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Reading in Detail:
An Analysis of the work of Ndidi Dike Nnadiekwe

Katy Deepwell

Ndidi Dike Nnadiekwe was born in London. She went to secondary school in Onitsha, Nigeria before attending the University of Nigeria, Nsukka (1976-1984). Her work has been shown in many exhibitions in Nigeria, USA, and Europe including 'Nigerian Contemporary Art: A Female Perspective' (USA: Illinois, Ragdale Foundation, Lake Forest, October 1992); Seven Stories About Modern Art in Africa (London: Whitechapel Gallery, 1995); Eight African Women Artists (Liverpool, June 1993, London 181 Gallery). ‘Nigeriana’ (Nigerian High Commission, Ghana, 1990). In 1989 her work was included in the Havanna Biennal exhibition in Cuba. She has taken part in several artists’ workshops including one in 1989 organised by the Goethe Institute and Yaba College of Technology, Lagos and in 1995 a workshop for the Africa ’95 festival in the UK at the Yorkshire Sculpture Park.

‘Dike pays fleeting attention to the indigenous art traditions of Africa, as though leafing through a vast volume of African cultural history: images do not stay long enough to make any lasting impression. She is drawn to the culture and art of Africa, yet she is distanced from it to the extent that she enjoys her freedom to take as much from the vast resources as her spirit wills. Consequently her sculptures merely suggest their cultural provenance, making no claim to particulars.’ Chika Okeke

Chika Okeke's reading of Ndidi Dike's work in the Seven Stories About Modern Art in Africa exhibition catalogue of 1995 highlights the much-debated tension between the modern and the traditional in contemporary Nigerian art as well as the politics of ‘National Synthesis’ developed by the Zaria Arts Society in Nigeria. Dike’s wood panels are in this reading situated as a successful synthesis in which ‘objects
from Akan, fulani and Igbo material cultures fuse together to create something
tellingly African, dispassionately contemporary (there is also an unmistakable
presence of uli, nsibidi and akwete motifs and designs in her work). Okeke highlights
the critical relation to traditional art forms which is characteristic of Dike’s work
and its modernity, while also suggesting that this different relationship may be the
result of a different lived experience. How can we characterise this experience, as
African, as specifically Nigerian, as a woman, as an artist?

In *Nka : Journal of Contemporary African Art* in 1995, Salah Hassan offers a
useful framework for understanding ‘The Modernist Experience in African Art’ an
article subtitled ’Visual Expressions of the Self and Cross-cultural Aesthetics’. Hassan argues for an intertextual, dialogic approach to reveal social relations of
intellectual production working at several different temporal, spatial and historical
levels. While Hassan’s article makes clear the number of different strategies adopted
by the modern African artist in the renegotiation of the traditional and the modern
and the extended dialogue with Western centers of modernism and modernist
practice, he points also to the asymmetrical privileging of the West’s preoccupation
with a monologue between a presumed cultural self and an ethnographic ‘other’.

Taking on board Hassan’s ideas and developing them from a Western feminist
perspective, it is possible to position Dike’s work in a new set of comparisons with
the formal strategies across painting/relief/sculpture of the American modernist
sculptor Louise Nevelson. The aim of the comparison is not to reinstate the binary
opposition Hassan rightly criticises but to show how the comparison may enhance
and develop an understanding of the particularity of each artist. Separated by nearly
half a century in age, working in two different countries, America and Nigeria, the
differences between these two artists superficially could not be greater.

What initially unites Nevelson and Dike are a number of formal strategies in
their work. For both artists, their primary medium is wood, carved and assembled in
panel forms, Dike’s panelled reliefs and Nevelson’s famous *Walls*. They both produce
single works as part of larger series and both use found objects in their work, though
Dike’s work is less dependent on this than Nevelson’s. Both artists’ sculptures/reliefs
rely on both accumulation of detail, ‘multi-layered’ textures and a strong tactile sense
(These two features take on a very specific meaning in relation to the idea of ‘reading
in detail’ (Naomi Schor) below and a case can easily be made that their work involves
concepts of the feminine as identified by French writers like H.Cixous and
L.Irigaray). In order to compare the two artists in this way, a high degree of
formalistic abstraction is needed: a position which overlooks all details even though
the really interesting argument is only to be found in the accumulation of details. If
one reads the detail, it is here that the differences between their projects lie and the
contrast becomes most apparent between a Western modernist, born in Russia who
lived and worked in America and a modern African artist, born in England who lives
and works in Nigeria.
Although both artists deliberately restrict their palettes to a minimum number of colours: Nevelson to black, gold and white, Dike to the traditional uli colours - red, yellow ochre, white, earth hues and additional blues. Rather than relying on method in which the colour unifies and the piece works through shadows produced by architectural scale installation and lighting which is Nevelson's strategy, Dike only occasionally enhances the multiple types of natural wood she uses with inks, the stain generally highlights the basic colour of the wood. Dike's choice of woods also seeks to provide a continuity between old and new: Indonesian rosewood, elm, spotted beech, cedar, copperfoil, iroko, pirana, camwood and pinewood, whereas no such discrimination was made by Nevelson who painted the walls to hide the range of different, often scrap, woods she used.

Both artists repeatedly use a circle motif as symbolic not just of the sun, a circle/cycle of life, but also ch’i (a unifying breath, spirit), though again to very different ends and in the context of a different vocabulary of motifs. Dike’s carved circle - the only motif to frequently cross the panels of her compositions - acts as visual focus to both unify the work, but also to introduce a spiritual dimension: Igbo cosmology. Nevelson frequently fragments the circle across the box forms which make up her walls and very occasionally she separates the circle out, highlighting its significance as a moon or sun form by hanging these separate forms above the entrance to her installations.

Nevelson did exploit the ethnographic Other in her work, with a particular interest in Mayan forms, and developed a personal collection of African masks between the 1930’s and 1960s. Her interest in totems (both Mayan and African) was mediated by the Modernist gaze of Picasso and of Henry Moore, and she became familiar with these ideas through her friendships with Diego Riviera, Wolfgang Paalen and through the latter with Surrealism. If one remains locked in this paradigm, Dike’s work can only appear as an ethnographic Other; bearing the recognisable signs of traditional African motifs and carved forms. As Hassan points out, underlying this dichotomy is another of Western individualism versus perceptions of communally-centred activity in which:

“The other is perceived here as static, non-changing and ahistorical [practices arising from the traditional village African], while the ‘self’ is viewed as universal, dynamic, changing and historical’ [the archetype of Western Modernist practice].”

However, this binary opposition is plainly false for the purposes of such a comparison, given Dike’s practice and her location as a contemporary artist in Nigeria. The particulars here are again important as Dike’s use of African imagery and symbols are not used to develop either a private symbolic vocabulary [much argued for in the case of key Modernists], nor are they available to be read in a straightforward iconographic way. Their particularity is important as a set of floating signifiers which announce a critical project towards a disappearing traditional culture. Dike describes her technique as ‘mobile mixed media’. Her sculptures are
composite: assemblages of different but mainly African woods, frequently she adds to the panels, beads, mirrors or items from the Ijele masquerade, for example, Agbagho Mmuo, in which the nuances and the characteristics of female behaviour are displayed by men. Again, the contrast with Nevelson is revealing; for Nevelson, the found object, off-cuts of wood, broken chairs, random pieces of machine-tooled wood were incorporated into a larger whole in such a way as to lose their original identity and become a form within the greater single whole of the sculpture. In this, Nevelson followed a transformative Surrealist aesthetic which valued the ‘found’ object and chance selection. In Dike’s work, such as ‘Traditional Igbo Women Mirrorholders’ part of the ‘Diminishing Culture’ series the mirrors are placed, almost in a procession, across the top section of the panelled piece. They remain objects to be perceived in themselves but are also drawn into a relationship with the horizontally carved sections beneath and the heavily worked circle which lies beneath the one on the far right.

How each artist uses the accumulation of detail across the surfaces of the walls/panels is also important. Nevelson built her walls as a structure of boxes, often with strong verticals, but using a varying set of abstract motifs, generated by found and assembled pieces. In Dike’s work, strong vertical designs generally predominate. The motifs and patterns which accumulate across the panels emphasise a multiplicity of textures and different intensities between burnt carving and flat surfaces, in which, as the artist suggests, the working of the surface is designed to ‘bring the flat piece of wood to life’. Incorporated into her reliefs are drawing motifs from the tradition of wood-carvings, textile patterns, uli motifs, - lizard, tortoise - derived from Igbo folk tales, Nsibide symbols from southeastern Nigeria - pictograms and Kalabashi burnt engravings as in her two pieces ‘Offering for a Child’ or ‘Ndigbo Regalia’ (a part of the traditional Igbo chieftaincy attire). In the choice of wood-carving, they bear an echo of the carving techniques of Igbo doors. Unlike these doors, the irregular panels do not conform to a uniformity in shape or overall design.

Chika Okeke draws a brief but interesting comparison in his discussion above with the work of El Anatsui, a teacher at Nsukka in the mid-seventies where Dike also studied, and Onobrakpeya’s mixed media installations - an artist who like Dike, also moved from painting to 3-D media. Anatsui considered that ‘modern art...can claim no legitimacy if it is not based on one’s originary art traditions and culture, from which vantage it can then seek to appropriate suitable foreign ideas or techniques. It is the awareness of these historical realities by contemporary African peoples that could engender the necessary collective re-affirmation.’

Anatsui’s work also explores the history of Africa and the present Otherisation of Africa through assembled panels, carving, and pictographs from a range of African symbolic forms: nsibidi, Bamun, Njoya, Bolange, uli and adinkrya. However, Dike’s work, as Okeke acknowledges is far from fundamentalist, nor is it an argument concerning nationalism. Dike’s works are a critical re-engagement with traditional forms, a search for a new identity, from the perspective of the modern African artist.
Hassan’s article also usefully distinguishes the contemporary and the traditional by the specific historical-cultural location of its emergence in a formal education system, nationalistic cultural resurgence and systems of patronage and exhibition practices. Hassan highlights the movement towards a ‘culturally rooted, self-conscious and ‘African’ aesthetic expression’ in the modern African artist’s search for new tropes of self-expression and new forms of synthesis between Western and traditional African influences: ‘Rejecting the homogenizing effect of Western cultural imperialism, especially its neo-primitivising and exoticizing tendencies, African artists have repositioned themselves as creators of an autonomous global art.’

While I agree with Hassan’s argument via James Clifford for a new understanding of ‘authenticity’ to be ‘reconceived as hybrid creative activity in a local present-becoming future’ and that ‘Non-Western cultural and artistic works are implicated by an interconnecting cultural system without necessarily being swamped by it’. The production of authenticity has all too often been salvaged iconographically in art criticism as an argument for specific local character, a recognisable ‘African-ness’ in an international art market, rather than a more critical project concerning representation and the identification of presences/absences. Debates about postmodernism in the visual arts confusingly speak about both the importance of the local AND the critical deconstructive project of contemporary art defined in relationship to the employment of floating signifiers from diverse cultures.

However, hybridity in postmodern debates has frequently been asserted as an autonomous value without necessary implying any critical reading or political stand. While it may add weight to claims for the recognition of an autonomous African art in the postmodern international mainstream, particularly where post-colonial debates are taken on board, debates around postmodernism are manifestly in need of distinguishing critically between works with a political cultural-critical edge and those which all too cynically gesture towards a seemingly radical look of hybrid awareness.

I would argue for productive engagement as opposed to relativity, since works are not always seen in their local context but increasingly positioned in an international frame and thus move in and out of many divergent contexts and different kinds of spaces. The exhibition space, the framing of the temporary show, the magazine and newspaper reportage, the catalogue all provide an endless layering and proliferation of meaning, framing and reframing the reading of the work.

Naomi Schor’s discussion of the problematic detail is useful here, especially her discussion of Lukacs’ use of particularity, or specialty, as a means to challenge Western aesthetics. She argues that Lukacs reread Hegel’s tripartite division of Aesthetics into the universal (the Ideal, determination of art); particularity (the arts as spatio-temporally different); and individuality (the socio-historical factors involved in the actual works of art with real examples). The centrality of the concept
of particularity in Lukacs is useful, as Schor describes it, for the way in which it acts as the middle or meeting point in which the forces generating a work of art are reconciled:

‘There is then...a movement going from speciality to universality (and back), and at the same time, a movement going from speciality to individuality (and back); in both cases, it is the movement towards speciality that brings the process to closure.’12

These distinctions exist again only at the level of analysis but they do provide another point of departure from the contrast of universal and individual (a debate which modernism has laid exclusive claim to). For, as Lukacs also stresses: ‘The relationship of particularity to individuality consists in an eternal process of cancellation (Aufhebung), wherein the moment of preservation (Aufbewahrung) is in a certain sense more strongly emphasized.’13

The detail, Schor argues, can manifest both presence and absence; it can act as a marker or operate as a trace of a trace. The detail does not simply authenticate, it can also negate, marking absence not just presence. Dike’s works in the ‘Diminishing Culture’ series and related works are a form of history read through symptoms; marking as much the recognition of loss and of things which are negated through the production of presence. While it is not possible to ‘exit’ the Modernist paradigm neither is it fixed in oppositional binaries which permanently and automatically privilege one form or modality above another. This is not to deny the asymmetry, unevenness or power and privileges accrued to certain individuals and denied others only to argue that it is possible to unfix the values behind such binary oppositions.

Parallels between Nevelson and Dike are also revealing in terms of their positioning as both modernist artists and women. Laurie Wilson begins her iconographic analysis of Nevelson’s work with the comment that ‘many critics have either vigorously rejected any search for meaning, or have surrounded the work with vague metaphorical remarks about the mysterious worlds of dawn and dusk’14: allying the feminine with nature, and with closed and interior worlds. Misunderstanding, stereotyping and a lack of scholarship have surrounded the work of many Modernist women, even in the West. In Wilson’s reading of Nevelson’s oeuvre, three themes emerge as central; royalty, marriage and death. These are read through the life and personality of the artist. Priority, however, is always accorded to individual autobiography which locate the production of the work as primarily personal responses to life experiences. Individualism is usually stressed rather than experiments with language, aesthetic preoccupations or a specific synthesis of social practices and ideas. Nevelson was unusual amongst her New York male and female contemporaries in developing a strongly abstract practice in sculpture.

Dike is similarly unusual amongst her own contemporaries in her adoption of carving as her media and this again underlines her critical relation to existing references and symbols. Traditionally Igbo doors have been carved by men even though uli wall painting is a female tradition with a developed vocabulary of abstract
motifs drawn from nature. The use of uli motifs in the work of many male painters associated with the Zaria Art Society and others trained at Nsukka might equally provide an interesting model of the appropriation of a female-produced form by male artists and another inflection of the synthesis of traditional and model. This is not a straightforward gendered role-reversal of forms because of the sex of the artist. However, Dike also appears interested in developing and exploring a female perspective within her critical appropriations but not in confining her work to female-orientated themes. The circle suggests a unifying perspective but it equally spatially acknowledges itself as a unique standpoint in the picture plane.

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Katy Deepwell has edited a collection of new essays on Art Criticism and Africa (Saffron Books, September 1997). Essays from Egypt, Europe, Zimbabwe, Nigeria and South Africa by Olabisi Silva, Everlyn Nicodemus, Fatma Ismail, John Picton, Olu Oguibe, Geroge Shire, Ola Oloidi, Colin Richards, David Koloane, Murray McCartney, Tony Mhonda and Barbara Murray. Enquiries and copies @ £12, email Eastern Art@compuserve.com

Notes
2. ibid.
4. Hassan ibid, p.32 & p.31
7. Okeke op.cit. p.58.
9. ibid, p.32.
10. see C. Jencks A Postmodern Reader (Academie Editions, 1991)

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12. ibid.
13. ibid.

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