

# ART PHILOSOPHIES AND THE THEORIES: TOWARDS INNOVATIVE GENRE PRODUCTION IN THE 21ST CENTURY ART PRACTICE

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## Abstract

*Art practice has been checkmated over the years with the introduction of art theories. Art theories have also helped artists with the interpretation as well as to understand the concept of art from different angles. Art theories are enormous, but each of these theories has its theoretical and also philosophical assumption, perception and interpretation. Usually, these theories attract lots of criticism and reservations especially with relevance to the contemporary arts situation in Nigeria. Some of these theories include Institutional Theory, Imitation Theory, Empathy Theory, Expression Theory and Formalism Theory. Therefore, this paper has highlighted how the concept of art philosophy and theories has influenced the artistic genre and also the development of art in the 21st century.*

**Keywords:** *Art Theory, Art Practice, Philosophy, Art Productions, Innovative Genre*

## Introduction

Over the years, one medium that has helped people to better identify, interpret, explain and understand artworks is Philosophy and Theory. Thus, it is obvious that theories have been able to make known the essence of art in terms of a single key concept such as "representation" or "expression", the awareness of art theory has helped people to carefully examine and also explain the concept of art as well as to distinguish them. According to Dictionary.com (2017), art theory as a branch of philosophy deals with nature, expression and perception of beauty as it relates to fine arts. Similarly, Webster's (2002) see theories as the analysis of a set of facts in relation to one another. Webster's adds that art is also an abstract thought, speculation and principles of a body of fact, etc.

There are various kinds of theories, today. They, include institutional, expression, imitation, empathy, aesthetics theories among others. Art theory according to Collins English Dictionary (2017) is a formal idea that is intended to explain something. One notable fact

about theories is that it helps in identifying, explaining and defending the views concerning artworks. The understanding of these theories was made possible by the efforts of the theorist or proponents. Among them are Institutional Theory which was propounded by Arthur Coleman Danto and George Dickie, Expression or Expressionism theory by Leo Tolstoy and George Collingwood, Imitation theory by Plato, Empathy theory by Leo Tolstoy and Aesthetic theory by Emmanuel Kant. The reason why these theories were propounded was to explain, interpret or develop an assumption with regards to artworks. However, the English Oxford Living Dictionary (2017) states that art theory originated in the 16th century in Latin Greek, and the word theory was derived from the Greek word *thoros*. These theories are aimed at guiding and directing artists to produce or interpret artworks.

## Overview Of Some Art Theories, Proponents And Principles

### 1. Institutional Theory:

The propounder of this theory was Arthur Coleman Danto and George Dickie. It is a widely accepted theory which emphasizes rational myths, isomorphism, and legitimacy. This theory focuses on the deeper and also resilient aspects of social structure (Scot, 2008). Also, Yanal (1998) points out that "something is a work of art, implies that it is. a thing of interest and worth". And it is seen as a purely private taste of an individual, something sufficient to make it art. It is neither the decision of the entire public, but a joint decision of the art republic that has a first stage members, creators, performers, spectators and ultimately "anyone that is involved with arts". To make art is basically to isolate something (an object, an idea) and talk of it. "This is a work of art which is catalogued under artworks from the explanations and assertions made by the authors with regards to institutional theory. Furthermore/Binkley (2017) opines that perhaps the most minimal institutional theory of art to be a piece of art, an item needs to only be indexed as an artwork by an artist. Following this statement by Binkley, one can state that something is art not by virtue of any properties of it but rather by virtue of a relation it bears to some large context.

### 2. Expression Theory:

This theory was made popular by Leo Tolstoy and Robin George Collingwood. This theory talks about the emotional life of an artist, that emotion has impact on the art work. It states that the theory holds that artists needs to have an experience with emotion in order to express to viewers a work of art. It is necessary for the artist to have felt sadness at some point and also be able to recall the experience. But not necessary for an artist to be sad when painting a picture expressing sadness.

Matravers (2009:1) states that Leo Tolstoy was the best experience of expression theory. Furthermore, Matravers adds that the term "expression theory" has a narrow and also a broad usage. Leo Tolstoy according to Noel (1999:61) sees this theory as a form of communication in art. While Collingwood views art as an expression of emotion (Kemp, 2017). According to Khatchadowrian (1963:336) in course of viewing Leo Tolstoy expression theory sees a work of-art as an expression of the artist's feelings or emotions embodied in it by the artist. Importantly, the mode of communication differs from that of artistic communication. Furthermore, artistic communication deals with visual presentation as a form of communication and this communication reflects emotions as it were in the expression theory.

While artist uses lines for communication or expression, the mathematician uses number. Likewise, the artist uses form, space and texture to express themselves, and the musician communicates through notes and sounds.

While viewing the definition of art by Tolstoy, Bruyn (2017) relates to his expression theory by pointing out that Tolstoy defines it as the expression of feeling and experience in a way that the audience to whom the art is directed can share their feeling or experience. Bruyn adds that the interpretation or criticism of art is irrelevant and unnecessary, because any good work of art is able to express thoughts and feeling which can be dearly understood by most people. Bruyn also explains further that Tolstoy argues that any explanation of thought and feelings is superfluous because art ultimately communicates feelings and experiences in a way which cannot be expressed by any words.

## **2. Imitation Theory:**

According to Plato, nature is only true and other materials are imitation or copy of the truth. So literature and poetry are not true but it is an imitation of nature. According to this theory, art is an image of the good, and has value inasmuch as through expression it enables us to experience edifying emotions or to contemplate noble objects. This subject could be natural or artificial, in essence, the artist will use natural forms. Art is an imitation or representation of nature or reality. Art being imitation means that, like philosophy, it reflects reality in its relation to man and depicts man, his spiritual world and relations between individuals in their interaction with the world. The imitation theory of art otherwise known as formalism, states that art is just an imitation of nature. Hursthouse (1992) opines that Plato's view on art reveals that "art can never truly represent reality for life itself, or which art is merely a copy, does not represent reality. In support of Plato's view on art, Cameron (2013) asserts that our world as we represent it, is an illusion, a collection of mere appearance like reflection in a mirror or shadow on a wall. Thus, Plato feels the only true reality is the unchanging world of the forms created by God and beauty is one of such forms or ideas that manifest in particular beautiful things. Therefore, whatever we think beautiful must be an imitation of the original beauty. For example, if a beautiful girl is a copy of beauty, then the artist that draws the girl is a copy.

## **3. Formalism or Formalist Theory:**

Formalism theory was propounded by Roman Osipovich Jakobson, and a group of linguists and critics who formed the society *Opuz*. This theory which emphasizes the relationship of two things: (1) The visible elements and composition of art-works (2) The way people respond to those compositions. According to the New World Encyclopedia (2017) in literary criticism, formalism refers to a style of inquiry that focuses, almost exclusively, on features of the literary text itself, to the exclusion of biographical, historical or intellectual contexts. Butterfield (2013) states that formalism is an early twentieth century mode of criticism that has its roots in Russian Formalism. In this theory, lines, colours, textures, shapes, spaces and the arrangement of these elements in a composition can stimulate a special kind of response called an aesthetic experience. Aesthetic experience is a strong feeling we may have when we greatly admire and personally respond to the visual impact of a work of art. What is unique about formalism is that the arrangement of visible elements is said to be responsible for stimulating aesthetic experience.

Furthermore, formalism came into existence in support of the abstract art of the post-impressionist period, which was early in the twentieth century and nonobjective art in the United States during the abstract expressionist period of 1940s and 1950s. Thus, exponents of this theory were of the view that “form” was simply the name for the unintended object. Whereas, modern formalism, then, is based on the principle that whatever is proper to ascribe to works of arts should be something which is not ascribed to anything else. As such, whatever does have some extraneous reference outside of art is not termed as a legitimate response to a work of art.

#### **4. Empathy Theory:**

This theory was propounded by Leo Tolstoy, a Russian born theorist and world acclaimed literary legend among other accolades. Tolstoy defines art according to Popova (2003:1) as a form of consciousness and frames the essential role of art as a vehicle of communication and empathy. Popova adds that the ability of art is based on the fact that a man through his sense of hearing, is capable of experiencing the emotion which moved the man who expressed it. It is upon this capacity of man to receive another man's expression of teachings and experience those feelings himself, that the activity of art is based. Popova further adds that Tolstoy calls this core quality of art as "infectiousness" and upon the artists' ability to "infect" others depends on the very recognition of something as art.

In a wider level, theories of art are aimed at shedding light on some, if not all aspects of art, thereby projecting and defining art or to theorize about the structure of the concept of art without necessarily providing classical definitions, which may be formulated in terms of necessary and sufficient conditions. Furthermore, artists view art works and terms of aesthetics which has to do with beauty. As such, the Concise Oxford English Dictionary defines aesthetics as a set of principles concerned with the nature and appreciation of beauty, especially in art. It also buttressed aesthetics as the branch of philosophy which deals with questions of beauty and artistic taste. Therefore, the first thing that comes to the mind of the artist before he produces his work is the final appearance or beauty.

In many ways, aesthetic response or functional theories of art is the most intuitive theories of art. In a concise manner, aesthetics refers to a typical phenomenal experience and aesthetic definitions that which identifies artwork and artifact with the intension to produce aesthetic experiences. Thus, nature too is seen as beautiful, and it can also produce aesthetic experiences, but doesn't possess the function of producing those experiences, as such intention is necessary which is regarded as an agency in the person of the artist. Accordingly, the formalist theory of art is of the opinion that we should focus only on the formal properties of art, which implies the form and not the content. The formal properties as regards the visual arts include, colour, shape, and line, whereas for the musical arts it includes, rhythm and harmony. Therefore, artists have in different areas and medium over time blended the use of form and content to give rise to the theme of the art work, even though formalist theories do not deny that works of art might have content, representation, or narrative, rather, they deny that those things are relevant in our appreciation or understanding of art.

### **The Relevance Of Art Theories In The 21st Century**

In course of producing art works over the years, contemporary artists have used various theories ranging from Expression, Empathy, Institutional, Formalism, Imitation and so on to aid them in giving a good narrative to their works. These theories stresses on rational myths, isomorphism and legitimacy. Before any object can be viewed or seen as an art work, it must have worth and be considered by the general art enthusiasts. This assertion was made by the proponents. For institutional theory by Arthur Coleman Danto and George Dickie, this theory makes available the opportunity for contemporary artist to decide which work is art based on their conclusion. Thus, since the proponents of imitation theory state that only nature is true and any other material is imitation of nature. The theory thus, affords contemporary, artists the opportunity to imitate nature. Expression theory was made popular by Leo Tolstoy and Robin George Collingwood. According to Khatchadourian (1965:336) in course of viewing Leo Tolstoy Expression theory sees "a work of art as an expression of the artists' feelings or emotions embodied in it by the artists, in the sense that it conveys and transmits to the listener, spectator or views." Many contemporary artists in Nigeria have one way or the other used this theory to express or portray feelings in their works. Accordingly, Mangiri (2018) views art as thoughts and ideas. Thoughts and ideas are energies, and energy is life. While Ilesanmi (2013) views art as the urge to create and manipulate forms which flows like a running river, and so each time a work is accomplished, the fulfillment of God's word rings a bell and the need to do more arouses.

Furthermore, Chimezie (2014) sees art as the freedom of expression which every creative person secures and brings into play during his/her creative encounters, thus, goes a very long way in empowering and to propagate the creative concept in a more outstanding and unique manners. Accordingly, Obot (2017) sees art as the exploration of materials, techniques and spirituality and intuition, which are portrayed in his works.

Furthermore, Wiche (2019) is of the view that art is the aesthetics of our society. This he has done by producing art works showcasing the beauty of our environment. He is of the view that everyone is born with art, that it should be developed, because art makes life beautiful and keeps life going.

On the other hand, Okparaocha (2019) sees art, artists and the emerging trends cuts across different types of media. Thus, accidental designs achieved could yield a concern for wide range of sponsorship and mentorship to achieve greater height, drawings and contemporary issues in design that becomes the main concern of those who decry lack of art patronage in recent times. In accordance to how artist use theories in describing their art works, Jenewari (2019) is of the opinion that reflections are the primary physical means through which we perceive the world around us, we are able to see only as a result of the diffuse reflection produced by whatever person, place or object we observe. Thus, life can only be understood backwards, but it must be lived forward.

Also in a bid to relate theories with art works, Ndukwe (2019) sees art work as a processthrough chance experimentation, where an art work is born as a medium of narrative to communicate memories, abstract thoughts or instant happening to others. As such, art can be termed life itself, so art can never change unless life ends.

## Conclusion

From the views of various theories, it is evident that theories play a significant role in the production of art works. Thus, it is seen that without applying any theory to a particular work, it would look like the artist is proceeding without direction. Therefore, this paper has highlighted how the concept of art philosophy and theories has influenced the artistic genre and also the development of art in the 21st century.

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