

Environmental Challenges as Creative Muse: The Installation and Performance Art of Bright Ugochukwu Eke

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Abstract

Our modern African society is challenged by many environmental issues owing to industrialization and exploitation of natural resources and other activities that are coeval with western-oriented modernity. The Niger Delta of Nigeria is particularly challenged in ways not found in other parts of the country and elsewhere due to the unethical processes of oil extraction. In the Niger Delta region, water, air and land pollution are serious environmental challenges that affect the biodiversity and the ecosystem. These deplorable issues have become creative muse for writers and visual artists with the resultant genres known as the Niger Delta Literature (NDL) and the Niger Delta Visuals (NDV). This paper engages the conceptual and installation art of Bright Ugochukwu Eke, a young and innovative contemporary Nigerian artist now based in Los Angeles, USA. Eke's uncommon exploration of water as a sculpture medium was sparked by an experience of acid rain he had in Port Harcourt, Rivers State, Nigeria in 2005. Eke is widely exhibited with many international awards and residencies.

Keywords: Niger Delta, curse of oil, environmental pollution, acid rain and installation art.

1. Introduction: "The Curse of Oil"

The first paragraph of Arne Perras's (2012) essay titled, "The Curse of Oil," gives a graphic and macabre imagery of the engaged spaces of Nigeria's Niger Delta. He states: "Where you to make a film about the end of the world, it could be set here: at this clearing, at the edge of the mangroves. Dense black smoke darkens the sky, the sound of steam: hissing, spitting sounds. And time and again, huge flames shoot up. Perhaps the script calls for a scene of the earth destruction, and now a few people continue to try to live. Somehow" (Perras, 2012, p. 17). This apocalyptic and entangled imagery evokes an illegal distillation camp, an alternative means of survival for the endangered peoples of the Niger Delta that furthers the environmental degradation caused by the oil companies. Although oil extraction has been going on here for more than 50 years, it remains grossly underdeveloped and poor and "[t]he average life expectancy in the delta is now forty-one years" (Ursprung, 2012, p. 10). Ursprung further states that, "The traditional food supply from agriculture and fishing is no longer feasible, made impossible by constant acid rain and the oil pouring out of the rusty or sabotaged pipelines; the fish are dying in the contaminated water. Livestock - cows, goats and sheep - have to be imported from northern Nigeria" (Ursprung, 2012, p. 10). Judging by the living conditions in the Niger Delta, one cannot but agree with the predominate assertion that oil has been more of a curse than blessing to the people of Niger Delta. The curse of oil is the theme of Ogaga Ifowodo's very imagistic poem titled "Jese." In the poem, Madam Edoja breaks her ninety days of silence with a mournful song: Oil is my curse, oil is our doom/ Where is my husband, where is my only love?/ At the bottom of the sea, the bottom of the sea/ Oil is my curse, oil is our doom./ Where is the fish for palm-oil soup?/ Dead in the creeks, dead in the lakes./ Oh mate, do you have a cup of garri/ to lend me for the children's sake?/ Not even a cup, not even a handful! The fields are tarred where cassava once grew,/ you know the fields are tarred and harder/ than a shell, too hard for our hoes./ Oil is my curse, oil is my doom./ Where are my children? Where is my husband?/ Ashes and bones. Ashes and bones (Ifowodo, 2005, p. 17). This poem evokes the imagery of despondency and death in nature's abundance: an irony and reality of the Niger Delta people. The Niger Delta region appears to be the only place on earth where the paradox of crude oil as a curse exists. Other environmental challenges faced by the inhabitants of the "poor oil-rich Niger Delta" (Akinleye, 2012) are oil spillage and gas flaring that cause water and air pollution, acid rain and a devastated ecosystem.

These environmental challenges/abuse have caused a series of peaceful and violent revolts and resistance in the Niger Delta. The first violent resistance and struggle lasted for twelve days when Isaac Jasper Adaka Boro and the militia

group he formed, the Niger Delta Volunteer Force, NDVF, declared the Niger Delta Republic on February 23, 1966. The armed resistance was squashed by the Nigerian armed forces on March 6, 1966. In recent years, more violent resistance have been initiated by the members of Movement for the Survival of the Ogoni People (MOSOP) formed in 1990; Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND) founded in 2004 and other militant groups.

Over the years, the various environmental challenges of the Niger Delta and the continuing expropriation of the resources of the region have given rise to a corpus of creative expressions by writers and artists which have been classified as the Niger Delta Literature (NDL) and the Niger Delta Visuals (NDV). Harrie Bazunu (2012, p. 11) asserts that "The existence of Niger Delta literature is not contestable. It has been brought to light through the work of great writers like John Pepper Clark, Ken Saro Wiwa, Tanure Ojaide, Gordini Darah and Ogaga Ifowodo." In the preceding paragraphs Bazunu (2012, p. 10) christened contemporary artworks on Niger Delta issues "Niger Delta Visuals (NDV)." Artists living in the Niger Delta and beyond have engaged the environmental issues of the Niger Delta in their contemporary expressions and Harrie Bazunu's Ph.D dissertation titled *Semiotic Elements in Selected Artworks on the Niger Delta* is a major research work on this burgeoning genre. Some Nigerian Diaspora artists and scholars who have produced NDV works include: Yinka Shonibare, *Black Gold I* (2006); Sokari Douglas Camp, *Teasing Suicide* (2004); dele jegede, *Niger Delta: Apocalypse* (2011) and Moyo Okediji, *Niger Delta Oil Spillage* (2012).

The conceptual and installation art of Bright Ugochukwu Eke (b. 1976), a Nigerian Diaspora artist based in Los Angeles, USA is the main focus of this paper. Eke's body of work falls under the Niger Delta Visuals (NDV) given that the acid rain experience that stimulated the artist's creative muse in the exploration of water as a contemporary sculpture medium happened in Port Harcourt, a major Niger Delta City; and from his earliest works that engaged the environmental issues of the Niger Delta to his later installations created as a Diaspora artist, Eke has continued to use water and its associated elements to interrogate the "problems of environmental destruction and the disconnection between humans and nature that allow for ecological devastation" (Matthews, 2009).

2. Acid Rain as Creative Muse

It was sometime in 2005 while working on a site in Port Harcourt, Rivers State, that Bright Ugochukwu Eke, who was then an MFA student in the Department of Fine and Applied Arts, University of Nigeria, Nsukka, experienced acid rain which jolted his creative muse. Eke reveals: "I was working outside the rain. In two days I discovered skin irritation from toxic chemicals that go into the atmosphere from the industries. The emissions from the industries come down when it rains. I was not surprised, as Port Harcourt has a lot of industries, especially in the manufacturing and the oil production. Then I came to think about not just myself but the people who live around the area. What about the aquatic life? What about the vegetation?" (Weintraub, 2012, p. 161). This creative epiphany was cultured and conditioned by the master sculptor, El Anatsui (b. 1944) who was Eke's teacher in his undergraduate and his MFA research supervisor. Anatsui's creative sensitive and sensibility are foundational to his discovery and appropriation of chain saw as a sculpting tool and the use of aluminum bottle covers as sculpture materials. Anatsui's use of the chain saw and the liquor bottle caps have resulted in intriguing body of contemporary artworks.



Figure 1. Acid Rain, 2005, Water, Ammonium Chloride, Cellophane. Nsukka. Photo: Courtesy of the artist.

Eke's *Acid Rain* (2005, Figure 1) is composed primarily of acidified water achieved by the admixture of ammonium chloride from spent dry cell batteries. Eke simulates multiple enlarged droplets of water by containing and tying the acidified water in transparent polyurethane film, then stringing them and suspending/installing them vertically from the edges of corrugated roofs as seen in (Figure 1) or from tree branches as seen in (Figure 2), or in an exhibition space as seen in (Figure 3). In the various display spaces: enclosed or open, the prevailing spaces are condensed and dispersed in nuanced spatiality. This highly conceptual installation art, problematizes visually the living condition of the inhabitants of the Niger Delta region. *Acid Rain*, an ephemeral environmental sculpture is Eke's seminal piece that has been installed in many exhibitions across the globe. Outside of Nsukka where it was created, it was first shown at Dak'art biennial, Dakar, Senegal in 2005 and it won Eke a Djerassi Artists Residency Program in California, USA. In an email correspondence with the artist, he states: "I have produced and installed 'Acid Rain' in different forms at different places, some of which include: Dak'Art Senegal, Copenhagen, Netherlands, Italy, Paris, South Africa, Aland Islands, Germany, and Lagos. Some places I had cancelled putting up the piece due to management and also it's tedious processes" (Eke, 2012).



Figure 2. Acid Rain, 2005, Water, Ammonium Chloride, Cellophane. Goethe Institut, Lagos. Photo: The author



Figure 3. Water Drop, 2008, Water, Charcoal, Cellophane. Paris. Photo: Courtesy of the artist.

Historically, "the concept of acid rain was first referred to by Robert Augus in 1872 during the industrial revolution to mean any acidic precipitation (such as rain and fog among others) or depositions that occur downwind of areas where major emission of SO₂, CO₂, and NO_x from human activities takes place (Oden, 1976; Botkin and Keller, 1998 and Efe, 2010b)" (Efe, 2011). Efe further notes that, "In Nigeria, acid rain has been observed in Warri, the rural areas of Delta State, Nigeria and the Niger Delta region of Nigeria" (Efe, 2011). And "[o]ne environmental watchdog group warns that

constant flaring now causes acid rain to fall in the Delta one day in every ten, in addition to blanketing it with layer after layer of fine particles and reputedly cancer-causing soot (Environmental Research Foundation 1997)" (Anderson, 2002, p. 145). These disturbing reports show how the Niger Delta area is one of the most ecologically disturbed and endangered spaces in the world.

Acid rain which is a negative marker of western modernity, technology and exploitative culture is increasingly corroding our lives and ecosystem. Prior to the incursion of western technology, values and materialistic culture, our forebears lived with a cosmological and religious ideology that respected man, nature and divinity. Today, the preponderance of western ideology of man against nature and its burgeoning atheistic philosophy, have created a rift between man and nature. In the past, "people [of the Niger Delta] treated the waters with great respect" (Eisenhofer, 2012, p. 29). And on the cultural significance of water to the Ijo people of the Niger Delta, Marla C. Berns and Mary (Polly) Nooter Roberts (2002, p. 10) note that, "water is synonymous with life itself, with spiritual sustenance, with wealth and prosperity, and especially with communication and identity." The consequence of oil extraction is not only on the environment but also on the overall cultural life of the peoples of the Niger Delta nay Nigeria. These ecological challenges are central in Eke's installation/performance art and he philosophizes thus: "Water is a precious natural medium/resource with universal language. It occupies the largest part of the earth, but has been disrespected, polluted, and contaminated with the advent of industrialization. It has been forced to lose its spirituality and purity ... I am interested in exploring water in ways that can examine global, human and environmental issues" (Eke, 2008).

The despoiling of the biodiversity and the ecosystem is a widening gyre. And "[a]ccording to environmentalists, between 9 and 14 million barrels of oil have been spilled in the Niger Delta in the past 50 years" (Perras, 2012, p. 17). The spilling of oil into the bodies of water has resulted in the death of many aquatic creatures particularly the fish, which for long has been a major food for the peoples of this region. Fish is not only an important diet to the ethnicities in this region but also a significant part of their religious and ontological constructs. The importance of fish can be seen in their wide range of masquerade complexes that include *oki*, sawfish; *apedeu*, lake perch; *kabi*, tiger fish and *tabala*, tilapia. Unfortunately, the fishes are dying in thousands due to the pollution of the waters. This grave situation informs Eke's *Exiled from River of Oil* (2007, Figure 4). This intriguing installation is a euphemistic or rather a poetic expression of the apocalyptic condition of fishes in the bodies of water of the Niger Delta. They appear to be so much alive having been suspended in "ether-formaldehyde" to defy death in a "tree-vitrine." This piece appears to be an ethical visual pun on Damien Hirst's *The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living* (1991), a death shark suspended in formaldehyde contained in a vitrine.



Figure 4. Exiled from River of Oil, 2007, Wood and Oil. California, USA. Photo: Courtesy of the artist.

Eke's effort to "protect" man from acid rain is materialized in his *Shield* (2005-2006, Figure 5). *Shield* is composed of many raincoats and umbrellas fashioned from the "pure water sachets" that litter our environment. By using a material associated with water, and in this case the "pure water sachets" used in packaging impure water as pure water, the medium becomes the message both materially and conceptually. The various sizes of the raincoats and umbrellas could be installed as a composite whole within a space as seen in (Figure 5) or they could be animated as kinetic sculpture or performance art as seen in (Figure 6). The elasticity of their display possibilities reifies the postmodernist character that

they enshrine. And in whatever context or mode they are used, they problematize the apocalyptic consequences of air and water pollution which is made worst by the littering of these non-biodegradable materials in our seriously corroded environments.



Figure 5. Shield, 2005-2006, Water Sachets. Goethe Institut, Lagos. Photo: Courtesy of the artist.



Figure 6. Shield, 2005-2006, Water Sachets. Nsukka. Photo: Courtesy of the artist.

Focusing on the problem of nonavailability of potable water to most Nigerians, Eke created the piece titled, *Wata na Wata (Water is Water)* (2005, Figure 7). In this conceptually condensed and minimalist installation, water from six different sources are contained in six bottles, three are glass while the other three are plastic. Just by visual perception, one can feel the impure state of these waters; but notwithstanding, most Nigerians who cannot afford anything better use the non-discriminately phrase, "wata na wata" as they consume and use what ever kind of impure water that is available. This disposition of most Nigerians may black people of Africa towards water, whether pure or impure, is embedded in Fela Anikulapo Kuti's classic "Water No Get Enemy" released in 1975.



Figure 7. Wata na Wata (water is water), 2005, Water from different sources. Photo: Courtesy of the artist.

In the Niger Delta, the living condition is made hellish and excruciating by the continuing environmental pollution and lack of essential amenities. And to compound the hellish conditions created by government's insensitivity and the extended abuse and rape of the land by the Western multinational oil companies and their local allies, the West now brings back the "stillborns," the "diseased" and the "deformed" in the nature of deleterious toxic wastes to dump in the Niger Delta. In an article titled "Toxic-Terrorism on Africa by Americans and Europeans," Odimegwu Onwumere (2010), informs us of an incident of a vessel, Maersk Line vessel, MV Nashville, from the Netherlands that berthed with toxic wastes destined for Nigeria. The vessel was operated by the American President Lines, APL, a wholly owned subsidiary of a Singapore based Neptune Orient Lines. Going down the memory lane, Onwumere reminds us of the 1988 incident at Koko, in the Niger Delta where over 3,500 tonnes of toxic waste were dumped. In a related article by James Brooke, a special to New York Times published on July 17, 1988, he states that:

In this African delta port, where children run barefoot through oil palm plantations and men pilot dugout canoes through mangrove swamps, the arrival of a ship from Europe has often meant disruption.... Escravos and Forcados are the Portuguese words for slaves and indentured. Today, a collection of steel drums stacked behind a villager's family compound here speak of the latest trade with Europe - 10,000 barrels of toxic waste.... As safety laws in Europe and the United States push toxic disposal costs up to \$2,500 a tonne, waste brokers are turning their attention to the closest, poorest and most unprotected shores - West Africa. From Morocco to the Congo, virtually every country on West Africa's coast reports receiving offers this year from American or European companies seeking cheap sites to dispose of hazardous waste. Fees offered African recipients have gone as low as \$3 a tonne. [Emphasis mine] (Onwumere, 2010)



Figure 8. Back from Shore, 2006, Junks. Goethe Institut, Lagos. Photo: Courtesy of the artist.

The analogy of the raped land - Niger Delta - being used as burial ground for the "stillborns," the "diseased" and the "deformed" (the toxic wastes) from the West, is a very disturbing reality. These incidents and others seemed to have informed Eke's sculptural installation titled *Back from Shore* (2006, Figure 8). This is a visual reportage of a vessel berthing and offloading containers of toxic, industrial and technological wastes like polychlorinated biphenyl sulphate (PCBS), methyl melamine, dimethyl ethyl-acetate formaldehyde, broken electronics and computers, clothes and underwear. The most commonly dumped "wastes" today in Africa are substandard consumer goods of all sorts. In this installation, a schematic ship bodied with rusted and hollowed aluminum zinc, offloads huge quantities of toxic wastes, damaged products and substandard items on our shores. Paradoxically, most of these junks and waste are sourced by Nigerians from various garbage junkyards in Europe and America. Here, the complexity and ambiguity of what is a junk or a stuff is enacted: "Stuff as the junk we keep and junk as the stuff we throw away." For the rich in the West, most of what they consider junk are seen as stuffs and treasures by most Africans. Alas, the current poor state of Africa is largely a consequence of Western exploitation, colonialism and neocolonialism that have been on since the 15th century. After so many years of forceful exploitation and enslavement of Africans by the West, the modern Africans are now migrating to the West through many dangerous means/routes to be menial servants and sex slaves. And in a grossly materialistic and "plastify" (Rafailovic, 2012) West, a significant number of African emigrants are drowning in the ocean of materialism and hedonism. In the installation and performance art titled *Drowning* (2008, Figure 9) produced in Arnhem, Netherlands, Eke used thousands of plastic water bottles stringed together to form the waves and movements of a body of water. And within the simulated ocean tides, a black person with only the arms still above the water, appears to be drowning in a hyper consumerist culture.



Figure 9. Drowning, 2008, Plastic bottles/Performance. Arnhem, Netherlands. Photo: Courtesy of the artist.

3. Conclusion

An ominous cloud hangs over the Niger Delta as the pollution of the environment continues unabated. While others lament the situation and some have taken the path of violence in the struggle to save the Niger Delta region, its peoples and culture; some creative minds have used their creative works in this struggle of redemption and regeneration. Hence, environmental challenges have become creative muses for writers and artists. Of all the artists whose creative expressions and ideas have been inspired by the issues and consequences of oil extraction in the Niger Delta, Bright Ugochukwu Eke appears to be one artist whose creative strategy and ideology are exceptionally critical and edgy. Just recently, his site-specific installations: *Ripples and Storm I and II* (2011) were shown in "Environment and Object: Recent African Art" curated by Lisa Aronson. The exhibition opened at the Skidmore College Frances Young Tang Teaching Museum and Art Gallery in Saratoga Springs, N.Y. on February 5 through July 31, 2011. It then travelled to the Anderson Gallery of Virginia Commonwealth University in Richmond (September 9 to December 11) and to the Middlebury College Museum of Art in Vermont (January 27 to April 22, 2012).

Bright Ugochukwu Eke received his BA and MFA in sculpture from the Department of Fine and Applied Arts, University of Nigeria, Nsukka, Nigeria. He has had several art residencies, solo and group exhibitions around the world. Eke is presently based in Los Angeles, California, USA and has distinguished himself as a contemporary artist with a critical focus on environmental issues.

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