

# Creating New Conditions for Creativity: Uche Okeke in conversation with Mario Pissarra

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*by Uche Okeke & Mario Pissarra*

[This is an edited version of a recorded telephone conversation that took place on 10 July 2006. It formed part of a series of conversations conducted for *From the Ground Up*, the Reader developed for the Cape Africa Platform's *Trans Cape* exhibition. Unfortunately, the publication of the Reader was held back indefinitely, as a consequence of the funding shortfall which saw *Trans Cape* being replaced by the *Cape 07* exhibition. This version is identical to that which was prepared for publication. It should also be noted that Okeke has recently relocated to Lagos.]

*For almost 50 years Uche Okeke has been concerned with the decolonisation of art in Africa. As a student in the period preceding and following Nigerian Independence in 1960, he developed the notion of Natural Synthesis, a radical concept that motivated African artists to research the visual practice of indigenous cultures whilst simultaneously encouraging artists to appropriate sources from global art history. In the 1970s Okeke had the opportunity to introduce these ideas into teaching practice at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka and his influence on successive generations of artists is well documented. Beyond his contributions as an artist, theorist and teacher, Okeke has played a critical role in advocating and establishing facilities for artists to practice and for intellectuals to research. He has done this through his numerous writings; his participation in policy processes; his membership of arts organisations; through organising festivals and exhibitions, and most importantly for the purposes of this Reader, by utilising his own resources to establish physical facilities for artistic practice and research. Okeke's Asele Institute has existed in various forms since 1958 [1]. Although it lacks facilities most in the 'developed' world would take for granted, it has survived largely through Okeke's persistence and unwavering commitment to developing infrastructure in an environment where everyday challenges cause many to lose faith or choose easier paths.*

**Mario Pissarra:** I know that the question of infrastructure is very important to you. When you went as a student to the art college at Zaria in the late 1950s [2], one of the things you were concerned with was "what to do to stimulate the growth of contemporary Nigerian art through appropriate organisation environments." [3] Since that time you have been consistently involved in a wide range of initiatives. I want to engage you on some of the key issues that concern the development of infrastructure.

I thought it would be appropriate to first look at the question of whether there are any surviving forms of education that have their origin in the pre-colonial period, and whether there are still traces of these in Nigeria today?

**Uche Okeke:** The pre-colonial model was an issue of apprenticeship.

Apprenticeship in the sense that art in the past was more of a family issue; a lineage issue. In our system there was a family crafting tradition. It's within that tradition that apprenticeship is situated. I'll give examples of what we have in our own family tradition that informed some of the things I did later: the tradition of what later we called the uli system – a system of drawing, decoration – initiated by women in our traditional Igbo society. At a point I said that the uli system was the highest form of drawing; it was done on the human body with motifs and symbols derived from the local environment. These motifs and symbols are the symbology of traditional people. My mother learned how to draw uli signs and symbols from her mother, from her ancestry. I gave her a sheet of paper – uli would normally be done with pen, but I said she could do the uli signs with charcoal on paper. And so she did her drawing – that was in 1959. I was highly impressed by the way the placement of the symbols was done by her. She was asked: if you are drawing on the human body and the ink or the uli stain drips, what would you do? What would be the reaction of the master artist? She chuckled and told me that was how one could identify a master artist. If it dripped the artist would want to control the creative accident. In our own system they will say that there is a type of control, that a new form could come out from that, and the artist's style would be the way he or she would create this new form. You start with what was there – the system, the symbols, stylised over a long time. But the – the system, the symbols, stylised over a long time. But the way the artist would control the accidents would inform the style of the work – and that would be a new thing. That's where I was able to decide that this was the type of problem we have to contend with in the new system – the artist has to control the media, and then be able to create a new form that will be peculiar to him as an individual artist.

**MP:** The one Nigerian tradition of apprenticeship that I am aware of is Yoruba wood-carving. For example, Lamidi Fakeye learned from Bandele, who learned from an apprentice of his father, Areogun, and Areogun learned from Bamgboşe of Osi, who presumably learned from somebody before that. The master-apprentice form of teaching appears to have its origins way back, certainly preceding the arrival of the British. But is there evidence of that kind of model, or any other pre-colonial model surviving today? Is there any value in trying to revive that kind of model – is it actually possible?

**UO:** Actually, artists that are practicing today do not necessarily come from such families. For instance they go to schools and they learn. But I have also looked at some of my students who came from areas with very strong traditions. And they make art more or less effortlessly because they've been watching and reading the past.

**MP:** When one reads about art education in Nigeria, the usual narrative starts with Aina Onabulu and how he taught art in schools in Lagos, and how (through him), Kenneth Murray came to Nigeria. Then one of Murray's students, Ben Enwonwu, is sometimes seen as a precursor or a forerunner for the notion of Natural Synthesis that you and your colleagues developed at Zaria. In looking at art education across the continent, in the colonial and post independence periods it often appears that individuals have played a leading role in shaping very different projects. But it is also possible to draw a distinction between what happened in the British and the Francophone colonies – because the French and Belgian colonies' early art

education initiatives were usually very informal, workshop kind of projects. Yet the British invested a fair amount in setting up universities. Why did the British invest time in setting up formal institutions? Was it an extension of their policy of indirect rule, or is there more to it?

**UO:** Onabolu was basically self-trained in the first decade or two. He had to look at magazines, and so on. He was also fortunate to have had a relation who was a medical doctor who had an encyclopaedia. He's from Abeokuta – in the west of the country – and that was where the first missionaries were. He was also a Christian, and he didn't hide it – so what he did early on was to make sure that art was based on the Christian idea and the European system. This. This meant you had to learn how to draw properly using European norms. He was proud to be a Christian and to be able to do what the European artists were doing. Onabolu went to Britain, France and other places in the 1920s, and after that he came back. He knew the colonial people in Lagos, and so he insisted on introducing curricula from the West; it was really Onabolu who initiated that. And Murray was invited in the late 20's on that basis. Murray thought that young artists such as Enwonwu and the rest of them should look at what their people were doing, or what was there in the environment – like drawing market scenes, drawing people climbing palm trees, and the nature around them.

Murray went to the secondary schools in Ibadan in the west and Umuahia in the east and taught them how to draw. The real formal thing wasn't very well grounded because he thought they should try out things and draw things around them. The more spiritual aspects like folklore, old traditions and so on were not the issue at that point. What came out was more naturalistic work– that's up to the '40s. Murray was keen on this, and they had an exhibition abroad. But the art school was really properly set up in 1953- it was the Nigerian College of Arts & Science that moved to Zaria in 1955, and that's the one we attended.

There was also a school at Yaba, before the Nigerian College. That was a kind of formal/informal type of school where they were training people to produce works for the advertising companies that had to advertise wares. I worked at these when I was a student in '58 during the vacation. This I thought was useful; but at that point most of the lecturers or teachers were British, and even at Zaria there were few Nigerian art teachers and some of these were also teaching the European way, but they were too few to actually change things.

**MP:** What I'm interested in here is that the British must have been aware that independence was coming – why do you think they established the art schools at that particular period? It was quite late in the colonial period for them to have established art schools.

**UO:** No, the school system started with the missionaries. Their major problem was to not let people learn about their past, they had to talk about Christianity. They also had small workshops where they taught people who would help build the churches – my father was one of those who did carpentry– because we have that tradition in our area. And so the foundation was more with the missionaries rather than the time Murray came. Because before then it was basically missionary schools and they had to teach the three 'R's' – writing, reading, arithmetic. In actual fact we did small

drawings at school at primary level but that was basically what it was. So when the colonial government came in seriously was when Murray came – he was sent to the secondary schools, he taught in the government colleges- they had a small group of students that he was teaching. In the '50s towards the later stage of the colonial 'adventure', there was the importance of trying to structure a number of things. The art schools came in during that period. The art schools came in during that period – and the school system then advanced higher than secondary level, which was where Enwonwu and other people started off before they traveled to Europe to train. At that point they had to get in new art teachers at Zaria. These are teachers who were mostly from outside the country and not only British. I remember a very good sculptor – a Canadian based in Britain – who taught there. But the schools in Makerere and Khartoum started earlier – some of the people who came over to Nigeria had been teaching in Sudan, a British colony

**MP:** When you went as a student to college at Zaria, you were very critical of the curriculum that was taught.

**UO:** It was not only me – the Zaria Art Society was set up in 1958. There were other young people like myself who were already thinking, working out things before we got to the art school. We started questioning why we should have a certificate from London – because quite a few of us thought that what we should do is to become an African artist, a Nigerian artist – and it will be wrong for us to get a certificate from London after studying in Nigeria. There were people like Demas Nwoko, he's also an architect- we were all mixed, we had different interests other than just producing paintings and drawings. There was Bruce Onobrakpeya, Yusuf Grillo – these were members of our art society. So we formed a group; I wouldn't call it a pressure group but the problems started because the college was structured like any other art school in Britain. We resisted that. During the first meeting we had after arrival, they were talking about affiliation with London art schools. I insisted that that the teachers coming in should teach us the techniques of production, the technical processes, but that the creative aspects of design should come from us as Nigerians – because they didn't know what our culture was; the way we reacted to things, the study of folklore, and so on. So we had to create the Zaria Art Society. I thought art, your creative process, should depend on appropriating ideas. Of course we should know about our past before taking in things that we could get from other cultures. That's what's happened in Europe and other places. Art is not static. So that was when I wrote Natural Synthesis in 1960, as a small address I gave to our Society. We were exploring these ideas and people were going home to find out more about traditional culture. It was informal, but we met often and we were trying out experiments on our own, not based on what was taught in the school. At the art school we gave them what they wanted; if they wanted us to draw a tree perfectly, we could do that. But there was one thing we didn't think they should bother us so much about, which was perspective. I said you are going more technical there – I know about geometry – that was my subject in the secondary school, and I didn't go to the Nigerian College to learn that. We thought there must be synthesis of our own traditional ideas and the new ones that we have learned. Because. Because over the years there were also developments in the secondary schools – including science. There was also already the university at Ibadan that was founded in 1948. So it's not as though art happens in a vacuum – the artists are part of the society and they must be part of their society. There were some disagreements in that we also had a problem with

our fellow Nigerian students who thought we were creating problems, who thought we were rebels when we said we didn't want so much technicality. We wanted to know the techniques of production, but wanted to try out our own experiments based on what we saw and what was traditional to us – and appropriating all the ideas that were relevant to our own system. That was the major departure then. And so that was what we started experimenting with and trying out – people had to work very hard to establish that.

**MP:** Later when you were teaching at the University at Nsukka you had a chance to re-write the curriculum, to re-orientate the focus of the education. What you were critical of as a student you now had the chance to put right. My understanding is that you were very successful in that project; and when I say 'you' I do acknowledge that you had colleagues that you worked with. But often people come and they make a contribution and then they leave, and new people come, and it's like they start from the beginning again. Have the ideas that you were developing with Natural Synthesis and the curriculum and the orientation you were developing been sustained? Can art education in Nigeria today show how it benefited from that period, or have we gone back to another period where if you were student now you would have to start all over again with trying to change the system?

**UO:** We left school in '61; then in '62 I was invited to Germany. I went there to learn mosaic and stained glass. I came back because by then I had started the Asele Institute – the Cultural Centre, as I called it at first – and I didn't want to be away from this centre for long. I wouldn't have liked to go into a system that was different from what we were talking about. Then I was in Enugu running the Mbari Art Centre along with my cultural centre. By the end of the civil war 1970 I was back in Germany because I went with the Biafra exhibition in 1969. They wrote to me from Nsukka and I wrote back to the university that if it wasn't going to be an African art school I wouldn't be interested to come back at the end of the war – because I could have gone somewhere else – I had been invited to the States, for instance. But when I got back to Nsukka, a lot of work had been done. Why I'm saying this – a few were thinking maybe we would fall back to the past, but that was impossible because we had done a lot of work. Our other colleagues were teaching: Grillo was in charge of the school in Yaba, Lagos; Bruce Onobrakpeya was in one of the secondary schools and doing his prints, experimenting; Demas Nwoko was teaching design and drama at Ibadan University. And before that there was the Mbari Centre at Ibadan[4]. We all connected with this, including the writers and so on. So a very broad kind of sensitisation of our people was happening, even before the civil war began in 1967. But when I was asked again to come, I said that's an assignment which I would very much like to do because it would be a continuation of what we had been talking about in our Zaria Art Society. Thus we could implement the idea. I was very lucky to have had that opportunity.

So when I came back I looked at the programme; changed it. I introduced drawing with uli. I also looked at the history that was being taught because I was keener on the more intellectual aspects – that the work of the artist is not only to draw, paint and sculpt without talking about what he's doing – he should be able to talk about the creative process. He should perhaps know more about that than another person who studied history. I broke the history into two major sections. One was African art history – traditional and contemporary. The other was world art history. When I was

talking about this in the staff meeting the person who had until then been teaching European art history said there were no books. He was concerned that he didn't have any reference materials to talk about African art. I remember I said: 'In Europe they are writing their art history. We have to go into the forest and dig out all these artists. They are there, and we don't know what they did and how they managed to survive. We should take our students and move into the field.' That's where we had to develop a lot of projects for students to go to their homes and find out about what was there about the uli system. That was why we had a lot of literature on uli art. We even ran a Masters programme on uli art. That way people learned a lot more about our traditional systems.

**MP:** How easy was it to publish this material – to actually get this information into the public domain? If this was mainly research that students did for their course work, how do you then take it further in terms of actually publishing? What has been your experience in Nigeria of getting research published?

**UO:** I am very interested in documentation. I told them if it means printing on cassava or banana leaves; we have to get these things printed, and some were published and this gained the attention of people outside who came to research uli. It became widespread and has continued. I have a journal article here by Sarah Adams, an American who worked on uli and went to the villages [5]. There are other people, not only Nigerians. One of my students did a PhD in London; she had more than enough materials to write about that, even from Murray's time. So it became widespread. Art history was one of the areas that I insisted that we have to get properly organised, and so people are now into that area. When I went to the States recently, I don't know how many of my students are art historians and professors in universities there. That is a part of that process of trying to bring some intellectual thing to bear on what we are saying and doing. The thing has gone very far into our educational system here and there are new universities in Nigeria that have art departments.

**MP:** I wanted to ask you about Nigerian academics working abroad, particularly in the United States. There are a number of very fine art historians who are teaching at the moment in the US – and I wondered if this had anything to do with the condition of teaching at universities in Nigeria. I have come across a few interviews, and one of them was with Professor Nkiru Nzegwu, she's based at Binghamton University [6]. She talks about how academics in Nigeria have such a heavy teaching load that it is very difficult for them to do research. She also says that the Nigerian institutions don't really encourage academics to publish. She refers to the fact that many publishers in Nigeria actually operate as printers where one has to pay them to publish your manuscript. What I'm getting at is that it clearly appears to be more attractive to a many Nigerian academics to work in the American environment because the infrastructure is much more supportive there to research and publish. I also read an interview with Obiora Udechukwu who made similar remarks about how one has easy access to resources, etc. when teaching in the US [7]. From the outside it appears that Nigeria is experiencing quite a significant brain-drain. But I'm not sure whether that's the correct assessment, because it may also have to do with visibility. It may have to do with the fact that perhaps internationally people are less aware of the academics and the intellectuals that are teaching today in the Nigerian universities. I wondered if you had a view on whether there has been a drain of

intellectuals to the US, particularly since the mid 1980s, or whether it's not really as bad as that, and that in fact there is a good distribution of people both in Nigeria and outside.

**UO:** This has to do with the political situation, the military situation, and one also must consider the issue of poverty. This is an African condition, I think. And in Nigeria it's even worse because it's a large country. There are almost fifty-something universities now. There are big ones coming up. But in the States you have help from organisations whereas here we haven't developed some of those conditions that will help artists get on without going to the government. The people here look to the State a lot because of poverty. And I don't think the State can manage to carry all that load of helping – they are trying to deal with roads, electricity, water, and all that. So this affected the universities. What does one do if the public is faced with buying bread and they're unable to buy a painting? We have developed quite a number of collectors internally – but that's not the best that we could get had the situation been a bit different. I think it has to do with the economic conditions. It is difficult for a developing society like ours to get to the stage America and some of the advanced countries are at. So educationally a number of people have to leave and come back – this is the position. At Nsukka quite a number of them have had to leave because of the confusion in the institution. And the confusion is not only in the arts but for the other disciplines. There are many academics and artists who leave the country. But every year people emerge from the art schools and there are some very excellent young artists who are working here. So gradually there have been some improvements. But the other thing that bothers me is that our artists can't go and try out other places within our own continent. There should be some kind of facility for people to move to other places, to at least visit and interact with their fellow artists in those places. Within the setting of the continent there should be something that will bring people together. When I went to the States people were going to the Dakar festival, and I told them I haven't had the opportunity to go there, so I have my own headaches. There are many of our young people who are trying hard, people are working within their means; and it is important for sustainability that we should keep working and creating. You don't have to have everything from outside to create – that's not what we're talking about with a process where we can sensitise our people and create a new environment – because we have to do that – we don't expect other people to come and do it for us. There are people who want to earn more money by staying out of Africa. They feel they have to go out somewhere to get more money. That's the situation in this place. The other point is that every artist also has his own social responsibility at home. You can't go out and stay there and not send food money for your people. Artists are human beings. Things will happen to solve the brain-drain problem – the condition will even out a bit when there is more development within our own continent. It's not good if one stays outside and decides that everybody at home is dying – no, I don't accept that. There are people at home who are working and also earning a good living. But there are others who suffer. People are being sensitised and they are being sustained by works that artists, writers, and so on, are doing within the continent.

**MP:** One of the things that is very impressive about your achievements is that (and this relates very much to this point of needing to take initiative and responsibility) the Asele Institute goes back in different forms to 1958 when you used rooms in your family home to set up a library, studio and gallery. Even today it's actually physically

a part of your immediate environment. Can you expand on why you felt it necessary to establish, maintain and develop an independent cultural centre?

**UO:** The first thing is to get people around. You should understand that in our own old social system the artist was not just an artist. This is basic in my home area – craftsmen etc. took titles, the highest title in the place; and were doing well because they were craftsmen. In the past that was the setting. Then suddenly there was this new situation where people said artists have to be seen, not heard – which is not our own way of life. Asele was initially a cultural centre at Kafanchan [8]– and the idea was for the local community to come there and see what other people were doing and to talk about these things. But people used it less before it was moved to Enugu in the early '60s. Enugu was the regional capital for eastern Nigeria –and there were facilities like radio, TV, educational facilities, the University of Nigeria, the British Council, and so on. And there too I had to be active in the programme for the festival of arts for the region. When I got back to Enugu from the north they had already started the Mbari group there. So of course, naturally I joined the Mbari group because we started the Ibadan Mbari club. The people who were involved in the Enugu Mbari club – artists and writers, the committee members or board members - were drawn from the media. We had the regional librarian, Wikina Gbole; John Ekwere, a poet and playwright was in charge of the regional TV & radio; Lawrence Emeka, a senior staff member of Radio Nigeria who was in charge of music programmes; well known writer Gabriel Okara, from the Ministry of Information, was in charge of literature; there was a board member from the British Council; and I was in the arts.

We coordinated our programmes and we were able to run programmes outside the state capital in the provinces and towns – we had to organise for teachers; we got the British Council because their director was part of us, we were using their centre and we had our own Mbari Centre as well as my collections there at Asele. So we did quite a lot of groundwork there. I had to spend a lot of money sending out letters and so on to people who were doing research – we were getting visits to Asele. Exchanges of ideas and publications were very helpful. At that point we were also running weekly drawing courses, and people came from other towns in the geo-cultural area. It was a worthwhile experience for me; and it helped a lot of people who finally moved into the art schools – it was a kind of a beginning centre for people like Obiora Udechukwu and several other young people who finally went into art. I was into drama too. During the first Commonwealth festival in 1965 I had to design the sets, and we went to Britain to represent Nigeria – it was our group, the Eastern Nigeria Theatre Group. Art was central to all the activities of the affiliated organisations engaged inside and of the affiliated organisations engaged inside and outside the region, including the art exhibitions that were a regular feature of the calendar of events.

That helped to make people around the area realise that artists or art teachers should get into the school system – and also learn about what we were talking about. That was before I went to Nsukka –I was busy doing this groundwork. So after the civil war – when the war came into this area I moved some of the things to Nimo in Enugu, that's the permanent location for Asele. Because at that point I got a piece of land where the centre is situated now, and where I was working from. By and large the different sections have been defined, and there were other ancillary sections for

children, like the small theatre that we were developing, quite a number of these are now in place. It's an on-going thing. But the major problem is – there's a lot of financing needs for the project– because we have been doing this on our own. I hope you hear what I'm saying?

**MP:** Yes – that's what I want to get to. How do you sustain it as an individual and as a private initiative when it's not only a national resource but in fact an international resource?

**UO:** This is the problem we've been having, and I think that's one of the crippling effects of the development we would have had. That is why I said some people may like to go abroad to get some money. But if I have to leave here to go and look for money then the place would close down and I don't want it so. For me the entire initiative is a creative act. It is an organic process and a learning process that has been taking place in Nimo since construction began on the site at Asele in August 1974. My return from Nsukka in 1986 has further enriched the place.

**MP:** How does it function now? If I wanted to come and do research – how would I access the resources there?

**UO:** We are here. There are people who have come to do research, Prof Herbert Cole was here when he wrote his book [9]; and there was also quite a number of people who were using the facilities here – Prof Simon Ottenberg[10]. People come, but the problem is that the technical facilities are difficult to operate optimally as a result of the inadequacy of human resources and the source of power and energy (electricity).

**MP:** Do you charge people for access? Do they come freely? What kind of arrangements does Asele offer?

**UO:** We have recently reviewed our fees for the eight categories of membership of the Asele Institute. There are people who have used this place, and some have been helpful in making contacts all over the place, outside the country. And that's a very helpful way of developing the place – but it could be much better. So for those people who came I didn't charge any fees. But if we had a place where people could stay, be able to manage themselves and pay their bills there, that would also help.

**MP:** What I'm hearing is that you assist people in good faith – and what you benefit from is support in kind – networking, providing you access to resources, that kind of thing, more than a straight, commercial kind of transaction. Is that how it has operated?

**UO:** That's the way it has been operating for all this time. We are trying to get some facilities. For instance, up till now we have not had a proper photocopying machine. And somebody paid for our internet, we are setting up a website. What I have been doing is, if I have some money we will keep building where these things will be housed. There are so many cultural materials in our collection, we are not starting from scratch. I can't I can't say there are 10, 000 or 20, 0000 or whatever – but there are a lot of materials, particularly in our area of interest in arts – traditional and otherwise.

**MP:** What kind of relationship do you have with the University at Nsukka, since it is not that far from you?

**UO:** The problem of the university, as I have said, is a bit difficult – they don't have money to fund their researchers. It's only recently that the central government has tried to regularise a few things in the Nigerian university system. But that is not to say they will have money to help with anything, not yet. But I hope once we have some of the facilities that I think ought to be here, we'll also get some money from the community and people around here. It's the facilities that should be used commonly that we haven't been able to put in place. But as far as resources, books, documents, and so on are concerned, it is in fact where the national gallery sources its documents.

**MP:** What I admire about your initiative is that I often feel that the universities (and I'm referring to my own experience in South Africa) – colonise the notion of intellectual life. You have to be a part of the universities to have access to resources. For example the public libraries cannot compete because they cannot afford good books. So in a sense you become excluded from debate if you're not part of the university community. One of the things I am becoming more aware of is the need to create a bridge between people who are working as academics and public intellectuals – people such as yourself who are engaging artists and other professionals more broadly. I think the creation of spaces that are open to people who are not part of the academic community is to be a very important challenge that I suspect a lot of countries are faced with, because not all of us are situated in the university environment, but many of us have an interest in research, in history, in education, etc. So when I started to see mention of Asele I got very interested because it has existed in one form or another for 48 years. Obviously the pressure is there to get the support to sustain it. Have there been no major donors over the years that have been interested in the project, or is it just a problem that maybe they see it as a private initiative as opposed to some kind of non-profit organisation or something? Are you registered as a Trust or anything like that, or is it seen as a private initiative?

**UO:** We have partial registration but it's not completed. The way the whole thing has functioned has been non-profit. I also had the opportunity of traveling to other places to see similar type of organisations. The normal thing donors did was to give projects to a place like this – and that way they are able to keep staff, the right type of staff, and then improve on facilities. But as I said, the debilitating factor is the prevalence of either misunderstanding or of poverty, that's what I ascribe it to – and nothing happened because at a point they sent people from different ministries – about eight directors – we talked about this, and nothing came out of it. I don't get bothered about this because I know the setting is not right yet. But at the same time we need this help to get more facilities in place to profit more people. The academia here is in a difficult situation because their libraries are unable to provide as much resources (in terms of books and documents) as we have here. The universities therefore also depend on us. The materials here on art and development are in hardly any of the universities in the country. I have been documenting and keeping all these things since '58. For example I was interacting with the Harmon Foundation in New York, exchanging materials since the early '60s. I don't think art is restricted to any particular terrain. We want to see what other people are doing; interact with

them, learn from them – and if we are on an exchange basis they would also learn from us. Occasionally we exchange papers and so on with some of the bigger libraries like the one in Washington, the National Museum for African Art. We also get documents on subjects other than art – social science, economics – so that you know what’s happening. We have exchanges like that from here. People come here to use the materials because there are lots of things, like cultural matters and so on that people ought to know.

Onobrakpeya also has a centre – the Harmattan workshop in Agbarha [11]. Demas Nwoko has his own centre [12], and there are a number of centres that we hope will spring up. I think art has to break out of the universities. The writers and art historians are still there. And so institutions like ours are open to artists so that they can function and do their workshops or symposia outside the stuffy academic environment.

**MP:** I fully agree with you – but it’s a particular interest of mine to try and bridge those two worlds – the visual, the making of art with the thinking, the writing, etc. I suspect that your centre bridges those worlds, but I think that in South Africa there hasn’t been such a tradition; here the artists who are making things and the academics who are researching tend to be quite separate... For me the question is: how do you create a space in-between? How do you bring people together?

**UO:** This year I went to the Harmattan workshop which was the eighth one run by Onobrakpeya. People from the universities around also go there. Some of them heard that I was going there and they wanted us to talk. One evening we sat and we were discussing problems about the artists and society. And the strategy that we gradually devised was that those centres become the finishing ground for artists, they come there and work on their own. In the universities they don’t have time for that. I don’t have regular workshops at Asele, but there is a major workshop programme in Agbarha – and it’s growing, and a lot of people come, young and old, and they practice and discuss. People move around, introduce new techniques, and so on. These are the things that these institutions outside of the establishments can do. It will help people rediscover their latent creative energy and recover their self-respect.

**MP:** I think different kinds of institutional forms have different potentials, and they each have their challenging sides. Ideally what we need is to be able to put the pieces together so that when the artist needs more space to explore technically and just be making, there are such opportunities. But when they need to be reflecting, there should also be people who can challenge them and engage them so that they can think more deeply about what they’re doing. I think that the challenge we’re really faced with is how do we put the puzzle together?

**UO:** I think within an African context, I like the idea of fairs and all that, But I also feel that the workshop system – the kind we are talking about with facilities such as libraries and all that – and ones that are not rigidly conducted – will yield very good fruits for us in future. In that way it will be possible for one to move from one place to the other, and also see what is happening within the African setting. Because we can’t get glued to a spot and think we are doing very well. The other point is if there are workshops, more experimental works are produced and more people realise that

artists have great potential for development, even in politics and all kinds of activities, I don't see why not. So we'll be performing our own service to our community and creating new conditions for creativity. We have to realise this is a function that people must do for their society – it's very important.

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Notes.

[1] Asele is the name of a mythical Uli artist. Uli is an artistic practice commonly associated with the Igbo of Nigeria.

[2] The Nigerian College of Arts, Science and Technology was initially established in Ibadan, before relocating to Zaria in the north. Okeke was a student there from 1958-1961.

[3] Ottenberg, Simon (2002) *The Nsukka Artists and Nigerian Contemporary Art*. Seattle & London: Smithsonian National Museum of African Art in association with University of Washington Press, p. 93.

[4] The Mbari art clubs were interdisciplinary venues that were begun by artists (performing, literary and visual). Initially founded in Ibadan Mbari clubs were also established in Enugu and Oshogbo.

[5] See: Adams, Sarah (2005) 'People have three eyes: Ephemeral art and the archive in Southeastern Nigeria'. *Res 48 (Autumn)*: 11-32.

[6] See: Adeleke, Kazeem (1999) 'Interviewing Professor Nkiru Nzegwu'. <http://www.africaresource.com/content/view/57/68/>

[7] See Ikwuemesi, Krydz (2004) 'Conversation with Obiora Udechukwu'. <http://www.thisdayonline.com/archive/2003/04/13/20030413art02.html>

[8] Kafanchan is a railway junction town in northern Nigeria

[9] Cole, Herbert M. and Aniakor, Chike (1984) *Igbo Arts, Community and Cosmos*. Los Angeles: Museum of Cultural History, UCLA.

[10] Op Cit. See also Ottenberg, Simon (1997) *New Traditions from Nigeria: Seven Artists of the Nsukka Group*. Seattle and London: Smithsonian Institution Press in association with University of Washington Press.

[11] Bruce Onobrakpeya initiated the first Harmattan workshop in 1998 at Agbarha-Otor, Delta State.

[12] Demas Nwoko began building the New Culture Studio in Ibadan in 1967. In 2005 he formed the New Culture Foundation, a trust that has taken over the studio on behalf of artists. See: Uhakhene, Ozolua (2005) 'Nwoko offers New Culture Studio to artists'. Daily Independent, 3 November 2005.<http://www.independentng.com/life/lsnov030507.htm>.