

Bruce Onobrakpeya and the Harmattan Workshop

Artistic Experimentation in the Niger Delta

Janet Stanley

Bruce Onobrakpeya (b. August 30, 1932) is unique among Nigerian artists, not only because he has had one of the longest, most productive art careers in all of Nigeria,¹ but also because he bridges the divide between the academy and the workshop, a divide that bedevils the Nigerian art discourse and practice, going back to the competing Aina Onabolu-Kenneth Murray philosophies (Oloidi 1998:42).² Innovation and experimentation are hallmarks of Onobrakpeya's career, which carry over into the Harmattan Workshop that he founded in 1998 in his hometown of Agbarha-Otor in the Niger Delta. Trained as a painter, Onobrakpeya graduated from the art program at the Nigerian College of Art, Science, and Technology in Zaria in 1961 (Fig. 1). A few years later, he participated in some of the Mbari print workshops,³ where he found his true *métier*: printmaking. There he came to appreciate the value of these informal, intimate opportunities to experiment without distractions. More importantly, he learned that even unsuccessful artistic experiments could open new avenues of creativity. Thus emboldened in practice, Onobrakpeya internalized an artistic philosophy anchored in experimentation, undeterred by the possibility or fear of failure.

Onobrakpeya's turn to printmaking led him to experiment with new techniques, e.g. deep etching, additive plastographs, and plastocasts. His successful plastographs technique derives from a mistake.⁴ By the 1990s he was trying his hand at installations, inspired by Urhobo shrines, which are fabricated using his own plastocasts and other artworks (Fig. 2). Since then he has done mixed media with CDs, motherboard computer parts, and Styrofoam. In the 2000s Onobrakpeya is making large paintings based on his earlier, much smaller prints that are photo-mechanically enlarged, then painted (Figs. 3–4). Bricolage has become part of his art practice.

A LIFETIME OF GIVING BACK

The Bruce Onobrakpeya Foundation (BOF), established in 1999, is now the parent organization of the Harmattan Workshop. It became the conduit for the Ford Foundation funding which was critical to the Harmattan project over the next decade.⁵ Onobrakpeya has made significant financial contributions to the project from his own pocket and his art sales.⁶ He has also received support from a few Nigerian corporations (e.g., Nestle Nigeria, Cadbury Nigeria, and Nigerian Breweries) and has enjoyed the collaboration and support of the National Gallery of Art, Arthouse, the Society of Nigerian Artists, Signature Gallery, Terra Kulture, and Omooba Yemisi Adedoyin Shyllon Art Foundation (OYASAF). Private individuals have also contributed money and in-kind gifts.

Long before the Harmattan Workshop took shape, Onobrakpeya had participated in and helped run several print workshops: at the Mbari Artists' and Writers' Club print workshop in Ibadan (1962), at the Mbari Mbayo print workshop in Oshogbo (1964), and in 1974 at the University of Ife's Institute of African Studies, at the invitation of director Ulli Beier. The real model for the Harmattan, however, is the Haystack Mountain School of Crafts, in Deer Isle, Maine, which he attended in 1975. There he realized how short, two-week courses in several media could run simultaneously, where artists of varying skill levels could work side by side. The mission of the Harmattan Workshop is "Artistic growth through interaction, experiments, and search." The idea of a community of artists, experienced and novice, working side by side, is central to the Harmattan project. The informal atmosphere that fosters creativity and testing new things appeals to the teacher in Onobrakpeya, who taught art at St. Gregory's College, Lagos, from 1963 until he went freelance in 1980. In Ovuomatoro Gallery, his print studio in Papa Ajao, Lagos, Onobrakpeya



1 Bruce Onobrakpeya in his Lagos studio with one of his photo-mechanically enlarged prints.
PHOTO: PERKINS FOSS, 2008

trained studio assistants and also enrolled apprentices on industrial attachment programs and collaborated with institutions of higher education. As his enterprise expanded, the Lagos quarters proved too small. He wanted to re-create this workshop environment outside of the hectic bustle of the city. Decentralizing the Nigerian art scene is a corollary motivation for Onobrakpeya, who feels that there is too much concentration in Lagos. Building art centers outside of Lagos has precedent in Uche Okeke's Asele Institute in Nimo; Demas Nwoko's hilltop New Culture Studios in Ibadan; and Solomon Irein Wangboje's Creative Arts Centre in Benin City. Onobrakpeya, who along with Okeke and Nwoko is associated with the so-called Zaria Rebels, downplays the rebelliousness, averring that his only rebellion was to build an art center at Agbarha-Otor. Interviewed for the publication *Zaria Art Society*, Onobrakpeya says "You can see what we have

done here in Agbarha-Otor and the remarks people have made about spending so much money on a building inside the bush rather than putting it in the township where so much rent can be collected ... If there is anything like rebellion at all, that is it" (Onobrakpeya 1998:61).⁷

The fact that Onobrakpeya was never a university art teacher may have led him to be more determined to succeed as a studio artist. As a teacher at St. Gregory's, he claims that he learned from his students and that he used all his free time at his home studio, trying new things. He turned the "disadvantage" of being a mere high school teacher into an advantage.⁸ He was quite open to participating in and benefiting from more informal, egalitarian workshops. He wasn't bothered working alongside untrained, aspiring artists and students at those early Mbari workshops. Onobrakpeya realizes that not everyone can attend university art schools due to lack of academic qualifications, financial wherewithal, or too few university openings. Art workshops offer an opportunity, maybe the only opportunity for aspiring artists to acquire skills and gain studio experience as well as a chance to work with experienced artists. Workshops clearly have a crucial place in the past, present, and future of the Nigerian art scene (Onobrakpeya 1999:30).



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2 When Bruce Onobrakpeya began experimenting with installation, he created shrines inspired by traditional Urhobo shrines. This shrine installation is in the Harmattan Workshop studio building.

PHOTO: DUNJA HERSAK, 2010

3 Bruce Onobrakpeya's new painting based on older prints enlarged.

PHOTO: DUNJA HERSAK, 2010

(opposite)

4 Two of Bruce Onobrakpeya's large paintings on display at the Niger Delta Arts and Cultural Centre.

PHOTO: DUNJA HERSAK, 2010

ART WORKSHOPS IN NIGERIA

The earliest art workshop in Nigeria was the Catholic enterprise in Oye-Ekiti with which Kevin Carroll is intimately associated. From 1947 to 1953 he and Sean O'Mahoney employed Yoruba artists, notably sculptors, such as George Bandele and his apprentice Lamidi Fakeye. Their mission was to adapt Yoruba arts to Christian uses, though the carvers were encouraged to take on commissions in their spare time for traditional purposes, for *orisha* and cult figures, masks, verandah posts, and doors. Teaching at Oye-Ekiti was by traditional apprenticeship to a master carver.

Most art workshops in Nigeria, after the Oye-Ekiti, have focused on one medium or have been ad hoc/onetime events. The Mbari workshops in Ibadan, Oshogbo, and Ife in the 1960s and 1970s are the best known of these artist-led short-term gatherings. The first and second workshops, in 1961 and 1962 in Ibadan under the auspices of the Mbari Writers' and Artists' Club, were for secondary school art teachers. They were initiated by Ulli Beier and led by Julian Beinart, Amancia Guedes, and Ru van Rossem.⁹ Ulli Beier, then part of the extramural program at the University of Ibadan, thought them less than successful because the art teachers were already too steeped in a rigid Western practice and were unable to experiment freely. According to Beier, onlookers who dropped by and sat in were much more promising. This observation may have been influenced by Beier's preconceived anti-establishment ideas about importing Western curricula into Nigeria, but it certainly had a major influence on what happened subsequently in Oshogbo.

In 1962, the first Oshogbo workshop was run by Guyanese painter Denis Williams, specifically for untrained individuals, under the auspices of Mbari Mbayo. In August 1963, Williams conducted a second workshop. Artists Jacob Lawrence and Georgina Beier were present in Oshogbo but did not run this gathering. In 1964 Dutch artist Ru van Rossem led a printing (etching) workshop. Georgina Beier and Bruce Onobrakpeya participated.



Despite the informality and casualness of the Mbari workshops, all were run by accomplished artists for relatively homogeneous groups of novices with similar socio-economic backgrounds and educational levels.

Ile-Ife was the site of the Ori Olokun Centre, which opened in June 1968 under the auspices of the Institute of African Studies, University of Ife, with Michael Crowder then the director. The Centre's Experimental Art Workshop was directed by Solomon Wangboje from 1968 until he left Ife to go to Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria. Ori Olokun art workshops replicated the Oshogbo model in that the participants were not university students but local recruits as well as some transplants from Oshogbo. After Ulli Beier became director of the University of Ife's Institute of African Studies in 1972, Ori Olokun was allowed to quietly decline and fade away, probably because the Beiers wanted to initiate their own projects. Georgina Beier started a design workshop (mainly textiles) in January 1972. In 1974 another printmaking workshop (monoprint and drawing from the back) took place at the Ogun Timehin studio in Ile-Ife, led by Ru van Rossem and Bruce Onobrakpeya, under the auspices of the Institute of African Studies, University of Ife. Following the Beiers' departure from the University of Ife in 1974, Agbo Folarin began a tex-

tile workshop at the Ogun Timehin studio, which for a few years produced elegant silkscreen printed cloth (Fig. 5).

In the late 1980s and early 1990s the Goethe-Institut, Lagos, organized several art workshops for students from the University of Nigeria, Nsukka, Yaba College of Technology, Lagos, and elsewhere in Nigeria (e.g., Oshogbo, Iragbiji). These workshops fit the model of art experts teaching new skills to homogeneous groups of artists. The Goethe-Institut brought in German artists to work with art school students, or separately, with informally trained artists. One of these workshops in 1989 was a textile *adire* workshop led by Georgina Beier in Oshogbo along with artist Nike Okundayo. Nike has since set up more permanent workshops in Oshogbo and elsewhere as part of her larger art enterprises (Fig. 6).

A different workshop model of heterogeneous artists coming together as peers is the Aftershave International Artists Workshop in Jos, in 1999 and in Kaduna, in 2003, based on the Triangle model though not funded by Triangle Arts Trust (Archibong 2000; Okpe 2001; "Aftershave" 1999). Or Bisi Silva's new media workshops at the Centre for Contemporary Art, Lagos (CCA—Lagos) begun in December 2007. None of these initiatives match the breadth, scale, or continuity of Onobrakpeya's Harmattan





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5 Agbo Folarin, formerly of Obafemi Awolowo University, with one of the screen-printed textiles made at the workshop that he led in Ile-Ife in the 1970s.

PHOTO: DUNJA HERSAK, 2010

6 At Nike Okundayo's art workshop in Oshogbo, apprentices specialize in textile arts and sculpture.

PHOTO: DUNJA HERSAK, 2010

(opposite)

7 The massive square studio building at the Harmattan Workshop in Agbarha-Otor, rises four floors around a center atrium.

PHOTO: PERKINS FOSS, 2009

8 The railing winding around the impluvial atrium inside the Harmattan Workshop studio building offers a hanging display of batik and screen-printed textiles.

PHOTO: DUNJA HERSAK, 2010

Workshop. They are largely initiated or led by expatriates, some of whom received funding from overseas. Harmattan is a solidly indigenous initiative and its footprint is larger and more permanent than other workshops. Considering Onobrakpeya's long experience of participating in art workshops and their profound impact on his own practice, it was a natural progression to the founding of the Harmattan Workshop.

BUILDING FROM THE GROUND UP IN AGBARHA-OTOR

Beginning in 1989, Onobrakpeya acquired land in his home town of Agbarha-Otor in the Niger Delta and began the design and construction of what would become the Niger Delta Arts and Cultural Centre. A massive 30-meter by 30-meter studio, four floors, impluvium style, designed by Demas Nwoko (Godwin and Hopwood 2007), now accommodates work space for printmaking, painting, mixed media, textile printing, fiber arts, bead working, jewelry, wood, metal and clay sculpture and pottery, installations, and photography (Fig. 7). The upper floors are reached by an ascending ramp winding around the atrium, which eliminates dependence on electrically run elevators (Fig. 8). Although the studio building was not built quite to Nwoko's specifications,¹⁰ the sandcrete building blocks were made at Nwoko's factory in Idumuje and shipped to the site. Local builders then constructed the studio building, "which rises above the tops of the surrounding oil palms ... (with) its four-square, almost brutal, assault on the landscape" (ibid., p. 89). Stone carving, iron working, and brass casting sites have been set up outside in open air (Figs. 9–10). Initially the curriculum was limited to painting, printmaking, and sculpture. As the studio space expanded, new media were added to the curriculum: a kiln for ceramics, an industrial sewing machine for leatherworking, and a foundry, built by Jacob Bada, for brass casting.





Quiet, rural Agbarha-Otor, in Delta State, provides the setting that Onobrakpeya feels is ideal to allow artists to step back, take a deep breath, and clear their minds. The local environment also offers some practical advantages in found materials (stone, wood, bark, scrap metal) in inspiration for artworks (flora and fauna), and even some anthropological explorations into the local culture. Occasionally participants take excursions to local sites, such as the source of the River Ethiope or local mangrove forests, or the nearby women potters' village of Oto Edo. All of this resonates with Onobrakpeya's working artistic philosophy: to draw on heritage, folklore, and the environment. Since nightlife in Agbarha-Otor is limited, workshop participants join in evening discussions, hear illustrated talks and lectures, and screen art films and documentaries, all of which keep the stimulating atmosphere going throughout the day and into the evening. These lectures are on a variety of practical and theoretical topics, e.g. "Studio practice, a way forward: survival tips for the young graduate," "Bamboo in contemporary Nigerian art," "Hazards and safety precautions in the use of PVC in printmaking," "Theoretical basis for the pricing of artworks," "Trends in contemporary Nigerian stone carving," or "Demas Nwoko's architecture." Some of these lectures are published in the catalogues of the Harmattan Workshops and have become part of the documentation.¹¹ A lively session witnessed by the author in 2010 concerned artists' consciousness and identity. Individual artists also give illustrated talks on their work. There is an art library on site which anyone can use. Jogging and judo provide a different kind of stimulation for those so inclined.

The first Harmattan Workshop was in 1998, the twelfth in 2010 (*12th Harmattan Workshop 2010*) (Fig. 11). Held each year during the dry December-March *harmattan* season, when trade winds sweep from the Sahara to the Gulf of Guinea, the project has grown dramatically in scope and size. In 1998 at the first workshop, there were fourteen artists; in 1999, twenty-nine. Between 1998 and 2009 more than 370 artists attended, many as returnees. Themes are chosen each year to provide a focus, e.g., the environment, installation, or experiments with new materials. In 2010 the workshop ran for six weeks in three two-week sessions in February and March and a final session in August with

the theme of fifty years of Nigerian creativity. More than 100 artists participated. The August session is meant to be more on the Triangle model, less structured, peers coming together. The Harmattan Workshop has an open admission policy, with participants asked to pay a 15,000 naira (\$100) fee and nominal costs for board. Experienced artists work alongside younger participants and are regarded as facilitators rather than teachers (Fig. 12).¹² Today, local women attend the workshop as "day students" and are engaged mainly in beadwork and jewelry making (Fig. 13). In 2003, Olu Amoda conducted a one-day metalworking session for village welders; twelve attended. In 2010 Jide Adeniyi-Jones invited local photographers to participate in the photography section. Onobrakpeya introduced scholarships for youth to attend the workshop. Curious school children are drawn daily to this hive of activity and are allowed to join in on occasion. Local schools bring students for tours of the center (Fig. 14). Regional art college students also make class field trips to Agbarha-Otor. The University of Benin encourages art students to participate in the Harmattan Workshop as part of their regular training.

Experimentation is an overriding principal of the Harmattan Workshop. Everyone is encouraged to try new media, to move out of their comfort zone, to be playful, and not worry about producing finished artwork. According to Onobrakpeya,

The question is sometimes asked, why do we attend workshops instead of art schools. For people with the urge to practice art, but do not have the necessary academic qualification to enter art schools, workshops may be the only way open to them to acquire some skills which could break them into the world of artistic creativity ... For artists already trained in art schools, the art workshops are supplementary and very necessary [for] growth. They give artists opportunity to get into areas hitherto unknown to them. In other words, workshops prevent artists from getting into grooves, defined as a state when an artist repeats himself. Art workshops do not aim at producing finished pieces; where successful, they give the artist fresh ideas which in turn gives new directions. It is therefore not immediately possible to assess the full gains of workshops soon after they are completed (Onobrakpeya 1999:30).

In fact, the very nature of the workshop as process is to start down new paths to imagine next steps in creating art, and to learn to



be more discerning in one's own practice and observant of others. Not all individual experiments are successful, but it is impossible to know in advance the creative directions artists will take. The long-term benefit of the workshop experience may take months or years for the artists to fully digest and put into practice what they learned. This harks back to Onobrakpeya's workshop experience where he discovered that printmaking was his preferred medium, which in turn led him to develop multiple print techniques. Experimenting with new media and trying new techniques may be worthy objectives, but there is a practical downside: How is the artist going to be able to put into practice newly acquired skills if there are inadequate or unaffordable facilities, equipment, or materials available back home? Lack of an appreciative market for these artistic experiments is also a big disincentive.

Many of the participants and facilitators return year after year, but each session also attracts first-timers (Fig. 15).¹³ Since 1998, the majority of participants have been men, though this gender imbalance has lessened in recent years. Although Harmattan Workshop attracts many attendees, they hail mainly from Lagos State, Delta State, Rivers State, and Edo State. Artists from the east (Nsukka, Enugu), the west (Ife, Ibadan, Ogbomoso, Ondo), and the north (Zaria, Jos, Maiduguri) are not well represented. Despite the presence of Ahmadu Bello University's art school in Zaria, northern Nigeria lacks a strong tradition of contemporary art practice. Islam may have a dampening influence on art production in the region. Many of the students at ABU are southerners, who return south on completion of their studies. Whether this preponderance of Lagos and Niger Delta artists at the Harmattan Workshop arises from logistical reasons of locale, apprehensions about dangers of the Niger Delta, or a perception of cultural/ethnic biases that persist in Nigeria is unclear. Probably it is a combination of these factors. Is there residual elitism or cliquishness among university artists from other regions that disinclines them to participate in the Harmattan Workshop? Is it because

9 In the alfresco stone carving studio Suleiman Taiwo pauses to talk with Bruce Onobrakpeya.

PHOTO: DUNJA HERSAK, 2010

10 Harrie Bazunu (left) at work in the blacksmith's shed. He has led the ironworking section at the Harmattan Workshop for many years.

PHOTO: DUNJA HERSAK, 2010





11 Lagos-based artist Juliet Ezenwa prepares a plate for the printing press. PHOTO: DUNJA HERSAK, 2010

it lacks the prestige of international workshops? Is it that some artists do not see the value of workshops or feel they don't need the experience? Or is it simply that the Harmattan Workshop needs better, more effective advertising, recruiting, and outreach to attract national participants? Art schools in Nigeria tend to attract students from their own regions. One could argue that the Harmattan Workshop, despite its ambition to become a national workshop, is merely repeating the regional pattern of Nigerian provincialism. Yet one of the goals of the Harmattan Workshop is to bring together individuals from all parts of Nigeria (and beyond) in the spirit of greater understanding and respect (Onobrakpeya 1999:30–31). This is Onobrakpeya as bridge-builder, not just between the academy and the workshop, but between persons of different ethnic backgrounds and nationalities.

ART CRITICISM: THE WEAK LINK?

The perennially weak part of the entire Nigerian art scene is serious constructive criticism. The state of written art criticism in Nigeria, journalistic and academic, has been analyzed by Ola Oloidi and Olu Oguibe, among others (Oloidi 1998, Oguibe 1998). But the strength of studio critique and direct feedback to artists is unexamined. The workshop setting seems ideally suited to this kind of critical intervention of one artist to another or among peers. What really goes on?

The original manifesto of the African workshop model of “teachers who do not teach” was delivered by Frank McEwen in 1966 at the World Festival of Negro Arts colloquium in a fascinating and bombastic polemic in which he explains his method of inducing inborn talent, based on his experience in Zimbabwe.



12 Kolade Oshinowo waited until he retired from Yaba College of Technology before venturing in to the Niger Delta to be a painting facilitator at the 2010 Harmattan Workshop. PHOTO: DUNJA HERSAK, 2010



13 Local Agbarha-Otor women find the bead-stringing jewelry making section child-friendly.

PHOTO: DUNJA HERSAK, 2010

14 School children from Agbarha-Otor are fascinated by this hive of workshop activity, where they are free to circulate through the studios observing art being made. Sometimes they are allowed to try their hand at art making. Bruce Onobrakpeya encourages this open-door policy.

PHOTO: DUNJA HERSAK, 2010



15 Shade Ogunlade, an artist from Ladoko Akintola University of Technology, Ogbomosho, was a first-timer at the 2010 Harmattan Workshop. She specifically wanted to work in Sam Ovrati's painting section, but tries her hand here at collage.

PHOTO: DUNJA HERSAK, 2010





16 Ifeoma Anyaeji, University of Benin, explains her “eye” painting.
PHOTO: DUNJA HERSAK, 2010

It has been solved by those teachers who do not teach. By those few wise men, sensitive to latent human values, who seek to encourage and amplify rather than to arrest and destroy that still small unconfident voice to be detected in the potentially creative artist.... His colourful soul, gentle or dynamic, must be discovered and given confidence in its own, often brow beaten self ... Its new directions must be interpreted and “built-up” with understanding and appreciation. It is only then that some technical assistance can be given—technical explanations and examples which will help to establish a unique and personal path of creativity (McEwen 1971:432).

Not all participants, he admits, make the cut. “Their talent is tried and coerced with a lengthy period of observation. If promising, they are kept on, if not, they go” (ibid., p. 434). The precise criteria for winnowing are implied but unstated. Nurturing, exalting, fostering individuality, avoiding copying (or “plagia” as McEwen calls it), achieving “saleability”—these are

McEwen’s strategies for “teachers that do not teach.” The imposition of his aesthetic preferences resulted in art of little variation in theme and style, reinforcing conformity rather than innovation (Pearce 1993).

In Nigeria, the question of intervention, influence, and instruction is more delicately put, but is essentially McEwen’s “teachers that do not teach” philosophy. It might be more accurately stated as “teachers that claim not to teach.” At Oye-Ekiti, Kevin Carroll’s role was to inspire:

I do not attempt to force the carvers outside their traditional limits in this matter. I narrate the [biblical] stories, answer the carvers’ questions, discuss technical details, and help them to improve their interpretation by frequent repetition of the same themes. The stories themselves provide inspiration, and I, a European, must be careful not to interfere too much in imposing my own ideas and emotions (Carroll 1967:91, 93).



17 Veteran facilitator Sam Ovrait is one of the mainstays of the Harmattan Workshop. He brings perspectives as a former teacher at Auchi Polytechnic and as a full-time Lagos-based artist.
PHOTO: DUNJA HERSAK, 2010



18 Bruce Onobrakpeya's installation incorporates his "jewels of the nomads" inspired by amulet pendants and leatherwork of Sahelian nomadic herders. Note the sand on the floor of this display in the studio building at Agbarha-Otor. His book *Bruce Onobrakpeya: Jewels of Nomadic Images* (Lagos: Ovuomaroro Studio and Gallery, 2009) provides full documentation of this body of Onobrakpeya's recent work.

PHOTO: DUNJA HERSAK, 2010

The experience at the Mbari workshops is best told by participants. The introduction of techniques was clearly taught by Georgina Beier and others, but what was the nature of critical interventions? Twins Seven Seven says: "Georgina also taught us to look at work critically. Before an exhibition she taught us how to look carefully and pick the best works; she never wanted us to exhibit any second rate pictures ... Georgina would never try to give us instructions, but she might say things like 'why don't you try this'" (1991:22, 23). Rufus Ogundele recalls: "... the most important thing about her was that she could make us all aware in which direction talents lay! ... Georgina would come and look at my work and ... she would immediately know which area of the painting I was unhappy with ... Of course I invite criticism from my fellow artists when I am at home, but nobody is so much on the same wavelength with me as Georgina is" (1991:46).

And finally, Muraina Oyelami: "If we had gone to a university art school, we would not have been able to develop that inner eye so early. Too many things would have been imposed upon us and it might have taken us years to free ourselves from that 'education.'" (1991:16).

Clearly the Oshogbo artists themselves bought into Ulli Beier's (and Frank McEwen's) viewpoint of the dangers of formal art schools to artistic imagination. Georgina Beier herself says, with reference to her collaboration with Jacob Afolabi and Rufus Ogundele, that "the problem was to make them aware of what they had achieved, without producing the self consciousness that could kill their freshness" (Beier 1991:68). Clearly some teaching and instruction was occurring beyond learning techniques and skills. The artists imbibed some sense of what worked and what didn't. Or took note of what the instructor liked and didn't like, as when Georgina Beier let it be known that second-class work shouldn't be exhibited. This reinforces McEwen's assertion that only when works achieve a degree of saleability would they be put in the gallery for sale, presumably with McEwen as the decider.

The primitivist discourse of McEwen, embedded in romantic notions of the spontaneous creativity of artists, unsullied by formal education or exposure to foreign influences, is a far cry from postcolonial art workshops such as Harmattan or the Triangle Art workshops in Africa. Onobrakpeya's commitment to experimentation and teaching art skills sets him apart from McEwen

and other European art workshop founders, who applied creative straight-jackets to the artists. The colonial workshops of McEwen and to some extent those of Beier invited untrained individuals in the hope of discovering native talent. Conformity to a particular purpose, such as church decoration or catering to a foreign art market, limited the subject matter and style of art produced. Open criticism and self-criticism were not part of the program. The Oye-Ekiti workshops adhered to the traditional master-apprentice formula, so skills were imparted but within a narrow range of creativity and innovation.

The postcolonial workshops break free from these constraints. Participants are mainly artists or art students. The workshops are viewed as complementary to art schools, not antithetical to them. The wide variety of media and subject matter also set these newer workshops apart from their predecessors. One sees this at the Harmattan Workshop and Bisi Silva's CCA-Lagos, both Nigerian, not foreign, initiatives. At the same time, the Harmattan Workshop differs from the CCA-Lagos and the Triangle Arts workshops in being more about teaching skills along with encouraging experimentation. The CCA-Lagos and Triangle workshops are gatherings of peers who interact in more egalitarian ways and who make works independently. The Triangle workshops and CCA-Lagos connect to the global in ways that the Harmattan has not yet achieved.

It is not clear how extensively real art criticism goes on in Nigeria, even at the Harmattan Workshop. The Harmattan facilitators usually offer informal critiques to those in their particular media sections. They instruct on techniques and handling of materials. They also teach by example, since they are creating their own works within the shared studio space. Participants may informally comment on each other's work, but varying skill levels preclude a genuine peer-to-peer critique. Artists circulate to other sections to observe what is going on and may offer comments. Harmattan Workshop facilitator Kunle Adeyemi maintains that it was a point of duty to bring his students together at the end of each day to review what had been done, highlighting strengths and weaknesses, particularly on technical matters (Fig. 16).¹⁴ The Harmattan Workshop is essentially a skills-based workshop, where critique primarily addresses handling of materials and technical matters.¹⁵

At art schools in Nigeria one would expect more structured critique sessions, in which, in addition to formal matters and materiality, artists are addressing intentionality, concept, and meaning. Significant variations exist on how this actually happens. Some academic art teachers are more conscientious and attentive to student critiques than others. Ideally the studio art critique strikes a balance between a teacher's evaluation or judgment and a student's simultaneous defense of and distancing from the object he has created. Group critique assumes an egalitarian and dynamic exchange, but are Nigerian art students comfortable critiquing each other? Do they know how? Artists may be hesitant to comment unfavorably on each others' work or may not know how to critically look at work. Is artistic self-criticism well taught? Fear of being too critical of others and fear of being on the receiving end may inhibit open discussion. Currying favor with one's instructor or peers can lead to unhelpful or misplaced praise. Critiques that are overly concerned with

being positive ("unconditional supporters") (Buster and Crawford 2010:97–103)¹⁶ or are perceived as fault-finding exercises cannot be successful. Artist Sam Ovrati (Fig. 17), who taught at Auchu Polytechnic and regularly participates as a facilitator at the Harmattan Workshop, suggests that art criticism in Nigeria, though prevalent, falls short because of insufficient grounding in art historical concepts and analytical ability on the part of teachers as well as students.¹⁷

The question might be asked more broadly. Is there a "culture of critique" in Nigeria? Ideally the studio critique should discuss what works, what doesn't work, and why, considering craftsmanship, concept, design, and originality. Did the artist successfully accomplish his/her intent? What makes the piece work, or not? If the "culture of critique" is not embraced as an essential pedagogical tool in Nigeria, ultimately the quality of art suffers. If you visit a Nigerian art school studio today, will you see anything different in theme, content, or medium from twenty years ago? Are originality and individuality truly valued in Nigeria and encouraged in art schools, as they are in the West? In the absence of a robust "culture of critique," the market assumes an overweening influence on art production. If it sells, it's good; if it doesn't, it's not. If an artist's work sells, others may imitate the successful formula, and the artist him/herself may get caught in a repetitious cycle. The conservative uncritical nature of the Nigerian art market exacerbates this state of affairs.

Underdeveloped art critique is not unique to Nigeria, but can be found elsewhere in art teaching, formal and informal, across Africa.¹⁸ One promising exception is taking place at Bisi Silva's CCA-Lagos, where the matter of art criticism is addressed head-on through a robust intervention in the workshops and programs she organizes. Silva trained in arts administration in England and is well connected in the network of international curatorial practice. At a CCA-Lagos photography workshop in February–March 2010, participants—experienced photographers, artists, and novices alike—gave Power-Point presentations of works in progress. They explained their intent, concept, and approach. Following each presentation, a discussion of the group, which included international participants, probed deeper, interrogating, suggesting what works, what doesn't, and pushing a rethink. There was a strong emphasis on how well the work conveyed the artist's stated intention and communicated effectively to the viewer. Work was assessed within the broad theme of the workshop "On Independence and the Ambivalence of Promise" (Silva 2010) and focused less on materiality and marketability and more on concept and communication of meaning.

BRUCE ONOBRAKPEYA FOUNDATION AND THE FUTURE OF HARMATTAN

Sustainability within the community has always been one of Onobrakpeya's goals in moving to Agbarha-Otor. The presence of the Harmattan Workshop in Agbarha-Otor has had a positive impact economically and socially. Local people were employed to build the studio, the residential chalets, and the kitchen and dining verandah, which doubles as a lecture hall. The Centre employs local people to run day-to-day operations and provide security. As pointed out above, townspeople, especially women and children, join in the workshop activities.

Bruce Onobrakpeya, the *éminence grise*, at 79 is still going strong. But he understands that a plan for sustainability of the enterprise must be put into place. Having a permanent, physical plant entails responsibilities and costs of management, operations, maintenance of facilities and equipment, and personnel. This year-round commitment is quite unlike the ephemeral workshops of earlier periods. Onobrakpeya has acquired an adjacent plot of land and plans to expand the residential chalets and build a new structure to house and display art. Although the design of the studio building allows for extensive ventilation and light, it is less ideally suited for controlling the high humidity and heat of the Niger Delta. This makes it ill suited to the long-term display of art. A smaller, air-conditioned space will remedy this situation.

Every participant donates one work created at the Harmattan Workshop; thus, a permanent Harmattan collection is being developed. Onobrakpeya has also been collecting Nigerian art, traditional and modern, for many years and currently displays the works at the Center along with examples of his own oeuvre (Fig. 18). A panel exhibition of images from art historian Perkins Foss's exhibition "Where Gods and Mortals Meet" is a permanent fixture, as are reproductions of works by non-African artists. Temporary exhibitions are also on view. In 2010, there was a photography exhibition by Segun Fayemi. These displays in the studio building plus the art books in the workshop library, which participants are encouraged to consult, broaden exposure to art.

However, Onobrakpeya realizes that the workshop facilities in the Niger Delta are underutilized, and he would like the workshop to be active for more of the year. Following each season, a Harmattan Workshop exhibition is held in Lagos, where larger audiences can see the work and be introduced to degrees of art experimentation that the Harmattan Workshop fosters. This Harmattan Workshop Gallery on Victoria Island, Lagos,¹⁹ holds a variety of exhibitions and art events year round. The Lagos press corps gives the Harmattan Workshop extensive and largely favorable coverage, in part because of the high regard for Onobrakpeya himself. The Harmattan Workshop has not supplanted Onobrakpeya's Ovuomaroro Gallery and studio in Papa Ajao, Lagos, which remain active year round.

Harmattan Workshop is one of a number of initiatives in Africa that are seeking to move beyond colonial and neocolonial models whereby sponsorship and control reside outside Africa. That the Harmattan Workshop continues into its twelfth year, despite its lack of international visibility, and shows no sign of losing momentum is testimony to the enduring vision of Bruce Onobrakpeya.

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Notes

I would like to thank friends and colleagues who offered insights and opinions on art workshops and art critique in Nigeria—Bruce Onobrakpeya himself, Dunja Hersak, Marguerite Michaels, Perkins Foss, Jean Borgatti, Peju Layiwola, Kunle Adeyemi, Olu Amoda, Sylvester Ogbechie, Krydz Ikwuemesi, Victor Ekpuk, Tayo Adenaike, Veronika Jenke, Elsbeth Court, Simon Ottenberg, and Jide Adeniyi-Jones.

1 See Richard A. Singletary's *Onobrakpeya* (2002) for a retrospective review of the artist's career.

2 Aina Onabolu (1882–1963), steeped in a formalist art tradition, espoused academic realism and sought to prove that Africans could paint as well as Europeans. Kenneth Murray (1902–1972) embraced cultural synthesis in art, which drew on indigenous sources and inspiration. Murray, an Englishman, was brought to Nigeria by Onabolu in 1927 to teach art. He encouraged his students to look to their own culture and surroundings and wanted them not to be constrained by Western formalism. Onabolu's agenda was quite the opposite. He believed that Nigerian artists must prove themselves competent and proficient in the principles of formalism which are fundamental to the Western academy. Both had their supporters and detractors. Murray's position gradually prevailed, as he gained support from like-minded expatriates such as Ulli Beier and E.H. Duckworth, editor of *Nigeria*, and was ultimately enshrined in the Natural Synthesis philosophy espoused by Uche Okeke, Bruce Onobrakpeya, and other Zaria artists in the 1960s.

3 The Mbari workshops in Ibadan and Oshogbo in the early 1960s were spawned by Ulli Beier, inspired by an art workshop in Mozambique. Initially the workshops were run under the auspices of the Mbari Writers' and Artists' Club in Ibadan and later under Mbari Mbayo in

Oshogbo. Led by established artists (not by Beier), these short-term workshops served as antithetical alternatives to formal Western-style art school training.

4 The Onobrakpeya plastographs technique originated from accidental drops of metal-binding glue on to a zinc plate, which had been damaged by dipping it into hydrochloric acid instead of nitric acid. The excess glue left on the plate actually produced interesting textural and sculptural effects. This led to further experimentation. Additive plastographs are an elaboration on the plastographic technique; it uses glue to draw the image on an abrasive surface, thus avoiding using acid or sharp tools to cut the plate. Onobrakpeya's metal-foil prints use thin sheets of metal foil with a resin between the plate and the foil, thereby creating a repoussé surface.

5 The Ford Foundation in West Africa, which was the primary funder throughout the first decade of the Harmattan Workshop, shifted its program priorities and withdrew support. But Onobrakpeya had already begun diversifying funding sources, including establishing an endowment. The Ford Foundation also guided the Bruce Onobrakpeya Foundation in professionalizing its administration and operations and in capacity building.

6 At the March 10, 2010, auction at Bonham's (New York) Bruce Onobrakpeya's mixed media work *Environmental Regeneration* (2005) sold for the impressive sum of \$42,700 (estimate \$35,000–\$45,000). Good news for the Harmattan Workshop, which will be the beneficiary.

7 It is noteworthy that Onobrakpeya's project is going strong while those of Okeke, Nwoko, and Wangboje are moribund.

8 Onobrakpeya views his growth as a teacher and as an artist as parallel and complementary. But he admits, poignantly, that he was envious of his peers from Zaria: "I was angry because I thought I wasn't enjoying what my colleagues—Demas Nwoko, Adamu Baikie, Uche Okeke and so on—were enjoying. I was affected psychologically,

I became a recluse. I was willing to spend all my extra time doing art because I wanted to balance up with these artists ..." (Harmattan Workshop Exhibition 2002:12–13). The high school where he taught, St. Gregory's College, encouraged his exhibiting and experimenting. As things have turned out, Onobrakpeya over the course of his long career has done a lot more art-making than any of his Zaria colleagues.

9 South African architect Julian Beinart and Portuguese-Mozambican architect Amancia "Pancho" Guedes had conducted an art workshop in Lourenço Marques in 1960 that appealed to Ulli Beier's experimental approach. Dutch printmaker Ru van Rossem, a kindred spirit, was a critical influence in Bruce Onobrakpeya's subsequent career.

10 The friendship of Bruce Onobrakpeya and Demas Nwoko goes back to their days at school in Zaria, so Demas is willing to overlook the cutting of corners in building the studio that he designed. Demas "does not have as much control as he would like [in the construction] but these two old friends understand the depth of their pockets and therefore perfection may not be attained! The building, though unfinished, stands as a tribute to those long standing colleagues and the ideals which they founded at Zaria nearly fifty years ago" (Godwin and Hopwood 2007:93).

11 Six Harmattan Workshop catalogues have been published: 1998–1999, 2000, 2002, 2003, 2004, 2005, and 2006. There was no workshop in 2001. Catalogues for 2007 through 2010 are awaiting publication as of this writing.

12 Some of the better-known facilitators at the Harmattan Workshops—apart from Bruce Onobrakpeya himself—are Kunle Adeyemi, Oladepo Afolayan, John T. Agberia, Olu Amoda, Harrie Bazunu, Ndidi Dike, Nelson Edewor, Peju Layiwola, Mike Omoighe, Kolade Oshinowo, Sam Ovrati, and Uwa Usen.

13 Folashade Temitope Ogunlade, from Ogbomoso, a first-time participant in 2010, writes (personal communication, May 31, 2010) that she was drawn by the opportunity to work with facilitator Sam Ovraitai in the painting section: "This marks my first time at the workshop, yet I can't wait for so many to come. This feeling is based on the experience and impression the workshop gave me. Firstly, the site is very inspiring for any true artist. Secondly, the facilitators are ready to share their own ideas and secrets about African art. They are equally ready to follow up on progress of their students during and after the workshop."

"The greatest achievement of this workshop is the ability to create unity and bridge the wide gap between the masters, professionals, and upcoming professionals (young artists). They did not just teach [me] how to create art, but they shared practical experiences on what they faced in becoming masters. The workshop experience has always been given flavour by the renowned Nigerian pastel and water colourist, Sam Ovraitai, who has always been one of the facilitators. Most of the young participants have been attracted to the workshop through him ...

"Nevertheless, the workshop needs more awareness in tertiary institutions and sponsorship by organizations, galleries, etc. to students who also have passion but can't afford much. Some students from my school wanted to come but changed their minds after weighing the cost ... A lot of people draw conclusions that are false, but only one night in Agbarha-Otor will change their perception. The workshop gives more than it takes. It breaks hierarchy and make all things one."

14 Kunle Adeyemi (personal communication, April 29, 2010) writes: "The studio critique that goes on at the Harmattan Workshop is between the facilitator and participants of a section. The facilitator, aside from instructing the participants on technique, materials, and sometimes subject matter, is also involved in producing his art work. He does a general critique of the participants' production, sometimes in the area of subject matter, composition, arrangements, style, use of materials, and technique, etc. The other workshop critique is between participants themselves. Because of the different knowledge levels of participants at the workshop (highly skilled, skilled, semi-skilled and unskilled), it is easier for some participants to critique positively works of others; the semi-skilled and unskilled in a section are critiqued by the skilled artists because of their technical advantage. Another form of critique happens when facilitators and participants from other sections move around to see what others are doing ... thereby help in critiquing some of the works produced."

"However, as a facilitator in the printmaking section in the just concluded edition, I made it a point of duty to put my students together after the day's work to reflect and review on what we have done so far and critiqued works produced, highlighting the strengths and weaknesses in each of the works produced. I gave room for independent production of works... However, I moderated the technical areas because most of the participants that registered under printmaking at the first session have never practiced the art before. It was mandatory for me to teach them the technical aspect of the art and see to how they have been able to perfect the art."

15 Harmattan facilitators Peju Layiwola, Sam Ovraitai, Kunle Adeyemi, Olu Amoda, and Jide Adeniyi-Jones confirm in email communications with the author that their critique of participants' work is primarily based on handling of materials and technical issues.

16 The *Critique Handbook* (Buster and Crawford 2010) identifies several types of critique leaders: con-

noisseurs, judges, evaluators, specialists, narcissists, drill sergeants, unconditional supporters, philosophers, and theorists.

17 Sam Ovraitai (personal communication, June 13, 2010): "On art criticism? Yes there is art criticism. For my many years of attending art schools and Nigerian workshops, I have observed that art criticism has not been taken seriously ... Art graduates coming out from schools lacked proper understanding of what art criticism entails. These art graduates are then employed to teach in art schools. The resultant effect is a crop of artists who are taught by art teachers who criticize the work of their students based on what they like or what they don't like ... Art history is not taught in depth and students don't have proper understanding of the mosaic of art and art history—the styles and characteristics for proper critique. Simple definitions such as perspective, impressionism, analytical Cubism, and other art terms are misconstrued. Students therefore learn how their masters do it rather than how they can use proper critiques to crystallize their inner creative ideas."

"At the Harmattan Workshop, facilitators criticize the works in their various sessions based on their intent and the thrust of their experiments. But still the knowledge of the participants and facilitators will usually determine the style and level of critique given. Most times, art works created are appraised as they are being produced. Critical comments and appraisals from workshop participants and explanations from the artists who are handling the work are common experiences. At the end of all the Harmattan Workshops an art historian with experience in art criticism is invited ... for a day [during which] the works are [reviewed] with in-depth analysis by all participants with the invited art critique/historian [serving] as moderator."

"In art schools like the polytechnic in Auchi where I taught, there were formal and informal critique sessions, which comes up in three broad forms: (1) when the lecturer is demonstrating in class and during the practical classes; (2) when lecturers are doing group assessment of students' works; and (3) when students are working in the studio [singly] or in a group, be it lecturer or student or both encounter the work and decide to do the critique. In schools all critiques had always been interactive with the moderate being the lecturer handling the course or a person perceived to be in a position to know better. Whether these critiques have the desired impact is left to the work already done by the curriculum structured to understand the basic terminology of criticism."

"As different art schools have different bearing and ideology, so also do their trust of criticism. The Auchi colourist school are avant-garde based—with colors as their primary intent; the Yaba Tech, realism; the Nsukka, Uli; and Ile-Ife, Onaism. Their ideological differences make for different points of focus. All the same, art criticism still abounds. One can conveniently say there is a critique culture in Nigeria, even if it is not fully a societal norm."

18 The effectiveness and robustness of art critique at Nigeria's universities is a topic that needs examination and is beyond the scope of this paper. Anecdotal evidence points to a decline in the quality of studio art critique at Nigerian art schools.

19 In 2011 the Harmattan Workshop Gallery relocated from Victoria Island to Ikotun, Lagos.

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