

Traditional African Art Technologies and Contemporary Art Practice

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Abstract

This study discusses the influences and relationship between traditional African Art, Modern and Contemporary Art, as from the Western perspective. It amplifies historical perspectives on the theatre of art making technologies, dissemination and consumption on the African continent in the past, which may have had some influence on Western contemporary art. Using material, documentary evidence and argumentative research methods, the study reveals that traditional African art and contemporary art often embrace and propose more egalitarian approaches in making and exhibiting art, however, their relationship has many times been obscured. More often than not, contemporary art is either presented as if it were new to Africa or was introduced to the continent later by the Western culture. The study posits that there are influences and close relationship between traditional African art and modern/contemporary art, in terms of liberalization of media, deskilling through the use of simple technologies and collective modes of production, and that the latter was partially and occasionally inspired by the former. It reaffirms the position that traditional African art technologies had always been integrated into communal life and reflected the technologies and societies of the time. Installations, reproductions, multi-form and cross genre art which propose a more inclusive agenda, also comprising publicness by way of production, experimentation, dissemination and experience as art reconfigures within given spaces, provide greater platforms for artists to re-examine traditional African art in relation to technologies for art today.

Keywords: Modern and Contemporary art, Traditional African art, Technology, Reproduction, Repetition.

Introduction

The intervention of colonialism on the African continent had several effects on the cultural, socio-political and economic fabric of the continent and African art was no exception.¹ The traditional approach to life, which integrated art into the existence of the communities through cyclic and annual rituals and ceremonies, suddenly began to give way to Western ideologies and industrial modes of working. In further pursuit of the colonial agenda, the traditional techniques of production were disrupted by division of labour and industrialization which were based on the demands of international markets rather than the demands and needs within local communities.² Traditional and subsistence technologies applied before this period were

often overlooked, underrated or given little credit. The plurality of media within traditional African art making cultures and the technology they employed have often been relegated to history. In fabric making, for example, apart from different weaving techniques, the technology of preparing dyes, their application through stamping techniques, the simple and repetitive motifs, and the collective production technologies employed in production were quite impressive. The transfer of technologies and knowledge through informal schools and apprenticeship systems do have some relationship or influence on contemporary art directly or indirectly. This paper attempts to juxtapose these histories with contemporary art practices to point out significant connections that relate to the artistic discussions on the infrastructure and technology of art making in African art and that of a rapidly changing modern world.

The language of art has changed tremendously over the past century, and the

¹ Mudimbe, Valentin-Yves. *The Invention of Africa: Gnosis, Philosophy and the Order of Knowledge* (African Systems of Thought). Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1988. pp. 17-20.

² *Ibid.* 20.

emphasis has shifted from the work of art as object or superstructure to how artists can situate their practices in appropriate technological contexts and associated histories, while the milieu and audience continue to play complimentary roles too.^{3, 4} The milieu here does not represent just the physical space. It includes the virtual space that technologies provide, also the cultural, economic and political spaces as well as private and public ones too. This makes it possible to relate modern and contemporary art to African art and culture, which permeated all spheres of life on the continent before the introduction of Western art education and its associated practices.⁵ The level of development of traditional African art is discussed in Alain Locke's manifesto *The Legacy of Ancestral Arts* (1925) and in *African Art*.^{6, 7} African art has influenced modern art most considerably. It has been the most influential exotic art of our era, Chinese and Japanese art not excepted.⁸ This study uses material, documentary evidence and argumentative research methods to discuss the influences of African traditional art and technologies on Western modern and contemporary art.

African art and its influences on Western Modern and Contemporary art

African art had profound influence on Western Modern art with European artists such as Henri Matisse, Pablo Picasso and others who adapted the qualities of African sculptures in their naturalistic Western art. For example, there are evidences of influences of African mask forms appropriated in the cubist oil painting of Pablo Picasso *Les Femmes d'Alger*, a permanent collection of the Museum of Modern Art. In that work, five nude female prostitutes are depicted in a confusing argumentative manner and none of the figures were conventionally

feminine.⁹ Interestingly, critical examination of Mbangu mask reveals superstructure appropriation of traditional African mask on Picasso *Les Femmes d'Alger*.¹⁰ In comparison of two images, Mbangu mask from the Pende region shows a figure of disconcerting feature with deformities and the eyebrow line in the shape of an inverted "W"; the triangular nose and pointed chin.¹¹ Furthermore, there are influences seen in the Fang Ngil mask of the people of Gabon¹² and Amedeo Modigliani drawing, sculpture and painting of Jeanne Hebuterne.¹³ When the Fang Ngil mask and Modigliani three images are juxtaposed, the adaptation of distinctive facial styles of the Fang Ngil mask is reflected in Modigliani's sculpture, drawing and painting. With such influences, Fred Wilson, in his contribution, questions on who sets the rules for modern art is posed, as there is superimposition of a Songye mask on a copy of Picasso's *Les Femmes d'Alger*.¹⁴

Today, significant connections and distinctions can be made in the works of African artists such as Ernest Victor Asihene, Vincent Akwetey Kofi, Uche Okeke, Yusuf Grillo, Bruce Onobrakpeya, Nike Davies-Okundaye, Peju Alatise, Abayomi, Jerome Elaiho, Bisi Fakeye, Kolade Oshinowo among others whose works span the early postcolonial period and that of El Anatsui, Romouald Hazoumé, Bernard Akoi-Jackson, Dorothy Amenuke and Ibrahim Mahama, all of whom live and work in Africa. We argue that whilst the former group had their media, technologies and exhibition styles aligned with traditional European formats through the training that came with colonization, the latter sought to expand the frontiers of making and displaying through inspiration from traditional African art and use of new technologies. The

³ Krauss, Rosalind. *Sculpture in the Expanded Field*. In *October*, Vol. 8, MIT Press, 1979.

⁴ Buskirk, Martha. *The Contingent Object of Contemporary Art*. Cambridge, Massachusetts, London: The MIT Press, 2003, pp. 162-167

⁵ Wilson, Fred. *Mining the Museum: An Installation*: edited by Lisa G. Corrin; with contributions by Leslie King-Hammond and Ira Berlin. New York: New Press, Baltimore, 1994.

⁶ Willett, Frank. *African Art: An Introduction*. Reprint Edition, New York: Thames and Hudson, 1985 pp. 11

⁷ Locke, Alain. *The Legacy of the Ancestors*. London: The Survey, 1925, pp. 228- 229, 673.

⁸ Locke, Alain. *The Legacy of the Ancestors*. London: The Survey, 1925, pp. 228- 229, 673.

⁹ "Les Femmes d'Alger" by Pablo Picasso 1907, Oil on canvas, Museum of Modern Art. Acquired through the Lillie P. Bliss Bequest, New York City. Source:

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Les_Femmes_d'Alger

¹⁰ Pablo Picasso's "Les Femmes d'Alger". Source: <http://anartlovers.blogspot.com/2016/08/pablo-picassos-les-femmes-dalger.html>

¹¹ Mbangu mask. Central Pende. Bandundu, Zaïre. Wood, pigments, Source:

<http://www.historymuseum.ca/cmc/exhibitions/cultur/tervuren/tera02e.shtml>

¹² Fang Ngil mask at the Louvre. Wood, Gabon, 19th century. Source: <http://ethnicsjewelrymagazine.com/the-ngil-mask-of-the-fang-and-amedeo-modigliani/>

¹³ Amedeo Modigliani drawing, sculpture and painting. Modigliani: Female head, c. 1911, black crayon. Modigliani: Tête, c. 1910-1912, sculpture. Modigliani: Portrait of Jeanne Hebuterne, 1919.

¹⁴ Wilson, Fred. *Mining the Museum: An Installation*: edited by Lisa G. Corrin; with contributions by Leslie King-Hammond and Ira Berlin. New York: New Press, Baltimore, 1994.

growing diverse trends of works of art on the continent also tend to buttress the amorphous nature of traditional African art systems that modern and contemporary art seem to weave together into many strands. By this, deskilling, repetition of identical units, technological and industrial materials, reflections on life, issues of capital and politics have all become part of the 'expanded field' and also enter fields of intellectualism through text.^{15, 16}

Through these developments, African artists have had different degrees of freedom of expression in terms of content, media, processes and exhibitions after a relatively short period of colonization, decolonization and thereafter.¹⁷ As a result, the discourse of art has not only deepened and broadened; it has become more of a zone of emancipatory struggle.^{18, 19, 20} Perhaps, if Africa had had no intervention of colonialism, art would have seen much more integration and development. It is intriguing to note that Nkisi (Minkisi) and Nkondi figure installations, which were made from cross genre media, full of repetitions of geometric and organic forms, identical units such as nails and found objects were already at play in both private and public spaces in African art long ago and reflected the technologies at that time.²¹

In an Nkondi installations outside a home in Congo²² reflects the nature of traditional African installation art in spaces other than museums and galleries before Western influence.

The activation of public spaces such as the works of Andy Warhol's *Brillo boxes* (1964), Robert Smithson's *Spiral Jetty* (1970) and quasi-architectural integers of Robert Morris negate the traditional nature of sculpture, making it much more amorphous and accommodative.^{23, 24,}

²⁵ Works such as the wrapping of the German Parliament by Christo and Jean-Claude (1971-1995) to Ibrahim Mahama's *Occupation Series* (2015), which involved repurposing used jute sacks on various architectural forms in different spaces to create new forms, also encouraged renewed ways of displaying and engaging art in public monuments and unconventional spaces changing the form and context art takes each time.^{26, 27}

There are several installations taking place worldwide today and, in all these, artists tend to interrogate almost anything they are interested in. However, and to a great degree, much of this corpus relies on qualities and philosophies identified with conceptual art in general and minimalism in particular.²⁸ The change which the minimalists brought included the introduction and use of industrial materials, techniques and other objects.^{29, 30} They also resonate with Marcel Duchamp in the process. It is also intriguing to relate the work of the minimalists to paintings such as those of Sirigu women in northern Ghana long before the 1950's.

Furthermore, the simplicity and the use of geometric forms were other traits these minimalists employed in their works, which have influenced lots of artists and art in general today, taking away the canons of the academies as the guiding principles of exchange for reality and more participation and interaction by the public.³¹ Substantially, these attributes characterized traditional African art prior to modernism in Western art and such tendencies, which could be found in installations, performances and reproductions, are not new to Africa's cultural history since a lot of these installations had been done in many parts of the continent over and over again.^{32, 33}

¹⁵ Krauss, Rosalind. *Sculpture in the Expanded Field*. In *October*, Vol. 8, MIT Press, 1979.

¹⁶ Stallabrass, Julian. *Contemporary Art: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004, pp. 14-22

¹⁷ *Ibid*, 19

¹⁸ *Ibid*, 20

¹⁹ Stewart, Mary. *Launching the Imagination- A Comprehensive Guide to Basic Design*. McGraw Hill Companies, New York, 2006, pp. 146-288.

²⁰ seid'ou, kaŋi'kachã. Theoretical foundation of the KNUST Painting programme: A Philosophical Inquiry and its Contextual Relevance in Ghanaian Culture. Ph.D Thesis, Department of General Art Studies, KNUST, 2006.

²¹ LaGamma, Alisa. *Kongo: Power and Majesty*. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, 2015, p. 27.

²² Nkondi installations outside a home in Congo. :

http://www.randafricanart.com/Bakongo_Nkondi_figure.html

²³ Stallabrass, Julian. *Contemporary Art: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004, pp. 14-22

²⁴ Buskirk, Martha. *The Contingent Object of Contemporary Art*. Cambridge, Massachusetts, London: The MIT Press, 2003.

²⁵ Krauss, Rosalind. *Sculpture in the Expanded Field*. In *October*, Vol. 8, MIT Press, 1979.

²⁶ Conran, Terence. *Terence Conran on Design*. London: Conran Octopus, 1996.

²⁷ Mahama, Ibrahim. *Exchange-Exchanger*, Verlag der Buchandlung Walther König. Köln, 2017.

²⁸ Buskirk, Martha. *The Contingent Object of Contemporary Art*. Cambridge, Massachusetts, London: The MIT Press, 2003.

²⁹ Stallabrass, Julian. *Contemporary Art: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004, pp. 14-22

³⁰ Buskirk, Martha. *The Contingent Object of Contemporary Art*. Cambridge, Massachusetts, London: The MIT Press, 2003.

³¹ *Ibid*, 136.

³² Phillips, Tom. *Africa: The Art of a Continent*. New York: Guggenheim Museum Publications, 1996. pp. 106-109

³³ Willett, Frank. *African Art: An Introduction*. Reprint Edition, New York: Thames and Hudson, 1985 pp.154- 156

In addition, other major tendencies of the minimalists, which contemporary and traditional African art often have in common, are the modularity or repetition of identical units, reproduction in terms of serialization, the dissolution of medium-specific genres and the change that the environment or context brings to the work of art. Traits such as the use of geometric shapes and forms, simplicity, repetition of identical units, collective and collaborative processes of production are clearly illustrated in the subsequent images and works. There is also evidence of communal work as men or women collaborate to work on projects such as making pottery or painting geometric designs on different surfaces as in the paintings by women of Sirigu in northern Ghana and NriUli classicists of Nigeria³⁴ long before the early phases of feminism in the West. Among the Senufo, who believed in matrilineal society, there were several women's associations (Fodonon and Sandongo) just as there were for the men's Poro. The women played significant roles in society and were accorded recognition and respect by all.³⁵

Reproducibility, aura and the theatre of installation art

The issues of physical permanence of the object, absence and presence had often been present in traditional African art; ephemerality in terms of materials, beliefs in life after death, presence and absence necessitated ceremonies, dramas and rituals which were reproduced cyclically or annually. Today, experience or engagement with art and the interactive nature of the works tend to dominate discussions in the art world today.^{36, 37, 38}

The modern world had become the source of inspiration for artists as they discovered and processed new materials and adapted industrial technologies to make art. Reproductions, which were common developments in traditional African art forms, began to be featured

extensively in Western art forms. After the Second World War, artists and some industrialists produced various comics and miniature sculptures of men in combat, which were marketed extensively across the world. In principle, works of art have often been reproduced for various reasons before the age of mechanical reproduction. The new technologies displacing old ones gives an example of lithography being displaced by photography and film^{39, 40} as Walter Benjamin expounded on the genuineness of opposing original works to their copies, views which we agree with, mainly in relation with reproduction or serial reproductions. Each work still has its own layers of histories and associations due to the processes involved in the production and exhibition. In Africa, too, craftsmen and artists have produced their works serially using very basic tools and techniques over the years. Reproductions had also been done communally for centuries and art was integrated with life in the society just as mask forms were pivotal to these ceremonies – while some of the masks were ephemeral, others were quite permanent, hence issues of permanence posed no challenges to them. Various agrarian ceremonies, rites of passage, installation of kings and queens, etc. were associated with reproductions consisting of new instances of the artefacts for the cyclical ceremonies.^{41 42} In Walter Benjamin's affirmative reading, this *theatre or situation* comprising, among others, the art object, the material and technical relations, the engaged artists and their public are constituting the same space that connects aesthetics to politics.⁴³

Exhibitions and installations in such public spaces, sometimes conducted through collaborations, tend to alter the architecture and ambience in general with the audience or viewers experiencing something different each

³⁴ NriUli classicists painting the walls of Iyiazi in Nigeria.: https://www.onepageafrica.com/2013/03/uli-symbol-of-forward-to-past-by_16.html

³⁵ Glaze, Anita. Call and Response: A Senufo Female Caryatid Drum. In *Art Institute of Chicago Museums Studies*, 19: 2, 1993.

³⁶ Krauss, Rosalind. Sculpture in the Expanded Field. In *October*, Vol. 8, MIT Press, 1979.

³⁷ Bourdieu, Pierre. *The Rules of Art*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996.

³⁸ Buskirk, Martha. *The Contingent Object of Contemporary Art*.

Cambridge, Massachusetts, London: The MIT Press, 2003, pp. 1- 16.

³⁹ Benjamin, Walter. *Author as Producer*. [Address at the Institute for the study of Fascism. Paris. April 27, 1934]. In Michael W. Jennings, Brigid Doherty, Thomas Y. Levin (editors) *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility, and Other Writings on Media*. Cambridge, London: Harvard University Press, 2008.

⁴⁰ Benjamin, Walter. (1936). *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*. Available at: <https://www.marxists.org/reference/subject/philosophy/works/ge/benjamin.htm> [Accessed 11 May 2013]

⁴¹ Willett, Frank. *African Art: An Introduction*. Reprint Edition, New York: Thames and Hudson, 1985 p.111 -112.

⁴² Phillips, Tom. *Africa: The Art of a Continent*. New York: Guggenheim Museum Publications, 1996. pp. 106-109.

⁴³ Ranciere, Jacques. *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*, New York: Continuum International Publishers 2006.

time they engage the work; the work is therefore charged and recharged with some form of energy and vitality at any given time and the environment plays a major role in this experience but what has not been highlighted is the fact that these practices were already being done in African social and cultural history.

Traditional societies across African kingdoms of Ashanti and Benin, among others, provide significant examples of the integration of art into the socio-cultural history and architecture. Homes and storage barns were also decorated with paintings and images (fauna and flora) from the environment. The kings' palaces and courtyards incorporated several African sculptural forms and paintings in their architectural forms while the cyclic and annual masking ceremonies in many communities were in themselves repetitive and present reproductions of various customs.⁴⁴

Undoubtedly, with time, scientific, industrial and technological development brought in new ways of making art; and from the outset the conception and making or fabrication of works of art were no exceptions. As a result, certain notions and other theories of the Art Academies in the 18th and 19th centuries were gradually, and sometimes radically, relegated to the background by the middle of the twentieth century.^{45, 46} In site specific works such as Anish Kapoor's *Cloud Gate*, although the work is situated at a specific place, the environment and interaction draws different experiences of illusion, real time viewing of a live event at any given time anytime of the day; the reflective surface of the stainless steel from which it was made, the interplay of light, the sky and movement of people and objects playing significant roles in this experience. Hundreds of years earlier, in traditional African art, there were several installations and performances presented in private and public spaces, in a cyclical way, and this meant that they were reproductions. It is also worthy to note that the very nature of some of the rituals and ceremonies meant that the whole community was involved.^{47, 48}

⁴⁴ Phillips, Tom. *Africa: The Art of a Continent*. New York: Guggenheim Museum Publications, 1996. pp. 106-109

⁴⁵ Buskirk, Martha. *The Contingent Object of Contemporary Art*. Cambridge, Massachusetts, London: The MIT Press, 2003

⁴⁶ Gardner, Helen, & Kleiner, Fred. *Gardner's art through the ages*. Boston: Wadsworth Cengage Learning, 2014.

⁴⁷ Vogel, Susan Mullin and Kate Ezra. *For Spirit and Kings: African Art from the Paul and Ruth Tishman Collection*. New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1981.

Contemporary art and mechanical reproduction

By the 1960's, artists used a lot of mechanized means to reach the rest of the world. The quest to produce art using new media was generally on the ascendency. Traditional Western media such as bronze and marble for sculpture, oils and watercolour for painting, which hitherto were considered as pure media, became less privileged. Issues related to frontality, verticality, the pedestal and many other guidelines, which governed the making and exhibition of sculpture for centuries, began to lose their relevance.⁴⁹

During the 1960's, artists such Frank Stella, Eva Hesse and Robert Morris had created works of art that blurred the boundaries existing between painting and sculpture,⁵⁰ moreover their works were characterized by simplicity, geometric forms with repetition of identical units and industrial fabrication methods. These developments, she further claims, formed the basis for a new wave of change in art and the revival of Russian constructivism. Duchamp's readymade precedents provided the necessary impetus for the minimalists. The minimalists' ideas, including those of Donald Judd and Frank Stella, were also intended to deconstruct the rationalist philosophy of balance. Krauss quotes Stella as saying that he developed his work on a *priori* systems and traditions and explored more structural forms based on European formalism than on thematic compositions and implications. Resultantly, Krauss explains further that Judd and Stella explored, considerably, another implication of industrial or mechanical reproduction – mass production (readymade) where repetition of identical units found in Stella's boxes or Flavin's use of fluorescent tubes sought to discredit earlier traditions we just mentioned and offer other forms of possibilities.⁵¹

Furthermore, the Russians (Pevsner and Gabo) promoted the use of industrial techniques and synthetic materials following "the logic of construction, with its symmetrical building outward from revealed centres as a way of

⁴⁸ Phillips, Tom. *Africa: The Art of a Continent*. New York: Guggenheim Museum Publications, 1996. pp. 106-109.

⁴⁹ Buskirk, Martha. *The Contingent Object of Contemporary Art*. Cambridge, Massachusetts, London: The MIT Press, 2003, p. 109.

⁵⁰ *Ibid*, 31

⁵¹ Krauss, Rosalind. *Passages in Modern Sculpture*, Cambridge, Massachusetts, London: MIT Press, 1981.

presenting visually the creative power of thought, a mediation on the growth and development of an idea.” Krauss explains that underlying these works “was the kind of order, or constructive principle” which, she claims, Judd spoke of as being “rationalist” and tied to an idealist philosophy.⁵² Minimalist art evolved as a reaction to abstract expressionism; hence, they tried to remove any suggestion of self-expression from artworks, metaphors, symbolism or any form of illusion that came from human minds or any form of spirituality that would give the work a significance that was derived within the work itself.⁵³

While these were going on in Europe and North America, African artistic traditions had been disrupted and influenced by invasion of the West through colonization and its implications on education and socio-political climate that accompanied the period. Masking traditions, among others, which formed the basis around which the various societies’ lives were propelled, began to lose their significance locally and gradually.⁵⁴ However, it should be noted that prior to this contact, masks were produced by the priests in the chief or king’s court and well respected people; the accompanying pageantry did not separate painting from sculpture, neither textiles from drama, nor ceramics from performance.^{55, 56} Later on, these works of art were produced and replicas were made by master craftsmen who were sometimes custodians of traditions and assisted by apprentices. Whether through the use of simple geometric forms, copies of similar units, and some ordinary objects such as nails, fabric or beads, or intricately carved forms,^{57 58} one can confidently say that African art and, for that matter, masking traditions had a lot in common with the phenomenological object which preoccupied the Minimalist school and later traditions of the post-1960’s. While there were some differences between Minimalism and

traditions of art making in Africa, as evident in the use of industrial processes and materials, the similarities are striking. Both approaches include the reproductions of seriality, geometric forms, the collective manufacturing processes, exhibition and public spectatorship, to state a few. It should also be noted that most African sculptures were not used in isolation as mere objects offering visual pleasure and because these media were embedded with layers of history, politics and other important provenances, these African sculptures come alive in various exhibition spaces; every member of the audience is engaged in the discussion or documentation of history.

We have argued so far that minimalists tried to create works which did not appear as fine art objects and sought to discard the idea of relational composition which focused on certain aspects of compositions through dominance, intensity, placement etc., which they thought were outmoded. Minimalists such as Donald Judd, Frank Stella, Andy Warhol, tried to achieve this by creating or placing objects one after the other, without any programmed composition and in principle removing the artist’s prior thoughts from the work.⁵⁹ Most of these artists therefore started using unconventional materials such as metal sheets, plywood, fluorescent bulbs etc., as well as tried to eradicate signs of artistic gesture from the work through the use of everyday objects, as Judd puts it. It is worthy of note that Minimalists also made the attempt to expunge the artist’s guiding hand or thought processes from the work so that the meaning is not found inside the work but on the surface of it. Although Michael Fried criticized their concepts and use of ordinary objects, arrangement and presentation, this wave has greatly influenced art making and exhibition making in contemporary art.^{60, 61, 62} These developments and emancipatory nature of artistic expression and production propose a very promising future for the world of art especially on the African continent. It is argued that art has acquired a certain aura over the ages, an aura which stems from the fact that, in

⁵² *Ibid*, 253

⁵³ *Ibid*, 258

⁵⁴ Mudimbe, Valentin-Yves. *The Invention of Africa: Gnosis, Philosophy and the Order of Knowledge* (African Systems of Thought). Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1988. p. 17.

⁵⁵ Vogel, Susan Mullin and Kate Ezra. *For Spirit and Kings: African Art from the Paul and Ruth Tishman Collection*. New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1981.

⁵⁶ Phillips, Tom. *Africa: The Art of a Continent*. New York: Guggenheim Museum Publications, 1996. pp. 106-109.

⁵⁷ Willett, Frank. *African Art: An Introduction*. Reprint Edition, New York: Thames and Hudson, 1985, pp. 11.

⁵⁸ Phillips, Tom. *Africa: The Art of a Continent*. New York: Guggenheim Museum Publications, 1996. pp. 106-109.

⁵⁹ Krauss, Rosalind. *Passages in Modern Sculpture*, Cambridge, Massachusetts, London: MIT Press, 1981.

⁶⁰ Buskirk, Martha. *The Contingent Object of Contemporary Art*. Cambridge, Massachusetts, London: The MIT Press, 2003.

⁶¹ Stallabrass, Julian. *Contemporary Art: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004, pp. 14-22.

⁶² Mahama, Ibrahim. *Exchange-Exchanger*, Verlag der Buchandlung Walther König. Köln, 2017.

the past, art has often played various roles and functions in religion across continents.⁶³ This is evident in the various sculptures produced or commissioned by the church in Europe from Medieval Age through Renaissance to the late 19th Century. Moreover, Walter Benjamin believes that artworks claim their authority and autonomy from their non-reproducibility which gives them that ‘magical aura’, the aura that makes the art unique, irreplaceable, priceless and authentic. There are evidences of collaborative production technologies being employed by Ghanaian men stamping repetitions of *adinkra* (geometric and organic shapes) symbols on fabric⁶⁴ and, later on, in 1965, some particular examples of collaboration in Western art such as Gerard Malanga silk screening with Andy Warhol in the rented studio space known as “The factory”.⁶⁵ These are all influences and relationships of technologies of African art on mechanical productions of Western Modern and Contemporary art.

Today, a consumerist world seems to reshape all spheres of human endeavours and reproduction of art is no exception – from wood block engravings, photomechanical reproduction to the digital world and everyday objects.^{66, 67, 68} Again, these reproductions can be related to various forms of artistic production in several parts of the African continent for centuries.⁶⁹

Emphasis is placed both on the technology of fabrication or production as well as on the product. It is worthwhile to note that Benjamin often talks about the “work of art” or “artwork” and not just “art”. Hence, the process of production is very important. The mechanical reproduction detaches art from the rituals of

uniqueness, originality and provenance. The artworks are liberated and become more “democratic”.^{70, 71} By this, the masses can participate in ownership of the artworks instead of a few aristocrats, wealthy individuals or bourgeoisie. However, this does not mean there is no ownership at all. Copyright protection could be obtained by artists to safeguard their intellectual work with regards to illegal reproduction of their works; at worse, provenances for these works could be traced all the way to the artists.

In as much as Albert Einstein, a contemporary of Benjamin, opposed reproduction of works of art and argued that reproductions in themselves are falsehoods and deception of self and mankind, Benjamin defeats this view by claiming that reproductions generate excitement and each piece comes with a new life in every situation.⁷² From this stage, art has gone through significant reforms challenging the category of high art, eschewing mysticism and allowing adulteration of various cultural forms, industrial adaptations and applications to art. Karl Marx talks about improvement in techniques of production that succeeded in bringing people from all walks of life and societies together, demolishing barriers, old structures, traditions and associations while creating new relationships.⁷³ It is therefore not surprising that African artists, are still relying on their environment and history as rich sources of inspiration for various media and processes of making art, turned to the use of simple industrial materials and artisanal or mechanical processes as well as other techniques that the technological world offers. In doing so, the artists intervene and expand the infrastructure of art making. For example, Romouald Hazoumé reconstructs an old slave ship deck using canisters and other materials of exchange during the slave trade in *La Bouche du Roi*, 1997-2005.

⁶³ Benjamin, Walter. Author as Producer. [Address at the Institute for the study of Fascism. Paris. April 27, 1934]. In Michael W. Jennings, Brigit Doherty, Thomas Y. Levin (editors) *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility, and Other Writings on Media*. Cambridge, London: Harvard University Press, 2008.

⁶⁴ Collaborative production technologies being employed by Ghanaian men stamping repetitions of *adinkra* (geometric and organic shapes) symbols on fabric.
<http://afaithfulattempt.blogspot.com/2011/04/west-african-adinkra-printmaking.html>

⁶⁵ Gerard Malanga silk screening with Andy Warhol in the Factory.
<http://www.wetcanvas.com/forums/showthread.php?t=1206122>

⁶⁶ Buskirk, Martha. *The Contingent Object of Contemporary Art*. Cambridge, Massachusetts, London: The MIT Press, 2003

⁶⁷ Beegan, Gerry. The Studio: Photomechanical Reproduction and the Changing Status of Design Source, *Design Issues*, 23: 4(2007), 46-61.

⁶⁸ Benjamin, Walter. Author as Producer. [Address at the Institute for the study of Fascism. Paris. April 27, 1934]. In Michael W. Jennings, Brigit Doherty, Thomas Y. Levin (editors) *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility, and Other Writings on Media*. Cambridge, London: Harvard University Press, 2008

⁶⁹ Phillips, Tom. *Africa: The Art of a Continent*. New York: Guggenheim Museum Publications, 1996. pp. 106-109.

⁷⁰ Benjamin, Walter. Author as Producer. [Address at the Institute for the study of Fascism. Paris. April 27, 1934]. In Michael W. Jennings, Brigit Doherty, Thomas Y. Levin (editors) *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility, and Other Writings on Media*. Cambridge, London: Harvard University Press, 2008

⁷¹ Benjamin, Walter. (1936). *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*. Available at: <https://www.marxists.org/reference/subject/philosophy/works/ge/be/njamin.htm> [Accessed 11 May 2013]

⁷² Haxthausen, Charles. *Reproduction/Repetition: Walter Benjamin/Carl Einstein*. In *October*, Cambridge: MIT press, 2004.

⁷³ Bodjawah, Edwin Kwesi. *Masking Beyond the Masquerade: on reproduction and Simulation of African Mask Forms*, PhD thesis, Department of Painting and Sculpture, Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology, Kumasi, Ghana, 2016.

The materials used such as beads, plastics, shells, bottles, tobacco, mirrors, spices, urine, faeces and the canisters represent human greed and exploitation and slave trade.⁷⁴ Again on the intervention and expansion of the infrastructure of art making, El Anatsui's *Bleeding Takari* puts together thousands of liquor bottle caps with copper wire to form huge cloth-like installations.⁷⁵ According to Anatsui, the work reflects the movement of people and commodities that came to shape West Africa and alcohol became a significant commodity of exchange during the slave trade.

Conclusions

Traditional African art and Western contemporary art often reflect the technologies of any given time and society in general. There are also significant associations between traditional African art and Western contemporary art. While industrialization and the post-industrial world continue to bring in new technologies to complement art production, it is quite appropriate to re-examine Africa's past from a cultural perspective for a better appreciation of technologies that informed their work in order to adapt more effectively to new developments that keep coming up for art production. In as much as technologies were also adapted to augment and replace subsistence modes of collaboration and production in traditional African art, the underlying philosophies are still quite valid. Installations, reproductions, multi-form and cross genre art, which propose a more inclusive agenda, namely publicness by way of production, experimentation, dissemination and experience of art that is reconfigured within given spaces, provide greater platforms for artists to re-examine traditional African art in relation to technologies for art today. The 21st century has a lot of promise for art on the African continent in terms of various production techniques and display methods. Opportunities that could be explored extensively include integrating both the new and the old; digital

imaging, robotics and second life, from bitcoins to the fusion of strategies of digital and analogue postproduction which are avenues that this century provides. Indeed, several things are being reconfigured and melting into one pot.^{76, 77} Should African art continue to remain relevant to contemporary art globally and defy categorization, as in the case of Anatsui and other artists, it needs to be expedient for technologists, art educators, historians and critics to clearly juxtapose the histories associated with African art and contemporary art, not only to give a better understanding to art, but to help build on technologies that would open up new vistas in art.

⁷⁴ Romouald Hazoumè. *La Bouche du Roi*, 1997-2005. Collection of British Museum. Media: 304 plastic cans, beads, shells, bottles, tobacco, mirrors, spices, urine and faeces. Source: http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/shared/spl/hi/pop_ups/07/entertainment_en1_1174472251/html/1.stm

⁷⁵ El Anatsui *Bleeding Takari II*, 2007. Media: Aluminium and copper wire. Dimensions: 393.7 x 576.6 cm. Source: https://www.researchgate.net/figure/El-Anatsui-Bleeding-Takari-II-aluminum-bottle-caps-and-copper-wire-376-557-78-cm_fig1_335583469

⁷⁶ Benjamin, Walter. (1936). *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*. Available at: <https://www.marxists.org/reference/subject/philosophy/works/ge/benjamin.htm> [Accessed 11 May 2013]

⁷⁷ Benjamin, Walter. Author as Producer. [Address at the Institute for the study of Fascism. Paris. April 27, 1934]. In Michael W. Jennings, Brigid Doherty, Thomas Y. Levin (editors) *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility, and Other Writings on Media*. Cambridge, London: Harvard University Press, 2008.

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