

Agakumorphics: Paintings that Make Real Movement and Music

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Abstract

Art in contemporary times has been reinvented to transcend the boundaries of mere aesthetics to a more dynamic sphere of political, social, and religious functions/dimension. It has become important for the artist to create works or pieces that challenge or invoke emotional reactions within the society; that can also lead to change. For such works to create and cause such change, they must transcend the normal confines of the canvas (painting) or amateur in the case of a three-dimensional work. Such works must be conceptual in nature thus effectively servicing their immediate environment. Such art, if successfully created, have a far more reaching effect than initially intended. Agaku's works bear such conceptual propensities and transcend the boundaries of two-dimensional representations thereby creating a kind of freedom in the representation and understanding of contemporary Nigerian art. This paper discusses the artist, style and ideologies, materials and techniques as well as the philosophical and sociological impacts of the works produced.

Keywords: Agakumorphics, Kinetics, Music, Movement, Modern Art

Introduction

Art in the past was always in the service of religion, ideology, reality or a combination of two or more of the aforementioned ideologies. Modern art however, is its own master and many artists over time have and are still demonstrating the freedom that comes with the self-mastership of the modern art period.

Perhaps, one of the words that best describes the art practices of the modern era is diversity. Today's modern artists seem preoccupied with a greater use of materials and techniques to express their ideas and feelings which are more and more subjective in nature. Many of these artists are consciously moving away from set traditional art styles thereby forcing art movements of the past to give way to an astonishing amount and an array of individual art styles, personalised dynamics in material and media choice and so on. Some of these current styles reveal the influence of earlier artists/styles while others reject vehemently, any visual or literary reference to historical or past models.

It has been said of modern art (20th century art), that it is an attempt to redefine the nature of art. Artists within this period display an increasing reliance on unconventional media such as texts, found objects, natural objects and elements, three dimensional and other solid materials to blur the boundaries between the forms of art. The period also saw the popularization of the idea of a subconscious mind, leading many artists to begin exploring dreams, symbolism and personal iconography as alternative avenues for the depiction and representation of their subjective experiences. These set of activities succeeded in challenging the notion that art must realistically represent the world, artists chose instead to experiment with the expressive use of colour, non-traditional materials as mentioned above, and new techniques and mediums. Some of which include, installations, performance, photography and so

on. All these new forms of art expression introduced to the world a new method for depicting and reinterpreting the world thus leading to an elevated level of art appreciation.

The activities of modern art were and are far reaching in a manner that spilled into the current era of contemporary or what is called post-modernism. However one chooses to see it, modern art revolutionized the practice of art significantly. It gave birth to newer methods and media of expression as well as to a new influx of artists who are young and vibrant. One of which is the artist and co-author of this article; Agaku Saghevwua Amos.

Agaku in his current direction has demonstrated a much more telling freedom. Creating *Agakumorphs* through the use of the Abacus Image in Painting which is premised on *postmodern* art particularly *kinetic arts*. He attempts to re-define the practice and understanding of contemporary painting in Nigeria. His core idea involves and revolves around the use of a *practice-based* synergetic approach to examine the abacus as an encapsulation of design elements such as, strings (lines), beads (ellipses, spheres and cycloids: shapes) and shades/tones of the beads (colour). His artistic creations which he refers to as *Agakumorphics* evolved from abacus paintings on 2-Dimensional supports with energetic characters on canvas to kinetically driven 3-Dimensional constructions which are usually suspended midair supported by wooden or metal constructions. *Agakumorph* has enabled the production of *kinetic* hangings mounted on platforms as engines on which physical motion is actualized. This ideology requires breaking most conventional academic art rules since available traditional vocabulary is deemed inadequate.

The aim of this current direction is to produce paintings through adapted image(s) of the abacus which bear kinetic propensities. Artistic creations also exhibit a capacity to use molded objects, found objects and ready-mades in the realisation of tangible works of art. It is within the ambit of this new found paradigm that this paper pursues Agaku Saghevwua Amos's creations of the Abacus image, for a contextual analysis of real kinetic energy, using two (2) of his current works.

Thus, the paper will give a brief background of the artists; proceed to discuss the selected works of the artist and lastly draw conclusion from the discussion done. The overall objective of this paper is the continuous application and making relevant of "found objects and ready-made" ideas in the creation of newer concepts, through visual art.

Kinetic Theories

Early experiments with movements in art began between 1913 and 1920, led by artists of the Dadaist and Constructivist traditions. Perhaps the earliest instance of kinetic art was Marcel Duchamp's 'Bicycle Wheel' (1913), (see fig. 1 below), which consisted of a wheel inverted on a stool.



Fig. 1, Bicycle Wheel, Marcel Duchamp, 1913, Source: www.googleimages.com

In 1920, Constructivist artists Naum Gabo and Antoine Pevsner used the term "kinetic art" in their *Realistic Manifesto*. Later, Bauhaus artist Laszlo Moholy-Nagy used the term "kinetic" to describe the mechanized movement of his piece '*Light Space Modulator*' (1930) (see Fig 2,below).

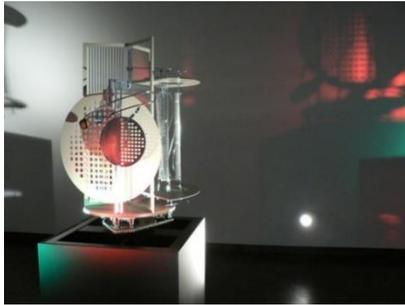


Fig. 2, light space modulator, Laszlo Moholy-Nagy, 1930, Source: www.icondaily.net

Although artists used the concept of kinetics intermittently for several years, it was not until 1955 that it was established as a major artistic movement, when the group exhibition *Le Mouvement* was held at Galerie Denise Rene in Paris. Central to this exhibition was Victor Vasarely; his so-called 'Yellow Manifesto' was published at the time of the show and came to serve as one of the movement's founding documents. Vasarely had been trained in Bauhaus ideas and had spent many years working in advertising. The graphic designs that he had initially used in advertising formed the substance of his new style. These took the form of a grid-like arrangement of black and white that produced a flickering effect. His style quickly attracted followers such as Bridget Riley (www.theartstory.org/movement 2015).

But other aspects of *Le Mouvement*, those involving real movement as opposed to optical illusions, began to attract the interest of artists across the world. This movement could be effected by air or touch, as in the context of Alexander Calder's mobiles: his '*Arc of Petals*' (1941) combine's subtle lines and biomorphic forms with natural movement to examine the behaviour of an object in space (see fig. 3 below).



Fig. 3, Arc of Petals, Alexander Calder, 1941, Source: www.googleimages.com

Nicolas Schoffer's desire to introduce a sense of dynamism to his geometric Constructivist sculptures initially involved merely lending them a complex sense of space. But he eventually introduced mechanized movement to these works, which he called *Spatiodynamic* sculptures, and this led to his interest in fusing electronics and art.

Jansen (2013) posits that; "Kinetic art was created by artists who pushed the boundaries of traditional, static art forms to introduce visual experiences that would engage the audience and profoundly change the course of modern art". This tendency provides this paper with positioning as to realising its goals.

Kinetic art includes visual artifacts of three dimensional or constructional type with mechanical motion of solid bodies, such as animated clockwork systems (which can be found on clock-towers in many cities of Europe) and Calder mobile driven by air currents. The second major domain of kinetic art comprises the use of cinema equipment to create pictures of changing composition and colour projected on to a framed area (the screen). Finally, there is the whole range of the less familiar kinetic painting system; utilizing a translucent screen among other lucid materials.

Kinetic art is usually divided into three but not too delineated categories namely:

- ***Virtual movement:*** Sculpture that don't really move,
- ***Optical movement (Op art):*** Painting that displays deceptive optical movement,
- ***Real movement:*** Movement that occurs through an illusion or actually movement via either independent means or via manipulation.

Most Kinetic artists, however prefer to use the force of nature, i.e. Wind, solar power, gravity or magnetism to power their works. (intlkineticartevent.org, 2013).

Preferred Ideology(ies)

The bodies of works brought forward for this critique are hinged on the concepts of works by Jesus Raphael Soto, Yacoov Agam, Bright Eke and Omeje Ngozi. These artists have in their quest to create art that would stand in space and do movement, strung objects, materials on certain platforms. Some of these artists actually pioneered the creation of the kinetic art movement, and their efforts have kept the movement alive through their optical and kinetic innovations.

Jesus Raphael Soto (1923-2005)



Fig. 4, *Cardinal*, Jesus Raphael Soto, 1965, wood on chipboard, metal rods and nylon threads. Source: www.tate.org.uk

Inspired by Mondrian's late works which set out to make forms appear to move optically, Soto created works based on repetition of identical geometrical units. Noted as a defining figure of both the [Op Art](#) movement and [Kinetic Sculpture](#), Jesus Rafael Soto employed industrial and synthetic materials such as nylon and steel to produce his trademark sculptural reliefs. [Hachem](#) (2016) holds that Soto's work dealt with pure abstraction, color theory, and the dynamic between background and foreground. His use of ready-mades like nylon and steel for instance are directions worthy of emulation by this study. Such ideas have some influence(s) on the production of installations in this paper.

Cardinal 1965 in Figure 4 above is described as a rectangular, vertically oriented relief by Jesus-Rafael Soto. The work is comprised of forty-five steel rods suspended horizontally at one end by nylon thread, one above the other in a cascading criss-cross configuration. The rods are mounted onto a black wooden backboard or frame which protrudes forward in two shelf-like projections at the top and bottom. In between and behind each rod are thirteen evenly spaced horizontal grooves, the inside of which are painted alternately black and purple. The areas between the grooves are painted with very fine white horizontal lines. The rods are painted black on one side of the centre line and purple on the other. As they are suspended from only one point, they move quite freely in any air currents, creating powerful optical effects against the static horizontals of the background.

Yaacov Agam (b.1928)



Fig. 5, *Fire and Water Fountain*, Tel Aviv, Yaakov Agam, 1986, Source: www.wikimedia.com

A world-renowned kinetic artist, [Yaacov Agam](#) pioneered a new form of art that stresses change and movement. He studied under the Bauhaus' color-theoretician, Johannes Itten, and then rejected traditional static concepts of painting and sculpture. He has enjoyed great public success since his first one-person show in Paris in 1953, and has become one of the most influential artists of modern times (Popper, 2016).

He's created a body of work that's optic in nature, changing with movement. After his first one man exhibition in Paris where he settled, eventually his body of work grew to include vibrating and tactile elements, and he began to create manipulable sculptures as well. Agam works in a variety of media, including painting in two and three-dimensions, drawing, sculpture, ceramics, stained glass, serigraphy, lithography, etching, and combinations of media. His creation of the "Agamograph" (a multiple series of images viewed through a lenticular lens that changes at every angle viewed), has allowed his unique concept to be appreciated by collectors across the world. Of interest to this paper here, is the use of diverse mediums for artistic production.

The "Fire and Water Fountain", shown in Figure 5, is also commonly referred to as the "Dizengoff Square Fountain", is a [Tel Aviv](#) landmark in the center of the [Dizengoff Square](#). Dedicated in 1986, the fountain is a kinetic sculpture. The fountain was developed by Agam for ten years and is considered to be one of Agam's most famous creations. Agam has gained international recognition as one of the founders of the [kinetic art](#) movement. The fountain consists of an illusory dimension and a movement dimension, both typical to works of Kinetic art and [Op art](#), which is achieved by the use of technology and by the observer's movement. The fountain is composed of several big jagged wheels, which were designed in the kinetic style (colored geometric shapes, which are perceived as different images from different angles). A technological mechanism is automatically activated at different times of the day and night, turning the wheels on their hinges, injecting water upwards in various forms, spitting fire upwards and playing music simultaneously.

Bright Ogochukwu Eke (b. 1976)



Fig. 6, *Acid Rain*, Bright Ogochukwu Eke, 2005-2009, water, ammonium chloride, cellophane bags, Source: www.axisgallery.com

Born in Mbaise, local Government area of Imo State, Bright Eke obtained both his MFA and B.A at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka, where he studied with El Anatsui. He has received numerous international awards and residencies, and has shown widely internationally, mostly in group exhibitions. In the United States he was recently featured in *Environment & Object: Recent African Art* at the Tang Museum, Skidmore College, and other venues, and in the *Global Africa Project* at the Museum of Art & Design, New York (www.axisgallery.com. 2017)

Bright Eke's medium is water, which links all humans and their environments. Inspired by a skin infection he developed from acid rain caused by oil companies' pollution in his native Nigeria, Eke first created a large installation comprised of small plastic sachets filled with acidified water suspended like poisoned raindrops frozen midair. This research takes a particular interest in the way and manner Eke hangs his work descending from the ceiling; a tendency that has influenced the production and exhibition of installations in the current paper.

Omeje Ngozi (b. 1978)



Fig. 7

Fig. 7, *She Bleeds*, Omeje Ngozi, 2010, Clay, acrylic, transparent nylon thread, perspex, metal, Source: www.ngoziomeje.blogspot.com.ng Strongly influenced by Bright Eke who perhaps may have been

influenced by Cornelia Konrads, Ngozi uses clay as her major medium. She would roll small clay-pinchers into small bead-like clay balls and perforates them. After an oxidation process, she strings these clay ‘balls’ on platforms usually made of such materials as metal, wood, iron and Perspex. Her techniques have been of immense influence to the works of this essay.

About the Artist

Saghevwua Amos Agaku



Fig. 8, Agaku Saghevwua Amos, 2013, Source: Artist collection

Agaku Saghevwua Amos, who is also known as Artsgaku, was born on 3rd of May 1980 in Samaru-Zaria, Kaduna State to the family of Agbete and Rachael Agaku of Sarkin Kudu Town in Ibi Local Government Area of Taraba State, Nigeria. He began his early education with the University of Jos Staff School from 1983 to 1988. After which he proceeded to Government College Langtang where he had a brief stay, and was then transferred to Demonstration Secondary School, University of Jos in 1990, where he obtained the Senior Secondary Certificate Examination (SSCE) 1995. Agaku attended the School of Remedial Studies Makurdi in 1996 where he obtained an IJMB Result. In 1998 he was offered admission into the University of Maiduguri to study Creative Arts and graduated with a Second Class Upper degree specialising in painting. In 2006 he was mobilised to Gombe State on the National Youth Service Corp Scheme, where he taught Fine Arts at the lower levels of education. He gained admission into the prestigious Ahmadu Bello University Zaria to study for his Master of Fine Arts (MFA) Painting, and graduated in 2014. He is currently an Assistant Lecturer with University of Maiduguri.

Agaku has had two solo exhibitions, and has participated in several arts exhibitions within and outside Nigeria. He has also taken part in several arts competitions, Life in My City Arts Festival 2013, 2014, 2015, National Gallery of Arts 5th Visual Arts Competition 2014, and EMBAJADA DE ESPANA (Competition on Nigerian Visual Arts 2014) among others. He pioneered the establishment of The Kwagh-hir puppetry theatre as a concept in painting 2013 which he christened “Kwagh-hirsm”. He is currently a PhD student in the Department of Fine Art, Ahmadu Bello University Zaria, where his ongoing research is on the creation of kinetics through the Abacus image in painting, a subject matter that has informed his current direction and topic of discourse for this paper.

Main Thrust

Abacus's Linear Component and Agakumorphs Creation of Apparent Kinetics in Painting

In its most widely used form, the Russian abacus is a rectangular wooden frame with several parallel wires running across the width of the frame. Beads are strung on the wire and are used as counters. In a decimal system of numeration, the separate wires represent units, 10's, 100's, 1000's, and so on. On such an abacus, there are usually 10 beads on each wire, so that each bead on the unit wire represents 1, each bead on the 10's wire represents 10, and each bead on the 100's wire stands for 100 (Green, 2008).

Aesthetically, the Abacus displays elements such as spheres, ellipses, circles, colours, lines; thick lines and thin lines, which are worthy of use for painting, hence providing for this artist a reservoir of visually aesthetic components for use in studio exploration.

The Abacus is a device used to perform arithmetic operations such as addition, subtraction, multiplication, and division. The Abacus has been used for thousands of years and has appeared in various forms in different countries. Merchants' big and small, traders and clerks in many countries especially in Asia and parts of Africa still make use of it to figure their accounts. Arithmetic teachers in the United States of America and many other countries, often use it to give young students a better understanding of how to place value in the decimal system of numeration.

The abacus nomenclature varies from country to country thus: in India the apparatus appears in the form of the *suan pan*, in China the *soroban*, in Japan, and the *tschoty* in Russia among other abaci found in Europe, U.S.A and Africa. The Chinese abacus has a separate division horizontally across the frame, below which units are counted up to five; the five are transferred to the upper section, where each bead stands for five units. This Chinese abacus is mostly referred to as the modern abacus.



Fig. 9, A *Russian Abacus*, “Schoty”, 2013, Source:<http://www.images> for abacus.

It is in this light that Agaku embarks on the specific journey of exploring apparent kinetics, within the ambits of the derivable components of the Russian abacus. Thus several works were produced by the artist, among which are: “*Silver Palace (Choir of Chime)*”*Eyo (Skirt and Blouse)* among others.



Plate I, *Silver Palace (Choir of Chimes)*, Agaku Saghevwua Amos, Steel pipes, Fish line, Wood and Square Metal Pipes, 2017, 122cm x 97cm x 92cm



Silver Palace (Choir of Chimes), Suspended View: Hanging from the ceiling

This work conceived out of the linear component off the abacus, is produced out of steel pipes. Since it is a research in painting, there was need to affect some of the steel pipes with somewhat analogous colours; in families of brown, red, yellow, blue, green and white. The work is an assemblage of steels that decrease length as they reach for the midpoint of the wooden platform. From a supposed entrance, the painting has a shiny look owing largely to the quality of the steel pipes. The steel pipes are strung in such a way that the spaces around each pipe allows for agitation.

On a design level, the pipes are arranged in an alternating format, disregarding a sort of triangular space on the wooden roof which forms the entrance underneath. Take a look around the artwork, its view is constantly changing from side to side. This is because of the assemblage of the pipes is a cheat. A consequent of this assemblage is that, with the passing of the most gentle breeze, the artwork is kept in constant motion. It sways and shivers and as the steels clink themselves the art piece makes tinkling, jingling, chiming, and ringing notes that produce music.



Plate II Agaku Saghevwua Amos, *Eyo (Skirt and Blouse)*, Crown corks, Fish line and Wood, 2017, 100cm Height.

At this point in the current research, it became pertinent for art works to take another leap leaving the platforms and assuming the ceiling as their stretcher(s). This “Eyo” therefore dangles and swings from the ceiling of its environment. It is a painting whose media in this case crown corks is strung from a circular wood. It is an assemblage that takes two circular turn suspended by the piece of wood. The crown corks in this painting are colour in families of yellow, red, purple, blue, green, yellow, orange and brown; while the others are allowed to bear their inherent hues. There is however no particular order in the application of the colour scheme, although tone(s) were considered.

By virtue of its suspension from the ceiling, and on a single string, this painting is kept in constant motion; rotating either clockwise or anti-clockwise depending on which direction the wind takes it. But with the slightest persuasion by either wind or touch the work dangles, sways and or shivers. In the process there is a clinking and clashing together of the crown objects making them susceptible to sounds like rattles which amount to music.

Finding(s)

1. This research has evolved ways of producing three dimensional paintings that not only sway, shiver and or move, but like a choir of chimes through their rattle, tinkling, jingling, chiming and ringing sounds produce music.

Conclusion

The apparent versatility provided by the activities of modern, post-modern and contemporary artists has influenced greatly the current generation of upcoming artist to seek divers yet original media and material for their artistic expression. These creative feats when pursued diligently, may lead to the establishment of unique styles and works that may cause a following which may consequently produce a basis for intellectual discourse within acceptable forums. This line of action seems to have been picked up by Agaku with his creative production of paintings that have departed from the conventional confines of the two dimensional surface. Using solid and found objects such as steel pipes, discarded crown corks of frizzy drinks strung together with transparent fish lines with great care and consideration of mathematical proportions, Agaku has been able to lay an adequate foundation for future developments in the spheres of painting and art in general. The works presented above relay

upon verbal descriptions of audience members encounters to explain their context. Heavily subjective in physical and psychological nature, the works encourage an engagement with individuals and the forces of nature such as the wind, rain etc. to enhance understanding and to blur the boundaries between man and art. Agakumorphics could be described as the beginning of a contemporary Nigerian art movement that possess great propensities to shake up traditional contemporary culture which seems to be at a loss for meaning and purpose.

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