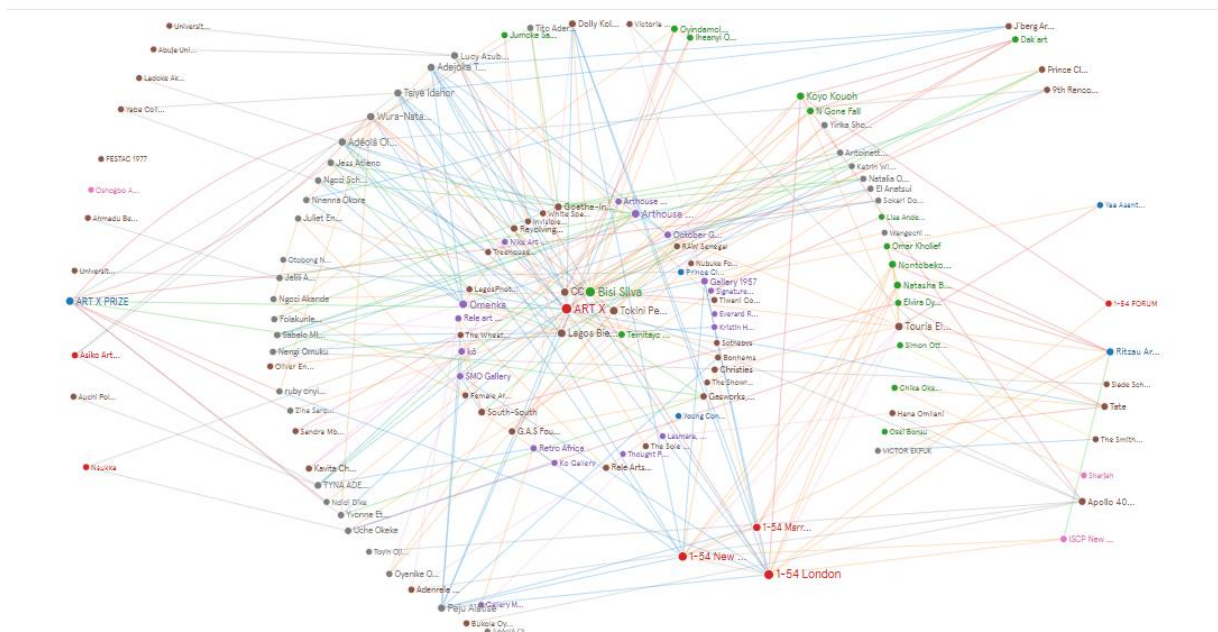


Figure 4.1 graphcommons model which highlights network connections, see appendix 4 for link.

⁸⁶ Interview between Stacey Kennedy and Bolatito Aderemi-Ibitola, video call, 26th October 2020

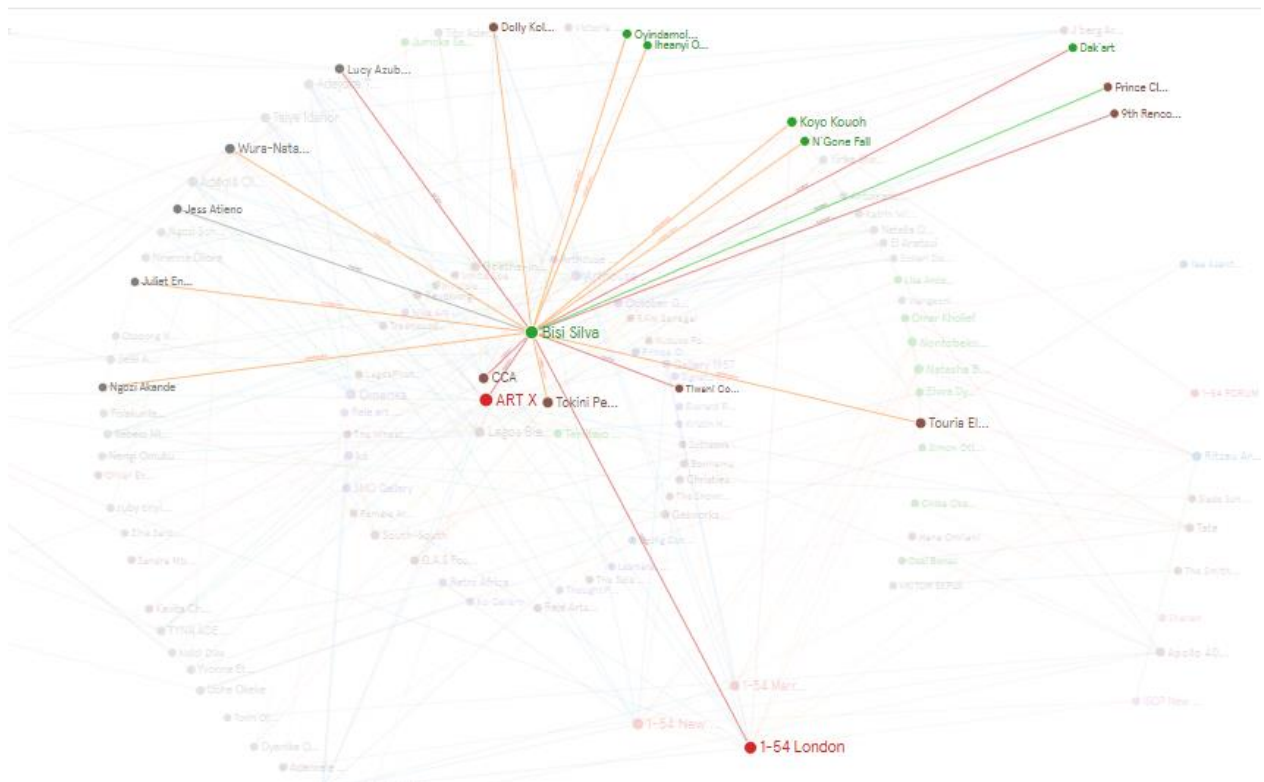


Figure 4.2 graphcommons model which highlights the central place of Silva and CCA in network connections, see appendix 4 for link.

Silva’s vision for CCA as a socially inclusive, politically driven project to create allegiances between individuals and collectives is further indication of a cosmopolitan position. Building on the idea of the importance of the local, the idea of being rooted or grounded, CCA was to be an ethical and utopian space where people could engage in conversation across racial, ethnic, national, and continental divides.

Silva was instrumental in creating new forms of structuration which served to strengthen the art ecosystem from Nigeria. With CCA, Silva disrupted the hierarchies of global art structures, to reduce reliance on former colonial formations and build more productive and egalitarian relations with Euro-American art hubs. In part her agency lay in her ability to draw on her network support and connections with institutions as funding partners, to exploit the opportunities which her ties offered. What was unusual about Silva, was that her networks and social relations were as strong and productive

across African countries as European ones. Her work was crucial in reaffirming the value of African people, and African women, within global art discourse.

Like a Virgin

Silva encouraged artists to find liberation in creative expression. A central part of her practice was to address the realities of women's lives across Nigeria, Africa, and the world. The productive relations she was building with arts communities gained trust and respect, which allowed her to push boundaries and challenge normative and generationally inscribed notions of gender. Her shows at CCA, such as *Like a Virgin* (2009), cleared space to debate the value placed on women and women artists.

Connecting with innovation and new media allowed Silva to assert agency as a woman. Artist Láyíwọlá (2013:85) notes: 'as new genres of art emerge, such as video art and performance art, that sets itself apart from the gallery system, *the possibility of inserting the female self into art practice increases* [my emphasis]'. This may be because experimental art forms allow women to step outside male dominated traditions, canons, expectations, and critical paradigms. Working with experimental media may cause a change in thematic focus, whereby formerly taboo subjects around gender and sexuality are more easily addressed.

Like a Virgin (2009) flouted accepted standards, themes, and representations of art in Nigeria, as Silva critiqued the role of society and the State in creating intolerant or undemocratic environments for women. *Like a Virgin* marked a radical rupture to the idea of what 'feminine' art was, and what women artists could and should produce. The exhibition explored representations of different bodies through the work of Nigerian artist Lucy Azubuike and South African photographer Zanele Muholi. Silva stated that her motivation was to 'highlight women's experiences, identities, their bodies and sexuality, in a manner yet to be explored in contemporary Nigerian art'

(Silva 2009). It was intended to be challenging and to push boundaries: 'it was the appropriate catalyst in a context in which few, if any platforms exist for artistic practice that strays from the conventional and the conservative'. Yet Silva made it clear that she was not covering new ground, and in fact there had been a trajectory of 'artists [dealing] with the issues of womanhood, the body and sexuality and ma[king] provocative works for over thirty years' (ibid). With this she located the themes and concerns of these contemporary artists within a genealogy of women's agency and resistance from the past to the present. Women situating themselves in lineages of female empowerment is a theme which repeatedly emerges throughout this study.

Silva noted that within 'an intransigent patriarchal society in which sexism is prevalent and in which homophobia is legalised, few if any artists have presented complex, provocative works on the body and sexuality [like...] Azubuike and Muholi' (ibid). She pointed out that the images did not occupy immutable positions defined by permanent gender structures but entered and influenced gendered discourses of representation. Of these artist's critical engagement with gender, Silva said:

We have this tradition here of male and female artists taking women as their point of departure but not engaging with it in a critical manner. And for me these two artists represented a strong voice about women's body, and about sexuality, but more than that, about the freedom to be who they want to be (Radicate 2016)

Silva's aim was to challenge female art production which was 'devoid of the complexities of women's lives'. She complained that: 'the diet of latitudes [women] are continuously fed in the form of mother and child, fulani milkmaid, market woman hardly allows them to engage with changes in their contemporary society' (Bookartville 2020).



Figure 4.3 Lucy Azubuike (2006) *The Whisper* image courtesy of the artist

Lucy Azubuike used her menstrual blood to create images which formed a diary or book of visual narratives (figure 4.3). Her art was inspired by real life interactions and observations, through which she offered personal reflections on her experiences of love, hope, disappointment, and friendship. Her images spoke of how traditional ideas and religious expectations around roles and responsibilities, as well as living in a patriarchal society, impacted negatively on women. She alluded to women enforcing beliefs in the name of 'tradition' on themselves and other women, without critical interrogation of the validity of their acts: 'women enforce it on their own women, they think it is culture, they accept it even though they don't like it' (Silva 2009). Here she referred to oppressive or discriminatory acts such as widowhood rites or girl/child marriage. Azubuike offered a creative questioning which moved from the autobiographical to the public, to make the very personal, highly political.

Muholi's conceptual strategies were like Azubuiké's, bringing the raw physicality of the body to the fore in ways which were forceful and often disturbing (figures 4.4 and 4.5).

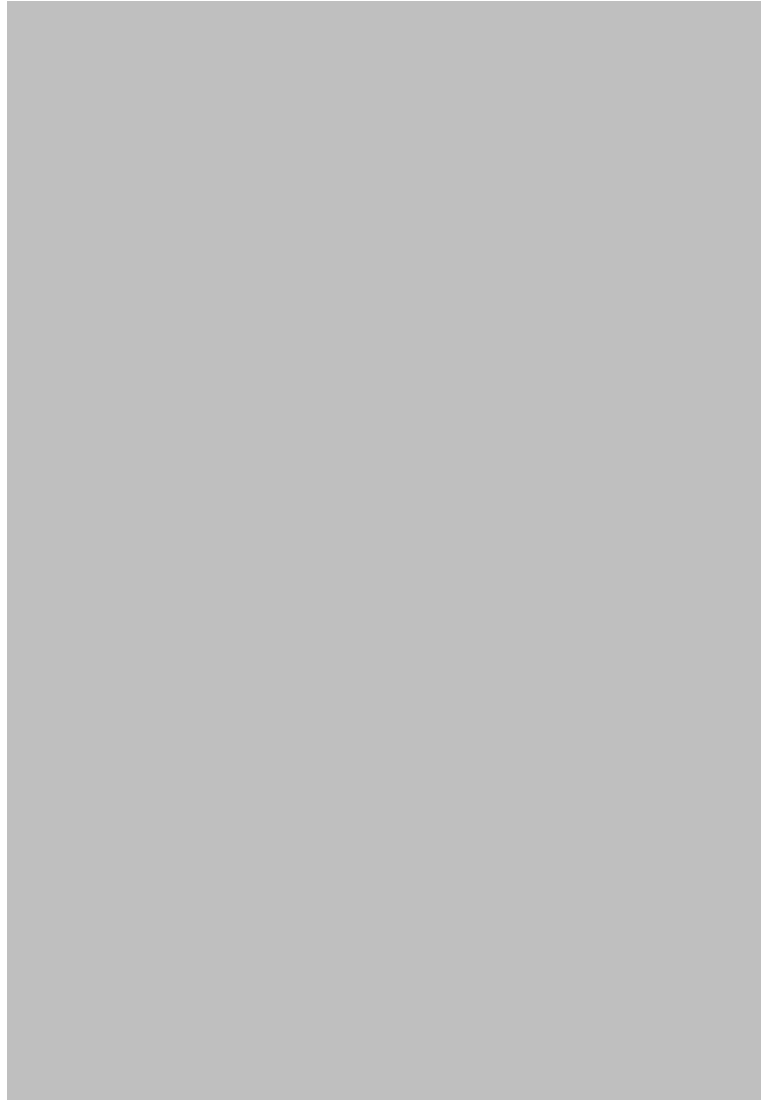


Figure 4.4 Zanele Muholi (2004) *Aftermath* image courtesy of Michael Stevenson Gallery

Muholi used their own body as the subject of their artwork, asserting the right to demonstrate feminist political expression, to challenge masculinist viewing pleasure and speak about how women negotiate their private lives and the public space. With

these artworks Muholi brought a challenging portrayal of the situation of the LGBTQI+ community in South Africa to an audience in Lagos. Muholi's subjects were powerful and unafraid, they demonstrated substantial agency in the act of mediating their own representation. The public violence perpetrated against queer individuals, such as the 'corrective' rape of black lesbians, was metaphorically captured in the body of work *Period*. Like Azubuiké, Muholi used the symbolic power of menstrual blood to highlight processes of violence, pain, renewal, and rebirth. Muholi was defiant in asserting that 'stereotypes about the sexuality of black women need to be challenged by African women themselves' and stated: 'My photographs provide the radical aesthetic for women to speak' (Silva 2009).

Like a Virgin became a platform for women to articulate the theme of empowerment through the relations generated by people and artwork: Muholi and Azubuiké through the production and display of their creative minds, and Silva through her choice to conceive, produce and execute this exhibition. Once again funded by the Prince Claus Fund, as well as the Commonwealth Foundation, the show was also a representation of the agency wielded by such institutions (see chapter three on FEAAN). These sponsors had a history of supporting exhibitions dealing in the thematic of women's empowerment, and here, their concerns overlapped with Silva's intentions to provide mutual benefit to both parties. Part of the funding support included money to produce an illustrated catalogue with accompanying texts by Silva and Cameroonian art critic Christine Eyene, which contributed to recording and producing knowledge about art production by women African artists in a highly tangible way.



Figure 4.5 Zanele Muholi (2005) *Flesh II* image courtesy of Michael Stevenson Gallery

Silva reflected upon the challenging nature of the show, stating that she ‘was apprehensive about how people would react and ‘half expected either the state/fed [sic] authorities to come and arrest [her] for promoting same sex activities or for a group of Christian fundamentalist to come and protest or worse try and destroy the images’ (Silva 2009). However, the show was generally well received, which Silva read as a positive sign that Nigerian audiences were ready for change.

Silva’s focus on pluralism, engagement with the ideas of others, and values of openness and dialogue once again resonates with the notion of a cosmopolitan sensibility. Against the backdrop of Nigerian society, *Like a Virgin* was intimate,

confrontational, provocative, and transgressive. It demonstrated an approach based on engagement with others and an opening up of space for conversation and discussion. Azubuike is a Nigerian citizen, Muholi is South African, and this relationship represented Silva's ambition to connect African perspectives from different parts of the continent. Silva stated: '[it is] important because its coming from a very local context but it's something that is universal. That's where the power of the work resides. Its personal [...] but extremely universal, women from anywhere in the world can identify with these two bodies of work' (Radicate 2016). With this show Silva created and strengthened the ties connecting Nigerian and South African art worlds. Gell's (1998) theory of art and agency helps to make sense of how art is an active agent in creating these social relations.

Gell (1998:12) suggests that the agency of art 'explores a domain in which 'objects' merge with 'people' by virtue of the existence of social relations between persons and things, and persons and persons via things'. When the visitor to *Like a Virgin* perused Azubuike's (2006) artwork *The Whisper* (figure 4.3), a particular cognitive operation of reading and interpreting the work occurred (see visual representation, figure 4.6). Gell (1998) identifies this as 'the abduction of agency'. The artwork would have caused the art viewing public to make a 'causal inference' about the intention of the 'social agent' who was responsible for this artwork being presented in front of them. Perhaps this could have involved the viewer trying to understand the intentions of the artist (Azubuike) who made the work, or the curator (Silva) who facilitated the exhibition, or the space (CCA) as a platform to transmit certain viewpoints. Thus, the art viewing public form a notion of the disposition and intention of 'social others' via abduction from the artwork. As the artwork dealt in the theme of menstruation, it is likely that the viewer would assume the artist to be a woman, and

that she cared about the issues that affect women. Maybe the viewer would form a notion around the intention of Silva, assuming that she was interested in promoting ideas such as the strength or resilience of women. Because the artwork caused the viewer to read into the social intentions of others, it affected its agency to become part of the social relationships being played out in this node and across this network. Therefore, the artwork was the outcome or instrument of social agency, an agent with human associates which emerged in a specific social context, there in the art exhibition space at CCA. This context dependent idea of agency means that the artwork was an agent only with respect to the viewer. The viewing public who attended *Like a Virgin* were the 'recipients' of the artwork; they entered a social relationship with the artwork because it affected them in some way, even if this was only disinterest or dislike. The viewer derived agency from the artwork because without them the artwork would not need to exist.

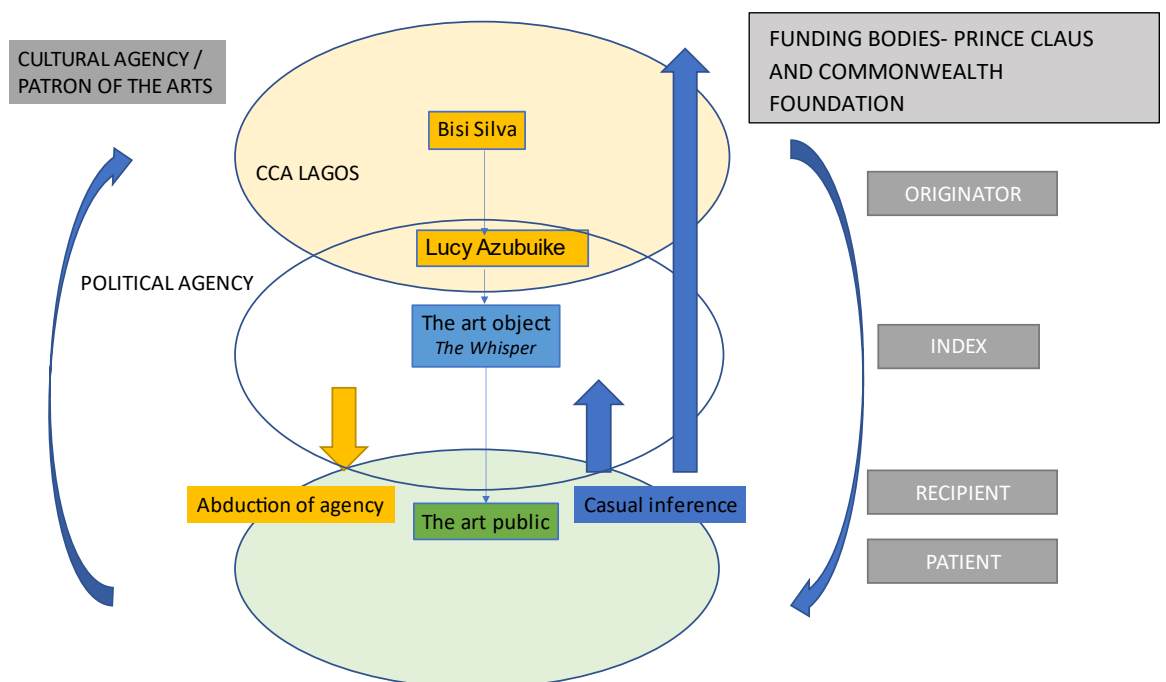


Figure 4.6 Diagram to visualise Gell's theory of agency within the *Like a Virgin* exhibition at CCA

This example shows how artworks become enmeshed in the texture of social relationships. Furthermore, the artwork acts as a 'prototype'; a visual representation of something more. In the context of this exhibition, this 'prototype' may have been the depiction of women as powerful. The agency of Azubuike as artist, Silva as curator, Prince Claus Fund as sponsor and artwork as prototype is therefore played out across these social relationships to become manifest in the artwork and in the networks which connect art worlds.

This leads to the argument which is drawn out across the thesis: that entangled social relations between artwork and human actor across the nodes and networks of contemporary African art worlds circulate ideas around women's value and women's empowerment. The contemporary African art scene is a domain in which issues of equality, especially relating to women are raised and explored, and the agency of artwork and human is how these ideas are transmitted and reinforced. As Macleod (2008) insists, women's 'things' have the capacity to change the women who come into contact with them and interact with them, and because of their emergence from a particular environment, ideology or set of practices, they can also help women to change and expand. Silva, Azubuike and *The Whisper* act as agents of change in gender relations with the potential to influence narratives around Nigerian women. The art object is a powerful agent.

Citizens of the world

Silva embodies Appiah's (2006) cosmopolitan 'citizen of the world'. She illustrates what Mbembe (2007) argues to be a longstanding African cosmopolitan experience, an inheritance of precolonial, colonial, and postcolonial history of Africa and Africans having been inherently transnational and cosmopolitan throughout time. He describes a practical intracontinental African migrant who can straddle distinct cultural, local, and regional identities, leaving room for an intense traffic with the global. His approach specifically challenges ideas of African peoples as stagnant or ontologically fixed in specific locations.

As a 'citizen of the world', Silva suggested that cosmopolitanism can be an orientation. She was described by artist Eddie Chambers (2019) as 'a truly global operator, able to bring all manner of international — as in pan-African or global — perspectives to her work as a curator'. She relocated from London to make Lagos her permanent home and stated: 'I like to think that although my practice is *of here* and *from here* [it] can be accessed internationally [my emphasis]' (ibid). For Silva, the international began with Africa and she encouraged artists to work in Ghana, Mozambique, or Senegal, before, or alongside Europe or the United States. Silva's reasoning was elaborated in this way:

We need to create more togetherness because that is what makes us stronger and relevant. We will get to a stage where an organisation in Lagos or Nairobi will collaborate with the Market Photo Workshop in South Africa and they will meet not outside the continent, but in Bamako (ibid)

Her eventual goal was for CCA to become a series of connected institutes across the African continent. *Àsìkò* alumni, Kenyan artist Jess Atieno, who worked closely with Silva told me that '[Silva] always talked about CCA — she wanted to start all these

CCA in Nairobi, in Lagos, she wanted to connect them all. She wanted to mobilise people who could actualise that dream'.⁸⁷

This network of CCA institutions would function like Bayart's (1993) rhizomes, as webs of invisible power structures connecting actors and interests below the surface of formal state art infrastructure, which is weak or non-existent across Africa. Relationship and partnership building were indicative of Silva's ability to mobilise and strengthen far-reaching global networks of the contemporary African art scene. Through collaborative projects Silva's work contributed to reshaping the geographies of the visual arts, both in terms of its key sites and actors, and in terms of how 'Africa' was positioned and understood.⁸⁸ Her collaborations tapped into networks that formed economic pathways carrying goods and people, crisscrossing complex transnational topographies. Silva expanded the idea of 'transnational' to focus on the 'transAfrican'. She shaped the rhizomatous networks of the art world to stretch out across Africa, across the globe, but remain 'rooted' in Nigeria.

Within the vagaries of art market demands for 'legitimacy', Silva and CCA gained kudos from this rooted cosmopolitan outlook or orientation. Operating within a strengthening art ecosystem dominated by commercial galleries, CCA's status as a not-for-profit venture added credibility to Silva's venture. Dolly Kola-Balogun, founder and creative director of Retro Africa gallery in Abuja commented on the non-commercial nature of CCA:

⁸⁷ Interview between Stacey Kennedy and Jess Atieno, video call, 13th July 2020.

⁸⁸ Silva's projects bolstered such international connections, for example: *Chance Encounters* (2009) in Mumbai; *Moments of Beauty* (2011) in Helsinki; *The Progress of Love* (2012-2013) in Houston and St. Louis; or *Contested Terrains* (2011) in London. Co-curated by Jude Anogwih, *Contested Terrains* was planned for London and Lagos but was postponed indefinitely due to civil unrest in Nigeria. It was replaced in the CCA programme with a series of short-term events and exhibitions relating to the *Occupy Nigeria* movement.

[Bisi was] not and never has been in the commercial art scene, CCA is an entirely non-profit organisation focused on research and documentation and has an intense curatorial focus [...] CCA being a non-profit organisation is significant.⁸⁹

What is significant is that CCA is a non-commercial organisation which bases its operational model on horizontal decision-making and is not structured by vertical or hierarchical power. CCA supports art and artists without any direct economic reward, and as such requires monetary assistance as well as considerable voluntary and unpaid labour support. CCA is funded by the Prince Claus Fund, British Council, Goethe Institut, French Institute, and American Embassy. Silva (2015) described this as a 'precarious situation', as these funds are not substantial. Kerry Greenberg (Tate Modern) recalls Silva having been invited to speak at an event and requesting an uplift to the stipend offered, stating that 'she had a building to run'.⁹⁰ Respondents share anecdotes of her asking for 'a book for the CCA library' at literary launches, or requesting financial support for specific projects at networking events. Her Ojeikere monograph (2014) was partly financed by a Kickstarter fundraising campaign, and she put her own money into CCA.

Silva's determination to fund CCA, even if she had to contribute personally, is evidence of a genuine commitment to the arts, a dedication demonstrative of an ethical cosmopolitan stance that shuns the commercial art world and suggests the pursuit of art as a collective and transformative aesthetic endeavour. This resonates with Appiah's (2006) understanding of an ethical responsibility towards other humans, and within this fundamental premise of cosmopolitanism lies an essentially moral view of

⁸⁹ Interview between Stacey Kennedy and Dolly Kola-Bagolun, Marrakech, 25th February 2019

⁹⁰ Kerry Greenberg (Head of International Collection Exhibitions at Tate Modern) 1-54 2019 London. Tribute to Bisi Silva.

the individual as having allegiances and responsibilities that extend beyond the local community. Although the commercial art world may *present* itself as philanthropic, (the art fairs discussed in chapter six trade on the idea that they are ‘giving back’ to Africa by platforming art, artists and carrying out pedagogic activities), ultimately art fairs and commercial galleries are profit-making endeavours. These goals do not necessarily have to be in conflict; art fairs and galleries can be highly self-reflective, to benefit the wider Nigerian art scene and individual artists by providing talks with collectors or art market analysts which assess investment opportunities, stimulate the market, offer forums for pedagogical debate and inspire dialogue with researchers or creatives. Yet CCA’s non-commercial status distances the organisation from the commercial art world and validates it as a politically and artistically legitimate venture.

Silva’s practice was grounded in generating tolerance, inclusiveness, hospitality, autonomy, and emancipation — the ethical grounding of the cosmopolitan. CCA is an open resource, it holds the largest art library on the continent, containing more than fifteen thousand books, magazines, journals, videos, and other ephemera on contemporary art, critical theory, and curatorial practice. Many of these resources originated from Silva’s own personal collection. CCA is used by the students of Yaba College of Technology and the University of Lagos, as well as by local and visiting international artists, curators, arts administrators and scholars. As an internationally well-regarded resource centre, CCA is a respected hub in contemporary visual art worlds. Silva encouraged a cosmopolitan outlook at CCA, creating a node in artistic networks where Nigerian creatives could navigate the ‘international’ art scene whilst keeping the nation/continent central to their thinking.

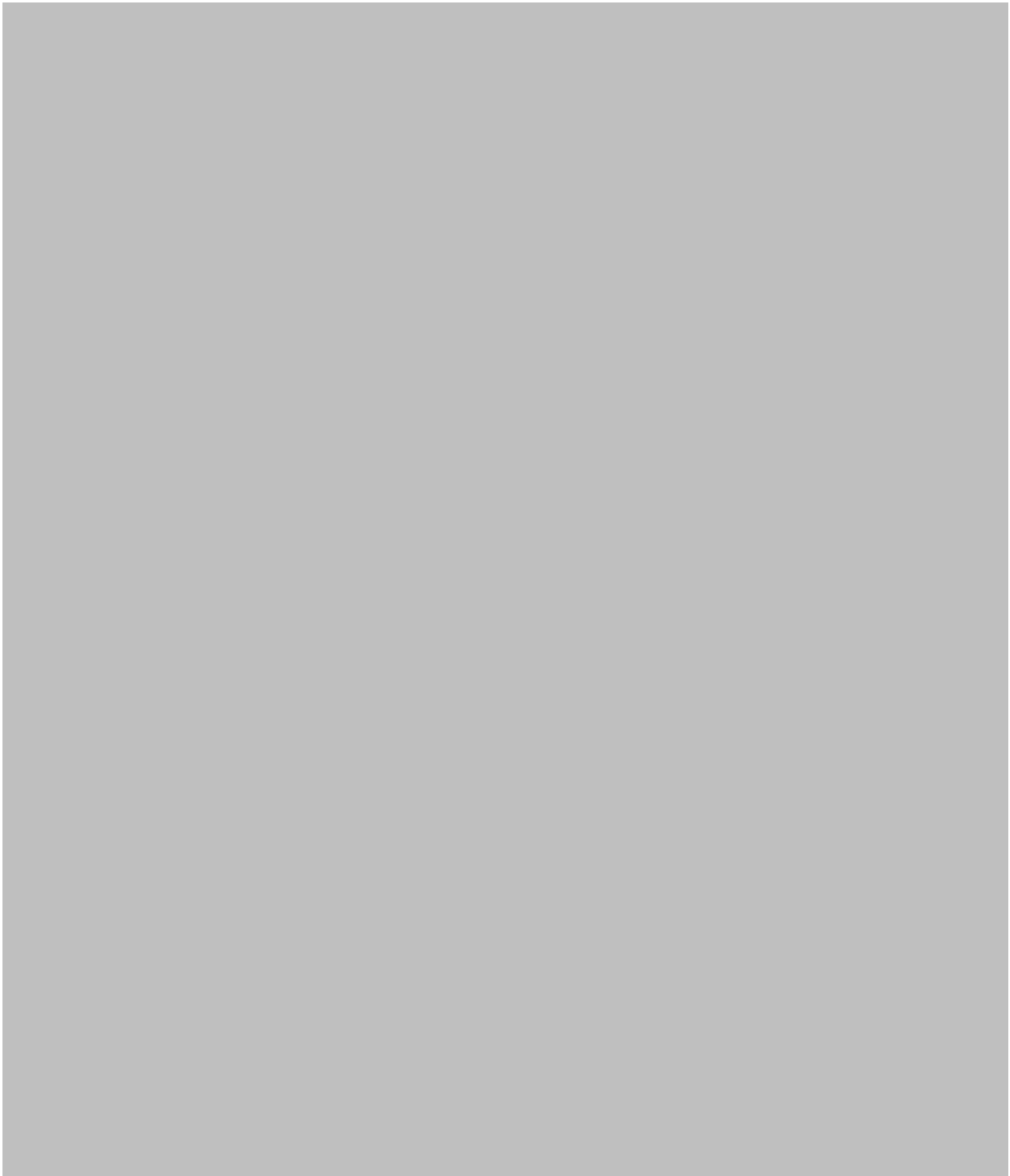


Figure 4.7 The design projection (exterior) for CCA, 2022 designed by Lagos-based architectural firms Greycave and Studio Contra Ltd

The importance of CCA was confirmed in 2022 when Sotheby's, London held a CCA benefit auction which raised over one million pounds. The aim of this fundraiser, (apart from as a PR exercise by the auction house to promote their sales of African modern

and contemporary art), was to renovate and secure purchase of CCA's three-storey building and redesign the venue into a world-class, multi-use, multidimensional arts centre (figures 4.7 and 4.8). The twenty-five donated lots in the auction included works by established names as well as up and coming artists.⁹¹ This fundraising mission is demonstrative of the key place held by CCA within the infrastructure of the contemporary African art scene.



Figure 4.8 The design projection (interior) for CCA, 2022 designed by Lagos-based architectural firms Greycave and Studio Contra Ltd

This mock-up renovation promotes the idea of CCA as an inclusive, open, welcoming space for all people, note the inclusion of the visitor who is a wheelchair user (figure 4.8). This is in line with Silva's cosmopolitan orientation. A central premise of this study is that cosmopolitan ideas of tolerance and celebration of 'difference' shapes the

⁹¹ Artists included El Anatsui, Sokari Douglas-Camp, Kehinde Wiley, Joy Labinjo and Michaela Yearwood-Dan.

networks and nodes of contemporary African art. This may be responsible for breaking down gendered barriers to participation: hence women artists are more likely to succeed in this environment. Of course, the unique dedication, hard work and sheer tenacity of Silva meant that she was also very much the agent of her own success. Individually, and through CCA, Silva exercised transformative social and political power to create new standards for women's rights.

Rooted cosmopolitanism: Nengi Omuku

Rooted cosmopolitanism has emerged as an important strand in this chapter and location is an important matrix through which to comprehend individual subjectivity. In 2019 I made a visit to artist Nengi Omuku's studio on Lagos Island (figure 4.9). Omuku described the sweeping skyline and ocean panorama view from her workspace as a constant source of inspiration and stated that Nigeria was her creative home.⁹² She had grown up in Port Harcourt, then spent eight years in England training at the Slade School of Fine Art, University College London. Although Omuku appreciated London, she eventually wanted to return 'home', describing a feeling of 'something missing...something [she] needed to get in touch with in Nigeria'.⁹³ As her parents were living in the UK at that time, the desire to return was more of a yearning for place than for family connections. Like so many other artists, Omuku describes Bisi Silva as a mentor and an inspiration. Once again, showing the importance of network connections and patronage, she describes messaging Silva for support in making this move back to Nigeria: "Before my return, I sent Bisi Silva an email titled 'Nigerian artist moving back to Nigeria' or something to that effect. She encouraged me to just keep painting and exhibiting and see what happens" (Iduma 2016).

⁹² Interview with Nengi Omuku, in her studio, Lagos with Stacey Kennedy October 2019

⁹³ Interview with Nengi Omuku, in her studio, Lagos with Stacey Kennedy October 2019



Figure 4.9 Nengi Omuku in her studio on Lagos Island. October 2019. Image by author.

Having returned to Port Harcourt initially, Omuku decided to move west to Lagos in 2019, seeking expanded artistic opportunities in the metropolis. She describes how the artistic community embraced her and supported her, often in practical ways such as helping her to locate a suitable studio space. Omuku described an intense feeling of being grounded, a deep connection with the immediate surroundings of her studio and the wider art scene of Lagos. She talked about feeling 'at home', a feeling which was expressed by other artists interviewed who described a sense of belonging in

Nigeria.⁹⁴ This suggested a rooted cosmopolitanism orientation, which was not in tension with a concurrent desire to transcend the limits of location and seek out international art worlds.

This history of movement within Nigeria, Omuku's travel abroad for study, and her eventual return to Nigeria, was indicative of a way of being which Simon Gikandi identifies as: 'a life connected across cultures, languages and states' which centres a 'connect[ion] to African communities, nations and traditions' (Gikandi 2011:9). It was also indicative of a commitment to the local or national. A base in Lagos or Port Harcourt allowed Omuku to access and engage with international art world networks but grounded her firmly in a Nigerian context. Although Omuku said that she works at her own pace and resists pressure to work more quickly or to modify her style to chase the fickle tastes of the commercial art market, her work was receiving increasing international attention and 'staying under the radar' was becoming more difficult.⁹⁵

Omuku described an African identity and practice which was deeply rooted in her specific local geography but reached beyond the immediate locality of Lagos. This is reflective of a cosmopolitanism through which cultural producers demonstrate a contemporary desire to connect local and global realities in a manner which is complimentary not contradictory. Greg Madison argues that home is an 'interaction' rather than a place, 'a moment when the individual and the environment 'match' to allow the feeling of being 'at home' (2006:12). Omuku said that when she travels away, she finds herself 'itching to come back'.⁹⁶ This visceral description suggested a deeply

⁹⁴ Interview with Nengi Omuku, in her studio, Lagos with Stacey Kennedy October 2019

⁹⁵ Since 2019, Omuku's burgeoning international career has taken her across national borders and Omuku has built up an impressive international CV. In 2020 Kristin Hjellegjerde Gallery, London added her to their roster of international artists, and in 2021, despite the global COVID pandemic I met Omuku in London where she was completing an artistic residency and solo show at Kristin Hjellegjerde Gallery, London.

⁹⁶ Interview with Nengi Omuku, in her studio, Lagos with Stacey Kennedy October 2019

embedded physical as well as emotional and practical connection to her location. Helen Hayes (2007) questions whether an individual's feelings of 'being at home' relate to a place of origin or a feeling of belonging. Feeling 'at home' in Lagos meant something different to Omuku than experiencing a familial or historical attachment with Port Harcourt. Omuku's narrative suggested that her own sense of feeling 'at home' was dependent upon relationships with significant others (the artistic community) and an ability to practice her art with ease (her studio, access to collectors). Hayes (2007:2-3) notes that a nostalgia for 'home' can be regressive and nostalgic or can be creative and future orientated. Omuku's expression of home and belonging is a mobile conception, located in past, present and future. Omuku says she 'feel[s] very in [her] skin in Lagos' which reflects a quest for personal wholeness and an ability to 'become home to oneself' (Hayes *ibid*).

Omuku's practice had significantly developed whilst studying at the Slade. During her studies she 'first began thinking about the possibilities of abstraction when painting the human body' and her 'deepening understanding and exploration of the possibilities of semi abstract figuration began'.⁹⁷ Omuku described her work as a continual battle between abstraction and figuration: a 'constant push and pull'.⁹⁸ Despite this 'push and pull' Omuku was successfully navigating her own recognisable style. Being in Nigeria, or perhaps this feeling of being 'whole' which she experienced there, has shaped Omuku's artistic practice in specific ways. She 'became fascinated' with incorporating local vintage fabric into her work and described feeling indebted to Lagos as a source of this artistic inspiration; 'it was in Lagos that I found these fabrics, so I feel like I owe Lagos to be here, to make these works.'⁹⁹ The connection she felt

⁹⁷ Interview with Nengi Omuku, in her studio, Lagos with Stacey Kennedy October 2019

⁹⁸ Interview with Nengi Omuku, in her studio, Lagos with Stacey Kennedy October 2019

⁹⁹ Interview with Nengi Omuku, in her studio, Lagos with Stacey Kennedy October 2019

with the city and her discovery of the cloth and how to incorporate it into her work are symbiotic, crucial to her sense of 'belonging' in Nigeria.

Omuku integrates the vintage Yoruba cloth *sanyan* and the Igbo cloth *aso oke* into her art practice. Instead of working on pre-primed canvas, Omuku uses this material to create a support on which to paint (figure 4.13). *Sanyan* has the appearance of raw linen, it was historically spun by women and woven together into individual strips by men, which were then sewn together to create the cloth (figure 4.10) The panels have an appealing grainy texture, covered in small, irregular puncture marks. Although *sanyan* is no longer in production, it can be bought at the vintage cloth market. Like *sanyan*, *aso oke* is a premium traditional fabric comprised of sewn woven strips, often dyed in bright colours (figure 4.11). Omuku sources this material as pre-worn garment, a complete outfit would usually have been previously worn by a woman.¹⁰⁰ If Omuku is able to purchase an entire outfit she keeps all the component parts together to create a substantial support on which to paint one large scale work.

¹⁰⁰ This is made up of a headpiece of four to six strips; a shoulder piece of eight to ten pieces; a wrapper of around ten pieces; and a top cloth of another ten.



Figure 4.10 *Sanyan* cloth prior to preparation. Image by author.

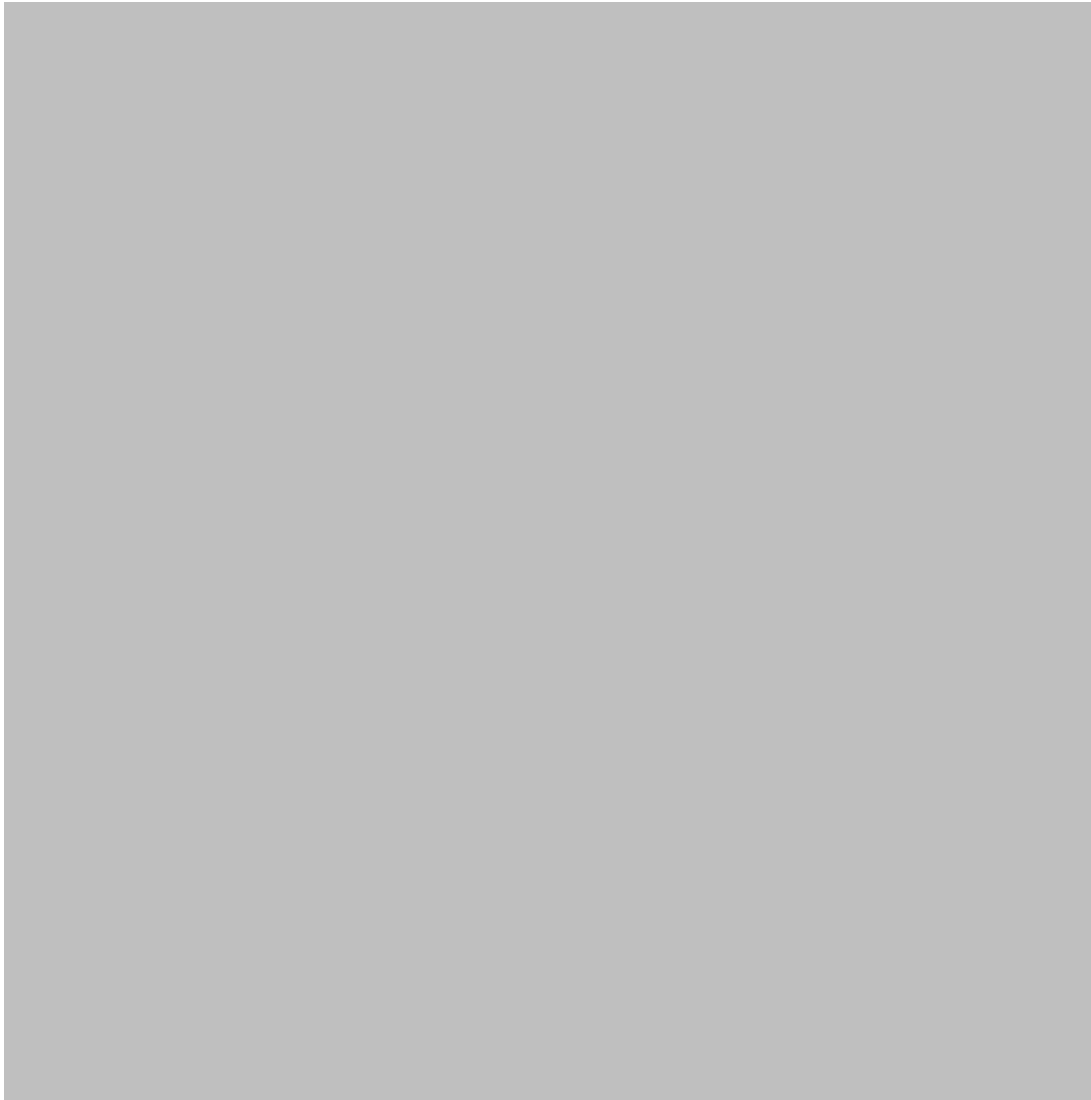


Figure 4.11 *Aso oke* material as support (verso). Image by author.

The specific history of the cloth has become significant to her practice, which relates to the politics of the female body. By painting on garments previously worn by women in their everyday lives, Omuku connects materiality and composition. Her work forms an intriguing circularity, as her subjects are often women portrayed wearing this cloth (figure 4.12).

Working with Nigerian cloth allowed Omuku to connect with a feeling of being Lagosian/Nigerian and a physical feeling of encounter:

The fabric [*sanyan*] is from the West, it's a Yoruba fabric. I am not Yoruba but I feel it is not about where I am from, it's the experience of being in a certain place passing through me.¹⁰¹

Omuku described herself as 'obsessed with the possibilities of fabric in relation to being Nigerian'. When she first encountered this material, she says she became 'passionate and obsessive', and 'recognised that the cloth was going to be important to her work, as well as to her sense of belonging.' Adopting cross-cultural aesthetics connects Omuku's work to Nigeria in a physical way, by creating work which is grounded in local material culture, her practice is intrinsically tied to geographical place. However, the use of *sanyan* and *aso oke* could be sourced and exported for use anywhere in the world and Omuku's connection thus extends beyond an appreciation of the physical fabric resources, to a feeling of being settled and at home which drives her artistic impulse. Whilst the cloth is part of this, it is also this deeper and settled sense of place which inspires her creativity. There was 'something [she] needed to get in touch with in Nigeria' which transpired in Lagos when she found her artistic community, her studio, and the ways to incorporate *sanyan* and *aso oke* into her work. I suggest that the way she describes this connection with place is indicative of a particular attachment to her local environment, although her outlook reaches beyond local or national boundaries, as well as racial or ethnic restrictions.

¹⁰¹ Interview with Nengi Omuku, in her studio, Lagos with Stacey Kennedy October 2019



Figure 4.12 Nengi Omuku *Untitled* 2019. Photo by author. Image courtesy of the artist.

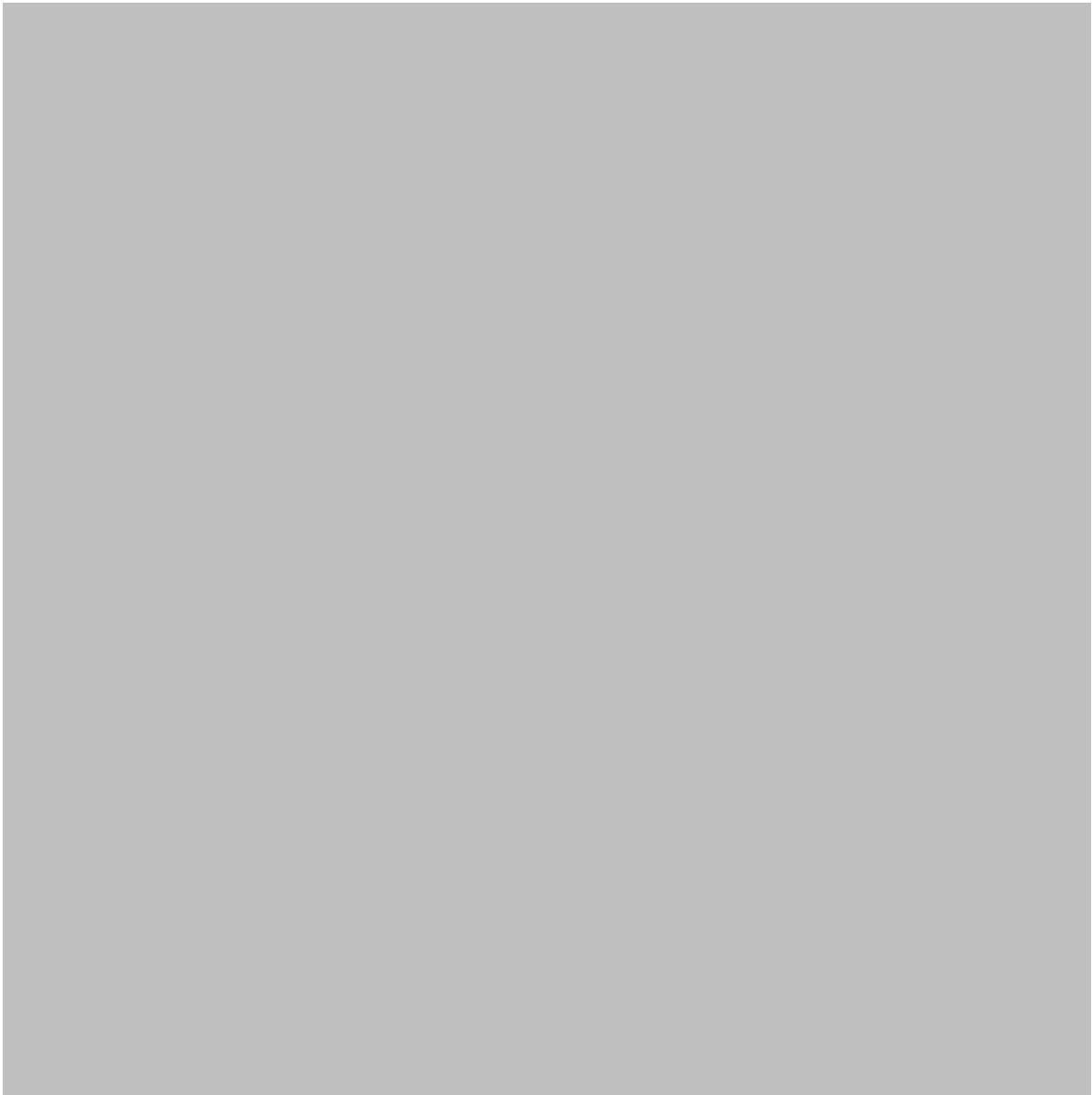


Figure 4.13 The material support of the painting on the stand is *aso oke* (the coloured strip cloth can be seen verso). Image by author.

Gender is a central theme in Omuku's work, which often 'explores the female body and the experience of being a woman'.¹⁰² She tells me that painting is her way of dealing with the way she is treated as a woman:

¹⁰² Interview with Nengi Omuku, in her studio, Lagos with Stacey Kennedy October 2019

people come to the studio and ask me how old are you and I say in my thirties and they say oh you are not married, you will soon expire, I am not even joking. Thinking about these things, what does it mean to be fertile, what is fertility, what does it mean to be a woman today, what are the challenges I am facing and how do I paint those experiences and frustrations

She engages with the politics of the body and the complexities that surround identity and difference. Talking with women about the fabric and about their lives, she 'became obsessed with fabric in relation to mental state'. From this starting point her work began to portray her own internal feelings and experiences as a woman, and she channels other women's narratives into her work:

It started with me, then it grew beyond me, when I hear other women's stories and their frustrations [...] it comes out in my paintings. I embody those experiences for myself and channel it into paint, it's almost like a way of empathising with people's stories and finding a way to paint that.¹⁰³

¹⁰³ Interview with Nengi Omuku, in her studio, Lagos with Stacey Kennedy October 2019

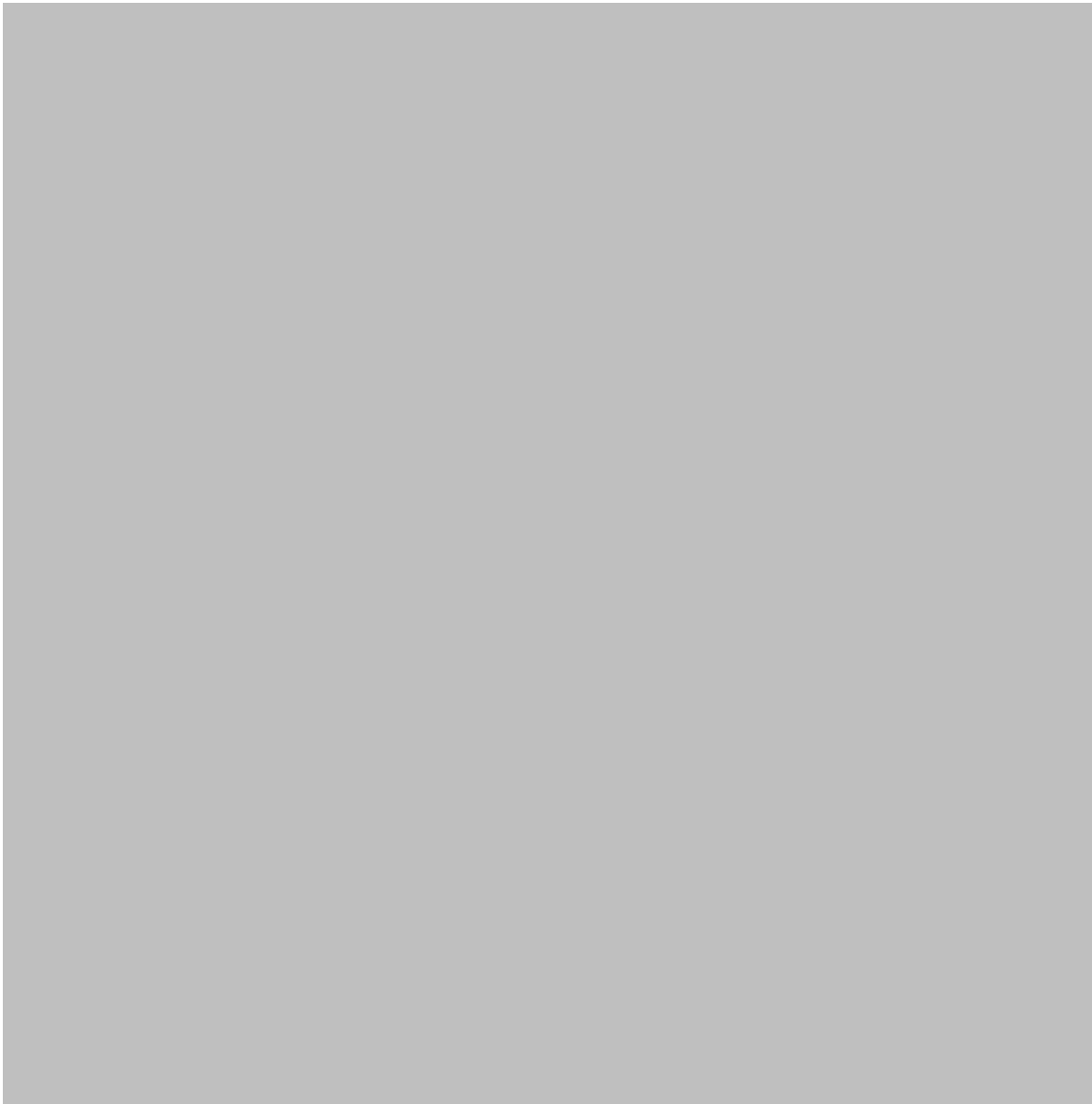


Figure 4.13 Nengi Omuku *Untitled* 2019. Image by author. Image courtesy of artist.

Omuku's empathic approach to her subjects is demonstrated in the image above (figure 4.13). This is one of Omuku's clients, a first-time collector who told her story of a dark past and hope for a brighter future which inspired Omuku to create this work. The colours she chose to use in the painting and the way the sitter is positioned suggest difficulties but also strength, the subject turns away from the viewer and away from the clouds which threaten behind her.

This kind of intrinsically human connection indicates a rooted local connection to place and person, yet Omuku also epitomises transcultural mobility and an increasingly international art practice, intersections which allow her to operate an international career from her base in Nigeria. Figures 4.14 and 4.15 show Omuku's work in exhibition in the setting of Kristin Hjellegjerde Gallery in London (2020). Nigerian material therefore circulates across the spaces of the contemporary African art world, from Nigeria to Britain, from the markets of Lagos to the white cube London gallery Omuku has transformed cloth into art object. Omuku understands her own 'art world' as a space in which to enact aesthetic practice— an enabling position which paves the way for her self-reflexive agency. Omuku's art practice, her intertwining of here and there, is an example of the complex manifestations, as well as benefits, of a rooted cosmopolitan outlook.

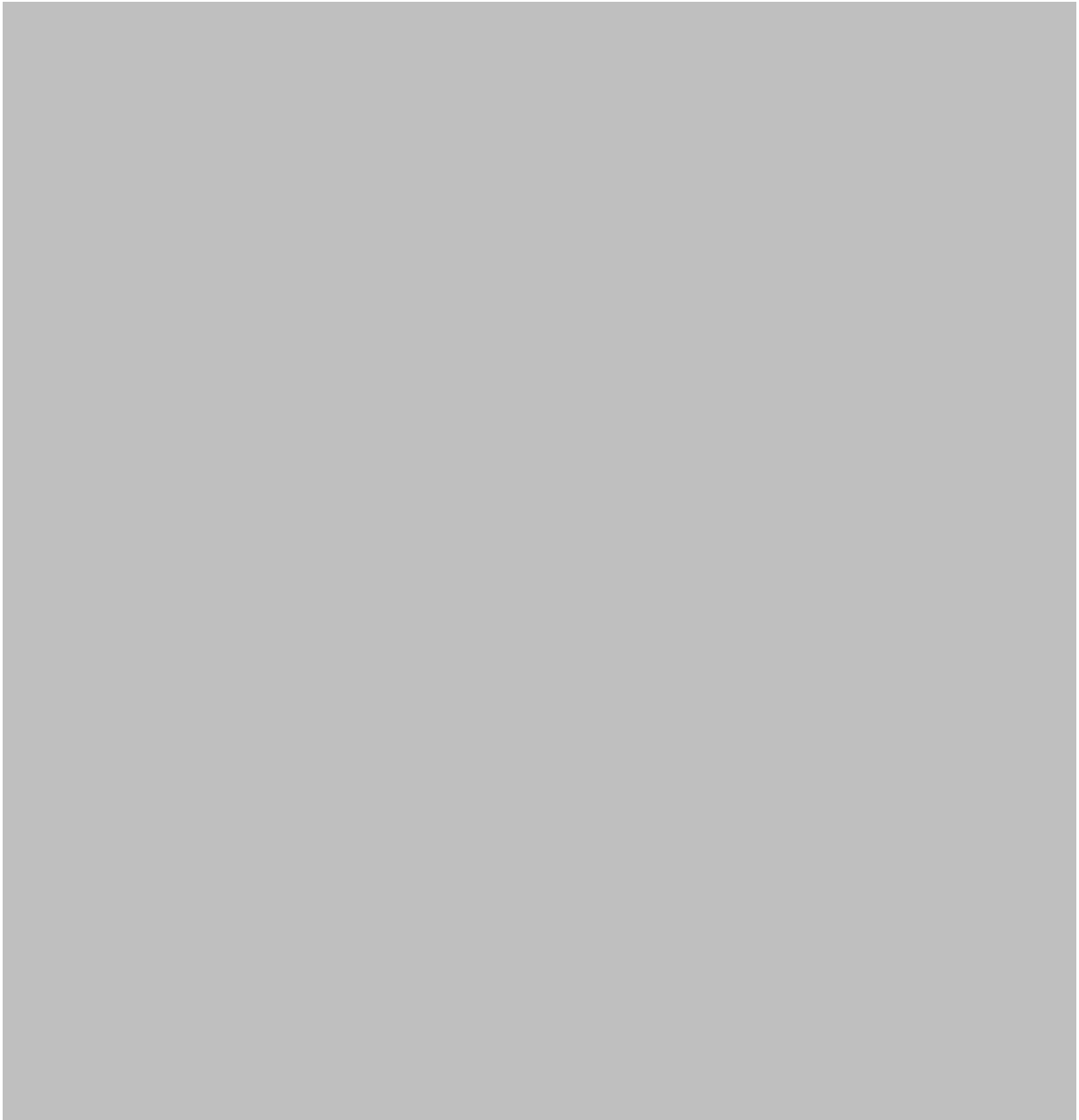


Figure 4.14 Artwork by Nengi Omuku which shows the use of *sanyan* cloth. Image by author. Image courtesy of artist. Kristin Hjellegjerde Gallery, London December 2020.



Figure 4.15 Detail of artwork Artwork by Nengi Omuku which shows the use of *sanyan* cloth. Image by author. Image courtesy of artist. Kristin Hjellegjerde Gallery, London, December 2020.

Omuku demonstrates that artistic practice can be firmly grounded in place, in a very material way. However, as her artwork circulates across art nodes and networks it crosses borders and brings ideas around women and women's lives into conversation

in Lagos and then in London. She is dedicated to Lagos, to Nigeria, but both herself and her artwork travel. As such they both possess an agency which can transmit ideas about women in Nigeria. What stands out in Omuku's practice is a cosmopolitan upbringing and acute embrace of her Nigerian heritage, in the context of hybridity through distance, dislocation and diaspora. Her work reflects this complex personal journey and speaks to the idea of cultural exchange not as an exile but rather as a critical paradigm necessary to understanding emerging Nigerian practice today.

Conclusion

The chapter brought to light the role of Silva and Fall in shaping the contemporary African art world of today, as they worked towards their shared ambition of lifting the profile of contemporary art from Africa within international art discourse. The two women strengthened already existing connections between actors and institutions on the continent and drew on emerging art networks from London in the late 1980s/ early 1990s which looked towards the African continent. Their work addressed the structural conditions of contemporary African art, as they built globally interconnected contemporary African art networks which could be multiplied without the requirement to be connected to formal art world institutions which are weak in African countries.

The chapter focused on a specific alignment in the direction of Nigerian politics, Nigerian society, and the turn towards a notion of 'global art' which looked beyond the West. Silva played a critical role in the global contemporary art scene from the turn of the millennium until her death in 2019, and Fall continues to be an influential curator of contemporary art. Together they demonstrated a fierce dedication to raising the status of African art and African artists, particularly women. Silva leveraged personal agency at a specific moment in art history, choosing to situate her practice in Nigeria and address the multiple local, national, and global dimensions of contemporary

African art from the continent. This rooted cosmopolitanism demonstrates Silva's extension of power and privilege across and outside of the borders of the nation, supporting Appiah's (2006) concept of cosmopolitanism as 'universality plus difference'.

The chapter has highlighted the complexity of art networks, whose structures are rhizomatous, with multiple entryways and connectivity. It has also begun to outline the nodes and connecting lines of parts of the contemporary art networks which emanate from and connect the Nigerian contemporary art scene, not just to art world nodes but to other networks and spheres of influence. Silva's agency lay in her ability to form strong social relationships and build pan-African cosmopolitan networks stretching from Lagos to reach continentally and intercontinentally. She was a significant player among the international cohort of 'super star' curators' working with contemporary art from Africa: N'Goné Fall, Okwei Enwezor and Simon Njami — multilingual, highly educated practitioners and academics well connected across Africa, Europe and America who live the hybrid, mobile lifestyles typical of the contemporary international art curator. Young artists and curators today such as Nengi Omuku emulate this flexible, mobile, transnational lifestyle to work from a base in Nigeria but reach international audiences.

Silva encouraged artists to find liberation in new forms of artistic expression and address women's lives across Nigeria, Africa, and the world. She built productive relations and gained respect across art worlds, thus she was more easily able to challenge inscribed notions of gender. Her focus on innovation and new media allowed her to centre women in art practice, because experimental art forms allow women artists to step outside male dominated traditions and expectations. Against this backdrop, formerly taboo subjects such as gender and sexuality were more easily

addressed. In the spaces she created, artwork can be seen to work as the outcome or instrument of the agency of artist and curator. This accounts for the ways in which ideas around women's empowerment circulate across the nodes and networks of contemporary African art.

Silva and Fall are important for thinking about African agency within the story of global art, because too often it is inferred that it is a European who 'brings recognition to' African art or artists. Silva demonstrated that African curators and artists have their own networks and can influence global art worlds from Africa, she was an example of a Nigerian woman who shaped the story of global art from Lagos. Silva resisted tired narratives of European curators 'making space' for Nigerian art and artists and used her Africa centred networks to interject into the 'international' art world.

This chapter suggests women-led art networks emulate a patron-client model which typifies Nigerian business, political and social systems as a way to 'get things done'. In contrast to the ubiquitous masculine 'big man', male dominated vertical political networks of patron-client relations usually recognised in Nigerian society, here women adopt a model of patron-client relations with women are the patron. This is the focus of the next chapter.

Chapter five: Networks, Patrons and Clients

women are the face of the art scene here in Lagos [...] Bisi was so unique because she didn't have the support of a strong male figure

Temitayo Ogunbiyi, Artist and Artistic Director of ART X Lagos 2019¹⁰⁴

Introduction

The previous chapter argued that rhizome like networks connect actors and institutions across the global reaches of the contemporary African art world. My historical reading of contemporary African art within the so called 'global art turn', centred Bisi Silva and N'Goné Fall as the chief protagonists. This chapter continues to unpack these complex networks, beginning more locally with the young artists and art administrators of ART X Lagos, then zooming out to assess part of the international network in which Silva was central. Silva's relationship building and mentorship is explored through her *Àsikò* programme. Building on this, the chapter will explore the patronage and mentorship of women by women, offering further case studies of Nike Òkúndáyé as patron and Taiwo Aiyedogbon as client to understand patron-client systems in the setting of the female run contemporary Nigerian art world. The opening quote demonstrates the respect which Silva garnered as an autonomous female agent, a woman who did not require the provision of a male patron but was herself the patron (or matron).

The chapter frames Silva, and her contemporaries such as Nike Òkúndáyé, as 'big women'. They have adopted patron-client systems to grow and develop the contemporary art scene and are examples of people achieving success through people. Joseph (1987) argues that clientelism is fundamental to political organisation

¹⁰⁴ Interview between Temitayo Ogunbiyi and Stacey Kennedy, via telephone 28th February 2020

and behaviour in Nigeria as individuals seek the support and protection of a patron whilst trying to acquire basic social and material goods. Transposing these mechanisms of power to the art world, artists may seek the support of a patron to provide 'protection' by way of access to networks of influence, development grants and loans, studio space or materials, or the ability to bypass art world gate keepers. Art networks do not exist in isolation from other networks in Nigeria, they are embedded within, and connected to, the many structures and 'ways of doing things' in society. However, in this art world *women* are the patrons, in contrast with the typically masculine, 'big man'.

In Nigeria, networks are more commonly associated with patrimonialism and predation, for example Reno's (2006:31) notion of the 'shadow state' turns networks into deviant mechanisms through which, 'rulers manipulate markets to manage clients and punish and deny resources to others'. The contemporary art world is far from warlords, militias, predatory rulers, or disenfranchised youth capturing informal economic networks for personal gain. The lens of cosmopolitanism helps to understand patronage, following Appiah (1997) who proposed that a cosmopolitan identification enjoins the individual in morally and emotionally significant communities whilst espousing notions of tolerance and openness to the world. This illuminates how and why the patronage of women on the art scene contrasts with the 'first lady phenomenon' of female agency in the Nigerian context.

However, caution is required not to set these 'big women', (particularly Silva who receives such in depth focus in this study), as peculiarly altruistic or selfless figures. Anthropologists view patronage as a 'type of social relationship', an *exchange* relationship in which an individual of higher social and economic status (the patron) uses their influence and resources to provide protection or benefits for a person of

lower status (client) (Weingrod 1968; Berman 1998). Exchange is reciprocal and benefits flow in two directions. The client may offer general support and assistance to the patron and there is personal and professional benefit in acting as patron.

The chapter ends with a case study of artist Taiwo Aiyedogbon, which demonstrates how young women develop their agency on the art scene through building network connections. It emerges through this case study, and in this chapter, that social and cultural hierarchies do not operate in isolation but instead intersect with one another to produce distinct patterns of power, oppression, and experience. In the Nigerian art world, status can be based on seniority, age or experience, connections, and position in networks of patronage. Gender is not the most powerful, or only, category of analysis. It is highly visible as an analytical tool but may obscure other factors of stratification such as class, religion, and access to education. Women claiming space in a male dominated art world exercise social agency which may be garnered from their background, wealth, education, connections, or position in society.

Network benefits

This opening section considers how and why young women in Lagos make conscious efforts to access networks and power structures. It is based upon thirty interviews with respondents who were working with ART X on a temporary basis to produce the 2019 fair. There were two groups: firstly, young people employed on short term contracts, or as interns, within the main office-based team (approximately four to six weeks). Secondly, young people taken on as front of house docents for the period of the fair (around three or four days work). The docents worked in a similar way to volunteers, although were provided with food and accommodation. All the posts were paid, even if only a small remuneration which covered travel and expenses. The ratio of women to men working in these roles was high, and although I interviewed all, the quotes in

this section are drawn from interviews with women. These are not individuals who are offered permanent contracts with ART X (although this was an aspiration for many), nor are staff at this level involved in management or decision making. For the office-based roles, those who make the grade are typically well-educated young women, who can be supported by their family while they look for permanent or long-term work. Those who worked in the front of house posts were a more mixed demographic, less affluent and less elite. However, even to volunteer at the fair requires a level of education, personal presentation, and skill. Certainly, good connections push you up the long list of individuals who apply. What emerged across my interviews was the ways in which both groups focused on the power of art networks as a strategy for success, and how this emulates other ways of 'getting things done' in Nigeria which often rely on associational or organised networking opportunities.

All of the interviewees cited seeking mentorship and patronage as a key part of their career trajectory. They described their motivation for working with ART X as an opportunity to connect to the 'right people.' When pushed on who was 'right' and conversely therefore, who was 'wrong', the office-based respondents offered specific names of individuals or organisations involved in the art world with whom they hoped to link with through working with the fair. This suggested that they viewed personal relationships as the entry point to artistic networks of influence, and in the main they cited other art world women as the aspirational figures whom they would look towards for support. Ethel, an office intern working on digital media for example, noted that she purposely looks to work with women, in organisations led by women:

I've intentionally worked and partnered with women clients such as [names removed] and women-run businesses such as ART X Lagos, Hanahana

Beauty, Africa Legal Aid etc. I'm looking to work with more and re-join organisations which are even more engaged with women's work¹⁰⁵

For aspiring art administrators such as Ethel, Peterside was cited most often as the woman who they wished to emulate and connect with. As well as Peterside being a strong and powerful individual who respondents felt would be an influential patron, they talked about the strength of the brand, describing ART X Lagos as an internationally respected organisation which encouraged them to feel pride in the achievements of the Nigerian art scene. To be 'seen' at ART X was a way to perform the success they were aiming to achieve.

The front of house (docent) staff cited slightly different ambitions. Whilst also keen to network, they more frequently mentioned a vaguer idea of the 'right people' to connect with, perhaps indicating they were looking for a more general affiliation with people who could provide opportunity. Many of the front of house staff were enthusiastic about working in the marquee where the talks were being held. In this location there was more potential to introduce oneself to the guest speakers and the ART X visitors, including celebrities and powerful social and political figures.

Ethel's commitment to working with women was a refrain echoed by many, and a dedication to working with and for women appeared to be a key element in the way in which young art administrators framed their aspirations. Like Ethel, many respondents suggested that ART X, or the art scene, was only one avenue in their strategy to find career success. They worked with, and connected to, many other organisations and associations which they believed would assist them in rising to their expected achievements.

¹⁰⁵ Interview between Stacey Kennedy and Ethel-Ruth Tawe Lokeh, by email, 11th January 2020

Working with ART X was therefore one thread in their often-substantial catalogue of activities. The fact that young men and women are keen to take on a short work contract with ART X as a means of connecting and contacting influential networks is in line with a way of managing one's career which Lane (2009) likens to 'independent contracting'. These 'career managers', as Lane describes them, view job changes as not only expected but necessary, where continual networking and job seeking are permanent aspects of a well-managed career. In Lagos, respondents reflected this idea, their job security born not of steady employment at a single company but of constant vigilance, flexibility, and employability.

These ideas represent a new chapter in career management, as the social contract of employment has changed and workers, not their employers, are seen to be responsible for planning their professional futures (Wesarat *et al.* 2014). In Lagos young women embrace this idea of career management, willing to accept the emotional labour required to maintain an image of oneself as a flexible, self-reliant entrepreneur, particularly in the face of a tight labour market and obvious power disparities between employer and employee (see Kunda and Van Maanen 1999).

The narrative of the autonomous, flexible career manager in charge of their own destiny taps into an origin myth from the USA, which describes the self-reliant pioneer fending for themselves in an uncharted, unpredictable environment. This is a setting which is reflected in the unstable and precarious working environment of Lagos. Women across the art world take on multiple roles (see chapters two and three). This appears to be in line with this neoliberal shaping of the role of employee and employer which the young arts administrators at ART X recognise as important in shaping a career. The ability of women to form and draw upon networks of support has been identified as crucial to enabling such a career management system.

The aspiring art administrators based in the office were, in the most part, from well-off backgrounds. A supportive family took the pressure off them to earn money and allowed them to take on voluntary work, often with NGOs. They described this work in terms which resonated with the international language of rights described in chapter three. Seto stated: 'I work for an international organisation called *Women in Africa Initiative*. [...] I believe that in order to cultivate and experience a thriving culture and society, it is paramount to uplift and financially invest in women, their ideas and contributions'.¹⁰⁶ It is common for young people the world over to take on various projects, often unpaid or low paid, as they find their place in the world and attempt to gain a foothold on the career ladder. This leads to a prevalence of voluntary association connections which allow women to construct effective interpersonal ties and affiliations.

The language of female empowerment and support once again frames the activities of these young creatives. Tosin describes how she works with a platform which supports women's creativity and navigates the patriarchal nature of society:

I [...] serve as the Community Manager for *For Creative Girls*, a platform that helps women market their creative works. I am a part of this because I know how hard it gets for women in patriarchal societies like Nigeria and every type of support we get, especially from one another, goes a long way¹⁰⁷

Once again this suggests that the rhetoric which circulates across art networks centres Western liberal ideas around gender equality, the validation of feminist ideologies, and the uplift of women, especially by other women.

¹⁰⁶ Interview between Stacey Kennedy and Seto Olayomi, by email, 28th February 2020

¹⁰⁷ Interview between Stacey Kennedy and Tosin Oyetade, by email, 26th February 2020

Everyone has multiple networks as a means of assuring as much personal security and access to channels of support as possible. These are business, economic, medical, or religious, in a country with no welfare support or healthcare system these networks are vital. The connection between art networks and business networks which emerged in chapter three was once again vocalised, as women were frequently involved in ‘corporate networking’ programmes. Joanna said: ‘I am currently involved with a programme called “9-5 chic” which supports women in the corporate world’ (see chapter six).¹⁰⁸ As further evidence of network membership in Lagos as entwined and entangled, many women described affiliation with religious organisations and networks. Their inclusion in such structures of support appeared once again to be framed around the benefits which they are able to access as women and pass on to other women. Toun described her voluntary work with a religious fellowship:

I am part of a Christian women fellowship that supports and encourages women, WOVIM (Women of Vision International Ministries), and I am also open to any organisation that supports and promotes women¹⁰⁹

Affiliation with religious networks often aligns women with the ethical or moral positioning of the cosmopolitan. Toun elaborates that she works ‘towards a global identity’, describing this as ‘a sense of oneness with humanity and therefore an important aspect of human development’. I asked how she would know when she achieved this sense of ‘oneness’ and her answer was interesting:

Toun: You know you have a global identity when you take an active role in your community, and work with others to make our planet more equal, fair and sustainable.

¹⁰⁸ Interview between Stacey Kennedy and Joanna Macgregor, by email, 19th December 2019

¹⁰⁹ Interview between Stacey Kennedy and Toun Benson, by email, 6th January 2020

SK: What gives you this global identity?

Toun:

- a. Identifying myself as being part of an emerging global community whose actions contribute to the bettering of that community's values and practices.
- b. Creating change and getting involved in the global community.
- c. Transcending all state borders and becoming more socially, politically, and economically integrated with the world.
- d. Participating in anything that supports change. It can be anything from empathising with others to fighting against global challenges.
- e. Willingness to understand the different cultures and hardships of the world as a global citizen.
- f. Staying up to date on current issues, understanding all global issues and realising the struggle that every human endures.
- e. Being trustworthy and having compassion to every human in the global community.¹¹⁰

What this indicated was that being a global citizen, for Toun, sounded very much like being a cosmopolitan. From her 'global citizen' we could read 'citizen of the world'. This exchange suggested that a 'global identity' was seen to be something which could be achieved through experience and action. Toun has a strategy to become more 'global', and perhaps more aligned to a cosmopolitan outlook. Like the other women in my interviews, through her connection with ART X and the contemporary art scene Toun sees herself as embedded, even temporarily, in simultaneously local, regional and global worlds in which she can be an effective agent. These young women are engaged not in emulation but in aspiration to become social actors themselves. As

¹¹⁰ Interview between Stacey Kennedy and Toun Benson, by email, 6th January 2020

women aim to achieve this by churchgoing, charity work and taking on a job with ART X, this suggests a cosmopolitan orientation. As my interviews demonstrated, ART X is viewed as a vehicle which may assist young people in achieving their goals. It may or may not prove successful, but exposure to different settings, the gathering of contacts and network building is seen to be key to developing oneself as an effective agent.

These artists, curators and art administrators of the future aim to break into the contemporary art world by working at ART X. They demonstrate that network connection is a fundamental part of shaping their career and their identity. But how do these art world networks operate? Social structure is the fundamental principle of social network theory, which emerges from a direct relationship between individuals. Wellman (1983:1261) reminds us: 'Each tie gives participants potential access to all those with whom other dyad members are connected'. Anyone who comes into contact becomes part of the network — even if weakly — and asymmetric ties of differing intensity connect network members and build network strength. Network ties help individuals and organisations to obtain access to influence, wealth, information, and power, they define the coordinates through which an art career is lived, and although different networks operate in different ways, they all provide social capital (Rainie and Wellman 2012:19).

Visualising Silva's network

My interviews with junior ART X staff revealed that aspiring art workers in Lagos consider personal connection to networks to be a powerful predictor of opportunity and upward mobility. This section now considers the power of network affiliation, which demonstrates why young art administrators of the future may want to access these structures. Once again the central place of Silva emerges. In 2019 it was reported that Silva had died in Lagos, aged fifty-six years old. Tributes were gathered and shared

by her friends and colleagues. Art events in London and Lagos made space in their programme to reflect upon Silva's life and legacy. In the UK, the 1-54 art fair, London (2019) dedicated its entire FORUM programme to Silva, in recognition of her 'champion[ing of] women artists and experimental artistic practices, prioritis[ing] research, publishing and pedagogy and nurture[ing] the next generation of artists, curators, writers and art historians in Africa' (Artsy online article 2019). Silva had acted as mentor to the fair's founder and director, Touria El Glaoui.¹¹¹ Over four days, 1-54 brought together individuals 'who benefitted from Silva's wise counsel and unwavering support, to continue the conversations she had begun' (ibid). Here is an example of Silva's endurance and legacy, a substantial marker of agency which defies the erasure outlined in chapter two.

Also in 2019, the final talk of the ART X discussion programme was dedicated to Silva's life and work: *The Progress of Love: Bisi Silva Remembered*. The event was a visible testimony to the art network which Silva and Fall had shaped over so many years, with Fall herself leading the session alongside artist Emekah Ogboh and curator Antawan Byrd. High profile guests such as The Obi of Onitsha (the traditional leader of Onitsha, Anambra State, southeast Nigeria, Igwe Nnaemeka Alfred Ugochukwu Achebe) and British-Nigerian artist Yinka Shonibare CBE (part of the UK based Young British Artist Movement of the 1990s, whose work explores cultural identity, colonialism and post-colonialism within the contemporary context of globalisation), were in attendance. Their presence was evidence of the wide respect Silva commanded locally and internationally. Fall began by highlighting the networks (outlined in chapter four) in action: 'it's thanks to Bisi that I met Emeka, she [Silva] said "oh there is this crazy young guy who is working with sound" and he came to Cape

¹¹¹ Interview between Stacey Kennedy and Touria El Glaoui, by email, 15th March 2019

Town for a workshop then we did two projects together in Spain and in Denmark'.¹¹² Of Antawan Byrd, Fall said: 'when I was researching the Arts Collaboratory Network which CCA was part of, Bisi couldn't come so she said I am sending my assistant, you will see he's amazing and that's how I met Babyface [sic Antawan Byrd].'¹¹³ This demonstrates that those drawn into the network become linked with one another, even if indirectly, and ties quickly become reciprocal. The combination of close geographic proximity in Lagos thickens ties to networks which are far reaching and well-connected across borders.

Throughout this session, stories were shared which illuminated how artists and curators had drawn on the international network of Fall and Silva to expand their career and in turn offer opportunities to others to whom they were connected, directly or indirectly. In addition, the ART X Modern section of the fair was dedicated to Silva, cementing her place in the art history of Nigeria and drawing attention to her 'amazing global visual art network' (see figure 5.0, and chapter six). The event was testimony to the success and endurance of these art networks and connections which Silva had shaped so effectively.

¹¹² N'Goné Fall, ART X Talks, Bisi Silva Remembered, ART X Lagos, 3rd November 2019

¹¹³ N'Goné Fall, ART X Talks, Bisi Silva Remembered, ART X Lagos, 3rd November 2019

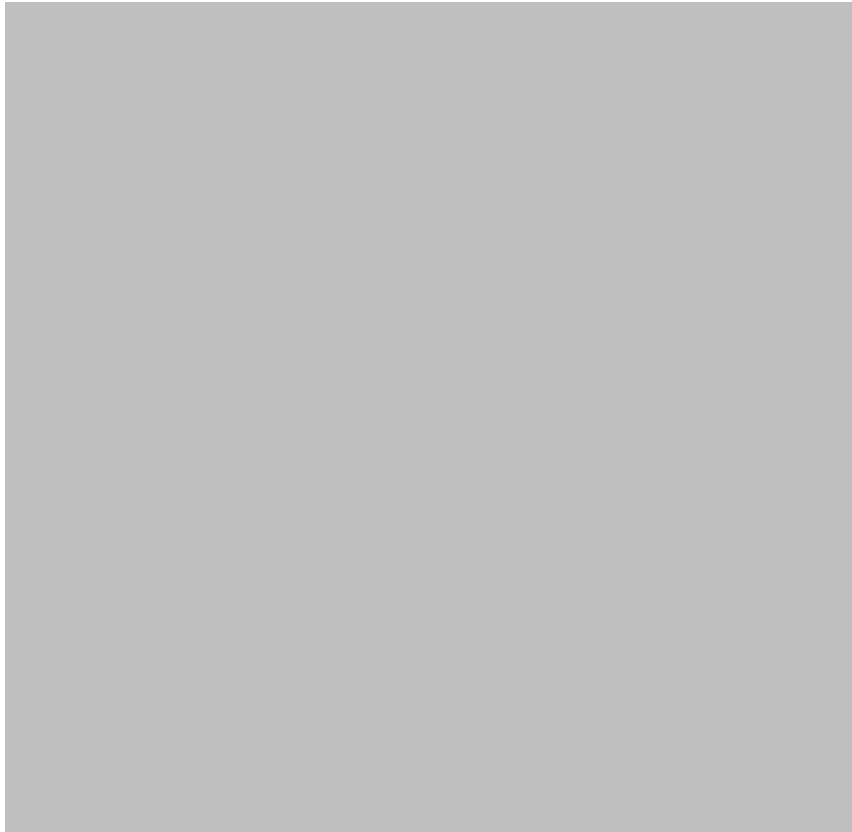


Figure 5.0 Dedication to Silva, ART X Lagos 2019. Image by author.

Figure 5.1 offers a visualisation, which shows the centrality of Silva in a small section of the network. Silva's connections were multiple, strong, and dynamic. Her agency was evident in her spheres of influence and robust ties which connected her to the network's furthest reaches. While it is impossible to map relational ties within the entire art 'population' due to its sheer scale, if it *was* possible to do so, Silva would be a central node in the dense clustered art networks (see diagrams in chapter four, figures 4.1 and 4.2). Silva was an actor who had a high degree of centrality across the networks. As Sinmidele Adesanya, Founder of Mydrim Gallery, Lagos stated: 'No one can tell the story of the visual arts in Nigeria without the mention of Bisi Silva' (Olatunbosun 2019).

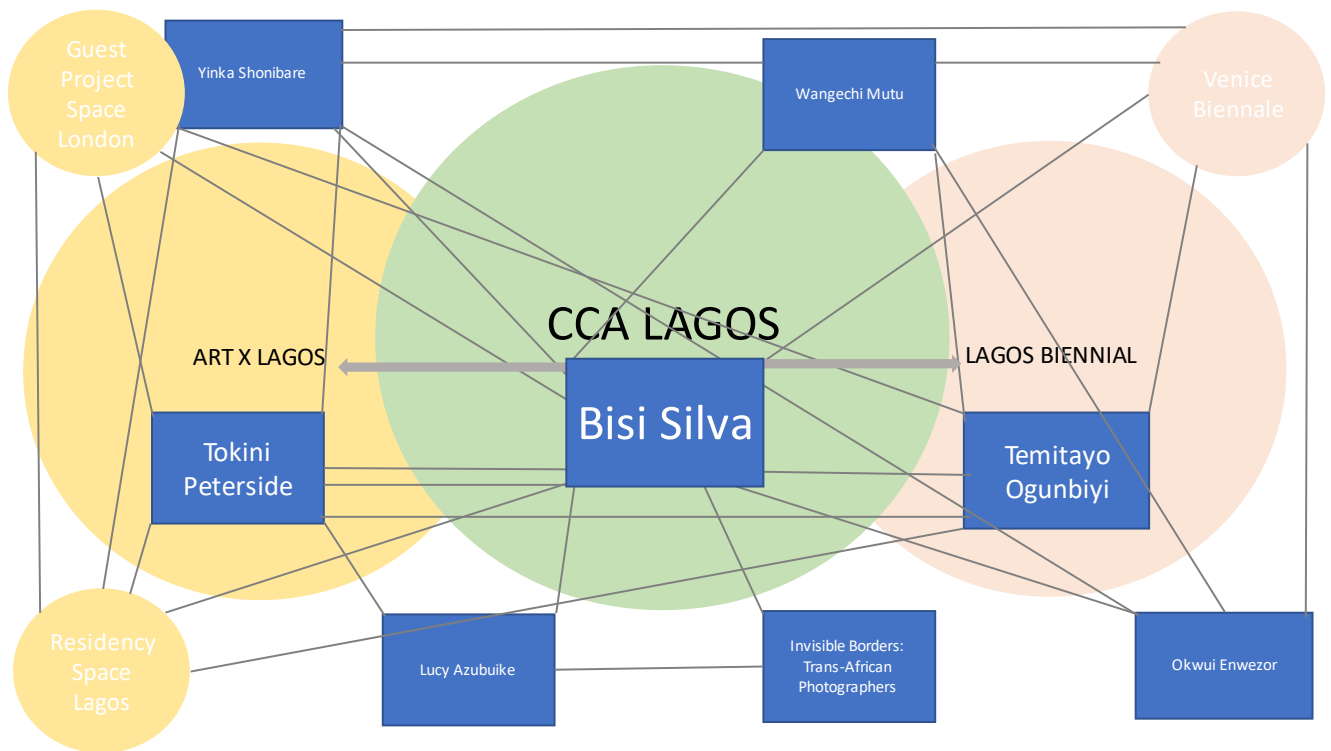


Figure 5.1 Visual representation of part of an art network

This diagram can be elucidated as follows: Silva worked with Yinka Shonibare in London in the 1990s; in 2019 the Lagos Biennial pre-show event took place at Yinka Shonibare’s Guest Projects Space in East London; and in attendance was Tokini Peterside, the foundation director for Shonibare’s artist residency space in Lagos. Peterside runs ART X Lagos who sponsor the Lagos Biennial; Temitayo Ogunbiyi is artistic director of ART X and an artist whose work was shown at the Biennial (figure 5.2); and Ogunbiyi curated the ART X talk programme and brought internationally acclaimed Kenyan artist Wangechi Mutu to Lagos. Mutu’s work was displayed at Okwui Enwezor’s 2015 Venice Biennale alongside *Invisible Borders: Trans-African Photographers*; one of the members of *Invisible Borders* is Lucy Azubuike, whose work was the focus of Silva’s first show at Centre for Contemporary Art Lagos. Silva was instrumental in the creation of ART X with Peterside, and Silva worked with Enewzor

in the 1990s..... under the rhizomatous formation of contemporary African art networks, this elaboration could go on *ad infinitum*.



Figure 5.2 Temitayo Ogunbiyi (2019) *You will find playgrounds among palm trees*. Steel, concrete, twine, and reconstituted metal. Dimensions variable. Photography by Temitayo Shonibare

Describing these network connections in such detail shows how Silva strengthened Lagos-London trans-urban connections, far extended the reach of art networks across continents, and drew participants into the networks. Through her growing network of collaborators, Silva shaped the nature of networks and the nature of relations. Through a cosmopolitan orientation enacted in the physical space of CCA she encouraged artists to seek a common purpose to follow their artistic ambitions whilst developing the art scene in ways which benefited all. Her drive to build networks was most clearly

elaborated through her *Àsikò Art School programme*, which also highlighted how patronage played a crucial part in network development.

Àsikò Art School

From early in her career Silva took on the role of mentor and in 2010 she formalised this support by creating *Àsikò Art School*.¹¹⁴ Fall recalls that *Àsikò* was conceived to 'arm the next generation', as her and Silva were 'always discussing the state of the art-schools, the state of the curriculum [...] education, education, education.'¹¹⁵ Described as 'part art workshop, part residency, and part art academy' the *Àsikò* programme was launched to respond to the 'insufficient state of arts education across the continent'.¹¹⁶

Àsikò is ephemeral. Each year it is created by bringing together an international faculty of practising artists, art historians, curators, and writers with a cohort of twelve to fifteen emerging African and diaspora artists and curators. It was based in Lagos for its first two years, with subsequent editions moving to Accra, Dakar, Maputo, and Addis Ababa to fulfil its unique roaming pan-African remit. Silva's deliberate choice to locate *Àsikò* across anglophone, lusophone and francophone countries demonstrates her astute strategy to draw in players from diverse art scenes and thus connect art worlds. The collaborators are often 'star curators' or other high profile art practitioners drawn from Silva's extensive contemporary African art networks (see chapter four). Fall revealed that the pair made a conscious decision to merge their contacts and draw on their network patronage to bolster the quality of participants. She said that Silva

¹¹⁴ *Àsikò* means 'time' in the Yoruba language.

¹¹⁵ N'Goné Fall, ART X Talks, Bisi Silva Remembered, ART X Lagos, 3rd November 2019

¹¹⁶ N'Goné Fall, ART X Talks, Bisi Silva Remembered, ART X Lagos, 3rd November 2019

asked her ‘how can we be helpful, you have a random confidential mentoring group, I also have one, how can we merge them?’ and this was what led to *Àsikò*.¹¹⁷

Àsikò alumni, Kenyan artist Jess Atieno stated that ‘[Bisi] started *Àsikò* as an intensive, because art education in Africa — most art schools — don't have what is here [...] she would get really good international curators, really good artists to come and speak to us in that very short period of time [...] It's very intensive, like getting an MFA in six weeks!’¹¹⁸ Silva grounded the training of *Àsikò* in research based artistic practice to encourage professional excellence. Participants and faculty spend an intensive thirty-five-days together studying art and curatorial history, methodologies and professional development in a format which moves between models of laboratory, residency, and academy. *Àsikò* privileges experimentation over conventional approaches to art making and curatorial inquiry, encouraging participants to workshop ideas, proposals and projects for long-term development and implementation.

The roving nature of the programme boosts African connections and collaborations upon which Silva placed such emphasis, offering participants ‘exposure’ to African countries which denotes a propensity towards becoming a cosmopolitan ‘citizen of the world.’ For Silva, such ‘cosmopolitan exposure’ and social agency was to be gained through experiences and knowledge of other parts of the African continent. The wandering *Àsikò* residency programme engages the concept of ‘the shifting local’, as artists and curators are immersed in new contexts and experience new points of reference. Tamar Garb, who collaborated with Silva on *Àsikò* in 2016 states:

¹¹⁷ N'Goné Fall, ART X Talks, Bisi Silva Remembered, ART X Lagos, 3rd November 2019

¹¹⁸ Interview between Stacey Kennedy and Jess Atieno, video call, 13th July 2020

The location and locality provide the necessary counter-points to the anodyne, theory-driven generalities of a globalized art-world that circulates in a stratosphere of metropolises, market-forces and so much hot air ¹¹⁹

Challenging participants on the basis and configuration of the local allows artists to overcome conceptual obstacles and reposition themselves in relation to local histories. Silva was particularly interested in considering the local archive beyond its physicality, to engage with its historical and ethnographic value within contemporary art practice. Atieno says her approach to continued artistic education and the primacy of research made an impact on the artists and curators trained through *Àsikò*: 'research and education were the main things she wanted to emphasise for everyone'.¹²⁰ After training with Silva, Atieno began working with colonial archives from Kenya. She talks about the value of the archive in processes of collective recollection, and how Silva influenced her thinking and practice:

[Bisi encouraged] creating the conditions to do the work before doing the work, because she felt that a lot of artists on the continent were not doing that, they [...] take on work that is heavy in theme like colonialism, war, struggle [...] made in response to events or feelings, it's never made after a long length of time doing research and reading.¹²¹

Atieno's comments highlight a number of principles central to Silva's vision: that art is based on the knowledge of past practices, traditions, archives, histories and stories that need to be unearthed, reworked and conserved; that art is a learned language that requires a knowing engagement with its changing techniques and technologies;

¹¹⁹ Quote from Tamar Garb, 1-54, London 2019.

¹²⁰ Interview between Stacey Kennedy and Jess Atieno, video call, 13th July 2020

¹²¹ Interview between Stacey Kennedy and Jess Atieno, video call, 13th July 2020

and that familiarity with Africa's material heritage and multiple modernities is the foundation of a located contemporary practice. Of central importance is the idea that to be contemporary, art from Africa has also to engage with the wider world.

Silva championed a pedagogical approach to address autonomy and emancipation through *Àsikò*. She promoted critically deep research to historicise contemporary art from Africa and free it from the constructs and constrictions of Western art historical narratives. For Silva, publication was crucial to ensuring Nigerian scholarship was uploading to, not downloading from, global art history and was as much a curatorial platform to interrogate individual artistic achievements and define artistic movements, as creating exhibitions. Silva shared her vision for in depth academic research and publishing with *Àsikò* participants in the notoriously challenging 'crit' (critique) sessions, where artists were pushed to explore and respond to themes which they may not have previously considered, such as gender, sexuality, colonialism, neo-colonialism, identity, or language. One of the 2019 participants of *Àsikò*, Saziso Phiri, stated: '[the curatorial programme] had a massive impact on my career, allowing me the space and time to develop my critical skills' (Phiri 2022).

Silva was a fierce and driven individual, unafraid to give advice and speak her mind. Although challenging, curators and other art-world professionals should be amenable to self-critique (Reilly and Lippard 2018) and it is vital that young artists are able to defend their work and vocalise their conceptual strategies. The *Àsikò* crit sessions offer artists autonomy over their own knowledge production, the space to share and develop this expertise, and a likeminded and supportive community to reflect and deepen their thinking. In the context of knowledge production around art and the ownership of creative processes, this indicates an agency previously suppressed by colonial structures (see introduction chapter). For women, *Àsikò* offers

a space free from the constraints of patriarchal, or even simply male centred, artistic thinking which allows all participants to imagine a future unconstrained by identity.

A ‘champion for women’s empowerment’

Silva’s role as mentor was rare among curators of her standing and marked her as a particularly uncommon presence (Chambers 2019). Between 2010 – 2016 more than seventy artists and curators from fifteen African countries had participated in the *Àsikò* programme. Moreover, Silva had mentored curators and artists who have gone on to have influential careers, such as: Antawan Byrd, Nontobeko Ntombela, Silva Jude Anogwih, Oyinda Fakeye, Temitayo Ogunbiyi, and Iheanyi Onwuegbucha. Artist Charity Ide uses a metaphor to describe the need for mentors like Silva: ‘bigger artists, they can help, sometimes for a child to cross the road you need an adult to hold their hand’.¹²² Through *Àsikò* Silva was able to empower younger women, who offer consistent narratives of her patronage, mentorship, and sponsorship. Early career artists describe how she played a vital role in the development of their own careers in practical and direct ways. Silva was a strong and mature woman who could offer advice, guidance, and support for those less experienced, less fortunate, or less well connected.

Silva mentored both men and women but was particularly supportive of women artists. In a personal blog post from 2006 she stated:

Meeting women artists can be a difficult endeavour in a lot of African countries as there are very few who are active, but I make an active point to seek them out (Silva 2006).

¹²² Interview between Stacey Kennedy and Charity Ide, video call, 30th July 2020

Dolly Kola-Bagolun states: 'In terms of women's empowerment, [Silva] was definitely one of our champions'.¹²³ Péjú Láyíwólá (2013:85) notes that Silva accorded women greater visibility through the exhibitions she chose to organise and curate; and as 'a woman who actively supports women artists', subverted the male dominated world of curating, whose sexist and privileged attitudes served to exclude women artists. Temitayo Ogunbiyi describes how Silva's fearless approach caused curators and others within the Lagos art scene to consider women and women's concerns more carefully: 'giving that visibility in that way made people think, "maybe I need to think a bit more consciously about women"'.¹²⁴ CCA exhibitions which featured women-only or women-led shows such as *Like a Virgin* challenged the male dominated status quo. Ogunbiyi says: 'when you are not really presented with an alternative, you just think it's normal that men are the most successful artists, but when you are in a situation where things are presented differently you start to think critically, you start to think "yes that is true, why is this the case?"'¹²⁵ Ogunbiyi draws attention to how Silva's promotion of women led to a more general uplift of women in the arts: 'since Bisi Silva started working actively here women have been inspired to support women more.'¹²⁶ Such comments are typical across my interviews, highlighting the crucial work which Silva had done to change the perception of women in art.

Mentorship into the art industry is cited as a key factor in successfully retaining women in the early years after art school, which is when they tend to disappear while men continue to build their career. This is one of the limitations which FEAAN identify and attempt to rectify through their own systems of mentorship and guidance (chapter three). Like the mentors in FEAAN, Silva offered younger women practical support.

¹²³ Interview between Stacey Kennedy and Dolly Kola-Bagolun, Marrakech, 25th February 2019

¹²⁴ Interview between Temitayo Ogunbiyi and Stacey Kennedy, via telephone 28th February 2020

¹²⁵ Interview between Temitayo Ogunbiyi and Stacey Kennedy, via telephone 28th February 2020

¹²⁶ Interview between Temitayo Ogunbiyi and Stacey Kennedy, via telephone 28th February 2020

Artist Taiwo Aiyedogbon notes: 'she directly influenced my career as a performance artist. I got some funding through her, I got some residencies through her and it was basically really lots of assistance for me at that time'.¹²⁷ Across the art scene it is agreed that Silva was extraordinarily influential in the lives and careers of other women (Milbourne 2021).

Atieno describes the specific ways in which Silva's patronage influenced her career trajectory, partly through personal mentorship and partly through participation in *Asíkò* 2016. Having graduated from the Technical University of Kenya with a Bachelor of Technology in Visual Communication, Atieno was frustrated about the way her first solo show had been received. *Full Frontal* (2015) was a series of polished, headless torso sculptures of naked female gendered bodies, which had prompted accusations of 'lesbianism' when it opened in Nairobi (figure 5.3).¹²⁸

¹²⁷ Interview between Taiwo Aiyedogbon and Stacey Kennedy, video call, 17th November 2020

¹²⁸ Interview between Stacey Kennedy and Jess Atieno, video call, 13th July 2020

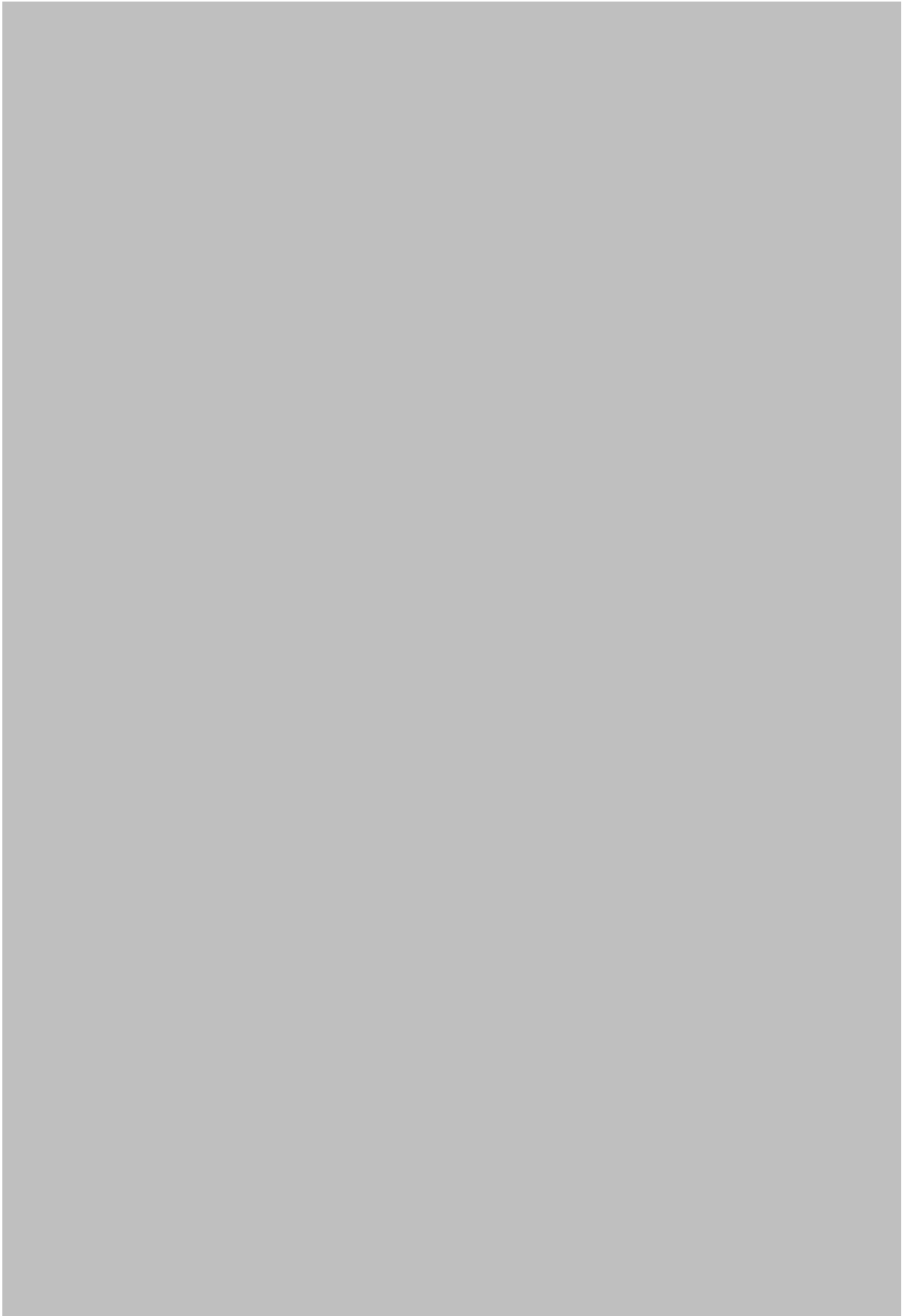


Figure 5.3 Jess Atieno (2015) *Caged Birds* image courtesy of the artist

Finding herself exhausted with continually having to defend her work, Atieno had become 'tired of fighting and explaining' and had decided to 'move away from work which could be deemed controversial'.¹²⁹ When she joined the *Àsìkò* programme a year later she found much welcome support, and was able to gain strength, through the personal mentorship of Silva. She says: 'Bisi always told me to come prepared, she said you have to do twice the work that the men are doing, so you always have to come to the table prepared. That fuels me because you have to prove them wrong!'¹³⁰

Atieno notes that Silva was 'incredibly generous' and 'very intentional of working with the 'girls' in *Àsìkò*. She described how Silva's patronage developed her own networks and connections:

[Bisi] became a mentor, and she developed this network of people and always kept in touch with everyone. We would have these discussions, she'd always want to know what are you thinking about, and make you present all the time. She was really critical and provided important insights and was pivotal to my practice in many ways. She connected me to so many other opportunities. (Perlson 2019).

This is evidence of Silva as a staunch supporter of her mentees. She assisted Atieno by writing a letter of recommendation for her MFA in 2018, even though she was unwell at this time. When Atieno was notified that she had achieved a full scholarship for the MFA she emailed Silva to say: 'Thankyou is an understatement. I can truly trace this back to you Bisi. That HPAC residency you got me on has set a lot of things in motion for me'. Silva replied, 'I am so happy that more opportunities are coming your way and that you will be holding your own with the "boys" because I know that you can.'¹³¹

¹²⁹ Interview between Stacey Kennedy and Jess Atieno, video call, 13th July 2020

¹³⁰ Interview between Stacey Kennedy and Jess Atieno, video call, 13th July 2020

¹³¹ From 1-54 *Bisi Silva Remembered* Forum pamphlet London 2019

Atieno's story points to Silva's emotional, practical, and artistic support at a moment when Atieno was in need of guidance and direction. This was therefore a fortuitous moment for Atieno, which allowed her to move through this low point and develop her career in a new and confident direction.

Working 'woman to woman' offers additional personal security and emotional support to younger, perhaps more vulnerable women. FEAAN leader, Juliet Ezenwa (see chapter three), notes:

[...] because we live in a patriarchal society, I quickly discovered that the parents of young females don't feel comfortable sending them off to do apprenticeships with male artists. And so parents felt more comfortable with a female mentor [...] And you know training for the visual arts requires a lot of time, a lot of private time, too much of it and in this age and era teenage girls cannot be in the custody of male mentors and surrounded by other male apprentices.¹³²

The safety of working with another woman is important to young female artists and reassures their families that art making is a respectable and safe endeavour. Women artists describe how male mentors would become influential later in their careers, once Silva legitimised their connection — it was not that young women required male mentors, only that they had safe introductions to them as they built their networks. One young artist told me 'you have to be careful, when you are new, when you know no-one, it's safer to stay women to women until you are known'.¹³³

¹³² Interview between Stacey Kennedy and Juliet Ezenwa Pearce, video call, 6th July 2020

¹³³ Interview between Stacey Kennedy and OE, video call 17th July 2020

As she drew mentees into her networks and strengthened their art world ties, Silva was able to connect artists to the ‘right people’, through the ‘right people.’ Aiyedogbon stated:

Odun Orimolade [...] had inspired me so much, and then through her I met Bisi Silva [...] and then working with these networks, [...] other residences have come through them and have really helped me [...] I feel like if you have the right person and know the right person at the right time really [it can] help speed up a lot of things, being an artist based in Lagos.¹³⁴

Atieno recalls being ‘lectured’ on the importance of networks and choosing suitable acquaintances, as Silva advised her: ‘you need to think of life after school, you need to start hanging out with the right people.’ Atieno explains:

people take advantage of young artists because they know young artists want to get their names out there, people are desperate. Bisi always said to me “be intentional with artists with whom you want to show, because you want people to respect your name, you want people to see that also you are among the big league.”¹³⁵

This advice came to fruition when Atieno was invited to be the artist in residence for the Lagos Biennial 2019 by co-curator Antawan Bird, another of Silva’s mentees (see ‘Visualising contemporary networks’ section above). Atieno states that Silva made clear that expecting this kind of network support was something to be enjoyed and reciprocated: ‘One thing Bisi always emphasised was about networks. And about the CCA network and keeping everyone close and pushing opportunities to people within the network’.¹³⁶ Atieno understood the opportunity with the Lagos Biennial as part of

¹³⁴ Interview between Taiwo Aiyedogbon and Stacey Kennedy, video call, 17th November 2020

¹³⁵ Interview between Stacey Kennedy and Jess Atieno, video call, 13th July 2020

¹³⁶ Interview between Stacey Kennedy and Jess Atieno, video call, 13th July 2020

this framework of reciprocity: 'Antawan used to work with Bisi in Bamako, I think for three editions of the Bamako festival and in 2018 I met Antawan and we did a talk together at the arts centre. So when he's doing the Lagos Biennial he calls me up and he says there's this opportunity do you want to take it? And I say of course'.¹³⁷ Respondents often talk about how important it is to support one another and form an art community based on consideration for others, participant of *Àsikò* in 2019 Saziso Phiri (2022) notes that '[the programme] inspired me in so many ways, and appreciating the power of community, I have made it my mission to support fellow creatives'.

Silva was able to engineer, expand or amplify an individual's art network connections or strengthen the ties of those on the margins of the international art scene. Silva's mentorship therefore became integral to inserting young artists and curators into patronage networks. Clientelism can be viewed as a channel through which one joins the dominant 'class', and a practice which is fundamental to the continued enjoyment of the perquisites of that 'class' (Joseph 1987). It is possible to view this upwardly mobile structure as 'mirrored' on the art scene. Silva engaged in clientelism as she created a channel for artists to develop their art world contacts (connect with the art 'class') and engage more intensely with parts of the network useful to them (enjoy membership of the art 'class'). The phenomenon of clientelism, as a strategy of both survival and upward mobility, is a hopeful one for the client in Nigeria. Silva's patronage could bring certain individuals increasing freedom to act in their own capacity, to bypass hierarchies, function less as embedded group members in certain situations, yet still enjoy the rewards of group membership. The rewards of

¹³⁷ Interview between Stacey Kennedy and Jess Atieno, video call, 13th July 2020

Silva's patronage allowed the 'client' to become well networked yet autonomous, able to navigate productive social relationships across diverse settings.

Whilst the rewards for the client or mentee, such as Atieno, are clear, it provokes the question: what did the patron, Silva, gain from this? The reciprocity between a new artist and a more established art practitioner such as Silva may be difficult to ascertain initially, and network participation may be reciprocated in a more general way. For example, the agency of patrons is relational to their access to artists themselves, new connections with emerging artists can be a sought-after resource. In this arena, social agency, (more than the traditionally stated goods or services gained through patron-clientism), is sought through the social relations of networks. As people are made through people, for the art patron there is great benefit in drawing clients — in the shape of younger artists, curators, researchers or arts administrators or entrepreneurs — into their networks to reflect and reinforce their status and position. New members to Silva's networks, such as Atieno, may initially have little to contribute by way of material resource, however, they draw in others from their local, national, or regional art scenes and thus exponentially grow the network. As artists seek out patrons to move upward socially and materially, their patrons come to accept ties of solidarity from their clients and build relationships which offer both parties security and continued advancement.

Ultimately, more patrons strengthened and grew Silva's networks for the benefit of those already connected, including herself. CCA curator Jude Anogwih emphasised Silva's extensive network of friends, and colleagues: '[with] Silva being a curator with a very strong international network, there [was] this sort of constant attraction of people within the contemporary art industry, to Lagos' (Owen 2013:158). With this comment Anogwih alludes to the fact that Silva was able to improve the quality of her

international network and refocus or redirect the attention of its participants towards Lagos as a hub of influence. In order to do this it was necessary for her to keep growing and strengthening her networks and connections.

Silva made constructive plans with her mentees which allowed her to progress her own ambitions. She leveraged her agency to work through those she sponsored in ways which were mutually beneficial. For example, she planned to set up a version of CCA in Nairobi with Atieno, who states:

We talked of working together in Nairobi but unfortunately, she is no longer here. I don't know if I want to carry on with CCA in Nairobi or even with my practice right now.¹³⁸

This quote demonstrates Silva's role as an agent in helping Atieno to *visualise* a plan for the future where she can emulate and partake in Silva's success, and to *physically* realise and develop these plans. Through this collaboration, Silva would have been able to benefit from the relationship by way of utilising Atieno's connections in Nairobi and gain greater access to the art scene, or at least shoring up her legitimacy by working with local emerging talent. Without Silva, Atieno's motivation to continue with the project, or even her own art practice, falters.

Silva exercised agency through her connections in ways which benefited women and served to enhance her own status and reputation as an influential patron of the visual arts. Similarly to the First Ladies, who wield influence and attract followers through their projects and wealth (Mama 1995), Silva was able to position herself as a patron to others and exert agency through her patron-client interactions. Chapter six will expand on the pervasive nature of Silva's networks. For a long time Silva exercised what could be described as a 'monopoly' on the contemporary art scene in Lagos,

¹³⁸ Interview between Stacey Kennedy and Jess Atieno, video call, 13th July 2020.

serving as a gatekeeper who was able to grant or limit access. Researchers and scholars, grant funding and sponsorship frequently found that they had to go through CCA, or Silva, to access artists and curators. Her agency was built on a business model, which was adopted by others, through which she was able to maintain power.

However, unlike the 'femocrat', who utilises her agency to achieve personal benefits at the expense of other women or society more widely, Silva's work aimed to lift women individually and as a group. While 'femocracy' constructs female power within patriarchal political power structures, Silva worked to affect structural change in an oppressive patriarchal art historical system which privileges the Western male. In addition, she was successful in her own right, building substantial authority in the art world by being an acclaimed professional and possessing a visionary outlook. Whilst 'femocracy' does not lead to any sustainable change in women's status, or any enduring improvement in the lives of ordinary women, this chapter reveals that Silva's mentorship and patronage affected real change in women's lives.

Mentorship and patronage are therefore another aspect of Silva's practice which can be read as an 'ethical cosmopolitanism'. The idea of supporting and lifting others is reiterated across contemporary art networks and was expressed by many individuals working on the art scene whom I interviewed. Figure 5.4 (below) shows the staff at Tiwani Contemporary in London. Maria Varnava established Tiwani Contemporary in 2011 with the encouragement of Silva as mentor. The idea behind the project was to connect CCA Lagos with a gallery space in London. Silva proposed the name as an encapsulation of the gallery's intention, which includes providing a space inclusive to everyone, and a safe space for dialogue that values nuance and considers context and the multiple dimensions of identity, being, and belonging. The importance of connecting networks a presence on the continent was reiterated in

2022, when Tiwani opened a gallery space in Lagos. As Figure 5.4 demonstrates, given the influence of Silva in shaping the thinking of so many individuals, it is no surprise that her ideas of inclusion, support, dialogue and collaboration between women characterise the social relations manifest across the art networks.



Figure 5.4 Screenshot from Instagram 'artistandgal' (artist Michaela Yearwood Dan) .

This quote from Fall (2021:68) summarises this 'ethical' mode of thinking:

If I can open the door, I am going to leave it open and bring with me more women. Or if I am building a platform, I am going to bring other women on stage. It is something we don't talk about, it's something we don't claim because just getting the job done is more important than self-celebrating. Because then you're not scaring other people who may think, "Oh, you're a feminist — and you're just here to promote women." No, you're here to promote amazing people who, by the way, happen to be women. We are also here to promote amazing people who happen to be Africans. That is part of the strategy

In this quote Fall refers to, what I have suggested to be, the complicated issue of feminism. She suggests that her 'strategy' goes beyond a feminist position, her ethos is to lift all talented people who are most importantly African. Whether feminists or 'champions for female empowerment' (the term used by the majority of my respondents) Fall and Silva, like the mentors in FEAAN and Ugbodaga-Ngu and Ekong before them, are examples of senior women transferring social and artistic agency to younger women. Whilst men may be more likely to hold positions of influence under patriarchy, here we observe an example of women as patrons sponsoring women as clients. This happens across the art scene in Nigeria, where women utilise patron-client relationship structures to provide women to women networking and support. Silva's primary place in setting up the patron-client relations which characterise the art scene has been demonstrated and leads to an exploration of the idea of the 'big woman' as a dominant aspiration on the contemporary art scene.

Big women

In Nigeria, the idea of the 'big man' - i.e., a man who distributes wealth and patronage through networks including, but extending beyond, his wives and children - remains a 'dominant male aspiration' (Lindsay 2007:248). Silva subverted traditional models of

women's agency, where positions of power attained by women are often attributed to their connection with this kind of 'big man'. As she built respect and influence independently, rather than through any connection with a male figure, Silva is a 'big woman'. Indeed, many of the women in this study could be conferred this status of 'big woman'.

The idea of the 'big man' or 'big woman' as patron typifies Nigerian business, political and social systems as a way to 'get things done': bound up in ideas of power, image, prestige, loyalty, reciprocity, respectability, influence, relationship making, relatedness, exchanges, and favours. Scholarship on patronage tends to concentrate on the organisational context of the business world and the effects of networks on individual careers and organisational success (see Burt 2000; Ibarra and Smith-Lovin 1997). The commercial art world in Nigeria is very much connected with the business world and my respondents describe 'ways of getting things done' in the art world which mirror business systems.

Prior to her death, Silva had been elected as *President of The Art Business Managers Association*, demonstrating the complex cross over between art, business, and art market structures. Studies of connections in work organisations, or the work force more generally describe patterns of relations typically understood to be performed by male social actors and place little emphasis on how gender shapes relationships. Yet women bring art and business together. Ezenwa marks her commitment to connecting the worlds of art and business and the importance of understanding business structures:

I am a member of the *Art Galleries Association of Nigeria* and the *Art Business Managers of Nigeria* [...] one has to learn to network with businesspeople. I am a member of the small and medium skills entrepreneurs of Nigeria and the

development association of Nigeria, *Businesswomen International*, and other professional and businesswomen's groups.¹³⁹

For Ezenwa, success is dependent on network connections across art and business. She says: 'I network with all of them, to succeed in doing this one has to partner with all of these groups.'¹⁴⁰ Her comments demonstrate once again that the numerous networks operational within Nigeria are highly entangled and that art networks cross over and interact with many other areas of life.

Chapter two introduced astute businesswoman, curator, social influencer, and gallery owner, Afi Ekong. As an entrepreneur, Ekong was able to achieve the financial freedom and economic stability which can liberate women from dependence, able to: 'dispel certain societal impressions, un-informed utterances and deprecation of art as a profession or as a gainful career' (Ecoma 2013:43). Viewed as strong and no nonsense — attributes often seen as prerequisites for success in the business world and frequently attributed to men more than women — '[h]er professional image erased the fear among young artists that an artist could not be economically enterprising [...] to show [...] that an artist can earn a sustainable living' (ibid). As the first woman to run an art gallery in Nigeria Ekong was a strong role model, who inspired women to follow her lead and actively supported them through establishing patron-client relations. Akande was mentored by Ekong and describes her as 'a dedicated and fearless woman [...who] really inspired me'.¹⁴¹ Women such as Ekong play a part in forming a strong lineage of arts producers, whose visibility is necessary for women to be able to visualise their own success.¹⁴²

¹³⁹ Interview between Stacey Kennedy and Juliet Ezenwa Pearce, video call, 6th July 2020

¹⁴⁰ Interview between Stacey Kennedy and Juliet Ezenwa Pearce, video call, 6th July 2020

¹⁴¹ Interview between Stacey Kennedy and Ngozi Akande via email July/ August 2020

¹⁴² Throughout the study I have shown that this lineage of female agency did not begin with Ekong in the 1950s and offered prior examples of women's collective agency or resistance. Female artists in Nigerian history prior to the twentieth century have been obscured by the processes I have outlined.

Nike Òkúndáyé-Davies is a highly regarded artist and businesswoman, perhaps the most visible woman working on the Nigerian art scene today (see chapter three). She is a specialist and world expert in the craft of *adire*, a Yoruba tie and dye process and the owner and director of Nike Art Gallery, Lagos; West Africa's biggest art gallery. Òkúndáyé is one of 'the icons' in Akande's painting (chapter three, figure 3.0) and an active patron of FEAAN and mentor to a vast number of artists. Akande describes her motivation for including Òkúndáyé as the third 'icon' in her painting: 'Òkúndáyé is another wonderful woman that has really touched my life [...] Any time I go to Nike Gallery I am inspired'.¹⁴³ Across my interviews, artists, curators and art administrators almost always mentioned 'Chief Nike' or 'Mamma Nike' as their patron, or as a woman who inspired them to be creative (chapter six discusses such relationships described as kin). For example, when Ezenwa was asked 'Who are your role models?' she replied: 'Chief Nike Òkúndáyé, she's both my role model and my art collector and my art promoter.'¹⁴⁴

Òkúndáyé is therefore a 'big woman'. She is the most successful woman artist to emerge from the Osogbo workshop, a school developed in the 1960s by Ulli Beier, Susanne Wenger, and Georgina Beier in collaboration with local performance artist Duro Ladipo. The most notable names from Osogbo, as recorded by the art historical record, are male: Taiwo Olaniyi (Twin Seven Seven,) Jacob Afolabi, Jinadu Oladepo, and Jimoh Buraimoh. However, Òkúndáyé was not the only woman in the workshop. Senabu Oloyede, (known as Zaenab Oloyede Adeyemi), and Kikelomo Oladepo were two masters of *adire* who worked in Osogbo before Òkúndáyé. Although their work was shown in numerous national and international art exhibitions there is little trace of them in the historical record. Òkúndáyé's acclaim as *the* female Osogbo artist is

¹⁴³ Interview between Stacey Kennedy and Ngozi Akande via email July/ August 2020

¹⁴⁴ Interview between Stacey Kennedy and Juliet Ezenwa Pearce, video call, 6th July 2020

another example of the trope of singular ‘exceptional woman’, she is seen to stand alone even though women had come before her and were her contemporaries.

Òkúndáyé practices indigenous Yoruba techniques of weaving and dying which she was taught by her great-grandmother — a head artisan and accomplished textile designer in the village of Ogidi. Thus, she sits within an historical lineage of women which progressed when her aunt brought her to Osogbo and she developed her skills with Susanne Wenger. When Òkúndáyé was asked who inspired and supported her she said: ‘The artist that inspired me in Osogbo was Susan [sic] Wenger. She was a white woman who came to our country to learn *adire* [...] She was here before I was born’. Òkúndáyé says she admired ‘Mama Susan’ as she called her, who ‘told [her] to speak Yoruba because she understood Yoruba’ (Ogujiuba 2021). Òkúndáyé includes Wenger and her grandmother as her forebears and patrons: ‘in those days knowledge was passed from one generation unto the other. I was taken to [Wenger] who] spoke to me and encouraged me to learn. She put me through and I also learned the art by myself’ (ibid). Wenger herself is often cited as having a ‘matriarchal role’ as artistic mentor to generations of Osogbo artists (Offoedu-Okeke 2012:20).

Òkúndáyé’s training reflects the entangled relationships and networks of patronage which characterise the Nigerian art world. Although likely that Osogbo women artists Adeyemi and Oladepo were influences on Òkúndáyé’s work, the written record most frequently attributes her success to her first husband, artist Twin Seven Seven (Taiwo Olaniyi) (see LaDuke 1991:23). Once again this is an example of the superficial representation of women as reliant on a male patron. The women who mentored, taught, and sponsored Òkúndáyé are seen as secondary agents, mere footnotes to the influence of her husband.

Òkúndáyé's story demonstrates that the framework for understanding the life and work of the woman artist is outdated and reductive. The work of Oladepo, Oloyede and Òkúndáyé was seen as evidence of the immutable connection between women and textiles, whilst the male Osogbo artists took the same themes and translated them on to canvas, which was seen as a superior medium in which to work. This is evidence of the appropriation and transformation of women's art production, as male Osogbo artists-in-training co-opted the artistic knowledge of women (see Vaz 1995; Nzegwu 2000, and chapter two).

Despite this kind of reductive portrayal, Òkúndáyé has forged a successful career and is an agent with economic, social, artistic, and political clout. Òkúndáyé exercises economic agency as an astute entrepreneur and Nike Gallery is testament to her success in the challenging and volatile business environment of Nigeria. Akande described her admiration for Òkúndáyé, stating: 'I admire her simplicity and business power. Nike turns every object into money'.¹⁴⁵ Òkúndáyé revealed financial ambitions early in her life, when Aino Ternstedt Oni-Okpaku, a Swedish philanthropist and textile artist, opened a gallery in Nigeria in the 1970s. Oni-Okpaku became a patron of the young Òkúndáyé, she says that Òkúndáyé 'started as a very young girl. She had made small pieces of batik and she was looking for an outlet to sell. She did very well with us' (Bosah 2017:326). Here is another example of woman as patron, and it should be noted that Òkúndáyé's economic agency was bolstered by the support of Oni-Okpaku. Òkúndáyé is a notable figure in society and respected businesswoman, as Ekong was before her.

Òkúndáyé has social and artistic agency. Akande states that: 'her outstanding hard work, dedication and creative power' have been responsible for 'bringing tourism

¹⁴⁵ Interview between Stacey Kennedy and Ngozi Akande via email July/ August 2020

and foreign envoys to visit her *adire* cloth weaving workshop and residency in Ogidi'.¹⁴⁶ Although the term 'culture' is a construct with no real meaning outside of its manifestation in social interactions (Gell 1998), Òkúndáyé's political agency is an extension of her extensive 'cultural' agency. Òkúndáyé is often framed as the 'quintessential cultural ambassador for Nigeria, or Africa' and as symbolic of 'reified culture' itself (Ogunbiyi 2017:179). Even as her artistic skills have taken her around the globe to share her talent for textile and design, she is '[p]roudly and fiercely Nigerian' (Bosah 2017:325). What this points to is that Òkúndáyé is a culture broker, that she says something about being Nigerian through her art *and* her social activity. Her 'brand' has local and global recognition, and her gallery is a must-see destination for the visitor to Lagos, hosting artists, scholars, and tourists from across the world. Like Ekong's Bronze Gallery fifty years earlier, Nike Gallery is a cosmopolitan hub on the international art scene.

Òkúndáyé is a patron of FEAAN and a notorious supporter of women. Akande tells me: 'Mummy Nike is a flamboyant self-trained [here Akande means not formally educated] artist who, through hard work and determination, has cut a niche for herself [...] She is a philanthropist and has offered training to indigent women and youths in society'.¹⁴⁷ An example of this would be when she established her first art centre in Lagos in 1983 and provided shelter and training for twenty homeless women and girls. Her commitment to sharing her skills with others has often 'empower[ed] them to be self-sufficient', and '[t]hroughout her career she has faced opposition from the patriarchal mindsets that dominate in Nigeria, primarily for pushing what some consider a feminist agenda', having even been 'arrested and accused of teaching

¹⁴⁶ Interview between Stacey Kennedy and Ngozi Akande via email July/ August 2020

¹⁴⁷ Interview between Stacey Kennedy and Ngozi Akande via email July/ August 2020

women to be insubordinate' (Bosah 2017:324). She offers practical support to the members of FEAAN and states that her goal is to support women and act as 'the Godmother of all the female artists exhibiting [...] giving an avenue to promote female artists and showcase their talents'. Akande says:

She constantly assists any artist [...] she gave the female artists free space to exhibit our works and she also collected a large number of our paintings. She is always there to give useful advice to me and other artists. I have personally benefited from her inspiration.¹⁴⁸

Òkúndáyé's support and mentorship is important to younger artists as well as the leadership team of FEAAN, who benefit from her advice and practical help with exhibitions. She offers her gallery to FEAAN for their exhibitions, attends their shows and offers words of encouragement and support to members and leaders of the organisation. FEAAN's 20th birthday celebrations were sponsored by Nike Gallery, in Lagos and Abuja. The event in Lagos connected with IWD, the theme of which was 'Gender Equality Today' (figure 5.6). The event in Abuja was held in conjunction with the Korean Embassy which revealed Akande's cosmopolitan outlook on collaborating with international partners (see chapter three, figure 3.13).

¹⁴⁸ Interview between Stacey Kennedy and Ngozi Akande via email July/ August 2020

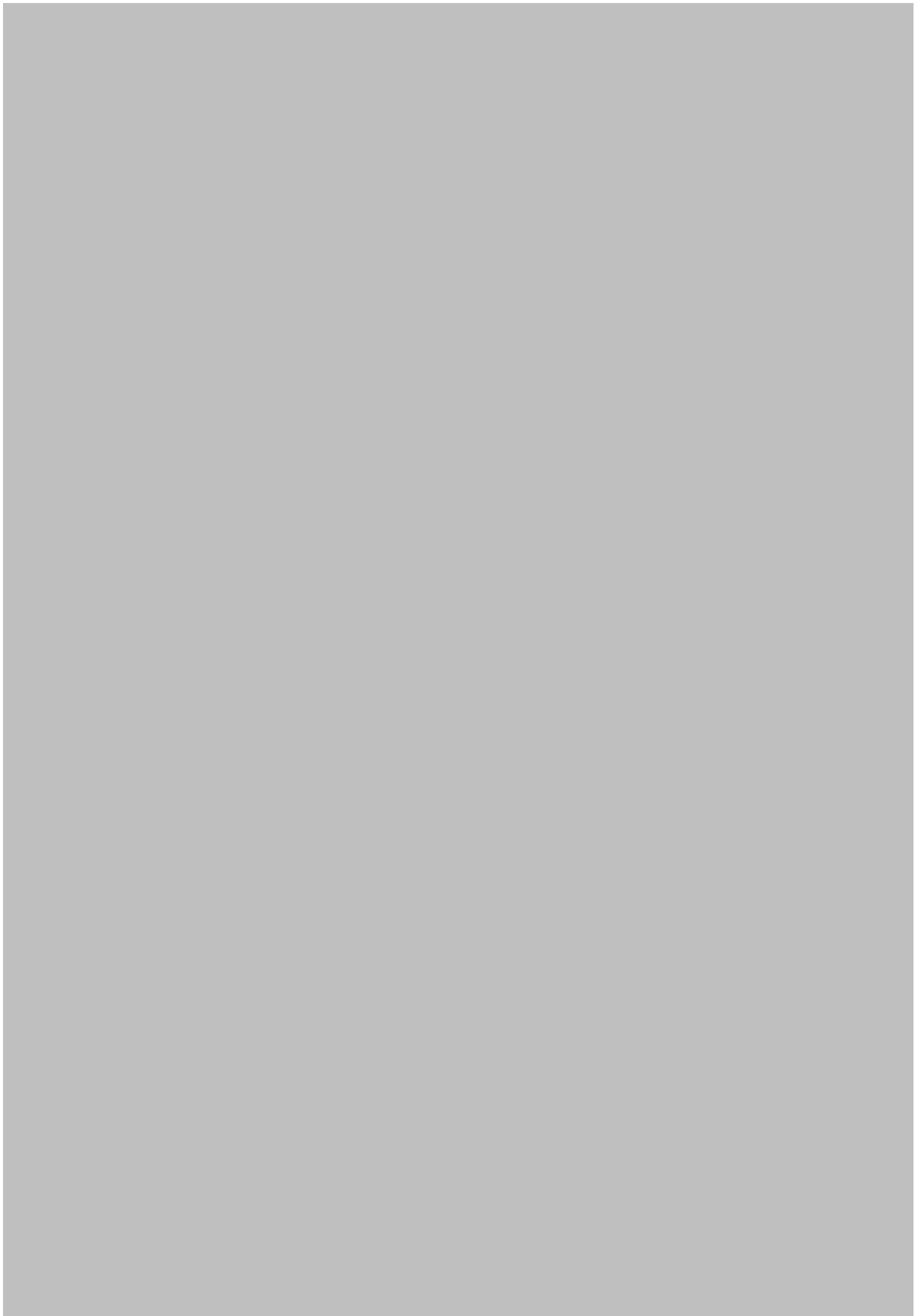


Figure 5.6 Promotional poster for FEAAN celebration event at Nike Gallery, March

2022

Whilst Ekong embodied the potential for succeeding as a woman under the oppressive structures of colonial rule, Òkúndáyé and Silva embody, (or embodied), success in the often disordered and patriarchal environment of contemporary Nigeria. How colonial or male dominated structures can be undermined or over written can be expressed through the metaphor of the ‘cultural script’, a blueprint of norms and representations which is constantly open to revision by actors in a society. A ‘cultural script’ is what Appiah (2006:107) suggests individuals use to ‘fashion [them]selves from a toolkit of options made available by [their] culture and society’. This is indicated in interviews when younger women report that they hope to emulate Òkúndáyé or Silva’s success: ‘I respect women who have been a formidable force in changing the art scene, it would be good to be like Nike or Bisi, they offer hope to us that we can overcome our challenging setting’.¹⁴⁹ Artist Victoria-Idongeist Udondian asserts that ‘there has to be more awareness about an art career generally’ and understanding that ‘art isn’t a career [only] for a man’ (Okediji 2002:41). It is only by women such as Ezenwa, Akande, Òkúndáyé, Silva or Fall, using their platforms to offer young women evidence that becoming an artist or curator is viewed as a discernible career option, to provide a visible ‘cultural script’ or ‘toolkit of options’, that young artists can fashion a personal identity based on a politics of recognition which centres women’s achievement.

Silva, like many women, saw herself ‘embedded in the history’ of a lineage of strong Nigerian women, which can be traced back through history to the modernists and beyond.¹⁵⁰ Kola-Bagolun described the way in which Silva ‘cleared the path’ for the next female curator:

¹⁴⁹ Interview between Stacey Kennedy and TR, Art Gallery, Victoria Island, Lagos 10th October 2019

¹⁵⁰ Bea Gassman de Sousa and Iheanyi Onwuegbucha in conversation at 1-54 FORUM, London (2019).

Art X Lagos, for example, the first edition was founded by Tokini Peterside as Creative Director and Bisi Silva as the main curator, these are two women, the financier and [the] logistics operations manager with the [...] art focus, both were female, which is very interesting and very powerful. Bisi did not curate the following editions but the replacement was a female curator [...] so I think it sends a powerful message to have women at the helm of affairs in something as significant as this. A lot of the operations and logistics team for Art X are women [...] and we see more women empowering other women in the art scene. It's necessary.¹⁵¹

Women are therefore important as role models, mentors, patrons, and sponsors. Their activities encourage the next generation of female arts producers and artists. This accounts for the visible success of women across the Nigerian contemporary art world. Feminist theorist Sara Ahmed (2017:45) reflects on the collective agency of women, to assert that 'once a flow is directed it acquires momentum [...] a crowd is directed [...] becomes directive. The more people travel a path, the clearer the path becomes'. These 'big women' promote narratives of female success which help individuals to locate themselves within a social and historical context, to allow them to construct a self-identity narrative that connects their past, present, and imagined future. Patronage is about practical support, but patrons also provide an essential element of self-reflexivity, a means by which women can engage in sensemaking to a different set of younger artists using these same structures to build success.

Mirror Mirror

As artist Taiwo Aiyedogbon informed me, 'if you have the right person and know the right person at the right time [it can] help speed up a lot of things, being an artist based

¹⁵¹ Interview between Stacey Kennedy and Dolly Kola-Bagolun, Marrakech, 25th February 2019

in Lagos'.¹⁵² This was the case when she was commissioned to perform *Mirror Mirror* for ART X Lagos 2019, having been personally asked to be part of the 'Performance Pavilion' series by curator Wura-Natasha Ogunji (see chapter six). *Mirror Mirror* was an endurance performance based on the themes of belonging and community. Aiyedogbon and her co-performer wore latex body suits, joined at the arms, and together they carried out a movement performance in the grounds of the Federal Palace Hotel in the intense heat of an October Lagos day (figure 5.5). The women spent an arduous three hours moving together to trace out various shapes and patterns with their movements, including the double helix of DNA. Ogunji said the work was about 'moving around while remaining attached', which is a suitable metaphor for the networks described in this study. She went on to elaborate that: 'Taiwo is really interested in how we are individuals but also need other people, which in Nigeria is a lived social and economic reality' (Bouteba 2019). *Mirror Mirror* therefore reflects Aiyedogbon's views on connection with other creative individuals within the art world as central to a successful career, and Ogunji suggests that patronage and network building is key to 'getting things done' in Nigeria more widely. Socially, economically, and creatively people need to work with and through other people. Thus, the art world mirrors society.

¹⁵² Interview between Taiwo Aiyedogbon and Stacey Kennedy, video call, 17th November 2020



Figure 5.5 Taiwo Aiyedogbon (2019) *Mirror Mirror* image courtesy of the artist

Aiyedogbon described the way networks of people had supported her career, particularly in relation to receiving the commission for this event at ART X.¹⁵³ Although she studied art at Yaba College of Technology, Lagos, she said she never felt education and training alone would be enough to get her ahead on the art scene. Alluding to the power of network patronage she states: 'I never thought just being a student would help [my career]'. To facilitate meeting the 'right people' to enhance her prospects, Aiyedogbon describes her purposeful intent to form connections even before she went to college:

[...] before I got admission to the school, I had worked with Nike arts, I used to be one of the managers in one of the branches and later I got to work at the

¹⁵³ Interview between Taiwo Aiyedogbon and Stacey Kennedy, video call, 17th November 2020

Lagos Gallery. I've had several experiences and one of the things with the art scene is networking with the right people, you know how to address them and meet them and talk right. You know, it helps. I've met quite a few people there.¹⁵⁴

Aiyedogbon's work with Nike Gallery connected her to individuals on the art scene and offered her a level of artistic agency which eased her entry into the art world. Nike Gallery is one of the premier visual art organisations in Nigeria and was an astute choice as a place to work, offering opportunities to build networks and visibility. The patronage of gallery director Nike Davies-Òkúndáyé is discussed below. A mentor and patron to hundreds of artists, Òkúndáyé is well connected to art worlds nationally and internationally. Her galleries are key hubs for art world visitors, especially the branch in Lagos which is the largest art gallery in West Africa. The experience with Nike Gallery set Aiyedogbon up to build on her connections and grow a network which would allow her to expand her career horizons.

Aiyedogbon became interested in performance art during her first year in YABATECH after participating in a performance art workshop organised by AFiriPerforma group (Africa performance artists) curated by Jelili Atiku, Wura- Natasha Ogunji and Odunayo Orimolade.¹⁵⁵ She describes how this came about:

I majored in sculpture. My first year in school [...] there was a performance arts workshop where I met Wura Ogunji and Jelili Atiku. And this workshop was organised by Odun Orimolade. It was my first encounter with performance art [...] I think it was the performance art that actually helped me a lot.¹⁵⁶

¹⁵⁴ Interview between Taiwo Aiyedogbon and Stacey Kennedy, video call, 17th November 2020

¹⁵⁵ Yaba College of Technology, popularly known as YABATECH, was founded in 1947, and is Nigeria's first higher educational institution. It is located in Yaba, Lagos.

¹⁵⁶ Interview between Taiwo Aiyedogbon and Stacey Kennedy, video call, 17th November 2020

There was a degree of reciprocity in this relationship, as Aiyedogbon's student status benefited her collaborators: 'my identity card [allowed] access to certain spaces because it was a student pass, and [...] I felt like I was helping them.'¹⁵⁷ Thus, she was able to offer access to rehearsal and performance space, whilst learning from these more experienced artists. Once she had made the connection she was unafraid to draw on the support of these patrons: 'I constantly contacted Wura and Jelili during school and said "I'm available for any project" and I think that was what helped I was super persistent and getting myself involved'.¹⁵⁸ Being 'persistent' and making herself available benefited Aiyedogbon, as she was able to strengthen her connections with Atiku, Ogunji and Orimolade — all respected names on the Nigerian contemporary art scene.

Aiyedogbon actively maintains her network ties and demonstrates that the formation of the tie alone is not adequate to draw on the network for support, it must be strengthened and cultivated. She says: 'I will never let go of communication. So if I have met you once I will keep checking up on you'. This shows that relationship building is key to developing and maintaining women-focused networks. Aiyedogbon describes 'thickening' her ties with others in the network through relationship building: staying in contact, maintaining communication, leaning on one another and drawing support and encouragement through personal interactions. Since their initial collaboration at YABATECH, Aiyedogbon has stayed in touch with Ogunji and built their relationship. This led to further collaboration between the two women, including the commission at ART X Lagos 2019.

Ogunji is an American-Nigerian performance artist, well regarded in international contemporary art circles. She invited three women artists to participate in

¹⁵⁷ Interview between Taiwo Aiyedogbon and Stacey Kennedy, video call, 17th November 2020

¹⁵⁸ Interview between Taiwo Aiyedogbon and Stacey Kennedy, video call, 17th November 2020

the 'Performance Pavilion' at ART X Lagos 2019: Aiyedogbon, Eca Eps and Ngozi Schommers 'because they create beautiful, poetic, gorgeous work' and their 'performances lead us to ask important societal questions [...] they bring critical conversations to the forefront' (Donoghue 2019). The series of performances was titled *Small Acts* and showcased new work by these three artists. As further evidence of the ideal of ethical cosmopolitanism which runs throughout this art scene, Ogunji stated that the work was made to 'consider the connection between art and ethics' (Bouteba 2019).

Ogunji acted as patron when she invited Aiyedogbon to perform *Mirror Mirror* at the fair (figure 5.5). Aiyedogbon says, 'I got into ART X through Wura and she invited me and she asked if I was interested and I could come up with something'.¹⁵⁹ This shows that the formation and then maintenance of Aiyedogbon's connection with Ogunji created a strong tie between the two women and produced opportunities for the younger artist. Aiyedogbon tells me that Ogunji introduced her to Bolatito Aderemi-Ibitola, the winner of the 2018 ART X Lagos prize, who has become a friend and important collaborator. She says: 'Tito and I were in touch and then she won the ART X prize and after that we have been together at a residency in Kumasi [...] I cannot have been in a project with her and never keep in touch'.¹⁶⁰ As well as becoming great friends these two artists are creative collaborators who offer each other a great deal of support and encouragement. What Aiyedogbon describes with Aderemi-Ibitola is reminiscent of the way Silva and Fall described their working relationship, she says: 'it's like having women watching women's back, we know that a lot of these spaces have been owned and run by men, but even for the few of us that are involved we still

¹⁵⁹ Interview between Taiwo Aiyedogbon and Stacey Kennedy, video call, 17th November 2020

¹⁶⁰ Interview between Taiwo Aiyedogbon and Stacey Kennedy, video call, 17th November 2020

have our backs and then keep watching over ourselves'.¹⁶¹ Aiyedogbon shows that networks and patronage are efficient ways to develop one's art career, but that relationships are not static and must be developed and strengthened over time.

Conclusion

This chapter began by setting out contemporary art networks from Nigeria, (focusing on Lagos primarily). It showed young women in the context of ART X using networks as a strategy to emulate certain lifestyles and outlooks, often using many different network associations as a strategy to achieve personal or career aspirations. I presented a section of an international art network which demonstrated that artists, curators and art administrators can be embedded in local and international networks, which allow them to enact agency across borders.

Silva played a key role in establishing these intertwined and entangled international art world connections and the chapter deepened the understanding of how the networks were constructed and how social relations were established and maintained. Her cosmopolitan outlook asserted that the art history of the continent should be written *from* the continent and contested the homogeneity ascribed to African art within the constraining Eurocentric artistic canon. Her work with *Àsikò* was key to forming relations and extending network membership, indicative of clientelism as a fundamental structure of organisation and behaviour in Nigeria. Silva was an advocate for women, and the creation of the open, cosmopolitan space of *Àsikò* encouraged debate and dialogue around topics such as the body, identity, and sexuality. She offered practical support through education and pedagogy, and as a woman her mentorship made a real difference to women's careers. *Àsikò* empowers

¹⁶¹ Interview between Taiwo Aiyedogbon and Stacey Kennedy, video call, 17th November 2020

women by offering mentorship and providing strong role models, alongside rigorous training in the arts.

The chapter closed with a case study of Aiyedogbon, which linked back to the first section as both junior ART X staff and Aiyedogbon demonstrated the efficacy of network connections and patronage in establishing the careers of young women. It showed that the business world model of patron-client relations is mirrored in the art world as individuals seek the support and protection of a patron, or perhaps multiple patrons, in various areas of their professional life. Across the art scene women adopt this strategy as a mode of effective and collective organisation. For aspiring artists and curators there is agency to be gained in forging connections to existing power structures and working patron-client systems to achieve one's goals. The ways in which patron-client relations produce agency for both parties in a transaction was demonstrated by the reciprocal nature of social relations.

The chapter concludes that Silva and other influential women such as Nike Òkúndáyé are examples of 'big women', who subvert the model of the Nigerian 'big man'. Their success is partly built on their ability to forge productive patron-client relations which build network strength and encourage others, in particular women. This occurs as women observe the possibility of scripting their own narratives for their lives, partly inspired by emulating the achievements of others. Through her training and mentorship Silva shaped the networks of the art world around her and this has been continued by a lineage of successful women working on the Nigerian art scene today. It is no coincidence that the events which Silva helped to set up, such as 1-54 and Art X Lagos, are run and managed by women and have become such vibrant and open spaces where women can thrive. These events are the focus of the next chapter.

Chapter six: Cosmopolitan Spaces

the artworks tell me about the situation of women in Africa, the struggle of women in Africa, but also, oftentimes they make me think about the joy and creativity of women in Africa

Faith Okupe, ART X visitor 2019¹⁶²

Introduction

This final chapter considers agency in the settings of the two most important international contemporary African art fairs: ART X Lagos and 1-54 Contemporary African Art Fair (held in London, Marrakech, New York, and Paris). These events were founded and directed by women entrepreneurs —Tokini Peterside (ART X) and Touria El Glaoui (1-54) — and are managed by their majority female teams. The chapter provides brief biographies of Peterside and El Glaoui and the history of their events for context. The art fairs are a revealing window into the operation of the professional, social, and artistic networks in which women are immersed. Although ART X takes place in Nigeria, and 1-54 editions are held in the UK, France, the US and Morocco, each event is highly associated by the networks and social relations outlined in the chapters thus far. This chapter interrogates further the networks which underpin and connect these art spaces, uncovering social relationships which are described using family or kin like terms that serve to strengthen ties between participants. Building on this, the chapter will consider the agency of artworks, how art is implicated in these complex webs of connection and relations, and how the theme of female empowerment is exhibited, debated, and reproduced within art spaces.

¹⁶² Interview between Stacey Kennedy and Faith Okupe, ART X Lagos, 2nd November 2019

I borrow from scholarship that theorises 'space' as socially and relationally constructed, neither natural or given but embedded in power relations produced through social relations and material social practices (Massey 2013; Foucault 1967). The two art fairs are distinct but interconnected spaces where the social relations of the networks are performed. Constructed within a broader context of social, economic, and political power relations, space is never simply an outcome of power relations, it can be integral in reproducing those relations (Lefebvre 1991). ART X and 1-54 are nodes in the networks where actors exercise their agency upon the art world by engaging with each other and with ideas and movements from and beyond their immediate locales. They form spaces where social relations are strengthened and reproduced, and as such, where values and ideas are formed and reproduced. The chapter focuses on the significance of these events, which provide the context for how contemporary Nigerian artists, curators and art administrators position themselves within a global art market and assert national credibility.

ART X blends mobility and outward looking transnationality with a celebration of Nigerian and African aesthetics. It promotes social interchange grounded in pre- and post-colonial Nigerian history, echoing the rooted cosmopolitanism which has emerged in previous chapters. The focus of 1-54 is on plurality and cross-cultural exchange, to disrupt the centre/periphery trope which frames Western art history. Through a close reading of ART X as a space which is at the intersecting prism of the global, (understood as the international art world), and the local (framed as the art scene in Lagos primarily), I assess what, where and how ideas of women's agency and women's empowerment play out and are reproduced in these spaces and circulations.

The chapter provides a detailed case study of Peterside, to shed light on ART X as a platform or vehicle upon which she can exercise her agency in the social, political, and economic spheres. In doing so, she makes an impact beyond the art world to push back against the outdated frameworks through which Nigerian women may be viewed. Scholars such as Chandra Mohanty (1991) and Oyèrónké Oyěwùmí (2005) have argued that, for too long, women in the third world have been seen not as agents of their own destiny, but as victims. A potent image has been constructed, even in feminist scholarship, of an 'average third world woman' who 'leads an essentially truncated life based on her feminine gender' and her being 'third world', which denotes 'sexually constrained', 'ignorant, poor, uneducated, tradition-bound, domestic, family-oriented, and victimized' (Mohanty 1991: 56).

The art managers and curators who participate in the art fair act as gatekeepers, mediators, and tastemakers for the African visual arts. These networks are characterised by 'emotive' or 'family like' connections which may help to strengthen ties between participants. The art fair forms an outward looking but grounded cosmopolitan space located in networks of international relations, where multiple and intersecting discourses of power are played out. As places where the contemporary African art world is 'performed', these are complex and powerful events, shaped by the structures of neoliberalism, capital and most importantly, the agency of the women who had the vision, talent, and passion to create and run them. The art fair emerges as a space of women's empowerment, and Peterside and El Glaoui as agents with the ability to speak to power.

Touria El Glaoui and 1-54

Touria El Glaoui founded 1-54 in London, 2013, adopting a new approach to institutional model building, which Milbourne (2021) identifies as a shift of focus from

the museum to the market (figure 6.0). While historically the art fair began as a trade event between art dealer and collector, it has evolved into a worldwide place for art publics to gather and network. Alongside collectors and art enthusiasts, a wide array of art professionals are invited and welcomed to participate in gallery visits, talks and the additional programme of activities, in the hope that they provide reviews and bring visibility. Art fairs have been facilitated by globalisation, which has made connecting with wider markets and clients easier, offered smoother transportation links, brought more sophisticated marketing tools, innovations in presentation, and eased methods of buying and selling. 1-54 London was my first encounter with galleries dealing in contemporary African art. It was the abundance of women art managers, curators and producers managing this space which inspired this research (see introduction, and methodology). 1-54 exhibits a 'cosmopolitan feminism' in a global art world context, which Reilly (2007) suggests is driven by a commitment to action orientated networking among women across boundaries.



Figure 6.0 1-54 London Edition 2018 Touria El Glaoui opens the fair. Image by author.

El Glaoui comes from a wealthy, artistic Moroccan family. Like the other women encountered in this study, she is transnational and mobile, living between London, New York, France and Morocco. Having achieved an MA in business from Pace University, New York, El Glaoui developed a career in banking before setting up the fair.¹⁶³ This is typical of other women managers across this art scene. Indeed, of the forty-three participating galleries in 1-54 2018, 72% of those were managed and/or founded by women with business backgrounds, for example Sandra Mbanefo Obiago, Founder and Artistic Director of SMO Contemporary Art (Nigeria); Yasmine and

¹⁶³ Interview between Stacey Kennedy and Touria El Glaoui, by email, 15th March 2019

Myriem Berrada Founders and Directors of Loft Art Gallery (Morocco); or Mrs C. Bendu Cooper, Director and Proprietor of Gallery of African Art (London).

1-54 was timed to take place at the same time as the influential contemporary art fair *Frieze* London in October. Having become a high-profile event on the contemporary art calendar, 1-54 has been expanded to include editions in New York (2015), Marrakech (2018) and Paris (2021). The art public who attend 1-54 in each different location are made up of affluent, well-connected and fashionable art collectors; mobile, multilingual, transnational and multi-sited art gallery staff; academics, artists, curators, and journalists; interested members of the public, students, day visitors and tourists; and often celebrity visitors (figure 6.1). Although a commercial operation, part of the 1-54 mission is to provide a platform for dialogue and exchange. This is in line with mainstream art fair exhibition models, where an educational element allows the organisation to apply for external funding support. Each edition presents a FORUM programme of discussions between artists, curators, and academics to address current concerns and issues in contemporary African art. The panel and audience for the FORUM sessions comprise a recognisable community of travelling arts professionals and highlight 1-54 as an important art network node (figure 6.2). The issue of gender and the visibility of women artists frequently appears as a concern in the FORUM sessions, part of the theoretical substructure of FORUM as an educational platform.

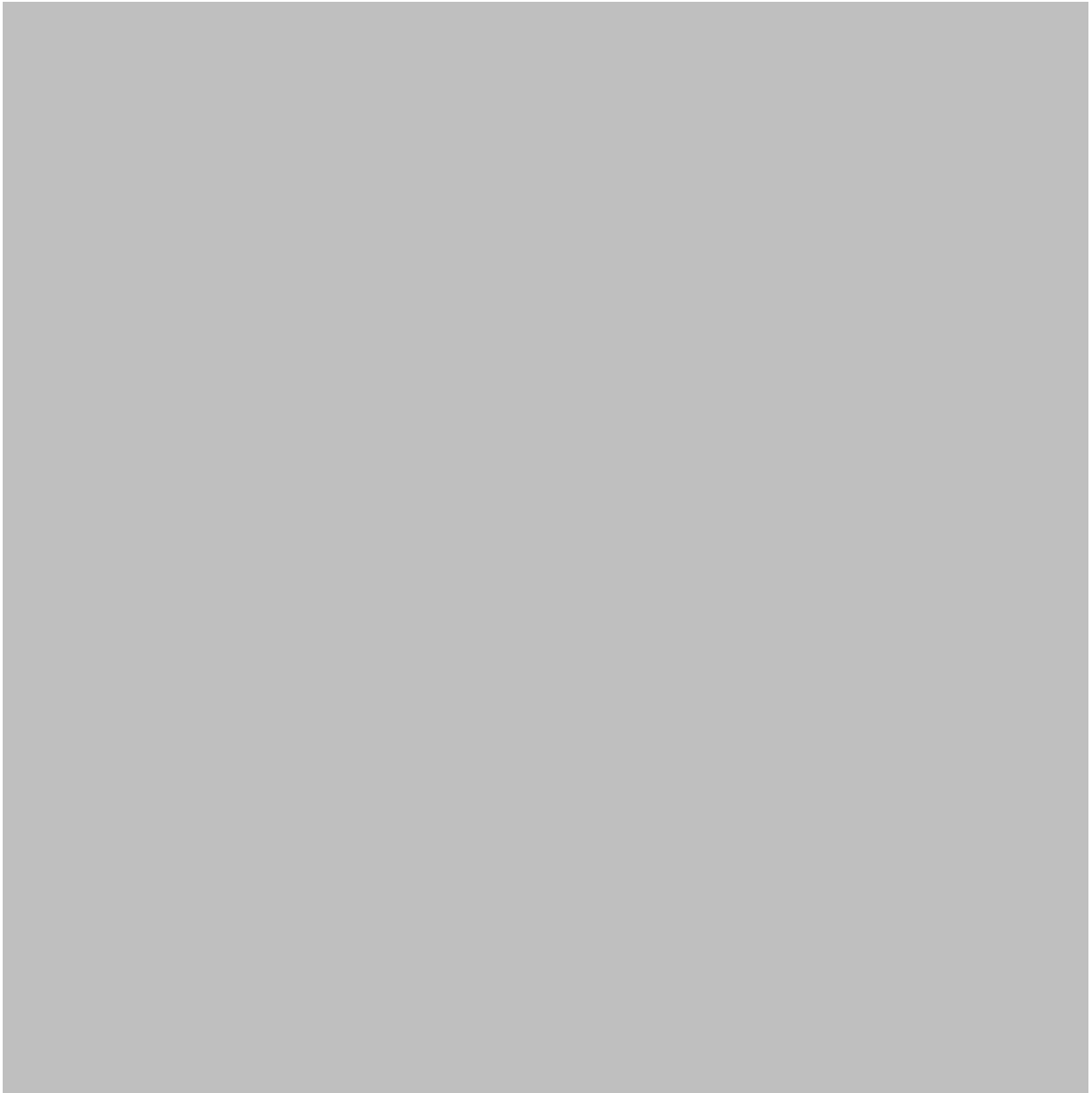


Figure 6.1 1-54 London Edition 2021 The welcome desk. Image by author.



Figure 6.2 1-54 London Edition 2018 FORUM event. Image by author.

The 1-54 London edition takes place at Somerset House, a grand building located between The Strand and the River Thames in central London (figure 6.3 and 6.4). Set among the buildings which once provided the administrative, legal, and commercial functions of empire, this building and this area bears the legacy of London's imperial past. The Marrakech edition was held at La Mamounia, an exclusive five-star hotel within the walls of the Medina where wealthy celebrities stay when they visit the city (figure 6.5). The New York edition was held at Pioneer Works in Brooklyn for its first four editions, moving to Industria in the West Village, Manhattan in 2019, both chic urban venues (figure 6.6). In all three locations the visitor to the fair enters an upmarket cosmopolitan space. Up to 50 galleries take part in the London edition, with fewer in

smaller scale Marrakech and New York. At all the events the presentation followed the ubiquitous *avant-garde* white cube style of the contemporary art world. Yet the location was not completely obscured. The rooms of Somerset House were partitioned into gallery booths whose minimal clean lines retained the grandeur of the building and its surroundings through partially exposed features such as fireplaces, parquet flooring and decorative high ceilings. Similarly, within La Mamounia in Marrakech the set up partially exposed the North African architectural features of the building. Finally, at Industria in New York the urban warehouse nature of the building formed part of the art fair aesthetic. In each venue the addition of the carefully placed *objet d'art*, created a stylish, up market and sophisticated environment.

1-54 showcases a diverse collection of works by artists from Africa and the African diasporas. El Glaoui invites a high proportion of galleries from the continent, particularly North Africa, to exhibit. She describes the fair's impact as 'a real testament to the shift away from Euro-centric art-historical narratives'.¹⁶⁴ Galleries from across Africa, Europe and America participate, breaking down essentialising tendencies and the artificial boundary between North and sub-Saharan Africa. Recent gallery additions have included players from Dubai and Madrid, demonstrating expanding art market interest.

¹⁶⁴ Interview between Stacey Kennedy and Touria El Glaoui, by email, 15th March 2019

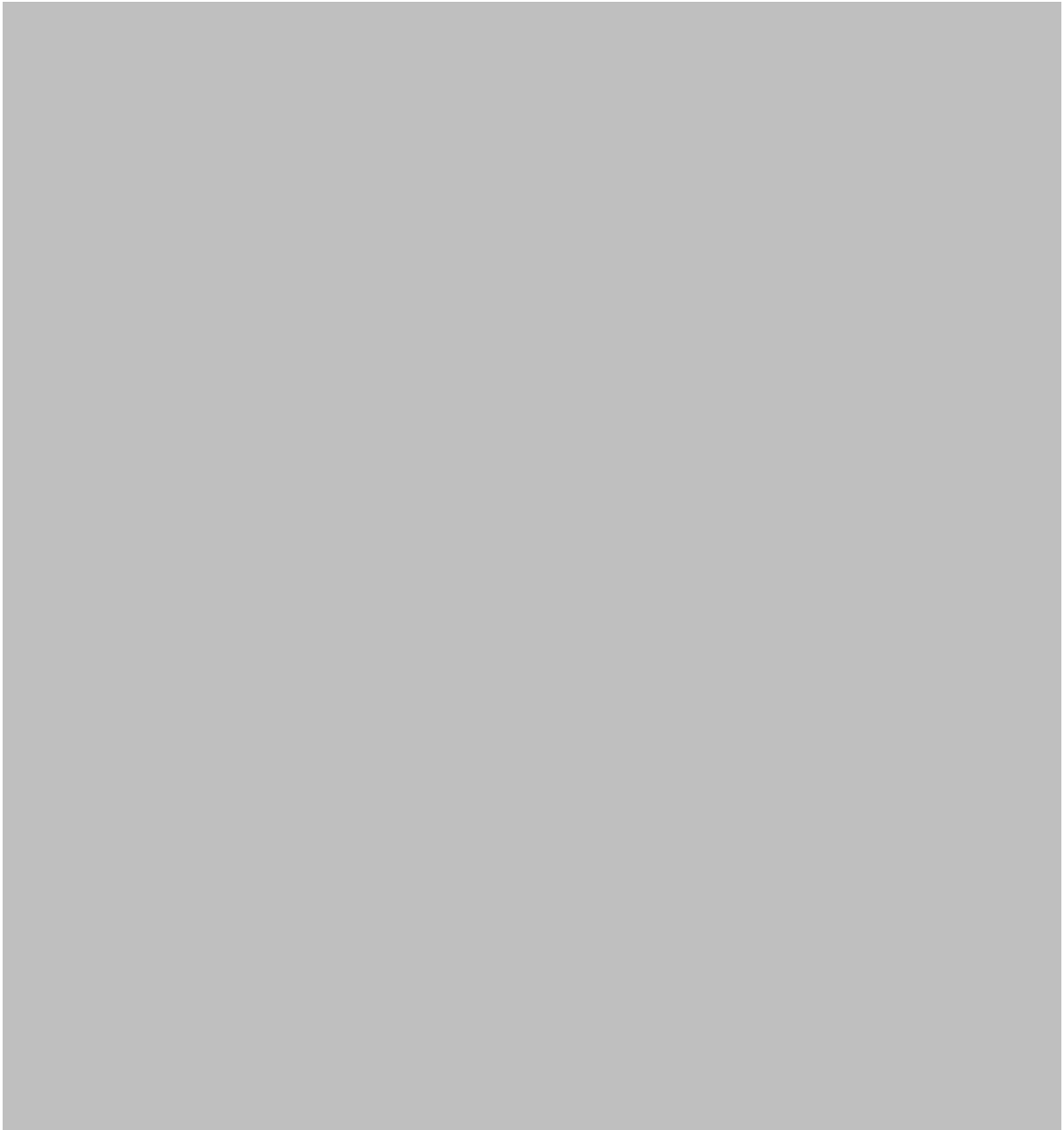


Figure 6.3 1-54 London Edition 2018. Courtyard of Somerset House. Image by author.

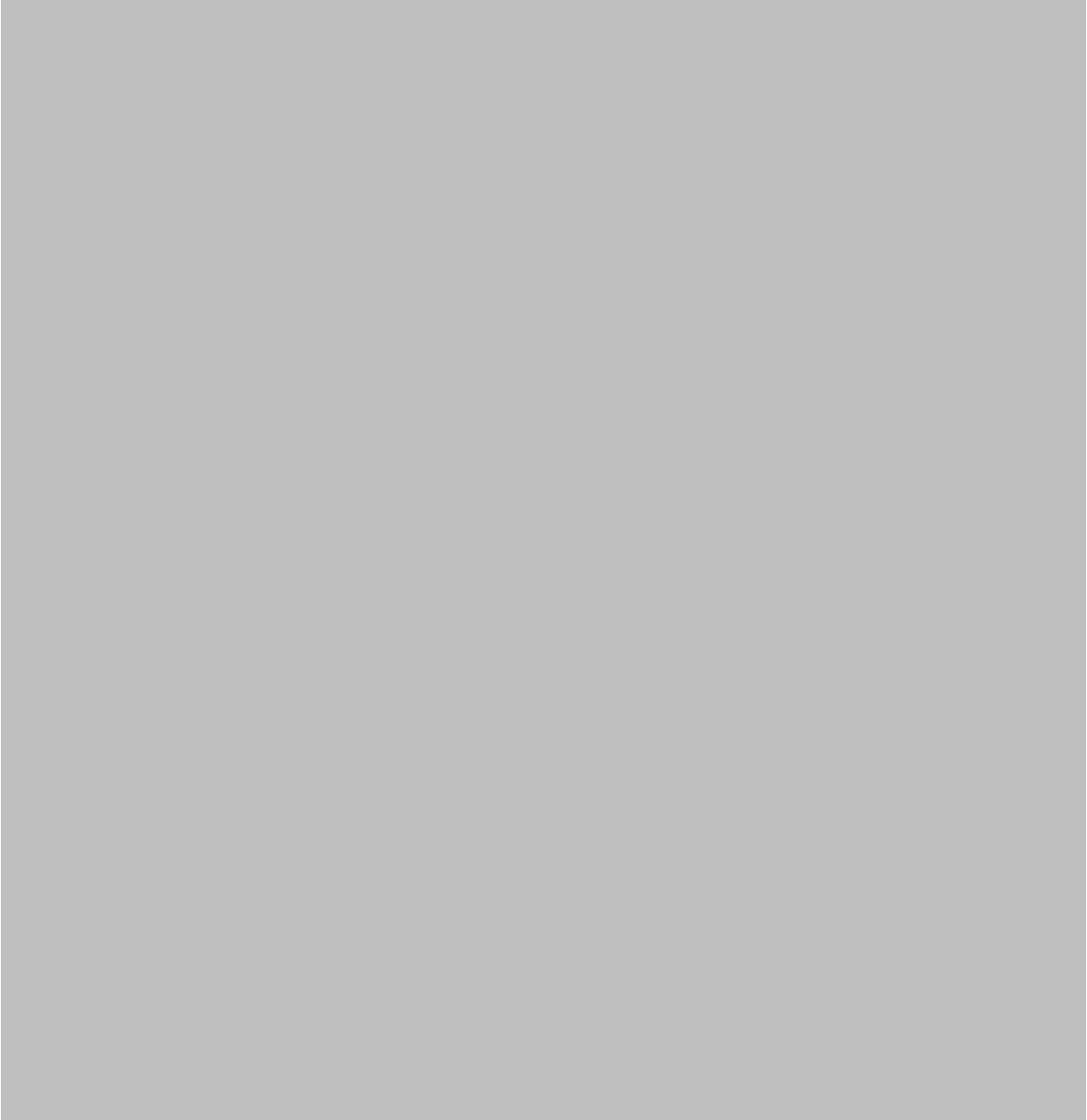


Figure 6.4 1-54 London Edition 2018. Somerset House interior. Image by author.

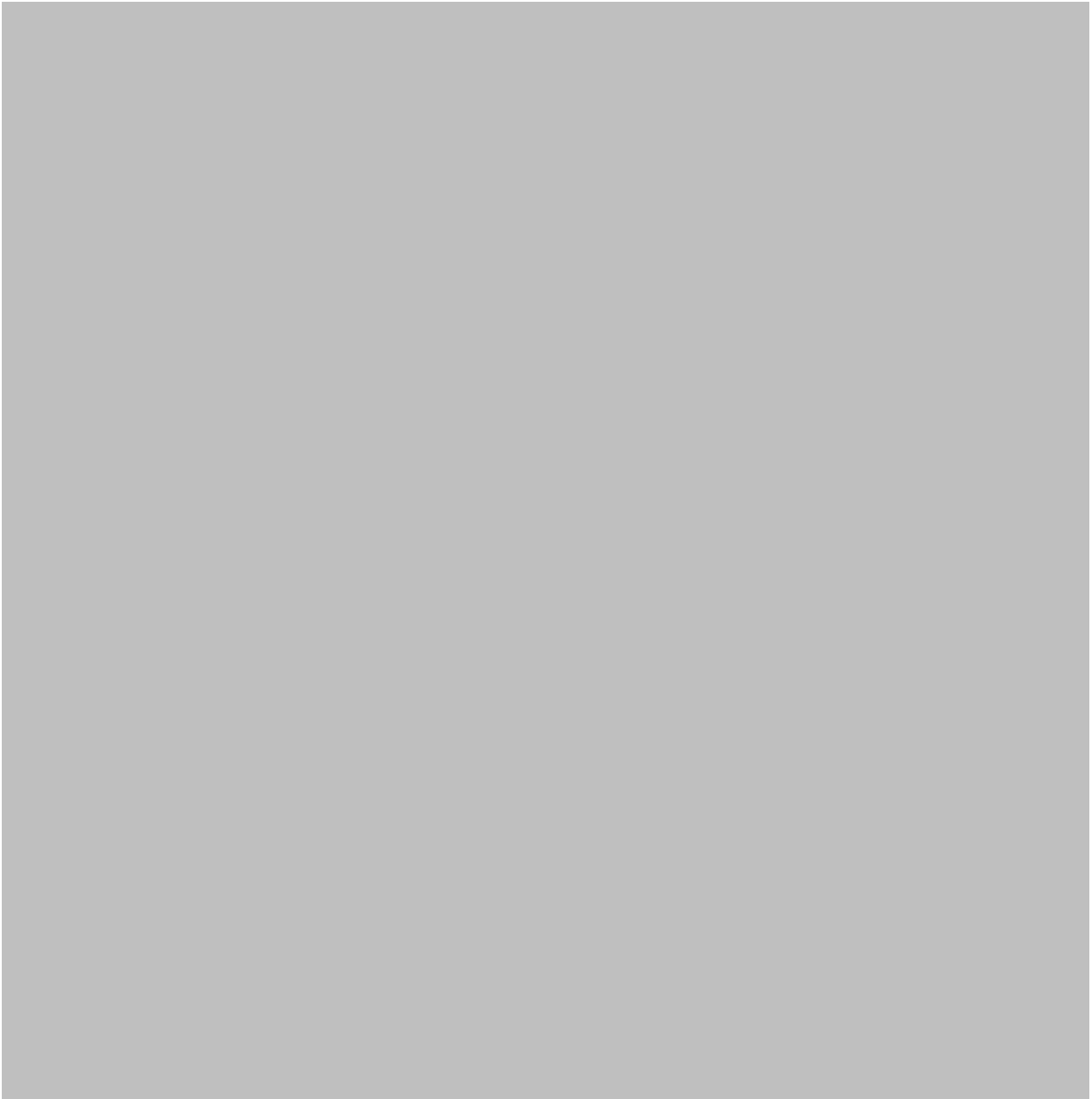


Figure 6.5 1-54 Marrakech Edition 2019. La Mamounia. Image by author.



Figure 6.6 1-54 New York Edition 2018. Industria. Image by author.

1-54 offers a loose sense of what constitutes 'contemporary African art', which focuses on a global black identity. The galleries on display tend to ground their contemporary work within a genealogy of African, African inspired, or black art history. El Glaoui brings together a diverse grouping of galleries and artists who are loosely connected by Africa as a theme, she says: 'if you feel you are with us, you are with us'.¹⁶⁵ Art that is gathered under the rubric of 'contemporary African art' 'nods towards the continent, but simultaneously registers a certain distance from the place of Africa' (Simbao 2018) and it may be this distance which gives 1-54 a detached, cosmopolitan character. The

¹⁶⁵ Interview between Stacey Kennedy and Touria El Glaoui, by email, 15th March 2019

primary market for 1-54 are wealthy, cosmopolitan, elites, who may have an outdated idea of what represents 'Africa'. As noted in the introductory chapter, in African art studies, there has been a tendency to perpetuate urbanisation in juxtaposition to rural life and the rural context was privileged as the discursive space (Siegenthaler *et al.* 2018). Anthropologist Ulf Hannerz (1980) suggests that the centre, (the West), controls the periphery (Africa) through its enabling institutional frameworks that dictate the flow of cultural processes on a global scale. This includes the arts. Although within national boundaries the village may serve as the periphery and the city as the centre, the reverse is the case in African art historical scholarship, 'where the village was often assumed as the site of authenticity and treated as the center because it aligned with notions of real Africa where the real works are produced, untouched by the accident of colonial and postcolonial modernities' (Siegenthaler *et al.* 2018:241).

Although dealing in what may feel like outdated images of Africa, 1-54 art fair nevertheless presents a cosmopolitan, open, and non-parochial environment. There is a visible predominance of women, often women of colour, managing the galleries across all editions. This is opposite to the mainstream Euro-American contemporary art world and is therefore surprising in a London art context. Across each edition the proportion of women led galleries participating averages at around 80%. In addition to the predominance of women managing the galleries, El Glaoui leads an all-woman team which she claims was not intentional, having merely 'hired people who are ambitious and work hard'.¹⁶⁶ Nonetheless, 1-54 is shaped by the vision of women. Bisi Silva mentored El Glaoui in the early days on the fair's inception, and between 2013 and 2017 Koyo Kouoh, Executive Director and Chief Curator at Zeitz Museum of Contemporary Art Africa (Zeitz MOCAA), was the curator of the fair's multidisciplinary

¹⁶⁶ Interview between Stacey Kennedy and Touria El Glaoui, by email, 15th March 2019

events programme, FORUM. From the outset Silva, El Glaoui and Kouoh shaped the fair as a platform to traverse critical subjects within the sphere of contemporary African art, subjects which often included equality, black feminist traditions, and the status and inclusion of women (figure 6.7).



Figure 6.7 1-54 London edition 2015. Koyo Kouoh introduces the FORUM talk. Image by author.

Tokini Peterside and ART X

Like 1-54, Art X is a high profile, sophisticated and cosmopolitan global art event. The fair hosts Nigerian and international commercial galleries who exhibit work for sale with a focus upon art from Nigeria, the surrounding region, and the African diaspora. Tokini Peterside initiated the fair in 2016 (figures 1.1, 6.12 and 6.14). Born in Nigeria, educated in the UK, and from a wealthy and well-connected family, Peterside lives in Lagos and (like her mentor Bisi Silva) is committed to growing the Nigerian art ecosystem from a base on the continent. Peterside and Silva had identified the need for a platform to showcase contemporary art within Lagos (see chapters four and five) to develop the local and national collector base. They curated the first edition together in 2016, with Silva as artistic director. The inaugural event showcased artwork by more than sixty established and emerging contemporary artists from ten countries in Africa and welcomed 5,000 visitors. When collaborating with ART X for my field research in 2019, the fair expanded to twenty-two galleries and brought in over 12,000 visitors. The fair takes place in October, which has become a showcase month for the arts in Lagos. In 2019, in addition to ART X, the city hosted Lagos Biennial; Art Summit; Lagos Photo Festival; Ake Arts and Book festival; Lagos Fashion Week and *Felabration* music festival; alongside satellite events including open studios, talks and workshops.

The opening vignette of the thesis introduced ART X 2019, which took place in the grounds of the Federal Palace Hotel.¹⁶⁷ The event was held in the two large, permanent marquees situated in the grounds of the five-star venue. This formed a restricted entry, secure, elite enclave on the prestigious Victoria Island. Within the marquees the fair adopted a standard global art fair format, injected with considered

¹⁶⁷ Prior to 2019 the art fair was held at the Civic Centre, Victoria Island

local and Nigerian character.¹⁶⁸ Like the ubiquitous contemporary art fair, temporary walls transformed the inside of the large ‘balmoral marquee’ into twenty-two gallery booths, three curated spaces, one interactive arts area, two guest lounges and a well-stocked shop selling ART X products (figure 6.8).

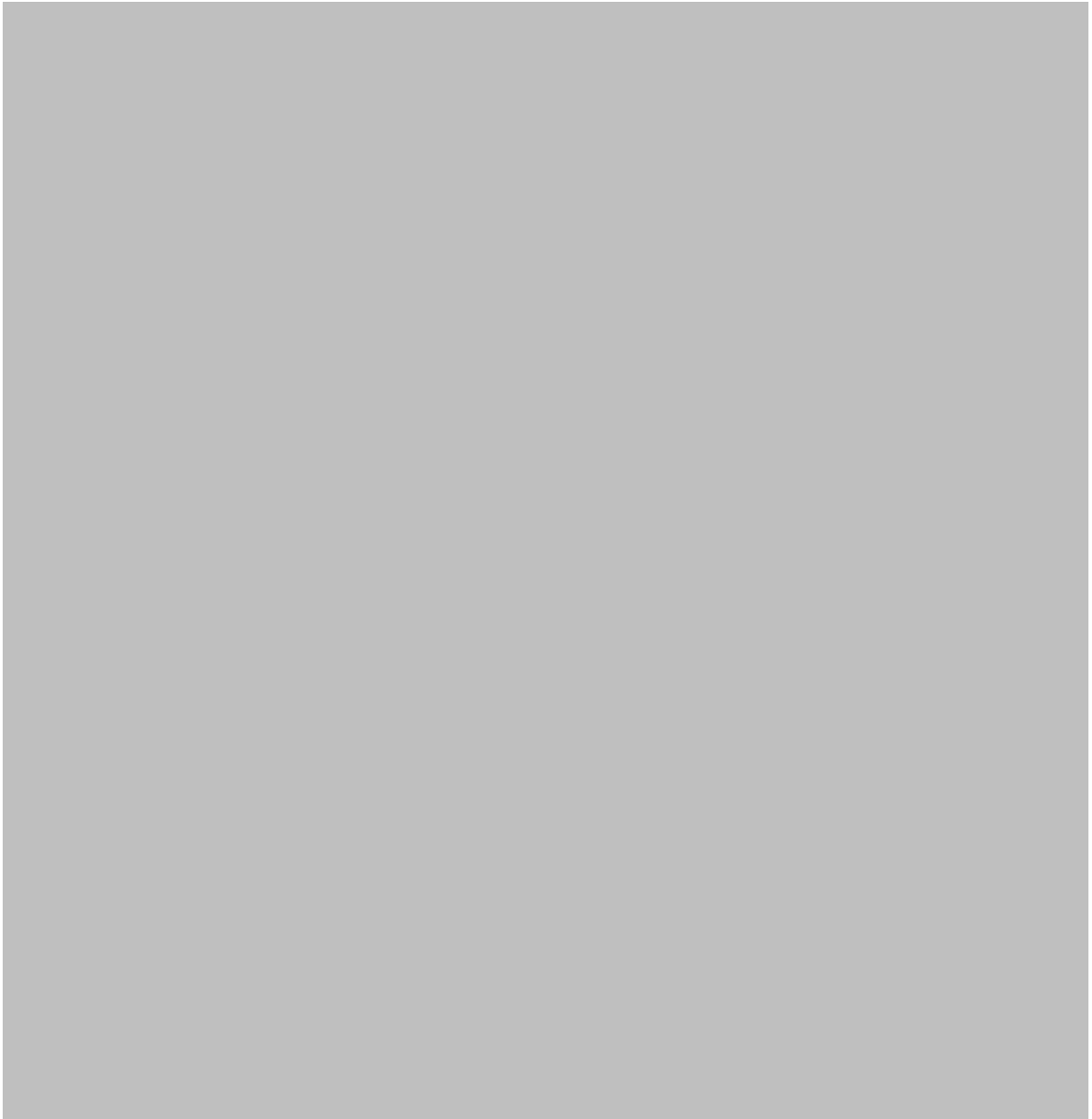


Figure 6.8 ART X Lagos 2019. Image by author.

¹⁶⁸ Throughout I refer to Art X Lagos 2019 unless indicated as a different edition.

The smaller marquee hosted the talks programme, which took a similar format to the FORUM at 1-54 to tackle a range of issues pertinent to the state of contemporary art in Africa. The talks featured high profile artists and scholars, with keynote speaker artist Wangechi Mutu and a tribute to Bisi Silva (see chapter five). Additional fair programming offered a sound art installation by Emeka Ogboh titled *Lagos: 20Hz – 20kH*, an augmented reality section and interactive activities. There was a programme of live performance curated by Wuru Natasha Ogunji, titled *Small Acts*, which presented three women artists whose work transfigured social notions of identity, pushing corporeality into interpretation through a theatrical rendering of gender and womanhood (see chapter five).

ART X demonstrated a resolute attention to detail and an ambition to expand the standard visitor experience. For instance, whilst standard museum style audio guide headsets were available to hire, there was an additional LED headset available which played the curated sound experience for no cost. ART X possessed the markers of a high-profile international art event, alongside creating a social arena in which to celebrate a Lagosian, Nigerian, and pan-African identity. Inside the main marquee were two lounges which showcased contemporary African interior design, the VIP Alara lounge paying homage to the Nigerian craft of *adire* fabric (figure 6.9).



Figure 6.9 ART X 2019, VIP Alara lounge. Image courtesy of ART X.

An outdoor refreshment area hosted local bars and restaurants to provide food and drink, serving local delicacies such as *suya* in an upbeat cosmopolitan atmosphere.¹⁶⁹ ART X therefore subverted any presumed ‘flattening’ of the global art experience, to challenge the idea that art fairs outside of the West are derivative attempts to produce local versions of a European experience. The fair adopted a viewpoint which blended mobility and locality to promote artistic interchange grounded in pre and postcolonial Nigerian history. Cosmopolitanism was visibly performed at ART X, offering a counter hegemonic vision of the dominance of Western art worlds. ART X became more than a mere translation of global values to the local, but a platform to assert and centre

¹⁶⁹ *Suya* is a smoked, spiced meat skewer which originates in Northern Nigeria and is popular across West Africa.

Nigerian positions and perspectives. ART X is able to assert locality and Nigerian modes of sociality due to its collector base of Nigerian patrons who appreciate art, or view art as a viable asset class.

Developing the idea of the art fair as a space for knowledge production, ART X engages in pedagogical activity, the team having secured funding to facilitate visits by groups of school children, as well as students and professors from Nsukka and Ibadan Universities. This resonates with Appiah's (2006:59) idea that people 'have obligations to others, obligations that stretch beyond those to whom we are related by the ties of kith and kind, or even the more formal ties of a shared citizenship'. ART X's pedagogical engagement could be read as an altruistic display of ethical cosmopolitanism, and inclusive way of invigorating and expanding the reach of the fair. Perhaps more cynically, it could also be a strategy to expand visitor numbers and shore up the event's legitimacy. What is apparent is that these two motivations can exist alongside one another, Peterside's ambitions can be simultaneously progressive and highly strategic (see discussion to follow).

The work exhibited for sale by the galleries at ART X was mostly conservative, with a distinct focus on portraiture. Perhaps to counter this, and to expose visitors to a variety of style and medium, the performance element of the fair presented more cutting-edge work (see chapter five). As well as looking forward the fair looked backward with a section called ART X Modern which grounded contemporary African art in the context of African Modernism. Art works by Professor Ablade Glover, Yusuf Grillo and Uche Okeke demonstrated the visual languages developed to articulate African artistic representation within the matrix of Modern art.¹⁷⁰ Peterside notes:

¹⁷⁰ Sponsored by Stanbic IBTC Pension Managers.

It was important to have a modern section to reinforce to our audience that today's contemporary artists stem from respected artists and art movements of the past — and to link the contemporary moment to our heritage (Proctor 2019). Making this explicit connection between the contemporary art on sale at the fair and the substantial art history of Nigeria articulates Nigerian artistic identities sets the fair in national art historical traditions. This can be read as a cosmopolitanism which rejects the hegemony of the Western art world as centre, to bring African histories and perspectives to the fore.

The counterhegemonic vision which underpins both ART X and 1-54 relies on a narrative which promotes Western liberal values around the idea of 'freedom'. Peterside and El Glaoui wish to be seen to challenge the social, economic, and political power relations which marginalise African art production, and thus invest heavily in ideas of equality and freedom from emancipation. As art fair spaces are socially and relationally constructed, they are reflective of the views and ideas which emanate from the individuals who shape these nodes. ART X and 1-54 focus on promoting marginalised non-Western art and artists, building a commitment to critically interpreting the idea of equality within a creative context. This produces an emancipatory space in which ideas can be explored, and very often these ideas focus on the freedom of women.

This is not to over inflate the altruistic or intellectual ambitions of the art fair. As demonstrated, art fair spaces may reflect the complex and perhaps contradictory motivations of their organisers. Peterside and El Glaoui's ambitions are potentially at once conservative, progressive and highly strategic. It is certainly in their interests to frame the art fair as an ethical and inclusive space. ART X claims to allow the wider public to access artworks and enjoy a social experience for a relatively small entry

price, which one could argue to be evidence of an ethical horizon or mode of practice. Although visitors may be unable to purchase the artwork, or drink champagne in the VIP lounge with celebrity guests, if they can afford the entry ticket, they can temporarily participate in a social world of art objects. But does this necessarily make the space accessible or inclusive?

Peterside notes that 'it is so important that people from across Lagos can come' and argues that a day ticket price of 2,500 Naira (roughly \$6) is reasonable, 'compared to \$50 for art events overseas' (Proctor 2019). Here she attempts to present the art fair as a node where individuals of different generational, social, economic, racial, and regional backgrounds can come together. However, this cost would still be far beyond the means of many Nigerians and it is obvious that the primary audience for Art X is the Lagosian elite. In addition to the cost, the Federal Palace Hotel is not a space which many Lagosians can easily enter. Security on the gates is heavy and the space is known to be a guarded enclave for the wealthy and well connected, not a publicly accessible area. Many Nigerians simply would not imagine entering this kind of event in this kind of place, and the event is therefore not as inclusive as Peterside may wish to frame it.¹⁷¹

El Glaoui makes similar claims about the accessibility of 1-54. She talks about keeping the ticket price low, although the £25 (roughly \$30) standard ticket for London would still be unaffordable to many people who live in the city or across the UK.¹⁷² Like the Federal Palace Hotel, the grandeur of Somerset House may simply not be a space which the majority of the public feel comfortable entering. The 1-54 edition in Morocco is free with no ticketing, theoretically open for all to enter. But the event is held at the

¹⁷¹ Although N2,500 is around \$6, this is still a vast sum for the average Nigerian in cost-of-living terms

¹⁷² Interview between Stacey Kennedy and Touria El Glaoui, by email, 15th March 2019

five star La Mamounia, (recently voted the best hotel in the world by *Condé Nast Traveller*) and this heavily gated venue has a strong security presence on the entry point. I observed certain individuals going through rigorous security checks and bag searches, which creates a barrier that does not encourage entry to all.

ART X and 1-54 are ultimately part of the commercial art world, and whilst Peterside and El Glaoui present their art fairs as philanthropic by platforming art, artists and carrying out pedagogic activities, they are profit-making endeavours. Many of the artists and creatives who form the networks and circulate in the worlds of ART X and 1-54 are part of the elite. Scholars who view the figure of the cosmopolitan as negatively associated with privilege have suggested that a cosmopolitan outlook is the purview of the 'winners' of global competition (Calhoun 2003). Certainly, the association of ART X and 1-54 with monied, urban city settings, wealth, and consumer lifestyles indicates a cosmopolitanism enjoyed by the new highly educated and urban middle class only. However, ART X and 1-54 form highly self-reflective spaces and key nodes in the operation of the global art market for contemporary art. These art fair spaces are characterised by collaboration, a cosmopolitan rhetoric is bolstered by the stated aims of the art fairs to engage in debate and pedagogy. As an institution, ART X is a platform which can resist the intrusions of the global art world to assert the place of Lagos and Nigeria on a global art stage.

Social relationships

Across the contemporary African art scene arts workers explain their working relationship ties in terms which could be described as 'emotional' or 'familial' (I use terms like 'family' in a loose sense, aware that they are specific to different individuals in different settings). Figure 6.10 shows an Instagram post by Koyo Kouoh, Director of the Zeitz MOCAA in Cape Town, South Africa. Kouoh is a formidable curator on the

contemporary art scene. She worked with Touria El Glaoui on the first editions of 1-54 and influenced the direction of the fair. In this post Kouoh (back row, centre) celebrates her team of women who work like a ‘tightly knit family’, alluding to work relations in family terms. She celebrates this image with the hashtag #dontpaylipsercictogender (sic), reinforcing her commitment to working with women. @dulicieaa (one of the team) posts a comment to celebrate Kouoh as ‘the matriarch of the family’. This introduces the idea that networks can be strengthened by alluding to relationships in familial terms. Additionally, ties are strengthened by finding a common unifying connection, in this instance gender solidarity. Figure 6.11 shows this idea of gender solidarity playing out on another social media post by an artist, with the hashtags #womenliberation and #strong women.





Figure 6.10 Screenshot of an Instagram post by Koyo Kouoh 2020



Figure 6.11 Screenshot from Instagram of post by Adejoke Tugbiyele, 2019

Across the art scene these refrains are commonplace. The obligations and interdependence which defines many African experiences of kinship and personhood are used to create community and strengthen bonds (see Meyer 1998; Robbins 2003). Fall and Silva regularly joked about how they were ‘pioneering sisters’.¹⁷³ Fall stated that ‘there was a promise we made from when Amianze first introduced us, we will always look after each other.’¹⁷⁴ When Silva was curating the Bamako Biennial in 2015

¹⁷³ N’Goné Fall, ART X Talks, Bisi Silva Remembered, ART X Lagos, 3rd November 2019

¹⁷⁴ N’Goné Fall, ART X Talks, Bisi Silva Remembered, ART X Lagos, 3rd November 2019

she experienced difficulties with the French government. Fall described offering her a solution: 'the French were driving her crazy, I said, put all the family on the jury, and if we all come as a group, just that crowd, the French will get the message, you as Bisi Silva, have your people'.¹⁷⁵ Silva's 'people', or 'family', refers to her art world colleagues and friends, and Fall's advice to mobilise them is evidence of strong emotional ties between nonblood related actors. Silva called Fall 'her partner sister in crime, curator sister in crime', and Fall states that they 'always behaved like an old couple.' Conceiving of social relationships in this way supersedes geographical closeness or proximity, to allow individuals to strengthen their ties across any distance. This is necessary in the expansive and mobile world of the contemporary African art scene.

Imagining relationships as 'family' connections may create stronger emotional ties, if positive connections are evoked which bring bonding, community spirit and a shared sense of a common purpose to mind. Familial ties often form the strongest bonds or most enduring relationships, and respondents often discussed their relations with their peers in these terms. Artist Nengi Omuku describes being 'slightly homeless' when she arrived in Lagos from Port Harcourt, and claims she was 'saved' by the artistic community who supported her 'like a family' to help her through her early months of settling in (chapter four).¹⁷⁶ Drawing emotional and practical support from her emerging network helped Omuku to secure somewhere to live and a suitable art studio. Similarly, curator Antawan Byrd talks of the ways in which he was emotionally supported by the 'insight and generosity of [...] artists when he was new to Lagos' (ART X Media 2019). The metaphorical rhizomes which connect art worlds locally and

¹⁷⁵ N'Goné Fall, ART X Talks, Bisi Silva Remembered, ART X Lagos, 3rd November 2019

¹⁷⁶ Interview with Nengi Omuku, in her studio, Lagos with Stacey Kennedy October 2019

globally are therefore marked by the creation, maintenance and reproduction of social relations which are described in terms which evoke family connections.

At Silva's memorial talk Peterside made a tribute to both Silva and Fall, which evoked a sense of their relationship based on family ties. She suggested that Fall had taken on the 'mothering' role to artists, curators and art administrators in Lagos which Silva had fulfilled before her death: 'N'Goné has been a mother to those of us who are here, choosing like Bisi did to stay here and to do this work here. N'Goné is an incredible mentor and friend to myself and also to Folakunle of the Lagos Biennial, N'Goné has adopted us in the absence of Bisi'.¹⁷⁷ Here Peterside reflects the complex nature of 'family' as she talks about adoption to suggest that the connection is the bond, not necessarily any specific blood tie. Hannah O'Leary, Director of Modern and Contemporary African Art at Sotheby's, alluded to the notion of emotional or family connections using the metaphor of an bestowed allegiance: 'Bisi really was like a godmother in the art world' (Kpade 2022).

Female elders on the art scene and across Nigerian society are referred to as 'mummy' or 'aunty' as a term of respect by more junior or younger people. These terms are fictions which are often used to denote patron-client relations. Òkúndáyé is described by artists and curators as 'Mamma Nike', and Bosah (2017) calls her a mentor and mother to many. This occurs in other African contexts, for example the 'Nana' in the Nana Benz women of Lomé is a hypocoristic of *na* (or *ena*) to mean 'mother' or 'grandmother' in Mina. These terms of esteem allude to family connections without blood ties. Silva exercised agency due to her age, experience, and generational status. She became 'aunty' to younger artists or arts administrators and took on a quasi-nurturing role which respondents frequently alluded to in the maternal

¹⁷⁷ Tokini Peterside ART X Talks, Bisi Silva Remembered, ART X Lagos, 3rd November 2019

terms used by Peterside and O'Leary above. Oyěwùmí (2003:13) states that 'mother derived ties are the most culturally significant, and that 'mothers have agency and power' in Nigeria. She suggests that motherhood is an attractive and desirable goal, unlike the role of wife in the nuclear family where the woman is 'first and foremost the patriarch's wife' (ibid:8). As shown in chapter three, motherhood is a respected identity in Nigeria, and African feminists promote the value of motherhood and mothering (Ikwuemesi 2004; Aniakor 2004; Buhari 2004). Across contemporary African art networks, speaking of social relations as kin like connections, and invoking the power of 'mother' and 'motherhood', establishes a sense of intimacy, connection, solidarity, and community.

Ogunbiyi (Artistic Director ART X 2019) and Peterside talk of the ART X team as a 'family'. This is despite the social class and economic disparities, differing levels of seniority and status, vagaries of length of connection with ART X, and mixture of permanent and temporary contracts across the team. Framing the network which develops through ART X in this way, as co-worker social relationships but also as 'family', creates strong group pressure, or 'bonding agency', which inspires trust and support within the team to get through the pressurised and stressful period delivering the physical event. One of the ways in which Peterside encourages this idea of 'family' is by a regular meal on a Friday afternoon, when all team members are expected to down tools and attend. To facilitate group bonding a selection of hot food is bought in, games are played, information is shared, and awards are given out for those who have done particularly well that week. These are joyful, celebratory events which strengthen connections and allow the team to feel connected in the run up to the fair.

How relationship building thickens ties between people was frequently mentioned in interviews, as those working on the art scene described 'looking out for

one another' or 'protecting' each other. This echoes Appiah (2006) who proposes that a cosmopolitan identification enjoins the individual in morally and emotionally significant communities whilst espousing notions of tolerance and openness to the world. Using emotive language, Silva described CCA as a 'labour of love' (Bookartville 2020). Emotion and a strong sense of solidarity was expressed by respondents across Lagos, as artists and art administrators described close relationships. Lagos Biennial co-curator Antawan Byrd noted: 'I am unapologetically sentimental about the artists whose trajectory is so enmeshed with mine; Temitayo Ogunbiyi, Ndidi Dike, Abraham Oghobase, Uthman Wahaab, Sabelo Mlangeni.' This list includes several artists that Byrd selected for the Biennial and shows the opportunities which arise from network support. ¹⁷⁸ With this, Byrd is speaking of age or career stage homophilous ties, which tend to be closer, longer lived, and involve a larger number of exchanges and to be more personal (Fischer 1982).

Understanding networks in this way can shed light on the nature of moral obligations, trust, and reciprocity. Family ties, because of their strong bonds and slow decay, often allow for much greater value, attitudinal, and behavioural heterophily than would be common in ties which are voluntary and easier to dissolve. Network affiliations which are *alluded* to as family or kinship bonds form attachments which are understood to be as strong and lasting as actual consanguineal bonds could be imagined to be.

¹⁷⁸ Antawan Byrd, ART X Talks: On 'How to Build a Lagoon with Just a Bottle of Wine?' 2nd November 2019

Speaking to power



Figure 6.12 Peterside with Macron, 2018. Image from 1stnews.com.

Peterside represents the legion of female creatives powering the visual art scene in Lagos and across the continent. She also represents women in the arts who have contributed to shaping artistic and social life in Nigeria but whose contributions have gone unrecorded. As the owner of her own successful business who brings visitors and kudos to Nigeria, Peterside stands for accountability in an often-corrupt environment. She is a woman with access to formal power constellations and decision makers. Gender solidarity is strong in the ART X team, in 2019 Feran Owootomo and Ebere Ohia were two key operational figures in the delivery of the fair alongside Peterside as director and Ogunbiyi as artistic director.

When French president Emmanuel Macron visited Lagos in 2018, the ART X team were asked to curate a special exhibition for him to visit at the iconic *New Afrika*

Shrine in Ikeja.¹⁷⁹ Peterside, with N'Goné Fall, hosted his visit with the Lagos State Governor, Akinwumi Ambode (figure 6.12).¹⁸⁰ This meeting was Macron's attempt to build bilateral relationships with Nigeria based on cultural interaction, at the event he announced the *Season of African Cultures: Africa 2020* for France and its previous African territories. Art has long been part of the soft power exerted by foreign nations on the oil rich nation of Nigeria, with numerous cultural institutes supporting the country throughout its turbulent history and into the present day (see chapter four, CCA Lagos). That Peterside was a key player in the theatrical performance of this international state visit is demonstrative of her political access and her high profile as a respected figure in the art world.

Peterside leverages her connections with the business and political world. Her social networks extend to the powerful and wealthy, whom she can call on for help and assistance. She is embedded in webs of patronage which allow her to garner support for her ambitions and operate successfully in the Nigerian business context. As chapters four and five suggested, art networks do not exist independently of other networks in Nigeria, and the commercial art world is highly intertwined with the business world. The success of ART X can be attributed to the sponsorship funding which Peterside garners from the private sector. She stated at the opening ceremony, 'the private and public sector got together and successfully repositioned the narrative about our city, about Nigeria, and about Africa'.¹⁸¹ She has repeatedly called for investment in Nigerian creative products and people to allow them to compete globally:

¹⁷⁹ The New Afrika Shrine or the Fela Kuti Shrine is a tourist destination and entertainment centre located in Ikeja, Lagos State. It serves as the main location for the annual *Felabration* music festival. Currently managed by Femi Kuti (eldest son of musician and activist Fela Kuti) and Yeni Anikulapo-Kuti, it replaces the old Afrika Shrine created in 1970 which burnt down in 1977.

¹⁸⁰ The exhibition featured works by three Nigerian contemporary artists (two men and one woman): Victor Ehikhamenor, Abraham Oghobase and Ndidi Emefiele.

¹⁸¹ Tokini Peterside, VIP Opening Night, ART X Lagos, 1st November 2019

'Lagos is one thing, but to reach to London or New York? They [creatives] need funds' (Freeman and Emina2018). Peterside's background in marketing and PR, as well as her expertise in mobilising capital, allows her to negotiate successful deals with the private sector and navigate productive relations with local and State government. This marks her smart business acumen, skill in making deals and ability to negotiate the structures of patriarchy. ART X is a platform which allows Peterside to exert her influence on the economic and political life of the nation, as well as the social and artistic realm.



Figure 6.13 ART X Lagos, 2019. Image by author.

Whereas ART X has been described as ‘the Frieze of West Africa’, Peterside takes a more Africa centred view. She aims to shake off associations with Europe: ‘ART X

Lagos is a proudly Lagosian entity, and we aim to capture the essence and spirit of our city' (Freeman and Emina 2018). The goal of ART X is to build a wealthy Nigerian and African collector base — as Ezenwa says, 'it is for the crème de la crème of the art scene' — and the event appeals to the Lagosian social and political elite.¹⁸² To be 'seen' at ART X is a marker of status, as Fatton (1998) suggests, the African ruling classes are discernible, their conspicuous lifestyles and life chances distinguish, or exclude, them from the rest of the population.

Participation in ART X is a means by which to perform a conspicuous and wealthy lifestyle. Nigerian Vice President Professor Yemi Osibanjo made a private visit (see chapter one) and guests at the opening ceremony included Bolaji Balogun (CEO Chapel Hill Denham), Herbert Onyewumbu Wigwe (CEO Access Bank PLC), Femi Gbajabiamila (Speaker of the House of Representatives), and Babajide Sanwo-Olu (State Governor). Such individuals are part of the 'organisational bourgeoisie', which consists of the 'top political leaders and bureaucrats, the traditional rulers, and their descendants' (Markovitz 1988:56). This 'organisational bourgeoisie' is male, and in this realm the women whose privileges, resources and political connections have given them a certain influence over state politics are the 'femocrats' (discussed in chapter four). Peterside operates independently of political structures but is an adroit agent among the male dominated 'organisational bourgeoisie' and a respected figure in her own right.

In her opening speech Peterside claimed ART X to be 'changing the narrative' by 'taking the people of Lagos and of Africa on this journey' to 'view the greatest work from their continent, here in this one location'.¹⁸³ She utilised her public platform to

¹⁸² Interview between Stacey Kennedy and Juliet Ezenwa Pearce, video call, 6th July 2020

¹⁸³ Tokini Peterside, VIP Opening Night, ART X Lagos, 1st November 2019

speak directly to the State Governor and appeal for financial support for ART X and for improvements to the infrastructure of Lagos which would attract increased business investment and improve visitor experience. Highlighting the work that ART X do to attract international visitors she noted: ‘as we are bringing the world here, as we are bringing the international community here, we want them to leave with the most phenomenally positive stories about our people’.¹⁸⁴ In making this speech she observed ‘all protocols’ and was careful to express her thanks, noting that she was ‘moved by the presence’ of ‘your excellency’ and praising Sanwo-Olu by saying she was ‘full of hope for [his] tenure’.¹⁸⁵ Peterside drew on the spirit of collaboration and solidarity: ‘we want to work closely with you to ensure that this momentum, this build up, this opportunity is really capitalised on for the future. Because what we are doing isn’t just about now it’s for generations to come’.¹⁸⁶ Although this rhetoric around positive change is limited or somewhat superficial in such a vast and complex nation as Nigeria, which approaches 400 languages spoken across its diverse communities, effective power brokers know that their work can be powerful when it is done in plain sight. Peterside uses her citizenship — her pride in Lagos and the State — as a channel to speak to power, and she herself is part of the power structures which she addresses. As a woman in the male dominated arena of political actors, she breaks the stereotypes around who is entitled to say what in the process of defining common social problems and deciding how they will be faced.

¹⁸⁴ Tokini Peterside, VIP Opening Night, ART X Lagos, 1st November 2019

¹⁸⁵ Tokini Peterside, VIP Opening Night, ART X Lagos, 1st November 2019

¹⁸⁶ Tokini Peterside, VIP Opening Night, ART X Lagos, 1st November 2019e



Figure 6.14 ART X Lagos 1st November 2019. Opening night, Peterside in centre.

Image by author.

Peterside seized this moment to align with power holders and make connections with prominent government representatives, whilst bypassing the baggage that comes with closer ongoing association with the State. She manages public affairs using her well-developed interpersonal skills to communicate her own, and others, needs and concerns. She expresses improvements which need to be made in the current state of Lagos, and as such, claims the power to define societal concerns and who has the entitlement to seek these demands. She serves as a reliable representative, her ambassadorship as a citizen is based on a solid in-depth knowledge of culture, history, and politics.

Once again Peterside echoes Appiah's (2006) notion of cosmopolitanism as an ethical horizon which focuses on an outward looking care for others. Asserting that ART X is a catalyst for the art industry in Lagos and Nigeria, with the 'potential for

rebranding Africa', she makes an effective spokesperson to make affirmations about a positive Nigerian future. Peterside uses her platform to exercise a particular kind of cosmopolitanism, to challenge power holders, claim participation in public debate, and attempt to reshape life circumstances. Sanwo-Olu was gracious in his thanks, praising the work of Peterside and ART X, making an agreement that the state would work more closely with the fair and offering funding for subsequent editions.¹⁸⁷ This public exchange is a clear marker of the authority wielded by Peterside and such events serve to bolster her legitimacy. Although Appiah's model may mask the inherent and intense competitiveness which exists in Nigerian society, Peterside draws on a cosmopolitan spirit of ethical horizons to accentuate her point.

ART X is marketed as a proudly Nigerian venture and Peterside espouses an emancipatory pan-African solidarity which subverts any notion that global contemporary art is no longer concerned with the national. In a characteristic cosmopolitan outlook individuals are seen to embrace the possibilities of the global and maintain a certain amount of distance from the natal or the national: to be cosmopolitan, or even to be transnational, means that one must not affiliate too strongly with any particular place (Simbao 2018). Yet Peterside adopts a celebratory nationalism in the construction of a patriotic position which offers kudos in her negotiations with political power holders. This is evidence of the rooted cosmopolitan position, so typical of contemporary African art world participants, and is in line with Werbner (2006:173), who argues that patriotism is by definition cosmopolitan. He suggests that the patriot extends notions of citizenship by insisting on universal rights for all and an entitlement to public recognition (ibid). In this framing, Peterside centres

¹⁸⁷ Babajide Sanwo-Olu (State Governor), VIP Opening Night, ART X Lagos, 1st November 2019

the national not as a parochial stance, but as a rooted cosmopolitanism through which she can exercise strategic agency in leveraging social relations.

Art and agency

Independent spaces for art and creative exchange in Lagos — like many contemporary art spaces across the world — form cosmopolitan arenas where Western liberal values are expressed. When state representatives such as Professor Yemi Osibanjo (Vice President) or Babajide Sanwo-Olu (State Governor) visit the fair and peruse the artworks, one wonders what effect the artworks they view, and the fair experience, has upon them? Around a third of the artworks on display at ART X 2019 were created by artists who identify as women, and a high percentage of those artworks engaged the themes of gendered subjectivity, womanhood, and feminism.¹⁸⁸ How did this artwork press on Osinbajo as he surveyed the exhibition, surrounded by the women of the art world? (see opening vignette, chapter one).

One of the most impressive and provocative artworks on display at ART X 2019 was Peju Alatise's large-scale installation *One side of the coin, not born to suffer*. This was a mixed media presentation made up of winged figures falling, flying, or tumbling — suspended in an overarching structure of constraint (figures 6.15 and 6.16). The work spoke of the injustices of political, religious, and societal contexts in which violence against women, girl child marriage, and the servitude of lower-class young women exist. Respondents told me that the installation made them consider 'women like mythological creatures flying free' or conversely 'people, mostly girls, who are trapped and alone' — both interpretations that picked up on the complex nature of

¹⁸⁸ The ART X catalogue (2019) describes artwork as dealing in the themes of gendered subjectivity (Adelaide Damoah 56), gender discrimination (Diana Ejaita 67), womanhood (Enam Gbewonyo 70), and feminism (Lady Skollie 86, Michaela Yearwood-Dan 89).

being a woman in contemporary Nigerian society. When Osinbajo — as representative of the Nigerian State which is far from achieving gender equality for women — encountered *One side of the coin*, was he forced to reflect on the theme of gender, or more precisely, women's rights?



Figure 6.15 Peju Alatise *One side of the coin, not born to suffer. Here I present to you- living the sheltered life* (detail) Permission sought from the artist.



Figure 6.16 ART X Lagos 2019, Arthouse Contemporary Booth. Peju Alatise *One side of the coin, not born to suffer. Here I present to you- living the sheltered life* inside the booth. Image by author.

Although I was unable to garner Osinbajo's personal views and responses to the artworks, my interviews with respondents did shed light on the messages which were transmitted to the art public viewing the artworks. When I asked visitors about the overall exhibition at ART X I received responses which suggested that the art objects were not simply receptacles but were imbued with their own agency which could press on the viewer. For example, art fair visitor Faith said: 'the artworks tell me about the situation of women in Africa, the struggle of women in Africa, but also, oftentimes they make me think about the joy and creativity of women in Africa.'¹⁸⁹

¹⁸⁹ Interview between Stacey Kennedy and Faith Okupe, ART X Lagos, 2nd November 2019

Another provocative work was shown at ART X: *N skaans teen die donker*, by South African feminist activist Lady Skollie (figure 6.17). This is a strong image, which portrays a contemporary mythology. A god like figure manifesting as female genitalia protects demonic bodies free floating in a womb like enclosure. Reacting to the artwork, art fair visitor Segun Akinwoleola said: 'I am not sure really what it means but I [...] can see the woman is the most important part and she rules the people below her but also helps them and is connected to them. I think this displays woman [sic] as powerful'.¹⁹⁰ However Segun had interpreted the visual imagery, the agency of the artwork had made him consider the power of women.



¹⁹⁰ Interview between Stacey Kennedy and Segun Akinwoleola, ART X Lagos, 2nd November 2019

Figure 6.17 Lady Skollie 2019 *'N skaans teen die donker (protection against the dark): I collect them all together under my arms, lifting us all up together, up and away from the past.* Image from Everard Read.

Gell (1998) suggests that social relations only exist in so far as they are made manifest in actions. When Segun came to peruse Lady Skollie's painting 'the abduction of agency' occurred (see chapter four). The painting caused Segun to think about its related social agent, perhaps about the artist Lady Skollie, or the gallery owner who chose to display this work, or Peterside as art fair director and who facilitator of the exhibition. Segun may have read the disposition and intention of social others from the painting, to assume that the artist was a woman, or that she cared about women's rights, or that she was interested in symbolic imagery or mythology. The painting causes the viewer to read the social intentions of others and thus the painting has agency. The diagram below demonstrates this idea and the multiple connections who act on one another in varying ways and to varying degrees (figure 6.18).

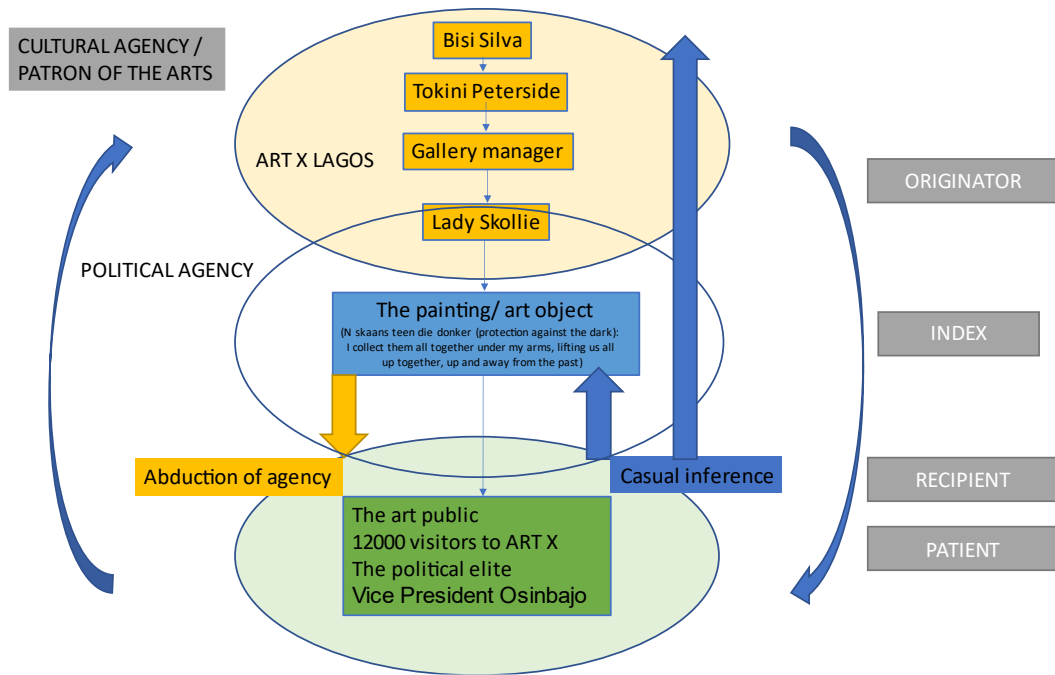


Figure 6.18 Diagram to visualise Gell's theory of agency in the setting of ART X Lagos.

This diagram visually represents what my interviews and observations across global contemporary art nodes point to — that the art object becomes imbued with agency, not only by the hand of the artist, but by the social relations between curator, art manager, gallery owner and the many other individuals connected by the art worlds' entangled networks. The agency of people and artworks create social relationships which bring the theme of gendered subjectivity to press on the art public and society more widely. Although Gell's model has been critiqued, applying his ideas in this way can show how the collective thinking for all those who plug into or are exposed to the art worlds' nodes and networks can be affected by the agency of the artwork.

This moment of contact and context occurs across the nodes, which can be: within the discursive spaces of institutions such as CCA; at art exhibitions such as FEAAN's celebration of International Women's Day; events such as FORUM (1-54);

the exhibition of ART X Lagos; or gallery shows such as Odotola's *A Countervailing Theory* at the Barbican in London (chapter one, figure 1.2). In all these diverse settings, the women who organise and support such endeavours are agents of change in gender relations, purposefully or otherwise. They may not view their work as contributing to gender politics, instead defining their impact as rewriting narratives framed through the prism of race and resistance to imperialist Western art history hierarchy. But their commitment to equal rights and challenge to oppressive power relations contributes to the formation of the nodes as cosmopolitan spaces which resist hegemonies. Individuals may not necessarily identify as feminist, or cite feminism as any part of their endeavours, but as social agents implicated in complex webs of social relations, they are involved in reproducing the ideas and values which circulate: ideas and values of female empowerment.

Cosmopolitan spaces

As large-scale events with many strands, 1-54 and ART X are important platforms where these ideas and values are produced and reproduced. Both fairs take place in major cities, drawing in galleries and artists from many different locations. The cosmopolitan nature of each event is underscored by its urban location, close to creative and artistic activities and suitable places to stay, eat and drink. ART X and 1-54 provide the familiarity and comfort demanded by market aesthetics. Both events are highly branded with logos, the names of the major sponsors are prominent on merchandising, and on the volunteers who wear coordinated T-shirts when offering greetings, entry tickets, information, and assistance (figures 6.13 and 6.19).

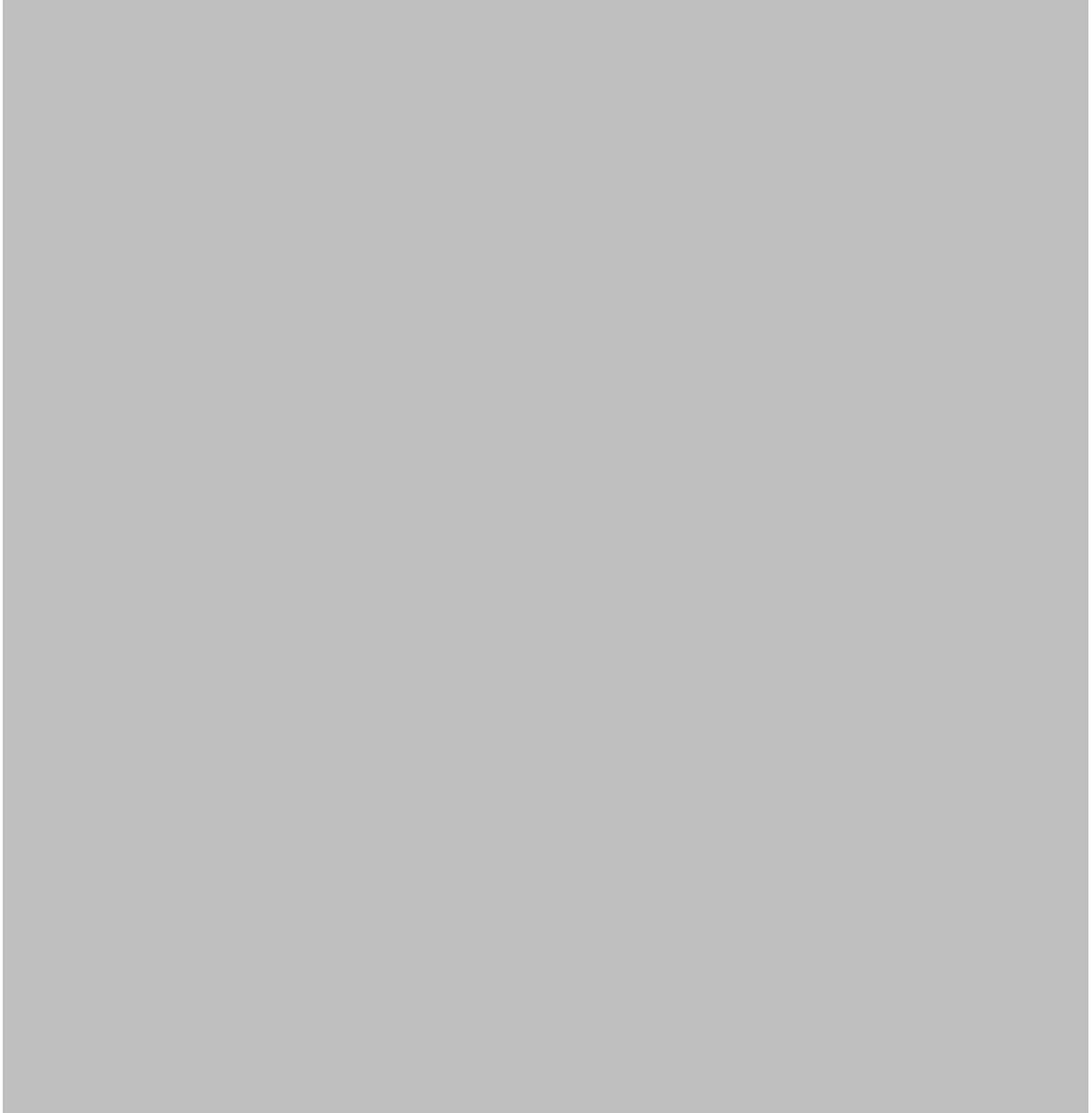


Figure 6.19 ART X Lagos 2019. Staff in branded T-shirts. Image by author.

ART X and 1-54 — like other global contemporary art enclaves — form spaces where visitors expect democratic dialogue which engages local, global, or universal themes and a cosmopolitan openness to other people and ways of living. Spatial organisation is implicated in how society functions and develops, and space plays a role in constructing gendered identities (Massey 2013). Massey suggests that the construction of gender relations has a direct and indirect impact on spatial

organisation, alongside spatial thought and practice becoming implicated in the social reproduction of gendered ideologies. This accounts for the visibility of women working at ART X, 1-54 and across the contemporary African art scene. Individuals across the contemporary art scene tend to take a democratic outlook, and women's success is encouraged because the art networks are embedded in a cosmopolitan logic of tolerance which bypasses hegemonies, including the patriarchal nature of society. This pattern is replicated across the nodes of the contemporary African art networks worldwide, via the social relations of people and objects which exercise an agency to force equal consideration of women. The sense of place constructed by the art fair is therefore relational and influenced by the wider context of associated events and flows of ideas across the network. As Massey (1993:6) argues, 'places are not bounded, they are articulated moments in networks of relations and understandings, full of differences and conflicts'. As such, the character of a place can only be constructed by understanding its links to other places beyond the immediate locale: place can be conceptualised as numerous social interactions which tie together. This allows a sense of place which is extra-verted, conscious of links with the wider world, and which integrates, in a positive way, the local and the global.

These values circulating across nodes and networks and between people are characterised by ideas which may conflict with local values or perceived values. ART X navigates complex terrain as it centres the idea of Lagos, Nigeria, and Africa, whilst seeking to overcome the social and political boundaries, restrictions, and social conservatism of the local, which are at odds with a global contemporary art outlook. One example of this tension is the inclusive approach taken by ART X Lagos to LGBTQIA+ rights. Contemporary art worlds internationally are generally recognised as places welcoming to queer individuals. As Bourdieu (1977) theorised, gender is a

kind of habitus of popular cultural practice, and art events are characteristically spaces where a particular form of Western ethical liberalism is played out, or at least performed. Contemporary art world producers tend to create cosmopolitan enclaves where artists raise the ideals of tolerance of difference as a specific symbol of their practice. But such an open-minded outlook conflicts with state policy in Nigeria, which does not recognise LGBTQIA+ rights. In Nigeria, homosexuality is illegal and gay people face life imprisonment or the death penalty. The same sex marriage prohibition act, which entrenched the intolerance of sexual minorities, was signed by President Goodluck Jonathan in January 2014. Although the law was condemned by global human rights organisations — Human Rights Watch (HRW) (2014) called it a ‘sweeping and dangerous piece of legislation’ — it was generally well received in Nigeria, reflecting the conservative views of the public, where 90% of people support the continued enforcement of anti-gay laws (HRW 2014). Religious groups claim that LGBTQIA+ issues are a corrupting Western import and social reproduction is tied to conservatism around gender and sexuality. This argument is made for ‘feminism’, which among certain conservative circles is viewed as a corrupting influence from ‘outside’. Maintaining the status quo and discouraging deviation from the heteropatriarchal model ensures that capitalism and economic growth which benefit the religious, social, and political elite continue to thrive. Even in this climate, actors who shape the Nigerian art world such as Peterside, make active attempts to create open, all-encompassing, welcoming ‘safe spaces’ across divides, both in the workplace and within the events which ART X generate.

Ephemeral forms of curation such as the art fair are of course temporary, but ART X has a life cycle beyond the period of the exhibition through events such as ART X Live! or the ART X prize. These events mark more clearly the fair’s cosmopolitan,

inclusive values, as this is where the positive impact on the art community and individual artists is found. In 2019 Peterside collaborated with the artistic director of ART X Live! Ayo Lawson to present a youth focussed curated music and art event as part of the programme of the fair: 'Nigeria has the most thriving music scene on the continent, and we felt we couldn't be in this city and not nod to that' (Freeman and Emina 2018). As Weiss (2009:110) notes, 'youth culture is absolutely central to the contemporary global production of power'. Titled *Making the Maverick*, ART X Live! 2019 featured live performances from Nigerian music stars WurlD, Lady Donli, BUJU and Mr Eazi. The event was marketed as celebrating 'Artists who do what they like, with influences from all over, who don't care to fit into boxes or classifications' — a clear assertion of individuals right to make their own life choices (ART X Lagos 2019). The event featured visual art commissions by artists Dafe Oboro and Joy Matashi. The crowd was young, alternative, and expressed differing identities in often flamboyant ways. This is in line with Mimi Salami's suggestion that art spaces are queer spaces (2013). ART X Live! celebrates the plurality of actors and stakeholders, the complexity of conflicting personal and public mandates, and the idea that individual freedom and a universal sense of the moral and social can be explored within, but away from, the confines of state control.



Figure 6.20 Performers at ART X Live! 2019. Image courtesy of ART X.

ART X Live! forms a cosmopolitan space which elaborates what Graeber (2006) describes as 'democratic creativity'. Few images, sounds and styles are borrowed from abroad, instead Nigerian luxury branding is central, combined with informal sector aesthetics, music, and art (figure 6.20). This can be read as rooted cosmopolitanism. For democratic, cosmopolitan ideas to be effective they need to be remade in the vernacular and to be reframed, reinterpreted, and translated in local settings (see Merry 2006). The emergence of democratic values springs from innovation by the diverse individuals of the Lagos art scene, as they 'make their own rules' and embrace difference: whatever their own background, beliefs or experience. Vertovec and Cohen (2002) suggest that spaces like ART X Live!, where people mesh and intermingle with

others, reveal the common, not separate, territory between them. They argue that being rooted in a particular place should underline a mutual interdependence rather than an exclusion of others. This idea of multiple belongings as opposed to unitary identity is about being grounded in specific local geographies but also transcendental of them. Furthermore, to be a rooted cosmopolitan in an intolerant environment often requires enormous courage and faith (Abu-Rabia 2006).

ART X do not make any self-conscious political affirmation to support LGBTQIA+ lifestyles, but instead carry out a highly public performative cosmopolitanism which recognises, before a global public and media, the democratic freedoms of people which are curtailed by Nigerian State laws. Similarly, they make no direct statement on 'feminism' but the whole ethos of the operation and the rhetoric of its participants demonstrates that gender equality is supported. Beck (2006:21) suggests this process is cosmopolitan because it does not involve 'forced mixing' but a 'reflection and recognition' of, among others, 'women and minorities'. This shows that cosmopolitanism is as much a local engagement within post-colonial States, through engagement with global rights movements, ideas about democracy and the right to dissent, as beyond their borders (Werbner 2006). Of course, it must also be recognised that elite spaces serve to protect individuals from the iniquities of anti LGBTQIA+ laws in Nigeria and espousing Western 'liberal' ideas is a means by which to attract foreign funding (see chapter three, FEAAN and funding).

ART X run an annual art prize, which is the art fair's intervention in artistic training for emerging Nigerian artists. Peterside draws upon local and international art world support, indicative of her ability to leverage extensive patron-client networks and access resources to shape artistic careers. The ART X Prize is part of the institution building which goes alongside the art fair. Peterside says: 'In the absence of

infrastructure that exists in other international centres for contemporary art, the prize was launched to contribute to the burgeoning contemporary art sector in Nigeria. In 2019 self-taught documentary photographer Etinosa Yvonne from Benin city took the prize with a series of montage portraits depicting survivors of Nigerian terrorism which explore the hidden experiences of post-traumatic stress disorder on Nigerian citizens. With the 2019 jury, Peterside had brought together a group of acclaimed postcolonial diaspora artists and curators who have achieved an international reputation for African achievement in the contemporary art world: Yinka Shonibare CBE; Sokari Douglas Camp CBE; Ibrahim Mahama; Wura-Natasha Ogunji; Emeka Ogboh; Zina Saro-Wiwa and Professor Bruce Onobrakpeya. These choices, many related to famous or celebrated individuals and two with CBEs, demonstrate a strong London-Lagos connection and an astute move by Peterside which capitalises on the achievements of the Nigerian diaspora.

The ART X prize winner receives a sum of N1,500,000 (around \$3600 or £3000) and the opportunity to present their artwork at the art fair — although recognition from high-profile creative individuals and a three-month residency with non-profit visual art organisation Gasworks in London is of the greatest value to their career trajectory. The 2018 prize winner Aderemi-Ibitola asserts that: ‘Gasworks and ART X definitely helped me. After Gasworks, I was offered museum residencies. One of them specifically mentioned Gasworks as a reason for connecting. A lot of these shows are tied to Africa or the diaspora in some way’.¹⁹¹ The ART X prize winner receives amplification through mentoring and support as they navigate the international circuits of contemporary African art which connect Lagos, London and beyond. Winning the prize magnifies the opportunities for the artist, although all the

¹⁹¹ Interview between Stacey Kennedy and Bolatito Aderemi-Ibitola, video call, 26th October 2020

nominees are offered the chance to present their work at the prestigious location of the ART X fair setting. This offers them exposure to the art going public, gallerists and art collectors, as well as attention from the high-profile jury members, which may strengthen their connections within art networks which they may have previously been only weakly tied to. The residency offers the opportunity to tap into global art networks and supports creatives in navigating the global circuits of contemporary African art.

Within ART X, the team are predominantly young urban Nigerian citizens, diverse in faith, gender, sexual identity, background, origin, class, level of education, affluence, and travel experience. They reflect the pluralities of their Lagosian setting, and their differences are accommodated and celebrated. All individuals are presumed to have a faith, which could be Christian, Muslim or any other. Peterside describes her team as 'multifaith', claiming solidarity as a group 'stand[ing] together because we know that truly there is incredible divine favour in what we are doing'.¹⁹² Group prayer which brings together any religious divides occurs regularly in the ART X office, especially prior to an event. This is evidence of a inclusive attitude.

Religious values are often seen as a precursor of bigotry and intolerance to minority groups, but within the ART X team there is no apparent tension between people's differences. Although across Nigeria religious violence erupts from time to time, in understanding how people experience lived religion and relate to one in Nigeria scholars point to examples of religious tolerance in differing Nigerian settings (Nolte *et al.* 2018); Janson 2016). Within team ART X we witness what Onyx *et al.* (2011) suggest being a 'cosmopolitan dimension', whereby the maintenance of religious commitments occurs simultaneously with other interests and forms of identity

¹⁹² Tokini Peterside, VIP Opening Night, ART X Lagos, 1st November 2019

making in the daily activities and outlook of individuals. The idea of local values is a misnomer, as values are always being challenged and evolving.

Cosmopolitan art spaces can bridge social divides within the context of national self-esteem, evoking a pride in the *potential* of the state rather than the current position of the State. Whilst 'the national' in Africa will always be conditioned by the competing interests of its powerful constituent ethnicities, art spaces attempt to 'do away' with divisions or differences and instead celebrate unity and togetherness. Nigeria's social unity within a federal government system is often channelled through the harmonisation of opposites and the meeting of affinities. A typical Nigerian slogan such as 'unity in diversity' (a governmental ideal of federated nationhood) stresses the benefits of Nigeria's plurality of ethnic groups where political cohesion is the perpetual goal of the nation, indeed the words of Nigeria's national anthem speak of 'one nation bound in freedom, peace and unity'. Thus, cosmopolitanism can be an outward looking set of values within a geographic confine, it does not always have to be relational to outside of its borders (Appiah 1997), and such patriotism in multi-ethnic nations can be cosmopolitan. Although the cosmopolitan usually arrives at recognition and responsibility, this may not necessarily reach a consensus but 'agreement to differ' (Appiah 2006:11). Peterside's work with ART X is an example of a plurality of outlook. She is a minority elite in a postcolonial nation, displaying a rooted cosmopolitanism which involves affinity with Lagosian and national concerns, but espouses values and opinions which may be at odds with the views of wider society. Peterside's work with ART X demonstrates that rooted cosmopolitanism does not deny the universal beyond the local and does not negate openness to difference even when it conflicts with local ideas.

Conclusion

The chapter has shown that artists and curators are connected across continents by network ties which are often framed in emotional or familial terms. Basic clusters of patron-client relationships can derive added strength from being combined with a moral tie, such as that of kinship or familial notions of connection, and such ties reinforce and strengthen the links between individuals. I have argued that a multiplicity of nodes are connected by these network ties which flow, cross-cut, intersect, align and possibly conflict with one another. ART X Lagos and 1-54 are nodes in these vast networks where people gather to create the contemporary African art market.

Exploring the art fair through a gendered lens suggests that in the commercial spaces of ART X Lagos and 1-54 women are visibly powerful as managers, art fair directors, and gallerists. Women are celebrated as artists and curators across the networks which connect the cosmopolitan art fair space, and in the art fair's related programmes of activities. Additionally, the creative output which is presented, both visual art and performance art, is very often an expression of female power and agency. With ART X, Peterside attempts to weave a 'universal' solidarity that can accord all individuals their rights and dignities regardless of their gender, ancestry or other personal characteristics. It is wise to question whether such optimistic readings of female power may actually serve to obscure a continued gender discrimination. This chapter has shown that the social relations of space are experienced and interpreted differently by individuals who hold different positions within it and understanding gender requires an exploration of the ways in which 'space' is imagined.

Peterside and many of the women in this study are from socially mobile and wealthy backgrounds, already well connected and well networked, with the ability to draw on their multiple associations which can enhance their art world careers. From

Afi Ekong's time, women working on the Nigerian art scene often possessed business skills or professional training, having come from careers in law, sales, or marketing to work in this sector. Educated women from such class privileged backgrounds are not typical of all African women. Minority elite women can gain an advantage by having more control over their own labour choices and Peterside, El Glaoui, and other affluent women in the contemporary African art world who work as gallery managers and directors, art fair directors and CEOs, are more easily able to decide the direction, content, pace, and timing of their work. For these women the private sphere of the commercial art world can be a space of enterprise, opportunity, individual expression, and liberty. But not all Nigerian women possess such social agency, only a few are in charge of commodity flows, and most do not live and thrive in a place of boundless connectivity, or unconstrained authority.

I conclude that, even with limitations, the cosmopolitan spaces of the contemporary African art fair can make a challenge to the fundamental precepts of art history in the western tradition — which decries any perceived traditionalism within the cosmopolitan spaces of contemporary art. Networks of cosmopolitan individuals create complex spaces which prompt art market acceptance of Africa as a place of contemporary art production (see introduction). Bridging disjunctions between cosmopolitanism and local artistic patrimony refutes the marginal place of African art on the global contemporary circuit. The contemporary African art fair is an example of a transformation in the global south which provides unique, if limited, opportunities. 'In the face of the structural violence perpetrated in the name of neoliberalism [...] the global south is producing and exporting some ingenious, highly imaginative modes of survival – and more' (Comaroff and Comaroff 2012:18). As such, these spaces form,

at the very least, nodes in expansive globally connected networks where the hegemonies and patriarchal character of the Western art world is resisted.

Chapter seven: Conclusions

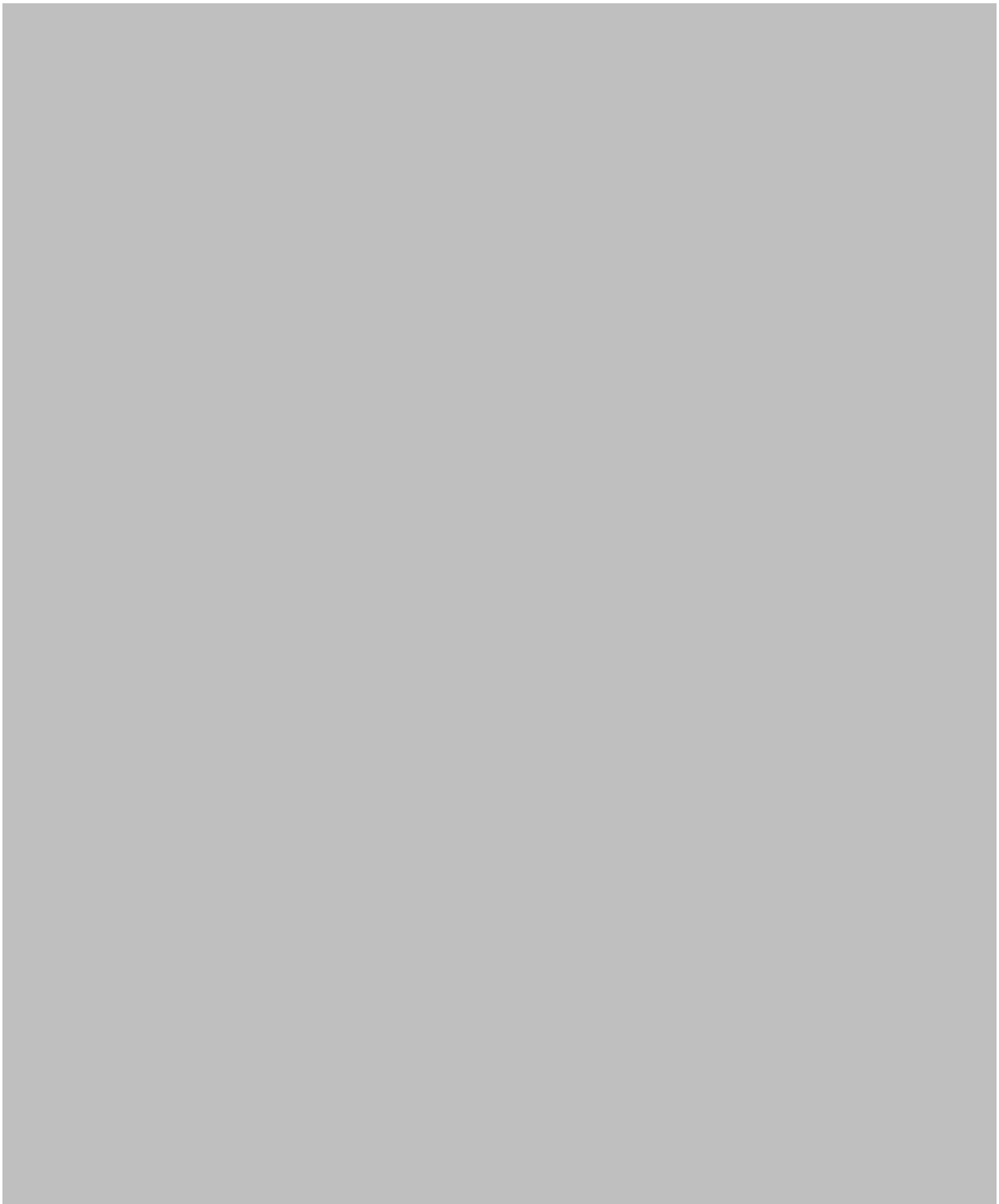


Figure 7.0 Chidinma Nnoli (2020) *Hold Me While We Wait (I)* Photo: Chidinma Nnoli

This thesis began at ART X Lagos art fair 2019 and ends with a reflection on the image above, *Hold Me While We Wait (I)* by Chidinma Nnoli, to bookend a study which has been concerned with understanding art and agency in the setting of contemporary African art. From the female curators and art directors escorting Professor Yemi Osinbajo around ART X - who set the scene for the thesis and introduced some of its key ideas and questions — to a powerful image by a young African woman artist, this thesis has explored the agency and influence of Nigerian women who are writing art history from the continent.

Nnoli's painting shows two young women holding on to each other against a wall flanked by flowers. They are watched over by two older women who appear through an arched window, perhaps keeping an attentive eye on them. This could represent the supportive bonds women form with one another, and the protection and encouragement of younger women by those more experienced. There is a sadness, which may allude to the issues women face in a conservative Nigerian society. Yet all four women stare defiantly at the viewer to demonstrate strength and poise. One of the elders holds a pamphlet that reads, 'We should all be Feminists', a reference to the book by the renowned Nigerian author Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie (2014) of the same title. With this, Nnoli challenges reductive notions of women, to show that they have diverse responses to the structures that shape their lives. Nnoli's painting offers a visual representation of the themes which have emerged from this research: female agency, empowerment, mentorship, and network building.

My study began by noting the predominance of Nigerian women making the contemporary African art scene worldwide. This is not a story which excludes men, but rather a story where female protagonists are the art producers with gravitas across global contemporary art circles. Each chapter of the thesis has presented the ways in

which female artists, curators and art administrators have created, or are creating, art world environments led by women. The thesis has shown that African, primarily Nigerian, female artists, curators and art administrators, are effective agents with the ability to empower women artists. They build agency by forming and working through networks of support. They build strong and supportive social relationships through mentorship and patronage. They combine art making with business, activism, politics, and art entrepreneurship. They mobilise human and material resources to pursue transformative agendas. I have presented many women throughout this study: Dolly Kola-Bagolun, Tokini Peterside, or Nike Òkúndáyé are just three examples. Throughout the research it has emerged that these women, and others like them, draw on their educational, professional, or artistic backgrounds to leverage connections and build collaborative networks, institutions, systems of patronage and social relationships across interconnected art worlds. I conclude the research by offering comments on the three strands which have emerged from this work: agency, networks, and cosmopolitanism.

Art and agency

The central part of this thesis has been to understand art and agency. It has found that relations with power holders are complex and women utilise bargaining strategies to work against or within existing structures of control to create opportunities in systems which oppress female opportunity. It emerges throughout the research that women across art history have been both actors and been acted upon. The structures of power are many, and include the hegemonies of the Western art tradition, the dictates of the global contemporary art market, the structures of the colonial project, the patriarchal nature of society and the expectations placed on women such as the pressure to marry and bear children. To meet these structural impositions, women adopt a wide variety

of strategies to overcome barriers. The commitment to building the Nigerian art scene by contemporary women reflects the agencies of historical women such as Afi Ekong and Clara Ugbodaga-Ngu, whose contributions have been obscured or silenced by the Western and androcentric biases of art history.

Exploring the effective agency of women has shown that silence is not synonymous with absence of action. The silencing of women has occurred as art and artists from Africa have been maligned by the hegemonies of Western art history, which reproduces fixed ideas around the legitimated conventions of art creation. Furthermore, women artists have been side-lined by the hold of the male 'masters' in the formation of the Nigerian art canon. Ben Enwonwu and the Zaria Art Society artists have been lauded as the most important creative producers of their time. They have been the primary focus of academic research, art sales and exhibitions within the commercial art market. Nigerian women's art production has been subsumed, appropriated, or misattributed to men, and the written histories of the Nigerian art scene primarily feature male protagonists. The work by contemporary female artists and curators, such as Ngozi Akande or Bisi Silva, shows that without understanding the role of women in the narratives of Nigerian art production, the formation of the Nigerian canon is incomplete and cannot be fully theorised. What my study has shown most clearly is that female Nigerian women working on the art scene aim to correct the distortions of the past by contributing to art historical knowledge production. They establish women artists as central players in the art history of Nigeria. In addition, they produce art history in the contemporary moment, supporting, promoting, and celebrating the women artist to ensure that the distortions of the past are not perpetuated.

My research brings to light the complexities of agency. Agency, as the transformative capacity to make a difference, can be conservative, progressive, or both at once. Women have responded to the systemic distortion of gender within creative production in practical ways, and chapter two demonstrated women painting in unexpected styles or using unexpected techniques. Ugbodaga-Ngu appropriated post-cubism when deeply gendered and racialised understandings of who could be an artist meant that for a Nigerian woman to be working in this medium in 1960 was a rebellious act. Her creative agency, a progressive agency, was context dependent and historically situated, going against the structural grain of the system in which she was embedded as she responded to the idea of what women artists should produce. She challenged the dictates and tastes of the Western dictated discipline of art history with her artistic output.

Yet Ugbodaga-Ngu was a salary earner within the colonial establishment, who interacted between circles of domination and subjection. Alongside Afi Ekong and Colette Omogbai, she worked against, through and alongside the colonial power structures of her time. All three employed strategies of extraversion to mobilise resources from building relationships with the colonial art administration, exercising what could be described as a conservative agency, whilst engaging in acts of reappropriation and reinvention. They contributed to Nigerian creative output and played major roles in the development of the Nigerian art scene. Their legacies inspire contemporary artists, for example Ngozi Akande, whose artwork *The Icons* was made in tribute to the women she regards as the elders of the art scene, or Nengi Omuku, who takes inspiration from these pioneers to blend local aesthetics and material with the artistic forms and styles she developed while studying at The Slade art school in

London. The female modernists demonstrated that agency can be conservative and progressive at once. They also show that conservative agency can still affect change.

Nigerian women, historically and today, affect positive change for female artists by understanding the challenges they face and supporting their practice. Art administrators and curators work against, or through, structurally determined constraints dictated by society or the state and demonstrate that conservative agency may also offer unintended capacity for change. Strategies of alignment can develop with structures of power, or with dominant discourse. The leaders of FEAAN are visible examples of female success, who offer practical support and guidance to younger artists so that they have the best chance of emulating their mentor's achievements. They provide a transparent 'cultural script' or 'toolkit of options', offering a politics of recognition which centres female achievement to show that becoming an artist or curator is a discernible career option in a specifically Nigerian setting. FEAAN leaders work in alignment with social norms and expectations around marriage and motherhood, they draw on ideas which speak to their circumstances. For example, they express an idea of feminism based on motherhood which addresses the nurturing role of women and assumes, rather than challenges, the identity of woman as mother and wife. This echoes African feminist scholars who argue for an inclusive approach to marriage and childbearing and proposes replacing Western feminist critique with 'positive gender concepts' built on 'indigenous' African principles.

The leaders of FEAAN therefore assume an assertive but non-confrontational stance to the situation of women in Nigeria. They are not activists. Akande, Ezenwa and the other mentors offer practical support and guidance to help young women achieve specific goals. Accessing funding and gaining visibility is an important strand in this strategy, and women may be encouraged to build on their identity as 'African

woman' to access economic and strategic support through donor development money. This collectively helps all members of the association, when collaborations lead to sponsorship of group art exhibitions, profile raising and hopefully new buyers. Individual artists can also benefit directly from such support, even as artists may be encouraged to make work which responds to a set theme which may play to outdated ideas of African womanhood. Yet such a short-term strategy can ultimately offer artists the security to work more autonomously on their own projects. Although FEAAN do not challenge prevailing gender ideologies in Nigeria, by encouraging members to align themselves with organisations embedded in international human rights networks with a strong feminist presence and orientation, they may alter the outlook of members and shape their subject matter in alignment with specific discourses. Once again, agency which can be read as conservative does not necessarily negate change.

Women curators demonstrate that agency can be more obviously progressive. Silva pushed boundaries with shows such as *Like a Virgin* at CCA, and Omogbai turned the critical framework of feminism on the conservative 1960s Nigerian art establishment to push against patriarchy and challenge tropes around femininity. In the contemporary moment, Omogbai exercises agency by resisting the intrusions of art historical enquiry. Her artwork persists and is increasingly valued by an art world turn towards modernism in Nigeria, but her refusal to talk about her past allows her to control access to information about herself. This voluntary act of self-preservation, of self-erasure, allows her control and autonomy over her representation. Across the decades, both Silva and Omogbai have used different strategies to assert that women can stand in equal footing to men as artists and as social actors.

To return to the idea of agents as entities' who work individually or collectively, women exercise agency in simple ways independently, or in more complex forms

through networks, patronage, and institution building. The work of Fall and Silva met the structurally determined constraints of the 'global art world' head on, bypassing the structural violence of history or geography by building on the creative energy generated by political events in Nigeria and the global art turn around the millennium. Their network building and collaborative efforts demonstrated that agency can be individual and collective, exercised by individuals and by institutions. Silva constructed and fortified Nigerian art networks, created systems of patronage, and built institutions to show that agents are autonomous but become implicated in webs of sociality. These webs of sociality are made visible within institutional, complex spaces such as CCA Lagos.

The material and social assemblages formed by CCA, ART X Lagos or 1-54 art fair are centralised nodes which connect networks. ART X is a platform where conservative values and ideas around being a 'good' Nigerian citizen are performed, through the artwork in exhibition, through the talks and events. But this sits alongside a more progressive celebration of maverick individualism at ART X Live! Within the space of the opening ceremony Peterside exercises both conservative and progressive agency. She 'speaks to power' by making demands on state resources for support and improvement to infrastructure yet is careful to follow all 'protocol' which includes deference to patriarchal political authority. As suggested in the introduction, my research has found that the agency of individual, institution or art object is autonomous, but becomes implicated in webs of sociality because their actions are evaluated by others implying forms of recognition and reflexivity.

This becomes important because the construction or deconstruction of women as subjects of art history is ongoing. This was proven by the recent publication of a glossy hardback coffee table book *African Artists from 1882- Now* (2021). Of the 300

plus artists selected for this 'who's who' of the global African modern and contemporary art scene, less than one third of the artists included were female. Of the women discussed in chapters two and three, Omogbai and Ekong are included, but Ugbodaga-Ngu is not. Could this be the shadow of her work as a teacher diminishing her output as an artist? In what appears to be another oversight, Òkúndáyé is not included in this compilation. It is ironic that Òkúndáyé — a living artist of international renown — is not included, when Omogbai, who no longer wants to celebrate her artistic career, is featured. Could it be that Òkúndáyé is not a formally trained artist and therefore did not make the list? Or could it be that she works in what are seen to be the primarily 'traditional' methods of textile and batik, which designates 'craft' rather than 'fine art'?

While it is difficult to ascertain the reason for Òkúndáyé's omission, the fact that certain female artists are privileged over others further complicates ideas around silencing and erasure. Even within the category of 'female Nigerian artist' — clearly a nebulous categorisation — we encounter the complications of trained versus untrained, the type of medium worked in, and class or labour issues which may affect the value judgement of women's art production. This shows the limitations of agency, where women can still be erased or put to the back of history. As my research has shown throughout, agency is always negotiated in contestation with other people. Òkúndáyé's omission from this art historical text demonstrates the limits of women's agency in relation to written art history. An artist's identity does not stop with them but is continually being re-worked by the art world at large. This includes by myself in this research, I am aware that there are many valid and important artists who have not been included in this study.

However, women artists do leave behind physical material evidence — their artwork — which accounts for their presence even when they have been obscured or erased in the written record. These material traces of their presence, if they are uncovered, have a relative permanence which becomes more important when the creator is obscured or erased. Throughout the thesis I have drawn attention to the celebration of female artistic output and the agency wielded by artwork. When *Dancers* (1965) by Ugbodaga-Ngu arrived onto the art market in 2021, or Omogbai's painting *Agony* (1963) was exhibited in Germany and Nigeria in 2018, the artists who had created these paintings became the focus of renewed art critique. The institutions who were interested in promoting and working with the art object, Bonhams and Iwalewahaus, although they had differing reasons for their engagement, join CCA, ART X and 1-54 as nodes in art networks where the agency of the artist, curator, art administrator and artwork intersect.

At these nodes the art object becomes an index of social agency through which ideas are enacted and understood, an agent with human associates which emerges in a specific social context. My research has shown that artists work with ideas of female empowerment and that art can perform a function in progressing social relations through construction of agency. Artists may not necessarily identify as feminist, or cite feminism as any part of their endeavours, but as social agents implicated in complex webs of social relations, they are involved in reproducing the ideas and values which circulate. Art is an extension of the artist's ability, fame body and agency. In such institutional contexts it is also an extension of the agency of the women who shape these spaces.

Studying the complex interplay between art, agency, and gender in the setting of the Nigerian contemporary art scene shows that female artists, curators and art

administrators make the continent, the women of the continent, and the artwork of the continent visible. They write art history from an African base, to challenge the skewed frameworks by which African art history is often misunderstood in the Western academy. They encourage the female artist to create, paint, sculpt, perform, or engage with digital media. Women destabilise the centring of the male European or American artist in histories of modernity and art historical discourse. They bolster African knowledge systems and forms of cultural production. Women formulate, debate, destabilise and contest accepted concepts and categories of art and gender to produce and support a rhetoric of female empowerment which is reinforced by the publication of texts and generation of artistic knowledge. Such critique of gendered power relations which strengthens narratives of female empowerment is articulated and exchanged as people and artworks circulate across global art world nodes and networks. Identifying the agency of women and art advances the understanding of complex and entangled art worlds.

Networks

Nigerian women shape the contemporary African art world through building networks and utilising their connections like an operating system. The setting of the Nigerian contemporary art scene gives rise to distinctive network dynamics and embeddedness, and gender relations shape network performance in specific ways. For example, women strengthen social relationships and form patron-client ties to leverage support, solve problems, improve skills, and locate opportunities. The successes of past and present Nigerian women are based on their local and global networks of communication, connection, and exchange, which operate like metaphorical 'rhizomes' with multiple entryways where any point of the network can be connected to another. As networked individuals with the capacity to bridge art

worlds, the women in my study challenge any idea of a static, monolithic 'African woman', or 'woman in art history' as an ineffectual player. They exercise agency through the construction and maintenance of relations and networks which embed their local art scene within a dense web of relationships that encompass global art worlds.

Networks are not just geographically expansive, as this research shows, historical networks are important. As savvy entrepreneurs, women such as Ekong, Òkúndáyé or Peterside have launched businesses in the visual arts and built substantial assets through their creative ventures. These women situate their activities and successes within a lineage of powerful women who came before them, such as the Yorùbá women who found economic success and created supportive networks based on their careers in market trading, or the 'Nana Benz' businesswomen who became powerful within the setting of the colonial and post-colonial economy. Young female artists in Nigeria situate their artistic practice within a genealogy of female artists stretching back through Nigerian art history, looking to Omgobai or Ugbodagan-gu as pioneers whose artistic contributions have been obscured by Western and androcentric biases of art history. The commitment to building the Nigerian art scene by all artists, curators and art administrators is embedded in the legacies and agencies exercised by women from the past.

Contemporary networks and nodes form webs which connect actors and interests below the surface of formal institutions. This occurs because formal or state art infrastructure across Africa is predominantly weak or non-existent. In the absence of any central or well organised art administration, women have established and maintain networks which connect actors and interests without relying on formal art institutions. In fact, the art institutions which they conceive and manage have become

central to the functioning art ecosystem as key nodes in the artistic networks: Bronze Gallery, CCA, ART X Lagos, 1-54, FEAN, *Àsìkò* and many more. Art workers suggest that the conditions in Nigeria make it necessary for all creatives to pull together to overcome structural difficulties, which may account for the development of particularly strong, reciprocal social connections and ties.

Systems of patron-client relations are, to a degree, a feature of much network activity across all sectors in Nigeria. Members of the art world adopt this model, which is effective because art worlds are built upon social networks which emerge from direct relationships between individuals. Artists are the clients (such as Jess Atieno or Taiwo Aiyedogbon), who seek patrons in the form of curators or art administrators (such as Bisi Silva or Wura-Natasha Ogunji). Making a connection with an influential patron offers the client potential access to all those with whom the patron is connected. There is reciprocity in this contract, as chapter five showed, both parties (patron and client) will benefit from the transaction. Silva, as patron, was able to gain local knowledge and build legitimacy through her connection with Atieno, and Atieno, as client, was able to benefit from the introduction to Silva's networks and the opportunities which came her way. Aiyedogbon, as client, was able to gain access to opportunities such as the chance to perform at ART X through her connection with Ogunji, and Ogunji, as patron, was able to source performance space through Aiyedogbon's connection with YABATECH.

My research shows that art networks do not exist independently of other networks in Nigeria. The commercial art world is highly intertwined with business and political worlds. As owners of successful, income generating businesses, women such as Peterside and Òkúndáyé can access to political and economic systems. Entrepreneurial women illuminate a new model of entrepreneurship and patronage in

Nigeria, one which features women as agents, and shows that Nigerian networks are more than popular entrepreneurship, parochialism, or predation.

Individuals remain concerned about local issues and women reconcile local or national affiliations with their sense of belonging to a shared global artistic community. The women identified in this research are simultaneously local and transnational cosmopolitan agents, who adopt a 'rooted cosmopolitanism' to reconcile these positions. Interlocutors are at home in their locality but rearticulate their social setting as they move easily between local and international art worlds. ART X prize winners Yvonne and Aderemi-Ibitola relocated temporarily to London for their artistic residencies; Peterside and Fall 'speak to power' on an international stage as they represent Nigeria at official state visits; Ekong and Ugbodaga-Ngu made demands from power holders operating locally and from the imperial base in the metropole which shaped the post-independent art scene; Silva relocated to Nigeria to strengthen the African art ecosystem from a base in Lagos; FEAN send artists to China to deepen and develop artistic practices which they share on their return to Abuja; and Ogunbiyi and Ogunji are Lagos based artists, who exhibit their work and curate exhibitions in London, Lagos, Dakar or New York. These women are operating in what Enwezor (2009) suggests is the space of a cosmopolitan African identity that is global in its stance and transnational in its traversal of cultural borders.

Cosmopolitanism

Cosmopolitanism has emerged as a frame of reference which can assist in understanding the agency of Nigerian female artists, curators, and art administrators. Working as simultaneously rooted and transnational agents, creative producers operate in and through global art infrastructure, highly plugged-in to contemporary African art networks locally, regionally, and continentally. A rooted cosmopolitan

outlook subverts the idea that one must not affiliate too strongly with any place, it involves the idea of multiple belongings as opposed to unitary identity and allows women to ground their work in specific local geographies but also transcend them.

The women in my study demonstrate a wide sphere of influence and the ability to draw on geographically distant art world connections. They show that resources may be sourced from beyond the geographical boundaries of city or nation. They choose to situate their practice in Nigeria, which has been shown to be advantageous. As they maintain an internationally accessible and well-connected base on the African continent, they garner legitimacy through their local knowledge and connections. Silva's key contributions, the development of CCA Lagos and the *Àsìkò* residency programme, were continent based. These projects show that agency could be built upon trans-African connections and cosmopolitan exposure. As a Nigerian diaspora returnee, Ogunbiyi (who relocated from USA to Nigeria), like Silva before her (who moved from UK to Nigeria), reverses the migratory pattern of African artists moving to and settling in the West. Ogunbiyi benefits from access to international institutional power, whilst enjoying the freedom associated with globalism and transnationalism. There is kudos and legitimacy in a practice which is situated not only theoretically but geographically within the debates of continentalism, and a pride and authenticity is imbued on artists and curators living and working in Africa who are viewed as being 'on the ground'. Here, cosmopolitanism can be an outward looking set of values within a geographical confine, it can be a deep connection to the wider world whilst maintaining commitment to one place.

Rooted cosmopolitanism brings to light a framework of strategic agency which centres Nigerian women working on the art scene as actors and does not depend on outside validation, thus moving away from the troubling frameworks of anthropology

and art history. This sheds light on a structurally important fault line between those who argue that cosmopolitanism is a condition — the inevitable consequence of globalisation — and those who maintain that it is a posture, a state of mind that cannot be solely defined by the social conditions which produced it. Those who view cosmopolitanism as the purview of the upper classes consider it to be a cultural resource which allows the elites of globalisation to adapt to the new demands of global capitalism in terms of flexibility, skills, training, and mobility, thus permitting them to reap the greatest benefits in terms of professional integration and ease across various cultural contents.

My research would support this view, but it also brings to light the existence of an everyday type of cosmopolitanism which is manifested across individuals from varying social classes and categories, who seek to harness the power afforded to them by international contemporary art world connections in fulfilling their goals. Interviews with younger, less affluent members of the ART X front of house team suggested that cosmopolitanism is no longer reserved just for elites. Cosmopolitanism can be a posture, an element of personal development, that reflects the self-aware individual grappling with a world where identity references have multiplied, and imaginaries have become transnational. Cosmopolitanism can be a state of mind, an aspiration towards social mobility and caution should be exercised in reducing its analysis to only the elite, educated class.

This uncovers cosmopolitanism as an orientation, whereby aligning with the cosmopolitan structures of the art world can be a strategy for Nigerian women of all classes and backgrounds. Women work in the field of contemporary art as one of many life strategies to find success. In Lagos the plentiful creative industries are viewed as a respectable arena for young women to engage, and art worlds form safe

spaces for negotiation of self. Men also operate through these women-led non-patriarchal networks, the art scene being viewed as a secure, and even a queer space, of inclusion, openness, and possibility.

The ethical projects of post-colonialism and multiculturalism align with a cosmopolitan outlook which emphasises a welcoming attitude to difference and a mutual respect for the cultural histories and practices of others. Ideals of consideration past local boundaries towards an ethical responsibility towards other humans, openness and dialogue are central to a cosmopolitan practice. CCA, ART X and 1-54 are spaces where fluid identities and intersectionality can be explored within transnational social fields. A fundamental aspect of cosmopolitanism is the freedom to create oneself. The possibility of redefining prescribed narratives linked to one's gender, race or other identity is a theme which plays out in the art world. Art workers suggest that larger social categories, like gender, can be detrimental to the development of personal agency and identity. But women organising under a common identity, such as FEAAN, can utilise the agency afforded through a shared gender identity to meet their goals and ambitions.

My research shows cosmopolitanism to be a wide lens through which to understand women's possibilities in Nigeria. To some degree all the women in my study have impacted local and global politics beyond the art world, as they have pushed back against dominant hegemonies and ideas about old and new identities. Cosmopolitanism can explain how the multiple local and global dimensions of female empowerment play out across the networks and nodes of contemporary African art worlds as ideas around gender and womanhood are enacted through shared transnational projects involving dialogue. What comes to the fore is an expansion in the vocabulary of globally recognisable references to female experiences. My

research suggests that the ethical project of cosmopolitanism, the orientation of the cosmopolitan as morally concerned for others, and the cosmopolitan celebration of difference leads to the theme of female empowerment becoming so widely enunciated within contemporary African art nodes and networks that artists and curators of any gender identification can lean into feminist positions whilst maintaining a reflexive distance as they see fit.

Concluding remarks

In the postcolonial context of Nigeria, all those involved in producing contemporary African art navigate the uneven power dynamics of the global contemporary art world. Crucially, this can also include bypassing the limiting structural forces of patriarchy, sexism, and misogyny. What has come to light in this research is that the fight by formerly colonised people for respect and recognition overlaps with the fight for equality for women.

Contemporary women who run the art scene, Peterside, Akande, Ogunji or Òkúndáyé, are powerful and visible female producers of art in Nigeria. Their presence demonstrates that women are successful agents in this arena. They set themselves within a lineage of women who have contributed to the art scene. Women, now and in history, have passed on the importance of female autonomy and agency to their mentees, both male and female. This shapes an art scene in which artists create artwork which talks about female empowerment, curators make thematic choices to centre gender, or women, in their exhibitions, and the publicly expressed rhetoric of both male and female art workers in various roles adopt a language of female empowerment. High profile artists such as Wangechi Mutu or Toyin Ojih Odutola make statements in support of women, which are bolstered by male artists and curators who also lean into feminist positions. For example, Yinka Shonibare regularly describes

himself as a feminist and positions himself within feminist debates. Whilst this may (cynically) be read as a performative stance, the point is that Shonibare has a platform, his ideas have gravitas, and his words are shared and travel across the nodes and networks of art worlds internationally.

As artists, curators and art administrators find creative ways around limiting hierarchies and hegemonies, they create inclusive, outward looking but locally grounded cosmopolitan art networks and art spaces. This pattern is replicated across the nodes of the contemporary African art networks worldwide, via the social relations of people and objects. Across the nodes and networks of contemporary African art, the agency of artworks becomes entangled with the agency of women to express and debate women as equal to men as social actors on the art scene.

The study has brought to life the vibrant force and agency wielded by women and artwork. Silva showed art which was political and possessed inherently transferable concerns about women's rights and equality: of the many shows at CCA, the example of *Like a Virgin* (2009) demonstrated her engagement with subject matter and themes that were taboo or even illegal in the local context. This artwork deviated from social norms by bringing the experience of the menstrual cycle, the naked female body, and the portrayal of queer individuals living their lives openly and without fear, into a public space. This challenged ideas around womanhood and asserted the rights of women to live their lives and express themselves with agency and autonomy. This work was at the cutting edge of an internationally exchangeable lexicon of feminist expression in contemporary art.

Showing how agency can be exercised in different ways, FEAAN also work with the vibrant collaborative force generated by women and artwork. They decentre Western notions of feminism as they make the operations of discursive power visible

and draw attention to what is left out of feminist theorising in the West, namely, the material complexity, reality, and agency of African women's bodies and lives. They draw attention to what is unseen, under theorised, and left out, in the production of knowledge about women's contemporary art production in Nigeria. FEAAN demonstrate that the idea of 'feminism' must be taken in context, and that what may not be described as a feminist position, can still empower women.

The many different approaches to female empowerment and agency which have been outlined throughout the research show that ideas of gender which circulate in the contemporary African art field are a cosmopolitan bricolage of ideas, themes, positions, and actions. Rooted in historical Nigerian women's movements, as much as from the ideas circulating in art networks, what is certain is that women across the sector assert and reassert the central importance of Nigerian creative contributors locally and on a global scale. The women in my thesis have taken immense strides forward in challenging hierarchies and assumptions, initiating debate, and circulating new knowledge as they draw on local and regional histories of gender relations, ideas and practices.

I would like to reflect on my own position in relation to this project, as a Western scholar approaching the Nigerian art scene. I have maintained a critical approach and largely resisted passing verdict on views expressed by my interviewees. Different experiences contribute to African women's agency, and I have attempted to draw out the complexities of these differing understandings of gender relations and women's specific situations. This has chiefly been a result of my research questions, and my wider theoretical and methodological approach. When the goal is to reveal how an idea such as the agency of women is negotiated, bringing a strong opinion on how it ought to be to any given research moment is, I suggest, likely to be incompatible with

remaining attentive and sympathetic to the complexities, doubts and contradictions which have arisen.

Finally, my practical research methodology has highlighted the challenges of negotiating situations that are complex, unequal, and at times, unfair. The majority of my respondents were incredibly well-informed and thoughtful, and their reflections on their lives and work described through their own ways of seeing the world, point at times to the irresolvable paradoxes of women's lives and what is at stake. I return to the research process and findings represented by this thesis to reemphasise the value of critical art historical and anthropological perspectives. By bringing these approaches into dialogue I have demonstrated the value of an art anthropological perspective on art worlds and look forward to exploring this approach further in my future engagements.

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Appendices

Appendix 1: Details of interviews

Name	Position/ organisation/ institutional context/ based in	Place of interview	Date of interview
	Arts Administrators		
Touria El Glaoui	Director of 1:54 Contemporary African Art Fair, France and Morocco	By email	15 th March 2019
Hannah O Leary	Director of Modern and Contemporary African Art, Sotheby's, UK	London	22 nd March 2019
Adriana La Lime	Deputy Director and Specialist of Modern and Contemporary African Art, Sotheby's, UK	London	22 nd March 2019
Ifeoma Dike	Art consultant, Europe and Africa	London	22 nd March 2019
Gazelle Guirandou	Co-founder and Director, LouiSimone Guirandou Gallery, Ivory Coast	Video call	1 st April 2019
Adora Mba	Founder and Managing Director, ADA contemporary art gallery, Ghana	By email	16 th April 2020
Nadya Shanab	Director, Ubuntu Gallery, Egypt	1:54 New York, by email	23 rd December 2019
Jumoke Sanwo	Storyteller, place-maker, cultural producer and Founder of Revolving Art Incubator Lagos, Nigeria	Video call	10th July 2021
Dolly Kola-Bagolun	Director of Retro Gallery and curator, Nigeria	1:54 Art Fair, Marrakech	25th February 2019
Pauline Giroux	Assistant Director MAGNIN-A Gallery, France	Video call	26 th March 2019
Jade Mann	Manager, Galerie d'art L'Atelier 21, Morocco	Casablanca	28 th February 2019
Roli Afinotan	Writer, (was with Bloom Gallery, Art X Lagos 2019), Nigeria	Lagos	2 nd November 2019
Hadia Temli	Founder and Director, Galerie Siniya28, Morocco	Marrakech	24 th February 2019
Clemence Duchon	Gallerist, Vigo Gallery, UK	London	22 nd March 2019
	FEEAN		
Juliet Ezenwa Maja-Pearce	Multi-media visual artist, leader and member of FEEAN, Nigeria	Video call	6 th July 2020

Ngozi Rosemary Akande	Artist, academic and President of FEAAN, Nigeria	By email and telephone	July/ August 2020
Abigail Nnaji	Artists and Executive Secretary FEAAN, Nigeria	Video call	14th January 2022
Susa Rodríguez-Garrido	Founder, Agama Art Publishing and Agency Limited, artist, publisher and curator, supporter of FEAAN, Nigeria	Video call	10 th January 2022
Abigail Nnaji	Artist and Executive Secretary of FEAAN, Nigeria	Video call	14 th January 2022
Anonymous (OA)	Artist and FEAAN member, mid-career artist in her 40s. Nigeria	Art Gallery, Victoria Island, Lagos	16th October 2019
Anonymous (OE)	Artist and FEAAN member, early career artists in her 20s, Nigeria	Video call, Abuja-Birmingham	17th July 2020
	Curators		
Folakunle Oshun	Arist, curator and founder and director of the Lagos Biennial, Nigeria	By email	22 nd April 2020
Florence Okoye	Curator, Qualitative researcher, User Experience and Service designer, UK	London	30 th January 2020
Kenza Amrouk	Curator, Casablanca	Casablanca	28 th February 2019
	ART X Lagos staff		
Boluwatife M. Ojikutu	Docent, ART X Lagos 2019, Nigeria	By email	19 th January 2020
Sonia Iroko Kpohraror	Docent, ART X Lagos 2019, Nigeria	By email	6 th January 2020
Toun Benson	Front of House team ART X Lagos 2019, Nigeria	By email	6 th January 2020
Aina Tiwalola	Docent, ART X Lagos 2019, Nigeria	By email	6 th January 2020
Aramide Pearce	Docent, ART X Lagos 2019, Nigeria	By email	11th January 2020
Oluwatoye Eytayo Oluwaseun	Docent, ART X Lagos 2019, Nigeria	By email	23 rd December 2019
Uyeme Itsueli	Intern, Art X Lagos 2019, Nigeria	By email	19 th December 2019
Joanna Macgregor	Docent, ART X Lagos 2019, Nigeria	By email	19 th December 2019

Onyejekwe Genevive Ngozi	Docent, ART X Lagos 2019, Nigeria	By email	28 th December 2019
Ethel-Ruth Tawe Lokeh	Marketing team member, ART X 2019, Nigeria	By email	11 th January 2020
Miriam Nwosah	Docent, ART X Lagos 2019, Nigeria	By email	17 th January 2020
Seto Olayomi	Event Production team member, ART X 2019, US	By email	28 th February 2020
Dada Oluwatuminiu	Docent, ART X Lagos 2019, Nigeria	By email	2 nd March 2020
Tosin Oyetade	Marketing team member, ART X 2019, Nigeria	By email	26 th February 2020
Osarieme Isokpan	Docent, ART X Lagos 2019, Nigeria	By email	8 th January 2020
Temitayo Ogunbiyi	Artist, curator, and Artistic Director ART X Lagos 2019, Nigeria	Video call	28 th February 2020
	Artists		
Amal El Atrache	Artist, Morocco	Casablanca	28 th February 2019
Nengi Omuku	Artist, Nigeria	Artist's studio, Lagos	26 th October 2019
Anonymous (OA)	Artist and FEAAN member, mid-career artist age 40s, Nigeria	Art Gallery, Victoria Island, Lagos	16 th October 2019
Anonymous (OE)	Artist and FEAAN member, early career artist age 20s, Nigeria	Video call, Abuja-Birmingham	17 th July 2020
Lalla Essaydi	Artist, US and Morocco	By email	16 th April 2019
Magdalene Odundo	Artist, UK	Artist's studio, Surrey	25 th January 2020
Temitayo Ogunbiyi	Artist, curator, and Artistic Director ART X Lagos 2019, Nigeria	Video call	28 th February 2020
Fouzia Guessouss	Artist, Morocco	Casablanca	28 th February 2019
Charity Ide	Artist, SNA representative Port Harcourt and FEAAN member, Port Harcourt	Video call	30 th July 2020
Ngozi Rosemary Akande	Artist, academic and President of FEAAN, Abuja	By email and telephone	July/ August 2020
Abigail Nnaji	Artist and Executive Secretary FEAAN, Abuja	Video call	14 th January 2022

Racheal Arogunmati Omoyeni	Artist, Nigeria	Video call	14 th July 2020
Jess Atieno	Artist, Kenya and US	Video call	13 th July 2020
Etinosa Yvonne	Artist, Winner of ART X Prize, Nigeria	Video call	19 th October 2020
Bolatito Aderemi-Ibitola	Artist, Winner of ART X Prize, Nigeria and UK	Video call	26 th October 2020
Taiwo Aiyedogbon	Artist, Nigeria	Video call	17 th November 2020
Amarachi K. Odimba	Artist, Nigeria	Video call	24 th November 2020
Antoinette Yetunde Oni,	Artist, Nigeria	Video call	15 th July 2021
Abigail Nnaji	Artist and Executive Secretary of FEAAN, Nigeria	Video call	14 th January 2022
Anonymous (TR)	Artist, Nigeria, age 30s	Art Gallery, Victoria Island, Lagos	10 th October 2019
Saziso Phiri	Artist, Asiko participant 2019, UK	LinkedIn	2 nd November 2022
	ART X Lagos 2019 visitors		
Faith Okupe	ART X 2019 visitor, teacher, age mid 30s, Nigeria	Lagos	2 nd November 2019
Segun Akinwoleola	ART X 2019 visitor, taxi driver, age 50s, Nigeria	Lagos	2 nd November 2019

My research was informed by more general discussions with Margaret Nagawa, Ndidi Dike, John Picton, Jill Salmons, and by working with and alongside Tokini Peterside and all of the artists and creatives in Lagos connected to ART X Lagos 2019.

Appendix 2: Significant art events in contemporary African art history since 2007

2007	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • First African pavilion at the Venice Biennale • Bisi Silva opens CCA Lagos • Africa Remix • Arthouse Contemporary Auction House, Nigeria opened by Kavita Chellaram
2008	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Raw Material Company established by Koyo Kouoh • Bonhams, London launches specialist 'Africa Now' sale • October Gallery presents 'Angaza Africa'
2010/11	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Bisi Silva launches Asiko pedagogical project • Lagosphoto International Festival is launched • Tate London launch African acquisitions committee led by Kerry Greenberg
2013/14	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 1-54 contemporary African art fair opens in London • Angola (co-curated by Paula Nascimento) wins Leon D'Oro best pavilion at Venice Biennale • Otobong Nkanga is included in 14 Rooms Project at Art Basel
2015	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Okwei Enwezor is first African born curator of Venice Biennale • Julie Mehretu artwork sells for \$4.6 million at Christies, London
2016	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ART X Lagos is launched • MACAAL opens in Marrakesh, Morocco • Njideka Akunyili Crosby artwork sells for \$1,092,500 at Sotheby's, London • AKAAL established by Victoria Mann, Paris France
2017/ 19	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lagos Biennale inaugurated, Nigeria • Zeitz Mocaa opens Cape Town, South Africa • 2019 Bisi Silva dies, Lagos aged 56

Appendix 3: Questions which inspired the research

These research questions have been adapted from Amadiume, I. (1987) *Male Daughters, Female Husbands: Gender and Sex in an African Society* Zed Books, London. Amadiume suggests these kinds of questions form a suitable rubric for ethnographic investigation. I structured my thinking when conceiving this research around this kind of investigation.

How is the status and self-esteem of women reflected in artwork? How does female representation relate to formal and informal power structures among men and women? How autonomous are women? What historical events are recalled? How is the ideology of female subjugation contradicted? Can we find evidence of the development of patriarchal control in art? What are the symbols of power, agency or autonomy? What are individual women remembered or revered for? What role does this play in terms of creating role models for later generations of women? How are women involved in the management of meaning as mediators or gatekeepers? How do women generate favourable gender ideologies and stress their importance? How is motherhood portrayed? How are relationships portrayed? How is the structure represented? What new gender ideologies are being produced and how do these affect the potential consciousness and situation of women? What are the new gender realities and how are they reflected? Have interpretation and meaning become political issue in social relations? Which aspects of culture which legitimise the new positions are stressed? Where is this struggle taking place?

Appendix 4: Network diagrams

Figures 4.1 and 4.2 in chapter four were included to demonstrate the networks centrality of Bisi Silva. Over the course of my project I tried, and was forced to abandon, many differing ways of mapping the nodes and networks of the contemporary African art scene. The most successful programme was graphcommons, but this did not have the full functionality required. Nevertheless, it is useful to demonstrate the possibilities of such modelling.

While I could attempt to reproduce the image here, it can be more clearly viewed by going on to the web page where one can manipulate the image.

<https://legacy.graphcommons.com/graphs/85db5835-cd37-4c52-8208-3b14be86e436>

Appendix 5: Participant information sheets

Consent Form

Title of Project: Women's agency in the African Contemporary Art World

My name is Stacey Kennedy and I am a PhD Student in the Department of African Studies and Anthropology at the University of Birmingham, UK. I am conducting this research to investigate the way that women network and collaborate to achieve success in the African contemporary art world.

By agreement, we have stated that you will participate in this interview. There are no risks associated with this study. You will be provided with a copy of this consent document for your records. I am also providing you with my contact information so that you can ask me any further questions that you may have regarding your rights as a research participant. My email address is [REDACTED]. You can also reach me by phone on [REDACTED]. If you need more clarifications about this research project you can also contact my supervisory team, the lead contact would be Dr Juliet Gilbert at [REDACTED]

Please initial if you consent to the following:

1. I confirm that I understand the information provided for the above project and have had the opportunity to ask questions.
2. I understand that my participation is voluntary, and that I am free to withdraw from the interview at any time without giving any reason.
3. I understand that I do not need to answer any question that I am not comfortable with.
4. I agree to take part in the above research project.
5. I agree to the interview being audio recorded.
6. I understand that all data will be stored securely and is covered by the data protection act.
7. I understand that I have the right to withdraw my data from the study, without giving any reason. In this instance, I would need to contact Stacey Kennedy within 3 months.
8. I agree to the use of anonymised quotations in publications.
9. I agree to the use of my name in publications, and for my publicly available interviews to be used as part of the research also.
10. I agree that the researcher can use publicly available images of my art work, where there are no copyright issues, and that images used will be fully credited.

Name of Participant

Signature

Date

Stacey Kennedy
PhD Researcher, Department of African Studies, University of Birmingham, England
Home address: [REDACTED]

Contact number: [REDACTED]
Instagram: @contemporary_african_art Twitter: @stakkkiii

Women led contemporary African art networks

The research project

There is an historical critical silence around women and gender in the art world, compounded by a marginalisation of women of colour in art history scholarship — and it is crucial and timely to redress this imbalance. This research explores female led art networks within the contemporary Nigerian visual art world, to highlight women's contribution to contemporary art. The focus of the work is on Nigeria in order to achieve a meaningful level of engagement with a wide reaching and nebulous 'African contemporary art world' — a term so broad it can become reductive. The study is based upon in depth interviews with women who work as curators, art fair directors, gallery owners or managers, art practitioners, art historians, collectors and scholars: centring the voices of the women who connect the African art world across countries and continents. The research has been conducted in Nigeria, the US, the UK and Morocco. Uncovering the ways in which women influence, connect, and support one another, the research offers a positive narrative of female success which is often overlooked in academic scholarship.

Research background

Previous research by PhD candidate Stacey Kennedy focused on the art market for contemporary African art through situated empirical work at Bonham's Auction House in London. This research exposed an art world where women are well represented in high level positions of influence, more so than in the broader contemporary art world of the UK and the US. The thesis was awarded the RE Bradbury memorial prize from Birmingham University and the Arts and Humanities Research Council granted a scholarship to support further full-time doctoral research. Stacey's background is in African Studies and Cultural Studies with the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies in Birmingham, and she followed a career in arts and social research prior to returning to academia. Her previous employment was with the Arts Council England, Royal Shakespeare Company, the Office for National Statistics and De Montfort Fine Art.

Research volunteers

If you are interested in taking part in this study, please contact Stacey for more information. The research involves a short interview — in person if possible or more likely via Zoom or over email — about your experiences in the art world. You can choose to be named or remain anonymous in the finished published work.