
From Waste to Art: Teju Olanrewaju's Sculptural Essays on Climate Change and Environmental Degradation

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Abstract

This paper recognises Teju Olanrewaju as a distinctive voice within the crop of young Nigerian artists whose works engage directly with issues of environmental degradation. Olanrewaju uses wastes, such as discarded sachet water bags, empty cans and packets of beverages and fast food wrappers, for his sculptures and installation art. Attention is drawn to the work of this burgeoning artist by examining the ways by which his work-processes, sculpture forms and choice of materials address issues of climate change and environment degradation. The paper also situates Olanrewaju's installation art in the wider picture of contemporary Nigerian art and visual culture.

Key Words: Teju Olanrewaju, Climate Change, Environmental Degradation, Installation
Introduction

“Climate change”, also often called “global warming”, refers to the adverse alteration of climate patterns around the globe as a result of the enormous amounts of “greenhouse” gases, such as Carbon Dioxide, emitted into the atmosphere, especially by man's use of fossil fuels. A one metre rise in water level, resulting from global warming, for example, displaces millions of people around the world, and thus creates serious social and economic problems. This is but one consequence, out of many, posed by climate change. Desertification, drought, extreme hot weather, and gradual extinction of some plant and animal species, are also part of the consequences. Like a whirlwind, the threats of climate change and environment degradation have tended to accumulate, swirl and confront the human race with existential burdens from different angles. Currently, there has been a growing awareness about this global problem of change in climate and weather conditions. It has become a regular ritual for experts from around the world to gather at different places to discuss this global concern for our environment and, especially, to negotiate how countries should cut down on the level of carbon emission that they release into the atmosphere.

On their part, writers, dramatists, visual artists and other creative people around the world have particularly used their media to call attention to the problem and to raise the awareness of the general public to climatic and environmental issues. It would appear that each artist addresses the problem from his/her own perspective, which is shaped by the peculiarity of the artist's own environment. In Nigeria, visual artists who are concerned with environmental and climatic issues have worked within the scope of their immediate physical and social environments. They have tended to focus on the impact of modern patterns of consumerist culture and poor refuse disposal in the country. The internationally acclaimed sculptor El Anatsui has for long focused on the transformation of disposable materials into media for artistic expressions. One of his latest projects is the use of liquor bottle tops/caps for his sculptures and installations. Using thousands of

bottle tops/caps, his works examine the impact of modern manufactured goods on the African people and their physical and cultural environments. His works in this mode reference the consumerist attitude of modern societies and its attendant pressure on the ecosystem. He has often turned to cast-offs of the society, including discarded printing plates, to address the subject. The artist holds that “...Art grows out of each particular situation ... artists are better off working with whatsoever their environment throws up” (Houghton, 2003). A number of younger Nigerian artists, some of who are Anatsui’s students, have also keyed into his mode of artistic production.

Kainebi Osahenye, for example, has explored trash (empty cans) in a way that awakens viewers’ consciousness towards the deplorable consumer culture and poor waste management pervading most contemporary African societies. Osahenye (2009) interrogates the shameless habit of litter disposal in Nigerian cities with his large scale installation that captures the magnitude of problems posed by poor refuse management to man and his environment. He collected thousands of trashed liquor cans and with them composed an imposing ceiling-to-wall piece titled *Casualties* – a work that also references the wars that man wages not only against the environment but also against fellow humans. Similarly Bright Ugochukwu Eke’s *Acid Rain* uses the medium of polluted water tied in transparent plastic bags and composed in form of water droplets to examine the problem of gas flaring, especially in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria, and its contribution to air and water pollution. Eke’s *Shields*, a work done by stitching together several hundreds of ‘pure water’ (sachet water) plastic bags into umbrellas and raincoats extends his examination of the issue of air and water pollution and their consequences. Other artists such as Amuche Ngwu, Alozie Onyirioha, Ngozi Omeje, Ekene Anikpe and Clement Onyekadi, have also used trashed or discarded materials sourced from their environments to comment or interrogate environmental and climatic change issues. These artists have received some measure of attention (Ojie and Onuzulike 2009 & 2010; Onuzulike and Obodo, 2009 & 2011). However, little or no attention has been paid to Teju Olanrewaju, a young Nigerian artist who has for a couple of years consistently channelled his creative energy towards the transformation of societal detritus into sculptural essays that add significant voices to the discourse on climate change and environmental degradation. This paper aims to spotlight the significant contribution of Olanrewaju to the ongoing debates and discussions on the problem. This is especially because his art appears to have attained a point where it emotionally instigates his audience to action in the fight against the monster of environmental degradation and climate change.

Olanrewaju and the Environmental/Climatic Change Discourse: Media, Techniques and Concepts

Olanrewaju’s creative media derives principally from societal cast-offs, and tends to recall the practice of two British artists, Tim Noble and Sue Webster, who turn garbage into complex and visually arresting sculptural installations (Honigman, 2004). However, while Noble and Webster manipulate and transform base materials in the form of self-portraits, Olanrewaju does not usually involve recognizable humanoid shapes in his configurations. Rather, he deftly manipulates and transforms household wastes into visual metaphors. Many of the works are characterized by the tying, wrapping and gluing processes employed in their making. They are mostly abstract. Regardless of differences in their formal presentations, the material components of the works, and the work processes involved, are regular and are also open to similar interpretations.

One of Olanrewaju's bodies of works in this mode is the *Forest* series (Figures 1 and 2). In the works, the artist creatively configured wood, threads, and discarded empty sachets of "pure water", biscuit wraps, and empty bags of processed foods, polythene, and foils in a manner that presents a spatial image of a forest. The first prong of interpretation that filters through from the works refers to the beauty of vegetation. In this direction, Olanrewaju brought together a wide assortment of colourful materials, carefully selected from rubbish bins, to bear semblances of natural order. The works are composed with sticks of variegated sizes and shapes which are adorned with predominantly brilliant colours for flowery effect. Confronting the works further, the viewer is inclined to move into another plane of thought. The works tend to launch the viewer into a social context that is pregnant with meanings. For example, the way each work in the *Forest* series is wrapped or tied, individualized and unified, refer to a community of people standing for a common purpose. Exploiting more the multifocal reflections projected into the works, the viewer is compelled to see a carnival of images or a spectacular beauty contest organized by the artist to give man a break from life of chaos and environmental degradation. Although the works are generated from refuse, there is no visual allusion to wastes or rubbish. Perhaps this is one characteristic feature common to all his installations made with garbage materials. Thus each piece shows the extent the environment can be cleaned up and transformed through recycling of wastes.



Fig. 2: *Pie Group*, 2011, Wood, nylon threads, empty sachets of "pure water", biscuits/Indomie/detergent wrappers, polythene and aluminium foils

Part of the power of Olanrewaju's assemblages arises from his mingling with familiar materials that readily concur with his idea to yield rhetoric unities of vigorous visual forms. His *Mat* series (which he also calls *Goody-Goody* series) carry rich associations of sweet and sour. *One Mat, Many Strips* (Figures 3a-3c) and *Lonely Thought* (Figure 4) look like broad multi-coloured hand-made mats. Also, due to their sweet-shaped elements of harmonized soothing colours, patterned after a rug, they vividly suggest comfort and satisfaction. On the other hand, to some viewers, it goes beyond recalling sweet feelings to implying tiredness as well as a desire for rest. In executing *One Mat, Many Strips*, Olanrewaju drafted discarded empty cans of drinks, which he cut in pieces and fashioned them into forms that look like wrapped "goody-goody" (a brand of chocolate sweet). Those forms became the physical elements the artist used to construct the visual metaphor that he charged with emotional feelings.



Fig.3a: *One Mat, Many Strips*, 2010, Empty cans of drinks, empty sachets of "pure water", cotton and copper wire.

Fig. 3b: *One Mat, Many Strips* (Detail)



Fig. 3c: *One Mat, Many Strips* (Detail)



Fig. 4: *Lonely Thought*, 2010, Empty sachets of "pure water" and biscuits/Indomie/detergent wrappers on chicken mesh.

While Kainebi Osahenye adopted a simple approach of scorching and arranging together structurally stable empty cans for his expression of worrisome environmental and social issues, Olanrewaju devised a painstaking approach of flattening, shredding, twisting and sewing or weaving the discarded metal cans for his artistic commentaries on our uncivilized methods of waste disposal in Nigeria. Olanrewaju's *Lonely Thoughts* measures approximately 500 cm by 200 cm in spite of the laborious and demanding process involved in the production of the work. In fact, size may be seen as one of the essential features that Olanrewaju appropriates in most of his installations for a more forceful and affective expression.

Olanrewaju goes about picking his materials with great enthusiasm. His enthusiasm appears to be largely because he believes his current creative exploration is a spiritual assignment. He has always insisted that he decided to drop painting, which he majored in during his art training, for exploration with trash following a God-given insight he received after converting to Christianity from his Moslem faith and being "born again" in 2008. In other words, he believes he is a messenger of God sent to affect people with his art, for according to him:

I love what I do, financially rewarding or not. I dropped painting for exploration of wastes because I want to affect people more; and I feel this kind of art will help me do that better. There is something inside me which makes me believe God is pushing me to do it as my own contribution towards the well-being of society. I thought of rest and love; I want to give rest to people. That's why I make 'mats' (T. Olanrewaju, personal communication, September 16, 2011).

There is a political dimension to Olanrewaju's work. A dart of reflection and speculation on the nature and form of his pieces, particularly *After the Race* (Figure 5), *Gbede* (Necklace) [(Figure 6)], *Communication Gap* (Figure 7) and *Gift* (Figure 8) will bring the viewer into agreement with Ikejiani-Clark (2004) who declared that art "strives to improve political conditions" of the society. The compositional strategies of these works subliminally guide one into nursing a cynical view of current political trends in the country. *After the Race* depicts a crop of politicians posing for a snap shot after a warm reception organized for them by their people. The artist used pieces of decaying corrugated iron sheets to reinforce the imagery probably taken directly from the communities around him. The rusty zinc-plated iron sheets seem to mirror beyond mounds of filth and rubbish that have become the cities' monuments to political and moral decay as well as social and infrastructural dilapidation that characterize many of the African societies. In other words, Olanrewaju ably used the metaphor of rust and decay as a visual imagery to critique our Nigerian society with her poverty and urban decay. In *Gbede*, the artist adorned a figure (richly dressed in a "lace" material fashioned from old, discarded metal mosquito net) with what looks like a necklace formed from bundles of refuse materials. Thus, the work tends to paint a picture of shameless people who litter their surroundings recklessly and display trash as valued asset.



Fig. 5: *After the Race*, 2010, Corrugated Iron Sheets, empty tins of canned food and acrylic colours



Fig. 6: *Gbede* (Necklace), 2010, Fast food wrappers and discarded mosquito net.



Fig. 7: *Communication Gap*, 2011, Used GSM recharge cards, chicken mesh, copper wire and empty fruit juice paper packets.



Fig. 8: *Gift*, 2011, Empty

It is engaging to see in a glance the power of cc sachets of “pure water”, work titled *Scriptural Code* (Figure 9). It is presented in a biscuits/Indomie/detergent exhibits strong textile patterns created with lines and dots. The artist employs variegated materials in the configuration of the piece, and this has given it the visual vigour that enhances its communicative power. Pages of an old Bible, used and discarded mobile phone recharge cards, empty cans of drinks and foils, all constitute the media enlisted into the work process for textual and visual effects. In the work, Olanrewaju evinces his spirituality in its conception. *Scriptural Code* comes through as an expansive page, probably of a holy book, and then posted up a public notice in coded language on it. At close range, the viewer could vividly read texts from the Holy Bible, from the Old to New Testament. Some of the texts are intentionally obliterated with the irregularly running vertical black lines and cut-outs of product codes. Lids of empty cans and foils are intermittently glued over the broad plane. From afar, the cut-outs resemble magnified particles floating in the air. A critical reading of the work will likely lead the viewer to comprehend the potency of the industry-generated pollution continuously emitted into the atmosphere. No wonder the use of the biblical texts in the work. They all tend to amplify the scriptural statement: “He who has ears, let him hear.”

In *Great Site* (Figure 10), the vagaries of the natural world are apparent and real. Olanrewaju deconstructs the physical world and introduces his audience to metaphysical matters where they may undertake their own imaginative excursions into a terrain that allows material, space and ideas to coincide in what Howard (2008) describes as objects of magnificent visual power. *Great Site* is composed of hundreds of dry cashew leaves

carefully arranged and glued in rows of half-drop pattern on a stable support. The arrangement looks stunningly orderly. Except the leaves in the first row, each leaf has its stalk hidden behind another in an overlapping formation. The order that was created by the systematic arrangement of the leaves was disoriented by the ravaging tongues of fire, which was deliberately and randomly used to scorch parts of some leaves. The effect is visually splendid but conceptually loaded by the manner in which it raises questions about the vulnerability of our natural environment. *Great Site* tends to make very apt references to desertification, parched earth, and drought. It successfully creates a site of contemplation about the state of our climate and physical environment.

Fig. 9: *Scriptural Code*, 2011, Discarded Bible pages, empty cans of drinks, aluminium foil, paper and cotton wool on canvas.



Fig. 10: *Great Site*, 2009, Dry cashew leaves, artificial flower, sand and earth pigments on canvas.

Conclt

Olarenwaju uses trashed materials to call attention to the imbalances being exerted by man's domestic and industrial activities on the earth's ecosystem. Although he realizes the distinction between fantasy and reality, he is encouraged by his faculty of creativity which enables him raise useful discourses on the issue of climate change and environmental degradation from the perspective of a Nigerian living and working in his country but who is aware of the larger implication of the problem in other climes. Working with materials from his immediate environment and employing basic processes of tying, folding, stitching, gumming, and much more, his recent works show marked inventiveness and expressive force in the light of current debates and discourses on climate and environmental changes.

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