At a 1997 international symposium organized at the National Museum of African Art in conjunction with the exhibition, *The Poetics of Line: Seven Nigerian Artists*, the white[1] American curator and retired Professor Emeritus of anthropology, Simon Ottenberg, briefly recounted the history of the exhibition. He described how Professor Roy Sieber, the white deputy director of the National Museum of African Art, lured him from retirement with an offer of a Smithsonian Institution's Regent fellowship.[2] On receiving the 1994 fellowship, Ottenberg surprised the museum by choosing as his project the research and organization of an exhibition on contemporary Nigerian art.[3] The choice was surprising since it had been assumed that he would maximize his wealth of professional experience in anthropology, focus on an area of disciplinary strength, and possibly, organize an exhibition on some aspect of traditional African art. After extensive discussions with the late black director, Sylvia Williams, he received the mandate to curate an exhibition on the modern art of the Igbos, a group that included the Afikpo people, whom he had studied in the late 1960s. What Ottenberg had going for him in terms of disciplinary strength was the geographical and cultural contiguity of the Afikpo area to the University of Nigeria in Nsukka, the center of contemporary artistic experimentations in *uli*.[4] At the emotive level, however, his credential for pulling off a successful exhibition was that he identified with Igbos, saw himself as their champion, and for over twenty years after his Afikpo research, had styled himself, "the sole interpreter of Afikpo Igbo

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1 I am using 'white' in a purely descriptive explicit mode to indicate that Ottenberg is not African American. Unlike in Nigeria, American names do not sufficiently mark the ethnicity or race of the individual; hence I am using racial markers to highlight an everyday fact about American pluralism, specifically that it comprises of different races. Furthermore this explicit use of racial markers is a response to the ethnographic approach of American cultural anthropologists who methodically mark the ethnicity of Africans. Since the lens I have used in examining Ottenberg's action and in studying American culture is somewhat ethnographic, it is inescapable that the obvious signs of social distinction in the United States are highlighted. If my use of racial markers seems calculated and divisive, it is unintentional.

2 It is interesting that this Africanist "old white boy's network" established at the formation of the African studies discipline in white universities is still very much in operation in the disbursement of major fellowships and grants on the research, presentation and publication of African studies and art. Further information about the fellowship is also in the exh. cat. Simon Ottenberg, New Traditions From Nigeria: Seven Artists of the Nsukka Group (Washington D. C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1997), xv.

3 This was stated by the present director of the museum, Roslyn Walker, first on the second day of the symposium when the issue was raised by the paper of the panels, and again in her speech at the formal opening of the exhibition.

4 Briefly, "uli" is a system of design with an extensive repertory of symbols. A full explanation follows on page 5.

culture."[5]

The approval of Ottenberg's research project by the National Museum of African Art is important for many reasons. It raises the issue of how knowledge about Africa and its art is produced and disseminated in the United States. It impacts on the kind of exposure and historical representation that contemporary African art and culture receive in major international venues. It addresses the issue of who is producing that knowledge, for whom, and why. The latter raises questions about the standard of excellence utilized in presenting African cultures and art. In more ways than one, Ottenberg's project provides a critical basis for examining the politics of organizing exhibitions on African art as well as for assessing the legitimacy of the cultural brokerage formula that requires Africanists to interpret and mediate Africa's experience. In short, *The Poetics of Line* allows us to simultaneously review the quality of the knowledge produced on African art, and to check the flourishing of intellectual imperialism in African Studies.

Ottenberg's emotive bond with Igbos notwithstanding, it is important to recognize the epistemological implications of the underlying asymmetrical relations of power between the curator's First World reality of the United States and the Third World reality of the Nigerian subject matter.[6] Well-meaning and admirable as an empathic bond may be, it needs to be borne in mind that it does not necessarily constitute a rigorous approach to knowledge acquisition and production. In a geopolitical relational context of inequality, empathy may be symptomatic of paternalism rather than intellectual identification with the subject of interest. It may be the imaginative projection of the dominant group's views and feelings onto a subordinate group. In this latter guise, empathy becomes an effective mask of a less than rigorous scholarship, enabling a relationally dominant group or its members to patronizingly pass off weak speculations and mis-descriptions as adequate theoretical work. In order to bypass this negative epistemic effect of asymmetrical power relations, what is professionally called for in organizing an exhibition is: detailed knowledge of the history and culture

5 See Simon Ottenberg, "Response by Ottenberg" in African Art Studies: The State of the Discipline (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution, 1990), 125-136.

6 By First World, I have in mind, the United States, Canada, and nations of the European Economic Union. I also mean the privileged citizens of this realm, who are typically, white and male. By Third World, I mean all those nations and that are referred to as the South and are seen by the First World as outside the "civilized world"--Asia, Africa, Middle East, and Central and South America. Clearly, the communities in these political groupings are neither singular nor homogeneous in type. Nevertheless, it is possible to trace a coherence of economic indices, ideological mind-set, and life expectancies to justify the relevance of this politico-economic First World/Third World division as is presently constituted.

of a nation's art, critical awareness of current theoretical issues that are germane to both global art and local art, familiarity with local artistic movements and their political concerns, and an informed appreciation of the aesthetics of space.

In beginning this essay with what appears to be a muted interrogation of Ottenberg's expertise, the objective is not to point out that he retired as an anthropologist without curating an exhibition of contemporary art, and without engaging in prior theoretical work in this area of art history. Rather it is to underscore that imperialism thrives on relations of unequal power, and that even given the best of intentions, reproduces cultural arrogance in the production of knowledge of another's reality. Specifically, when knowledge of a subordinate social reality is produced without considering the impact of the power differential between a First World producer and a Third World subject, what sometimes results is an "Othering" that allows producers to claim that cultural representation is never an objective presentation of facts.[7] With an eye firmly trained on curbing academic imperialism in African Studies, the question that begs to be asked is: What justification is there for approving Ottenberg's proposal to organize a major exhibition of contemporary Nigerian art? Simply put, how qualified is he to undertake this venture?[8]

An answer to these questions would help us come to grips with the sorts of liberties that are taken when producing knowledge about Africa in the United States. One such liberty that is of prime consideration is the treatment of Africa as a field of research in which the commonplaces of good scholarship may sometimes be suspended. This occurs frequently in the First World when citizens receive mandates to undertake major assignments such as curating an important exhibition of the art of a Third World nation without demonstrating prior expertise in the area, and without being subjected to the same standards of requirement that are applied to curators of European art. The

7 Mary H. Nooter did this in a 1994 exhibition she curated at The Museum for African Art, New York, titled *Secrecy: African Art That Conceals and Reveals*. For more extensive comments on how cultural arrogance is reproduced even with sympathizers of Africa, see Nkiru Nzegwu, "Exhibition Review," American Anthropologist vol. 96, (1994): 227-229.

8 This question may seem to be quibbling over nothing. But it is raised because it helps to foreground the important issues of competence that are generally considered before approving any scholars' or curators' projects. The reason for trying to ensure that this basic protocol of intellectual work was satisfied comes from the fact that there were numerous art historians at the time the mandate was issued who were far more knowledgeable about contemporary African and Nigerian art, who had undertaken extensive research work in the area, and who had repeatedly proposed contemporary art exhibitions to the National Museum of African Art. The puzzling question has been: Why were they ignored? Why was a retired anthropologist selected over those more conversant with the issues? What is the basis for selecting a curator for this show?

inherent lack of symmetry in these requirements reveals the vast disciplinary differences in the scholarship of Africanists on Africa and of Europeanists on Europe. While anthropologists are given free range to define and curate Africa's art, rarely would a retired anthropologist or sociologist be allowed to curate a major art exhibition of a First World nation. Moreover, hardly would permission be granted should any of the following art movements be substituted for "Nigerian art"—abstract expressionism, French or German art in the 1980s, Los Angeles mural art, or Pop art. So why are things different in the field of African arts? Evidently, this discrepancy in standards between the First World reality and the Third World reality derives from the suspension of good scholarly practices in one context but not in the other. It is noteworthy that this suspension is engineered from a patronizing framework that uses race as a measure of intellectual worth. Thus, it is for this race-based reason that an art exhibition would rarely be approved from an eminently qualified former citizen of the Third World, who is now a citizen of the First World, and is desirous of organizing an exhibition of European or American art.[9]

A critical aspect of the problem of imperialism in African studies in the United States is the tacit racialization of knowledge that manifests in the privileging of knowledge of certain individuals and the devaluation of others. This practice derives from the race-based ideology of the American mode of knowledge production that states unequivocally who are the legitimate producers and arbiters of knowledge, and who are not. While Americans of European descent are legitimately seen as arbiters of their own reality and of other parts of the world, scholars from the Third World, and who are studying their own reality, are rarely recognized as arbiters of any reality, including their own.[10] This ideological mind-set creates a situation in which First World intellectuals and curators of European descent are rarely subjected to the same rigorous standard of proof in their professed knowledge of Third World reality as their colleagues are about their familiar First World reality; and

9 A critical look at the politics underlying the curation of exhibitions reveals the existence of racial and cultural tracking. Asian or African curators are institutionally placed to curate shows of their racial and cultural areas, even though they may have trained in the privileged area of European art history. However, only those classified as Western Europeans are institutionally placed to be racially neutral and culturally objective. While they can easily curate a show of African or Asian art in the United States, it is difficult to find mainstream European art shows organized by Asian or African curators.

10 Anyone who may wish to contest this point should first take a hard look at departments of Near Eastern, Asian, and African Studies and ascertain who are the chairs of the departments, and who are the notable experts on Asia, Africa, and the Middle East. After this cursory survey, it would help to probe deeply the linguistic competence of so-called experts to determine the level of their cultural and metacultural fluency. Once that is done, scrutinize relevant bibliographic listings to determine how often culturally informed, internally-oriented interpretations and Third World scholars are referenced on matters relating to their own reality.

as Third World scholars are about all their knowledge claims.

In this essay, I shall use the category of gender to expose and examine the conflicted ideological basis on which *The Poetics of Line,* which opened at the National Museum of African Art in Washington D.C. October 1997, is recouped into First World imagination. Complying with the Smithsonian Institution's request to examine the relationship of Nigerian art in the context of African, Third World, and Western art,[11] and mindful of African scholars' dissatisfaction with current Africanist scholarship,[12] I will highlight the problem of representing contemporary Nigerian art from a position that ignores[13] the asymmetrical relation of dominance between the First and the Third Worlds.[14] I begin by considering the following questions: Is Nigeria's social life and its category of gender factored into analysis? What assumptions, if any, are mapped onto the Third World art of Nigeria by a First World curator, and how? Whose gender history and beliefs are taken to define the role of women and men? How are the gender, nation's, and cultural histories of Nigerian art and *uli* invoked and deployed? In what ways do these representational strategies impact on the determination of artistic worth, and in the selection of artists and art works? And, lastly how do issues of funding impact the definition and framing of the history of *uli* by the Smithsonian Institution?

Uli: Historical Parameters

Before progressing further, two basic questions have to be answered: What is *uli*? And what is its relationship to women? Prior to contemporary interest and stylistic experimentations, *uli* is a

11 The request was made by the National Museum of African Art regarding the theme of Panel Session IV of the symposium accompanying the opening of the exhibition.

12 I have in mind an essay by Olufemi Taiwo, "African and Africanist Scholars, Knowledge Production, and African Studies" in Scholarly Authority and Intellectual Production in African Studies. Kofi Anyidoho, ed. (Chicago: Northwestern University Press, forthcoming 2000). Another essay is Paul Tiyambe Zeleza, "Africans, Africanist and African Studies: Thoughts for the Future," presented at the James S. Coleman African Studies Lecture Series, UCLA, May 21, 1998. Other works are Zeleza, Manufacturing African Studies and Crises (Senegal: CORDESRIA Book Series, 1997), Thandika Mkandawire's Abiola Lecture at the 39th Annual Meeting of the African Studies Association, November 1996, and many more that could not all be listed.

13 This paper was prepared for a panel on Nigerian art in the context of African, Third World, and Western Art in a symposium hosted by the National Museum of African Art in Washington, D.C. on the occasion of the opening of an exhibition on contemporary Nigerian art titled "The Poetic of Line". The issue of the representation of Nigerian art and history through a Euro-American lens, and on the world stage is the subject matter that this paper addresses.

14 By Africanists, I mean those who take Africa as an area of study.

cosmetic dye and an art form historically developed and practiced by Igbo women. It took its name from the indigo dye extracted from the pods and berries of several species of plants. *Uli* comprises an extensive repertoire of designs that were executed on the body, wall, pottery, and woven clothe. Fine ideographic patterns were "written" (*ide uli*) on the body with a thin sliver of wood in *akala uli* (*uli* lines, fig. 1). Turning the body into a canvas, women created two-dimensional designs that took advantage of the monochromatic brown hues of their skin as well as the contours of their body. According to Chinwe Uwatse,[15] a female artist and former arts administrator of the National Council of Art and Culture,[16] the basic form of the designs in the art system "depicts nature substantively," but at "other times natural forms are broken down to their basic outlines and rearranged as distinctive pictorial compositions." Celebrated *uli* artists are renowned for their sensitive eye, concentration, and deft steady hand. Since bleeding, erasing or cleaning was discouraged, women "writers of body-*uli*" strove for linear precision and delicacy in patterns that were heavily coded with proverbial allusions and innuendoes about social events. The stylized language and vocabulary of *uli* appeared on the body, both as decorative patterns and as communication scripts. Blending attractively with the brown shades of the skin, the tastefully placed ideographic scripts and codes transformed the female body into a moving interactive organ of communication.

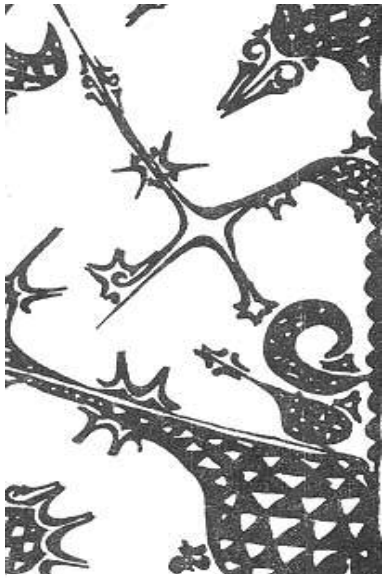


fig. 1

On this construal, *uli* may appropriately be seen as constituting an "active voice," used by women to engage in a variety of sociocultural commentaries on history and life. Central to this conceptualization is its regenerative vision. Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi, an Igbo female scholar, isolates this vision when she asserts:

> *Uli* is woman's writing on the wall, emphasizing its spiritual qualities. *Uli* painting/writing conditions one to worship the

15 Chinwe Uwatse is both an artist and art administrator. She studied *uli* designs during her Bachelor's of Fine Arts and wrote a thesis on it. For twelve years after her graduation, she worked as an arts administrator at the National Council for Arts and Culture. During her tenure, which involved organizing art and cultural festivals, she deepened her knowledge of this art form as she organized events and traveled on national assignment to diverse parts of *uli*-producing regions.

16 The National Council of Art and Culture is a parastatal of the Federal Government of Nigeria.

> divine within, enabling the individual to express sororal or maternal feelings towards others...it is also necessary for decorating public shrines, to inspire the community to commune with its gods... [With *uli*] women teach a lesson on transformation, the power of indeterminacy, the state of becoming, and the human links with nature which we must respect and maintain, even imitate.[17]

The indeterminacy and state of becoming that Ogunyemi speaks about are features of a system of signs that are subject to differing configurations of forms and meaning. They are also expressed by the flexible nature of motifs that are transferable to textiles, ceramics, wood, and metal. This flexibility is the regenerative force that facilitates stylistic improvisation and adaptation in diverse media. The designs were transferred to walls by muralists who were largely responsible for the decorations of walls in public spaces and private homes. On walls, the normally minuscule motifs expand spatially, resulting in murals in which the surface is vertically divided into segments within which different female artists paint large (*oboobo*) designs interspersed with small (*kilikili*) designs The effect is a sophisticated contrast of complex lines, voids, and positive and negative spaces. Two kinds of *uli* murals are discernible: the first emphasizes linearity (*akala uli*) and positive open space, while the second reverses the sequence and underscores swaths of filled-in voids or *oboobo* (large) designs.

In modern art in Nigeria, *uli* has shifted from women's body to paper and hardboards and from public, community-inspired murals to personal, individual-oriented paintings. These shifts from public (traditional) spaces to private (modern) spaces, and from rural to urban locations embody a move from sororal and maternal feelings to individualistic feelings of fulfillment. In the first, second and third phases of its modernist transformation, the principal agents of change were male artists.[18] In the 1940s, *uli* designs entered modern art and featured prominently either as decorative devices or as

17 Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi, The Wo/Man Palva (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1996), 19-20.

18 The reason for this is not unconnected to the colonial history that gave men a head start in education and to a great extent encouraged men's exploration of initiatives. By the time more women came along to actively study art, men had over three decades of a head start. Moreover, women had to battle the gender ideology that was the legacy of both Christianity and colonialism. The imperatives of domesticity, ideals of womanhood, men's growing sexism, the divergent natures of present economic reality and the traditional economic scheme all combined to undermine women's pioneering lead in *uli*.



fig. 2

the central emphasis of exploration in the paintings of numerous male artists. The internationally renowned painter and sculptor, Ben Enwonwu, liberally reproduced *uli* motifs in his paintings as background fillers in compositions or as sensitive designs on the bodies of *Agbogho Mmuo* (masked maiden spirit) dancers (fig. 2). Following this lead, Uche Okeke, in the second phase appropriated the technical logic of *uli*, and by the early sixties, was producing works that derived from that base. Unlike Enwonwu, who as a schoolboy studied *uli* designs directly from women designers in Umuahia, Okeke, "living in Northern Nigeria, far away from Igboland…had to be helped by [his] mother who acquired some knowledge of uli body decorations in her youth."[19] Again, unlike Enwonwu, who preserved the decorative ideal of *uli* in his work, Okeke, by his own admission, and possibly because of the influence of Hausa culture in his formative life experiences, "stripped [his] work of most of *uli's* decorative quality." This minimalist stripping meant that the linear effect of *uli* is subdued and not immediately obvious in his work. Okeke's stylistic experimentation and curriculum reforms at the University of Nsukka moved *uli* into an academic setting where it acquired intellectual overtones. In this shift from popular community life to elitist academic location, men predominated, creating a repertory of works that no longer functioned as an integrated mobile design system with communicative intent.

Revealing the Gendered Frame

To transmogrify is to distort, to change completely, and to transform in a grotesque or strange manner. In this section, I shall expose the hidden gender context of *The Poetics of Line*, and I will argue that gender transmogrification occurs in the exhibition through the diminution of Nigeria's complex social reality and artistic history. This occurs in two ways: first, through the seeping in of sexist bias through the disciplinary pathway of cultural anthropology; and second, through a failure to broaden the interdisciplinary base, and elevate theoretical discussion of Africa to a meta-interpretive level.

19 Excerpts of an interview of Uche Okeke conducted by Obiora Udechukwu. See Uli: Traditional Wall Painting and Modern Art from Nigeria (Lagos and Bayreuth: Goeth Institute and Iwalewa House, 1990), 60.

Most exhibitions of African art organized in the United States are curated either by anthropologists or from the anthropological perspective. Given that cultural anthropology is edificatory of Western norms and exclusionary of gender matters, such exhibitions tend to contain problematic assumptions and unflattering preconceptions about Third World cultures that are at the heart of the discipline of cultural anthropology. Typically, these exhibitions start off from a point that admits into the picture gender insensitive relations of dominance and untenable notions of cultural intelligibility. These force African art exhibitions either to remain at a low descriptive level so as to make African cultures intelligible to the Western audience, or to invent interpretations that suggest cultural representation is never an objective presentation of facts. The danger of this is that limited conceptual understanding portrays a culture from a negative frame and curtails sophisticated contextualization of that culture's art and social life. Since most Africanist art historians readily employ an anthropological perspective, sexist distortions tend to vitiate such exhibitions.

Prior to African women's critiques of social and cultural anthropology in the 1980s, and prior to the face-off of American women artists and the museums in the late 1960s and early 1970s, the full ramifications of gender biases on art were not really appreciated. In the United States, awareness of gender discrimination in art grew with women's demand for gender parity, which the passage of the Civil Rights bills by the Congress sought to ameliorate. Drawing inspiration from the activist strategies of the Civil Rights movement, American women artists demanded access to institutional venues like the Metropolitan Museum, Museum of Modern Art, the Guggenheim, and the Whitney Museum, from which they had been previously excluded. In 1967, black female artist Ruth Waddy, founded the Los Angeles based "Art West Associated, and another black female artist, Evangeline J. Montgomery, established the Art West Associated North" in San Francisco. Three years later on the east coast, black female artist Faith Ringgold led the organization "Women, Students and Artists for Black Art Liberation" (WSABL) in two major events: one to protest against the exclusion of women and Black artists in the Venice Biennale exhibition, and second to picket the Whitney Museum's Sculpture Annual.[20] A year later, in 1971, the pathbreaking article, "Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?" published by Linda Nochlin, a white female art critic, set the tone of feminist critiques for dismantling the Euro-male dominance of artistic production.[21] From the 1980s onwards,

20 Information is contained in the chronology listing in the catalogue Tradition and Conflict: Images of a Turbulent Decade, 1963-1973 (New York: The Studio Museum in Harlem, 1985), 83-89.

21 Linda Nochlin "Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?" in Women, Art, and Power and Other

the persistent critiques of museum policies and practices by feminist artists and art historians revealed the severity and crippling nature of institutionalized gender-based discrimination. Hard pressed to defend the systemic character of women's exclusion in the arts, museum officials in the United States were forced to abandon the traditional response of representing women's art as sub-standard, and to introduce measures that redressed the historic effects of sexism.

Before these radical changes were instituted, most male curators and museum officials in the U.S. and Canada deflected critiques, charging that beauty and aesthetic taste are the sole defining factors in art exhibitions. Feminist critiques quickly exposed the hollowness of this defense by showing that the concepts of beauty and aesthetic taste functioned as structural devices to discriminate against and erase women, their art, concerns, and interests from view. Such kinds of devices, Elizabeth Spelman later argued, were historically manufactured by European and European American men "to make it a matter of course that their own needs and deeds will be attended to."[22] However, by keeping the focus on parity and consistently emphasizing issues of equity and equal access, feminists successfully engineered a radical redrawing of the art historical landscape in the United States.

Further adding to this ferment in the arts were the extensive anti-imperialist critiques of the West by Third World scholars, writers and poets[23] as well as by race theorists in the United States. The former highlighted the role culture plays in interpretation, while the latter focused on the impact race plays in evaluations. The cumulative effect of these critiques highlighted the importance of the categories of race, ethnicity, class, and cultural heritages to art historical analyses. Third World intellectuals forced art history and other disciplines to theoretically address the implications of their imperialistic stance and colonizing legacies. The new cartography that emerged from this intellectual ferment undermined the legitimacy of former assertions of objectivity and neutrality that had naturalized and normativized male privilege.

Although cultural anthropology continually faces charges of racism from Third World

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Essays, Linda Nochlin, ed. (New York: Harper & Row, 1988), 145-178

22 See Elizabeth V. Spelman, Inessential Woman: Problems of Exclusion in Feminist Thought (Boston: Beacon Press, 1988), 4.

23 Okot p'Bitek, Song of Lawino (Nairobi: East African Publishing House, 1966); Chinweizu, Onwuchekwa Jemie and Ihechukwu Madubuike, "Toward the Decolonization of African Literature" Transition 48 (1974-75): 28-37, 54-57; and Cheikh Anta Diop, The African Origins of Civilization (Westport, Connecticut: Lawrence Hill & Company, 1974).

scholars and has been indicted for its colonizing role,[24] it has less been critiqued for its gender bias and marginalization of women in the Third World. Evident in much of anthropological literature on Africa, for example, is the miniscule attention that women have generally received.[25] Most of the standard disciplinary observations, opinions, and interpretations offered about genealogy, political structure, social organization, warfare, rites of passages, artistic practices, and beliefs proceed from male perspectives and continue to be about men. Meanwhile data pertaining to women's roles and beliefs are treated as extensions of men's views, and their cultural products and views about social and political practices are dismissed as inconsequential. This is evident in Ottenberg's earlier writings on the psychological aspects of Igbo art, published in African Arts in 1988.[26] His comments on Afikpo girls' and women's lives offered no evidence of Afikpo females' conceptualization of their own social identities and their own roles within the society. They remained totally voiceless and passive, a situation that encouraged Ottenberg to deprecatingly invoke the category of domesticity to explain their creative production.[27]

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24 Maxwell Owusu, "Ethnography of Africa: The Uselessness of the Useless," American Anthropologist, vol. 80, (1978), 310-334; Talal Asad, ed. Anthropology and the Colonial Encounter (London: Ithaca Press, 1973), 103-118; Ben Enwonwu, "Problems of the African Artist Today," Présence Africaine, 8-10 (June-November 1956): 177-78. Though Enwonwu is widely known as an artist, he is well versed in the theoretical issues of social anthropology, having studied it at the Master's level. He had a Master's degree in Social Anthropology from University College, London and was a Fellow of the Royal Anthropological Institute.

25 There are two types of such anthropological writings: one that engages art and one that does not. For the sorts of general anthropological works that do not engage art see Amaury D. Talbot The Peoples of Southern Nigeria, Vol. 3 (London: Humphrey Milford, 1926); C. K. Meek Law and Authority in a Nigerian Tribe (New York: Barnes and Noble, Inc., 1934), Darryll Forde and G.I Jones The Ibo and Ibibio-Speaking Peoples of South-Eastern Nigeria (London: International African Institute, 1967), and Richard Henderson The King in Every Man (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1972). And for the second type of writings, see Robin Horton "The Kalabari *Ekine* Society: A Borderland of Religion and Art," Africa, no. 23 (April 1963): 94-114; G. I. Jones The Art of Eastern Nigeria (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1967); Simon Ottenberg, "Psychological Aspects of Igbo Arts," African Art vol. 21, no. 2 (1988): 72-93, and The Masked Ritual of Afikpo: The Context of an African Art (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1975). Although Horton's treatment of the Ekine Society and Ottenberg's engagement of the psychological aspects of art invokes the lives of women, both authors do not engage women's reality substantively.

26 Ottenberg (1998), 72-93

27 In his analysis, Ottenberg relied substantially on an all-male cast of interpreters; specifically, Herbert Cole, Chike Aniakor, Boston, G. I. Jones, Richard Henderson, and Oseloka Osadebe. When a female voice was invoked, it was by his white American wife, Phoebe Ottenberg. She represented and spoke for Afikpo women. This mediation of Afikpo women's experiences by interpreters of varying cultural competencies and gender sensitivities creates a basis for the injection of sexism into analysis. Not only are Afikpo women's lives of marginal importance, Ottenberg's descriptions of the artistic activity of Igbo women conjure up images of inferior, limited enterprise. When he states that "female's experience in visual arts throughout Igbo country is more limited to the domestic scene and personal adornment, centering around pottery, weaving, body painting, hair styling, and, of course, dancing" (1988: 73), he simultaneously restricts women's creative expression to the domestic category and suggests that men's are not. So

As analyses of the writings of cultural anthropologists have shown, women drop out of the picture when men are deployed as the sole yardstick of legitimation in a largely male universe. Under this circumstance, legitimate challenges can be entertained since the theoretical constructions of Africa's societies are often driven both by anthropologists' familiar cultural scheme, and an underlying asymmetrical relations of dominance. Even where no immediate challenge is made of the limitations of First World interpretations, it must be noted that such theoretical representation of Igbo society and Africa's social structures, political organizations, cultural norms and events further reinforce the irrelevancy of women. Except for a smattering of studies by a few female anthropologists—M. M. Green, Leith-Ross, Phoebe Ottenberg, Helen Henderson, Felicia Ekejiuba, Kamen Okonjo, Judith van Allen, and Ifi Amadiume—most anthropologists working in Igboland essentially treated women in passing, referencing them only when their roles as wives, daughters, or mothers amplified their otherness and the dominant role of men in the community.[28]

Paradoxically, First World feminist anthropologists have been most effective in perpetuating gender bias against African women, even as they exposed sexism in the male-based presumptions of scholarship and popular culture in North America and Europe. Micaela di Leonardo locates the reason for this in the determination of First World feminist anthropologists to establish the thesis of women's domination worldwide, and to expose the fact that Western women were better off than "oppressed" women in non-Western societies.[29] In a thoughtful essay written two decades before di

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how are men's weaving, pottery, hair styling and dancing to be understood? The suggestion that there is nothing domestic about men's experience of these activities is a sexist and incoherent utilization of the concept of domesticity. Are we to assume that Igbo men's experience of these visual arts is more limited to the forest? I am setting up the opposition between home (*unno*, which is the domestic space of human habitation) and forest (*offia*, which is the non-domestic). This accords with the metaphysical assumptions of the Igbo social scheme rather than with the American social scheme in which domestic is opposed to public. Ottenberg cannot accurately supplant one for the other, as that would entail an imperialist move.

28 M. M. Green, Ibo Village Affairs (New York: Praeger, 1964); Sylvia Leith-Ross, African Women: A Study of the Ibo of Nigeria (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1939); Phoebe V. Ottenberg "The Changing Economic Position of Women Among the Afikpo Ibo" in Continuity and Change in African Cultures, eds. W. R. Bascom and M. J. Herskovits (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1959); Helen Henderson, Ritual Roles of Women in Onitsha Ibo Society (Ph.D. diss., University of California, Berkeley, 1969); Felicia Okonjo, "Felicia Ekejiuba, "Omu Okwei: The Merchant Queen of Ossomari," Nigeria, 90 (September 1996): 213-20; Kamen Okonjo, "The Dual-Sex Political System in Operation: Igbo Women and Community Politics in Midwestern Nigeria," in Women in Africa, eds. Hafkin and Bay (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1976), 45-58; Judith van Allen, "'Abo Riots' or Igbo 'Women's War?: Ideology, Stratification, and the Invisibility of Women," in Women in Africa, eds. Hafkin and Bay (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1976), 56-85; and Ifi Amadiume Male Daughters, Female Husbands (London: Zed Books Ltd., 1987).

29 Micaela di Leonardo, "Introduction: Gender, Culture, and Political Economy: Feminist Anthropology in Historical Perspective" in Gender at the Crossroads of Knowledge: Feminist Anthropology in the Postmodern Era, ed. Micaela di Leonardo (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), 1-48.

Leonardo's, Wendy James reveals the error of such unfortunate urges by showing that the distortions derive from feminists' appropriation of artificial constructs, namely Engel's unscientific intuitions on the origin of the family, Lévi-Strauss' mythopoeic structural categories, and the hypothetical role of women in early societies in which African societies were inappropriately used as models. James chides feminists for accepting "these unscientific theories in their entirety,"[30] and contends that ignoring the artificial nature of these constructs encourages Marxist and liberal feminist anthropologists to ignore the matrifocal character of African family structure and its social implication on the status and role of women. The thrust of James's critique is that the postulation of women's universal subjugation as a universal truth comes from an illegitimate amplification of the role of men and a focusing on them as the key actors in social and conceptual life. No doubt, the circuitous logic of this self-fulfilling "universal truth" provided the basis for treating African women as either passive, submissive, or lacking moral standards.

Reflecting on these lapses and the male-privileging proclivity of male social anthropologists and feminist cultural anthropologists, Amadiume roundly condemned both for racism and sexism.[31] Cheryl Rodriguez builds on the critiques of Filomina Chioma Steady in this area,[32] by reviewing the images of African women in structural-functionalist and feminist anthropology.[33] Like Amadiume, she too argues that, notwithstanding the vast differences between the two theoretical orientations, African women are subjects rather than social actors. Theoretical interpretation has been effectively deployed to cast the women as marginal players in various forms of Africa's social endeavor. Given Steady's and Rodriquez's data, one sees the convergence of imperialism's asymmetrical power of dominance and sexism in Africa-oriented anthropology. The typical gender attitude in the discipline, as Rodriquez convincingly shows, is still that "men are the key actors in the creation and maintenance of social structures" and social life (1997, 5). Men's lives continue to be presented as the most important in societies, and they are the normative standard against which all activities must

30 Wendy James "Matrifocus on African Women" in Defining Females, ed. Shirley Ardener (Oxford: Berg, 1993), 126. See 123-145.

31 Ifi Amadiume (1987), 1-10.

32 See Filomina Chioma Steady, "The Black Woman Cross-Culturally: An Overview" in The Black Woman Cross-Culturally (Cambridge, Mass: Schenkman Publication Co, 1981), 7-41.

33 Cheryl Rodriguez, "Anthropology and Womanist Theory: Claiming the Discourse on Gender, Race and Culture," Womanist: Theory and Research, vol. 2, no. 1 Fall/Winter (1996-97): 3-11.

be measured. Following Steady, Rodriguez argues too that this female-effacing ideology of cultural anthropology has been most effective in transforming into a universal truth the idea that women in African societies were, and continue to be, subordinate players in creative activities, and in the maintenance of our social order.

This masculinist (male-privileging) character of cultural anthropology was transferred to the discipline of African art history in the United States at the moment of the latter's inception. Conceived and nurtured within anthropology, the study of African art, which had begun as a study of anthropological artifacts in museum collections, was effectively "Othered." Forced to wear a troublesome anthropological garb, African art history reflected the assumptions, master narratives, metascripts, and methodological biases of the birthing discipline. The disciplinary impact of this reflection is evident in the relegation of African art history to a subordinate position in most art history departments in the United States. As well, it manifests in the privileging of the methodology of anthropology, of men's artistic products, of men's voices and ideas, and in the attribution of artistic initiative and inventiveness to men.

As a result of this conflicted history most historical explanations in African art typically ignore the inventive role of women in the creation of stylistic movements, and in the production of patterns and models for textile designs and sculptural forms.[34] Far more egregious in this gender bias is that the media of painting, pottery and certain textiles in which African women predominated were cursorily treated in art history. Not surprisingly, this masculinist bias in the study of traditional African art is also transferred to the contemporary arts of Africa through the route of assumptions and methodologies of cultural anthropology, the dominant theoretical approach that is utilized in the domain of African art. This transference is further compounded when curatorial mandates to organize exhibitions on Africa's contemporary art are given to anthropologists for whom issues of class and gender are of minimal importance, and who typically ignore imperialism's asymmetrical relations of dominance that is at the heart of the discipline.

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34 I have argued elsewhere that women's erasure is often secured by assigning creative initiative to men. This works through a set of disciplinary assumptions about art and gender relations. Since the anthropologist-art historian privileges physical objects over forms created with the human body, male sculptors are attributed as inventive even though they merely copied the forms women created with their bodies. And given that the disciplinary assumption is that men are the dominant actors in African societies, women are automatically disqualified from occupying a dominant artistic position. See Nkiru Nzegwu, "*Enenbe Eje Olu*: The Transfixing Beauty of Nubile Maidens," a commissioned paper for the prospective catalogue for the exhibition, *Nature, Belief and Ritual: Art of Sub-Saharan Africa at the Dallas Museum of Art.*

Oblivious to the problem of gender stereotyping, aspects of gender difference vitiate *The Poetics of Line* even as the curator strove to give an accurate reading of the history of contemporary *uli*. At a time when African feminist literature has effectively demonstrated the ways in which conceptual devices work to entrench male privilege,[35] and African intellectuals have illuminated the forms of misrepresentation and mis-description of Africa's reality inherent in Africanist scholarship,[36] Ottenberg's methodology unfolds as if oblivious to these critiques. This refusal to recognize the theoretical import of American and African feminist analyses fosters a less than critical posture that facilitates the reproduction of male privilege in African art exhibitions. The failure to interrogate his own First World's subject position, and his avoidance of an examination of the attitudes, beliefs, symbols, and relations between women and men means that he missed the insight that could have been provided by the discursive politics of practitioners of *uli* stylistics known as the "Nsukka School."[37] Such oversights are often perfunctorily dismissed by claiming that issues of gender do not intertwine with art, or that they are unimportant to Nigerians. Of course, such a stance is intended to deflect attention from the discursive mediation of sexism on curatorial decisions, especially in the selection of artists.

Gender Transmogrification of *The Poetics*

The Poetics of Line offers a cogent example of how gender disparity is reproduced in exhibitions, and of how women artists are rendered invisible. The convergence of these two factors results in the dissemination of the fallacious message that no contemporary female artist of

35 Oyeronke Oyewumi, The Invention of Women: Making An African Sense of Western Discourses on Gender (Minneapolis, MN: Minnesota University Press, 1997); Nkiru Nzegwu, "Recovering Igbo Traditions: a Case for Indigenous Women's Organization in Development," in Women, Culture and Development, eds. Martha Nussbaum and Jonathan Glover (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), 444-465; Felicia Ekejiuba, "Down to Fundamentals: Women-centered Heathholds in Rural West Africa," in Women Wielding The Hoe, ed. Deborah Fahy Bryceson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995); Molara Ogundipe-Leslie, Re-Creating Ourselves: African Women and Critical Transformations (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 1994); Amadiume (1987); Simi Afonja, "Women, Power and Authority in Traditional Yoruba Society," in Visibility and Power, eds. Leela Dube, Eleanor Leacock and Shirley Ardener (Dehli: Oxford University Press, 1986), 136-157; and Achola Pala, "Reflections on Development Myths," Africa Report, March/April (1981): 7-10.

36 Taiwo (forthcoming 1999), Oyekan Omoyewola, "With Friends Like These…A Critique of Pervasive Anti-Africanisms in Current African Studies Epistemology and Methodology," African Studies Review, vol. 37, no. 3 (1994), and Michael Echeruo, "From Transition to Transition," Research in African Literatures, vol. 22, no. 4 (1991): 135-145.

37 Nsukka, the name of the university town where the school is located, became the signifying marker of this group of artists.



fig. 3

significance works in the stylistic mode of *uli*. Yet, a cursory review of the Nigerian art scene reveals that, of the numerous women artists in *uli*, there are two leading female artists, namely Ndidi Onyemaechi Dike and Chinwe Uwatse. Dike is a sculptor, mixed media painter, furniture designer, and fiber artist, and Uwatse is a painter and textile artist.[38] Since 1984, Dike has been featured in over thirty-eight group shows, both nationally and internationally, and seven solo exhibitions. Versatility is her trademark. In her wood sculptures (*Ikenga*, fig. 3) and *Cloth From the Apprentice Weaver's Loom* (fig. 4), she confidently uses the power-saw in the slash-and-burn technique pioneered by the renowned Nsukka-based Ghanaian artist, El Anatsui. Going beyond Anatsui's invention, she introduced the application of paint on the relief sculptures, displaying an uncanny ability to marry paint with sculpture. She lets the natural colors of the wood and the blackened color of the charred grooves dictate the specific colors for highlights. In sculptures such as *Okwa Nzu Igbo—Igbo Hospitality* (1993) and *Female Masquerade* (1990), she extended this inventive act by sometimes attaching cowrie shells, copper foils, brass figurines, plastic beads, coins, animal skins, or vegetal fibers to the sculptures. In addition, she liberated her relief sculptures from the wall and moved them into three-dimensional space long before it was fashionable to do so.



fig. 4



fig. 5

Since 1982, Uwatse has had five solo exhibitions and has been featured in fourteen group exhibitions. Unlike Dike who integrates multiple media, Uwatse moves confidently between painting in acrylic and painting in watercolor, and in the process produces two very distinct painterly styles. Her works are sometimes



fig. 6

38 For a detailed profile of Ndidi Dike that examines her work in the context of women's histories, see Nkiru Nzegwu, "Transgressive Vision: Subverting the Power of Masculinity" in Issues in Contemporary African Art, ed. Nkiru Nzegwu (Binghamton: ISSA at Binghamton University, 1998).



fig. 7

dictated by the technical qualities of her medium as they are by the formal elements of *uli* designs. The acrylic paintings *Praise God* (fig. 5 1992), *Help Me* (fig. 6, 1992), and *Untitled* are bold colorful works whose compositional style rests on a skilful blending of vigorous brushstrokes, the *uli* logic of design, and sharp engaging colors. Her watercolor paintings, as seen in *The Decision* (fig. 7 1997) and *Dreams* (fig. 8 1997), and the pastel works, *Onwa (The Moon)* (fig. 9 1997) and *The Sun* (fig. 10 1997), display a haunting luminosity and translucency that differ from the solid opacity of colors of her acrylic paintings. She explains the technical process she sometimes uses to achieve certain effects: "I set the paper alight and put it in the sink. It absorbs water, here and there, so that certain parts don't burn. There are holes in different places, and with the damp areas of water, it looks like people are peeping through the burnt out hollows, burnt out cities, and burnt out lives."[39] Moved by her watercolor paintings, the co-founder of Earthly Treasures Gallery in Ottawa, Maurice Bryan, described them as "demonstrating a lyrical and exquisitely ephemeral quality that hints at unseen energy fields and forces that influence the everyday realities of the material world, and are themselves modified by the thoughts and actions of this realm" (1992).[40]



fig. 8



fig. 9

Although the professional paths of Dike and Uwatse differ enormously, they have both received a number of accolades, and they both possess a visible national profile. Dike is a full-time artist, commuting between the provincial city of Owerri (where she

39 Interview with the artist in December 1995.

40 Maurice Bryan's panel text for *Dissimulation: An International Exhibition of Paintings* at Earthly Treasures Gallery in Ottawa, July 29 to August 29, 1992.

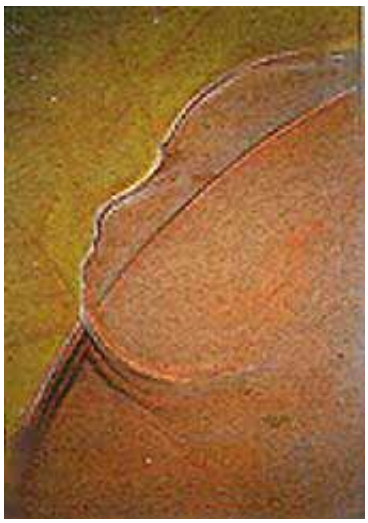


fig. 10

sculpts) and Lagos metropolis (where she exhibits). Uwatse works full-time, initially as an arts administrator at the National Council of Arts and Culture in Lagos, and presently in the corporate world, as the General Manager of Bang and Olufsen, Nigeria Limited. Despite their extensive social commitments and diverse professional obligations, both women have productive careers, and have successfully maintained their profile as artists at a critical historical period in which the draconian economic effects of the structural adjustment programs are ferociously sapping artists' vitality. To her credit, Dike has been most successful in attaining a measure of financial independency as an artist, and lives off the proceeds of her work. Astutely entrepreneurial, she has skillfully marketed her work and has received a number of art residencies in Britain, the United States, and Senegal.

By contrast, Ottenberg chose Ada Udechukwu to represent the female presence in *uli*. Although she has intermittently sketched and painted *uli* patterns on paper and on textile, the short duration of her dalliance, and the sparse amount of time devoted to visual art up to this point, are insufficient to categorize her as a serious visual artist. But this is to be expected given that her creative interest lies elsewhere. Since she graduated with a degree in English and Literature she has devoted most of her attention to writing poetry, indicating that visual art is not an area of significant attention. Further proof of this is that since her interest in visual art was piqued, she has not consistently applied herself to defining a career in it, and has not fully developed as one. Poetry, however, has been her main area of creative focus, and she has published a collection of poetry. Prior to moving to the United States, a couple of years ago, she had lived in relatively quiet seclusion in Nsukka contributing more to poetic life of Nsukka literary community than to its visual art. Because of her literary potentials, a great disservice was done to her (and to female visual artists as well) by misrepresenting her as a visual artist.

A consideration of this disservice is important since it begins to reveal the sexist ground of Ottenberg's justification for selecting Ada Udechukwu over Uwatse and Dike. In probing the reason of this selection we discover a politics of gender that, on the one hand, accords with the anthropological portrait of African women as passive, and on the other hand, accords with a patriarchal consciousness that penalizes women who deviate from that ideal of femininity by erasing

them. This politics of gender introduces sexism into the picture and represents the *uli* school in ways that defines an asymmetrical relation of dominance between men and women artists, and abandons the criteria of achievement and excellence just when it ought to be upheld. The abandonment of an ideal of excellence for women ignores that artistic accomplishment ought to be the motivating consideration for the selection of female artists as it is for men. Had this ideal prevailed for women as it has for men, Ada Udechukwu would not have been chosen. Thus, regardless of how he pleads, Ottenberg's readiness to select a less than worthy female candidate in a strong cast of male artists reveals patronizing attitudes about women that finds its home in a patriarchal framework.

Feminist critiques of the logic and power of patriarchy have shown that it is a time-tested strategy of a patriarchal consciousness to pit women against each other by putting them in different categories.[41] In this divide and rule policy, assertive women are kept in check by privileging the attributes of softness, passivity, and docility. Women who transgress this ground of feminine normativity are perceived as threatening, and are chastised and punished. Public censure is galvanized to represent them as "unfeminine" and "maladjusted."[42] Under patriarchal rule, female dependency is underscored by conferring accolades on women who approximate the desired ideal of acceptable womanly behavior. To a large extent, and as I shall later elaborate, the selection of Ada Udechukwu over the professionally established Dike and Uwatse could also be read more as a patriarchal reward for her instantiation of the ideal of femininity than for her art. The egregious harm of this reward is that Ottenberg internationally projected a picture of Nigerian women visual artists that is at variance with Nigeria's sociocultural reality.

The trouble with imperialism is that it defines a hierarchical relation of dominance, dependence, and subordination between First World and Third World nations. In *The Poetics of Line*, Ottenberg's First World attitudes and views supervenes and sometimes overrides the Third World reality of Nigeria. The problem with the ensuing erasure is not simply that the two preeminent female artists of *uli* are represented as incidental to the larger history of *uli* in modern Nigerian art, but that in dissimulating Nigeria's social reality Ottenberg misrepresents himself as gender sensitive and as a

41 The readings in Issues in Feminism: An Introduction to Women's Studies, ed. Sheila Ruth (Mountain View, Calif. Mayfield Publishing Company, 1990) provide compelling analysis of the dynamics of patriarchy and of the ways women are socially exploited. Particularly illuminating is chapter 4 on "Talking Back: Feminist Responses to Sexist Stereotypes," 123-137.

42 Ruth (1990), 123.

champion of gender representation. This misrepresentation comes from his selection of Ada Udechukwu. The selection of a weak visual artist makes it seem that he is motivated by considerations of gender parity, and hence went to great lengths to protect women's representation. But in fact, in the process of cross-cultural translation of *uli* art from Nigeria to the Smithsonian Institution, certain liberties were taken that transmogrified factual reality. Unaware of the dissimulation of social reality, and the attendant displacement of Dike and Uwatse by an amateur artist, the audience believes that the featured female artist is the better, more established one, and that only one good female *uli* artist exists. In a context where perception is everything and the audience is accustomed to looking up to the Smithsonian Institution as the purveyor of knowledge, no basis remains for an uninformed audience to challenge a curator's constructions.

The implicit danger in simulating verisimilitude is that one risks mis-educating the international audience about the gender politics inherent in the Nsukka School, as well as the professional relationship between male and female *uli* artists in Nigeria. The tendentious aspect of the mis-education is the suggestion conveyed that it is only when standards are drastically lowered, or the rules are exceedingly bent, can African women be found who minimally qualify to be called visual artists. The resulting transmogrification of knowledge of contemporary *uli* comes through under-estimating the ontological effects of gender attitudes in the construction of knowledge about Nigeria's Third World reality. Like most of such intellectual distortions in African studies, these occur when the social critiques of Nigerian women scholars are disregarded. For one so concerned about championing the achievements of Igbos, Ottenberg failed to realize that to invalidate women's accomplishments, and to foster the disempowerment of those most deserving of recognition, is to produce a gender-biased narrative that does a disservice to the artistic tradition he claims to validate.

Performing Gender Exclusion

It is significant that Ottenberg's exclusion of Dike and Uwatse is achieved mainly by playing fast-and-loose with his substantive criteria of selection. The illicit moves are cause for concern for a variety of reasons. Methodologically, the curator does not consistently apply the criteria across the board, yet suggests that he does. Epistemologically, *The Poetics of Line* is pitched as an accurate account of the history and development of *uli* style, yet there are serious sexist flaws that are not addressed. And cognitively, the seven-featured artists are presented as the key principal figures of the School where, in fact, the discriminatory application of the criteria of selection precluded the

representation of key women artists of the School. We need to take these moves seriously because of the two bold claims they collectively make. These are, that the seven artists are the most outstanding of the Nsukka School, and that the featured works are samples that most eloquently approximate the desired artistic quality to be represented in the global venue offered by the Smithsonian Institution.

Gender inequity manifests in *The Poetics of Line* through a series of exclusionary acts that subversively discredits what achievement-oriented women visual artists do. It does this by presenting women's art as below par. Consider Ottenberg's response to charges that major women artists were arbitrarily excluded.[43] According to him, he visited Dike at Owerri to look at her work and to talk to her about it, but could not get beyond his negative personal judgement of her work. He states:

> She made everything available to me, her art, catalogue, slides, photos, and let me photograph her work. We also discussed some of the other artists trained or teaching at Nsukka as well. All this was very helpful to me. And she got me together with Tony Nwachukwu in Owerri, to share his art. But *I could not get very excited about the quality of her work. I did not find it bad, but not that good, a personal judgement* (emphasis mine).[44]

To provide justification for this "personal judgement," Ottenberg appeals neither to the internal yardstick of Nigerian social reality nor to the art milieu in which Dike had established a formidable reputation. He neglected the opinion of many Nigerian collectors, who have her works in their collection. Finally, he disregarded the yardstick he himself had used in selecting the male artists. Rather he justifies his negative taste and his concurrent erasure of Nigerian social reality by appealing to the authority of Sylvia Williams, the late Director of the museum and to Philip Ravenhill, the late Chief Curator.[45] According to him:

> Williams felt strongly that Ndidi's was not of the quality that should be in the show. This was later reaffirmed

43 Official letter from Professor Simon Ottenberg to the author justifying his exclusion of Ndidi Dike and Chinwe Uwatse. The letter was dated May 13, 1997.

44 Ibid.

45 One cannot ignore the fact that Ottenberg's letter was written after the death of Sylvia Williams and Philip Ravenhill. Thus, it is quite possible that they may have had a different account of the decision-making process.

> independently by the Chief Curator here, Philip Ravenhill. Other work I have seen at exhibitions by Ndidi in Nigeria and at the Whitechapel exhibition in London did not cause me to change my mind.[46]

There are a number of interesting things about this appeal, not least of which is Ottenberg's ready invocation of First World authority figures of the Smithsonian Institution to legitimize his stance. At best, this appeal is disingenuous. In the following, I uncover its diversionary and problematic basis.

Professionally, the practice is for guest curators to decide on the objectives of the exhibition, and to identify and work with artists who most fully meet the goals of their mission statement. They then select the most appropriate works and submit the exhibition proposal for consideration. To understand this relationship between the guest curator and the host institution is to realize that Ottenberg's duties require him to guide the museum and to provide the requisite leadership in producing a historically sound exhibition. This obligation implies that Ottenberg cannot be both the expert and the intern at the same time. If he is truly the guest curator, and there is no reason to suppose that he is not, then Williams's and Ravenhill's opinions are incidental to the selection. While their views are important, they cannot function as legitimizing voices, because guest curators possess the relevant expertise in the specific area of the exhibition that the museum lacks. The legitimacy of this interpretation derives from the fact that Williams and Ravenhill are hardly knowledgeable about the history of contemporary Nigerian art, its culture of gender, the *raison d'être* of its stylistic innovations, and the cultural templates that inform and animate the intra-national debates and discussions on art.[47] They have neither undertaken theoretical work in this area, nor have they researched or curated an exhibition on modern Nigerian art. Thus, to the extent that Ottenberg constitutes them as authorities, he, the researcher and the more knowledgeable one, is either abdicating responsibility, or the expressed viewpoints were actually nurtured by him. Since the latter is the more charitable option, his appeal is really a non-appeal.

The second problem of Ottenberg's pseudo appeal is the subtle, but significant shift of the

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46 Ottenberg's letter.

47 I am aware that in the credit roll of the film *Nigerian Art: Kindred Spirits*, produced by the Smithsonian World, Sylvia Williams was credited as an Art Consultant. Having worked intimately with the film producer, Carroll Parrot Blue in the production of the film, I am also well aware of William's lack of theoretical and critical contribution in the development and narrative content of the film. In my view, the listing of her name was more a recognition of her role as the Director of the National Museum of African Art.

criteria used in selecting the male artists and the lone female artist. This shift involves a conception of gender in which double standards are utilized. Substantive issues of history and art development defined the basis for the selection of male artists. However, the criteria swung to subjective matters of personal taste and judgment once the focus was shifted to female artists. By this move, Dike and Uwatse were forced out of contention. They were placed in a demeaning situation of having to earn their participation if and only if their works aesthetically stimulated the curator to excitement. This latter requirement was not in place for male artists as was the following set of questions: Who pioneered the stylistic changes? Who extended them dramatically? Who provided the theoretical underpinnings? Who are the flag bearers of *uli* in the domestic and international arenas? That Ottenberg failed to consider the importance of these questions as he looked at the work and worth of women artists demonstrates that he wanted to exclude them and so rigged up different criteria. Women artists were definitely not allowed to play on a level field.

Ottenberg may try to bypass this critique of his sexism by shifting the problem to a segment of Nigerian male artists.[48] Unfortunately, this move is untenable. Depicting oneself as gender sensitive and highlighting the sexism of others is different from being gender sensitive. The issue at stake is the set of curatorial decisions he made that code sexist attitudes. This is contrary to what some members of the Nsukka School may think.

A close look at the gender framework underpinning Ottenberg's curatorial position reveals traces of its sexist character. When the sub-text of the framework is filled out, the obscured gender intent becomes visible in the putatively gender-blind assumptions. That he pays virtually no attention to women becomes obvious since the sub-text reads: Which *male* artist pioneered the recent stylistic changes in *uli*? Which *male* artists extended it dramatically? Which *male* artist provided the theoretical underpinnings? And which *male* artists are the flag bearers of *uli* in the domestic and international arenas? Given this recessed male-privileging framework the following artists *naturally* emerge. Uche Okeke merits critical attention because of his role as the founding artist of the Nsukka School, not because of the aesthetic quality of his artistic contribution. Obiora Udechukwu emerges

48 He did it in the following way in his letter: "At an AKA meeting in Awka in the fall of 1995 which I attended, where there was discussion of extending the group from thirteen to fifteen members, I suggested that she [Dike] would be a good candidate, and that certainly AKA should consider bringing in female members, something I have also suggested in my 'Introduction' to the 1994 AKA catalog. My suggestion at the meeting drew no apparent supporters."

as the innovator who extended the ideas set forth by Okeke. Chike Aniakor is presented as the theoretician of the School. El Anatsui represents the inter-African national linkage. And Tayo Adenaike, in Nigeria, and Olu Oguibe, in England and the United States are included to illustrate the two divergent paths of development offered by male practitioners of *uli*. If aesthetic taste was the sole criterion for inclusion for men, as Ottenberg had it for women, it is doubtful whether some of the male artists would have made it to the list given the poor technical quality of some of the exhibited works. Also, had Ottenberg paid close attention to the ongoing debates in art history about representation and the representation of others, a different set of names would have been generated that bears little resemblance to what he had produced. For example, had he seriously factored into consideration Oguibe's public rejection of his classification as *uli* artist, citing as his reason the ghettoizing nature of the term, and the progression of his art beyond the boundaries of *uli*, his name ought not to have been on the list.[49] The artist had made an important claim about the significance of his art and self-identity that should have been taken seriously.

Lastly, the third problem about Ottenberg's appeal concerns the traditional sexist manner in which the category of artistic beauty and aesthetic taste were deployed as criteria for the disqualification of Dike. As earlier mentioned, feminist artists and art historians in the United States had taken on the art establishment and exposed the gender discriminatory uses of these categories. Thus, given the centrality of concerns about gender, ethnicity, class, and cultural heritages in art history, it is interesting that Williams, Ravenhill, and Ottenberg missed the larger objective to combat the reproduction of discrimination, which they themselves have produced. Indeed, to eliminate the vicarious rule of prejudice in curatorial matters, they should have adopted more objective standard of measurement such as the accolades that Dike has won. This would have provided a publicly sanctioned way of evaluating her competency, and ruling on her professional worth. Putting the matter concretely and succinctly, Ottenberg's elimination of Uwatse and Dike is similar to denying recognition to African American artists Lois Mailou Jones, Faith Ringgold or Joyce Scott, simply because a white male curator "could not get very excited about the quality of [their] work." That such a personal judgment is untenable today is increasingly seen in the fact that respected curators or art historians do not invoke it as a yardstick for recognition, let alone use it to justify the elimination of artists of eminent stature.

It is worrisome that Ottenberg found it easy and justifiable to insert his personal bias into the

49 This disavowal was repeated again by Oguibe during the symposium at the Smithsonian Institution.

publicly assigned task of accurately representing Nigeria's artistic and social reality in an international venue. It is equally disturbing that Williams and Ravenhill sanctioned this displacement of Nigeria's artistic reality by insisting on the preeminence of their personal bias. It is troubling too that instead of focusing on publicly recognized, historically grounded issues of assessment such as Dike's solid accomplishments, inventiveness, international and national recognition, historical precedence, and impressive record, they invoked an irrelevant matter to endorse her elimination. The tragedy in this elimination of Dike is that substantive objective features that define artistic achievement as well as the criteria of excellence and success are the very things that are waived. This waiver illegitimately discounted Dike's historical significance and artistic importance in Nigeria, and failed to show why all the international and national attention she has received was deemed completely worthless. That a foreign curator's personal taste is imbued with supervenient force and sets aside widely established practices of assessment highlights the tendentious character of *The Poetics of Line*, and the representation of the Nsukka School in the United States. Africa is ill served when cultural interpreters and the very institution that is responsible for the dissemination of knowledge about its artistic expressions fail in their task.

So what might explain the existence of such an attitude in the work of a scholar of Ottenberg's stature? The reason for probing this is to unravel the discrete ways sexism lodges in a scholar's or curator's work, and thereafter becomes imperceptible to observation and theoretical reflection. In reviewing Ottenberg's response, it is worthwhile to note that his willingness to treat Dike as an exception and manufacture new rules for her is symptomatic of gender bias. This double standard essentially proves the gender-based nature of his judgment. Its lapse is magnified when we perceive him cutting slack for men and some of their poor quality works, [50] while no allowance was made for Dike's inclusion.

Gender conscious analysis is a necessary corrective to the deployment of male-privileging aesthetic concepts. Clarity on this point can be sought in the writings of American feminist art historians who have researched the processes and strategies of marginalization of women artists. Further illumination of gender discrimination in contemporary Nigerian life is provided by the rapidly growing corpus of literature by Nigerian women on the diverse processes of gender

50 Again, I am referring to Okeke's oil painting, *Aba Revolt* and some drawings by two other male artists that were largely described as "doodles" by visiting artists.

discrimination in social life.[51] These readings isolate the reasons for gender exclusion, and they heighten one's awareness of gender-based pitfalls implicit in the articulation of Nigeria's social history. In providing evidentiary support of an internal constituency, these readings undercut the view that concerns of gender discrimination and gender bias in Nigeria, in particular, and Africa, in general, are of interest only to Western feminists. Aware of the revolutionary potential of the concept of gender in analyzing contemporary reality, Nigerian women scholars are increasingly analyzing their current realities to check misguided explanations of women's absence in modern sociopolitical life. Hitherto, this absence has been represented as a fact of nature rather than a social construction.

At this point, the complicity of the National Museum of African Art to this erasure can no longer be ignored. Dominated for too long by a limiting anthropological vision that rejects the legitimacy of the non-traditional, modern art of Africa, there is a seeming lack of awareness of issues of critical art history and the way these intersect with contemporary African art. The reason for this is that for too long the National Museum of African Art safely pitched its camp with American collectors and scholars who believe that the only authentic African art is the historic traditional art of various regions. Prior to this project, Ottenberg worked within the expectancies of the anthropological framework rather than the art historical frame. Unfamiliarity with the latter may explain his failure to avail himself of the issues, insight, critiques, commentaries, and methodologies of art historical literature. This failure certainly points to one danger of permitting an anthropologist to function as art curator/art historian of the modern art of any African nation. Recognition of this danger means exercising caution so that the modern art of Nigeria, for example, is not captured within a limiting framework that takes it outside the boundaries of critical theoretical engagement. The shortcoming of such a framework is that the analysis of sociopolitical events terminates just when it should begin.

A complete account of the Nsukka School definitely cannot ignore the implication of the female legacy of *uli*, especially given the extensive study of traditional forms and designs by artists in the academic community. For an art form that owes its roots to women, and in which for centuries Igbo women were the exponents, one would have expected, at the very least, that Ottenberg would have critically engaged this history by adequately reviewing the contributions of the female members

51 A very short list of names of these scholars include Bolanle Awe, Kamen Okonjo, Molara Ogundipe-Leslie, Felicia Ekejiuba, Simi Afonja, Tess Onwueme, Antonia Kalu, Tola Pearce, Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi, Ifi Amadiume, Nkiru Nzegwu, Oyeronke Oyewumi, Obioma Nnaemeka, Leslye Obiora, and Aisha Imam.

of the School. Additionally, he could then have explored the implication of the male presence on the logic of creation, and ascertained whether or not this differs from the logic of creation of modern female artists. This critical posture would have yielded an interesting commentary that would have transcended the stereotypical narrative on male privilege and female subordination that is subsequently offered by the exhibition.

Without a doubt, questions of historical significance, precedence, innovation, experimentation are as important to contemporary women artists of *uli* as it was to their female forebears. Naturally, according legitimacy to such a focus would have forestalled Ottenberg's masculinist narration, as well as hindered the illicit shift from substantive historical issues to that of personal aesthetic taste. At the very least, it would have helped him rethink his disregard of Dike's "considerable reputation as an artist, [her] extensive vita, and that she has exhibited widely, and not only in Nigeria."[52] He could have seriously reexamined his subject position while acknowledging that:

> As a person I find her always interesting to talk with and a peppy individual. Further, I am not one who subscribes to the view that her art is derivative of El Anatsui's, as some others state. I believe her when she says that it has grown out of her own development. I see her as a fully independent artist standing on her own. And I admire her as a female in taking up sculpture in Nigeria, in the past a male preserve. Her independence is reinforced by comments in Marcia Kure's B.A. thesis at Nsukka about her independent role as a student at Nsukka. I have no personal antagonism towards her, and wish her well in her career. But I stand by my aesthetic judgement about her work, which is clearly not in agreement with that of some others.[53]

How can Ottenberg recognize Dike's "considerable reputation as an artist" yet rule in a manner that belittles it? Is he claiming that his aesthetic judgment is superior to everyone and every institution

52 Ottenberg's letter.

53 Ibid.

that had positively reviewed Dike's accomplishment? If so, what are his credentials? On what is he basing the superiority of his aesthetic judgement over peers, art juries, art institutions that have recognized the worth of her art both internationally and nationally? Moreover, what is Ottenberg's stature and expertise in both the American and the Nigerian art worlds? Lastly, if "considerable recognition" is a litmus test for weighting artists' worth and for privileging an artist over others, what justification does Ottenberg have for dispensing with this time-honored test in the case of Dike?

That there is an element of hostility towards Dike is revealed when we challenge the inflexibility of Ottenberg's opinion. By all objective standards of evaluation, Dike has more than satisfied the stringent requirements of any criterion through the national and international accomplishments in her "extensive vita," the innovations she pioneered, her art residencies in different countries, and her full time career as an artist. Any withholding of recognition is, therefore, unjustified. If, with all her accomplishments, both national and international accolades, Dike cannot reach the threshold of Ottenberg's aesthetic taste, then there is something seriously wrong about this notion of taste. It is probable that there is really no aesthetic taste to speak of, only prejudice. This lack of fairness of his opinion provides a clue as to why he "could not get very excited about the quality of her work." To unravel it we have to revisit Ottenberg's description of Dike as "a peppy individual" and ask, why does he believe that "peppy" is a relevant term to use in describing Dike's artistic skill and achievement? What does the description add to her art? But, more perceptively, what does it really tell us about Ottenberg's intellectual grounding and biases?

At the level of gender expectation and gender consciousness, it is clear that Dike's "peppiness" would not sit well with anyone who views African women as submissive, passive appendages of men. Being full of energy, brisk, vigorous and spirited is exactly what African women, as represented in anthropological literature and media images in the First World are not supposed to be. If they are, then it is usually assumed that they are thoroughly Westernized, and from the point of view of Africanists, are quintessentially marked by inauthenticity and unAfricaness. Functioning as a vector of disciplinary-based sexism, Ottenberg unconsciously injects them into his study and bases his curatorial decisions on them. Seemingly reluctant to internationally promote an African woman who so decisively explodes the legitimacy of disciplinary stereotypes, it was far easier to compromise the veracity of the exhibition, and dump the problematic Dike. After all, who would know, or object?

Female Artists: Perfecting Effacement

To leave the analysis at this level is to fail to underscore the structural dynamics of the asymmetrical relations of power at the heart of Ottenberg's override of the social context of Nigeria's Third World reality. To whom does Ottenberg owe accountability as he straddles the two sides of the Atlantic divide, speaking for, and (mis)representing Nigeria's art to the U.S. audience? That he could easily efface Dike and Uwatse proclaims clearly that the exhibition is primarily for the U.S. audience, that he owes no obligations to Nigeria, and that what Nigerians think is inconsequential. Paternalism defines the character of the asymmetrical relations of power on which academic imperialism thrives. It manifests in the unproblematized belief that the ultimate reference frame for presenting *uli* in the international arena is the curator's own aesthetic taste. The very idea that Ottenberg is not accountable to Nigeria, nor can he be compelled to represent events as they are in the country, uncovers the imperialistic basis of the exhibition.

Taking the issue of accountability a step further allows us to address the imperialistic politics at play in the elimination of Uwatse. To his credit, Ottenberg acknowledged that Uwatse's work interested him, and that he had hoped to include her in the exhibition "particularly because of the interesting ways in which she made use of *uli* motifs to create her images, which seemed somewhat different from other Nsukka artists." The questions these invoke are: Why was she excluded? Why did she not make the cut? Again Ottenberg resorts to the formidable authority of Williams, whom he portrayed as adamant to the idea of including Uwatse. According to him:

> I might say that there was another Nsukka female artist, Chinwe Uwatse, whose work interested me, and I had hoped to have her in the exhibition, particularly because of the interesting ways in which she made use of uli motifs to create her images, which seemed somewhat different from other Nsukka artists. Unfortunately, I got a definite 'No!' from Dr. Williams, and I could not persuade her to change her mind. By the time of Dr. Williams' death it was too late to change the plans for the exhibition; they were set.[54]

But how can an unreasoned reaction, a sub-theoretical ejaculation, be allowed to override Nigeria's

54 Ibid.

artistic reality and to repress the artistic accomplishments of an artist? Why is it possible that the art history of an entire country can be contravened because of one person's opinion? What permits this contravention? Before examining these questions, it is important to note that Ottenberg had concurrently laid the basis for this abdication of responsibility by earlier citing the implacable will of the museum director. He states: "As far as I know, while Dr. Williams was the museum's director, no work ever appeared in its exhibitions, certainly none that originated here, that did not please her."[55]

Interesting as this information on Dr. Williams may be, the question of Uwatse's inclusion is still inseparable from the question of Ottenberg's attitude towards African women, and his reluctance to jeopardize his interests for veracity. His unwillingness to see in Williams's response a reason as to why women artists do not receive the recognition they deserve means that he could not mount a spirited defense either for Uwatse's inclusion, or for the maintenance of a quality standard in scholarly work on Africa. If things occurred as Ottenberg claims they did, and there is no reason to suppose they did not, it calls to question, not the meddlesome nature of the director, but the professional competence of the guest curator. That he can so shabbily be overruled despite his acclaimed research and his status as a Regent Fellow, is both a commentary on the problematic state of scholarship on African art and the compromised ground on which contemporary Nigerian art is defined in the United States.

A reflection of Ottenberg's account of Williams's intervention and its impact on Uwatse's participation forces to attention the enormous role of First World institutions and funders in dictating what constitutes art in Africa. The enormity of this role sometimes underwrites the suspension of good scholarly practices when convenient. While Ottenberg's invocation of the power of Williams underscores his own powerlessness, and lays the decision-making initiative on the museum director, it glaringly highlights the weakness of Africanists' investment in Africa. Although Ottenberg's picture of powerlessness is designed to prove the awesome power of institutional authority, what he succeeds in showing is the readiness in which scholarly compromises are made to preserve political interest. The real reason for his inability to challenge the institutional power of Williams is not lack of power, but collusion with power. By failing to contest Williams's decision, Ottenberg lends his weight to the idea that in the intellectual study of Africa anything goes, including homogenizing women artists of *uli*, and organizing exhibitions that tendentiously state African women artists are professionally weak. The epistemological consequences of an asymmetrical relations of power is

55 Ibid.

exposed when collusion with the structures of power in the First World ordains a trajectory of work in which a critical framework is abandoned and accountability to Africa and the subject matter are ignored.

Two negative statements are immediately made by the abandonment of accountability. The first is that being an informed art historian, artist, or curator is irrelevant to organizing an exhibition on contemporary Nigerian and African art; and, the second is that expediency (self-interest) rather than scholarly integrity sometimes defines Africanist scholarship in the arts.[56] Though Ottenberg's collusion with institutional authority results in the erasure of Uwatse, his failure to argue for her inclusion derives more from a concealed gender ideology that admits plurality and difference for men, and none for women. When he feels that many male artists are needed to elaborate the history and development of *uli*, but believes that only one lone female is required to account for women's expressivity in art, an important gender statement is made. The statement foretells a negative attitude towards women, suggesting that Nigerian women artists are exceedingly small in number, and that those who are artists lack professional rigor, dedication and sophistication. Such patronizing Othering serves to locate women artists outside of the boundaries of a serious critical study of art history, and widens the gap between them and the men.

The relevance of this to the evaluation of *The Poetics of Line* is that it provides a textured understanding of the asymmetrical relation of power between the First and Third Worlds, and of the implication of ignoring gender issues in organizing exhibitions on African art. While Ottenberg must be commended for travelling six times to Nigeria, interviewing artists and collating data on *uli* stylistics, and understanding the sociopolitical determinants of this art, he must be censured for ignoring the issue of parity of concern to Nigerian women artists who are facing systemic effacement. In organizing future contemporary art exhibitions, there is need for ideological reflection and reconsideration of cross-cultural translation of the art of the Third World into the First World. The following is a set of questions that ought to be raised: What is the underlying objective of this exhibition? Why do I want to curate it? Whose views and concerns about art will influence the

56 At the "Recovering Benin: A Centennial Celebration" conference at Wellesley College (April 1997), Jean Borgatti gave an illuminating presentation on how expediency and self-interest have functioned, behind the scenes, to interfere, and sometimes shape the kind of knowledge produced on African art. It is disconcerting the way established experts have worked with collectors to construct information and to fallaciously legitimize objects in collections.

selection of artists? What are the critical issues of art being engaged? What is the constitutive nature of the yardstick of evaluation? How does my identity, privilege, and location mediate my construction of the society's history? And how do critical issues of art and culture lend themselves to interpretation? Typically, when the curator and the funds for the exhibition are from the First World, these pertinent questions ought to, but are never raised. The result is that First World interests, extraneous concerns, and presumptions about Africa become the dominant driving force of the exhibition. While this tells us more about the First World than it does about the artistic reality of the Third World, which the exhibition claims to tell, the audience remains tragically unaware of the transmogrification. The point of this is not that it is impossible for First World funded exhibitions and curators to accurately reflect issues as they are in the Third World. Rather, it is that if one fails to fully respect the subject matter, study the complex interconnections of the style and its artistic legacy, and factor in the gender politics at work, one is engaged in imperialism. This is because one is displacing a nation's reality on imperialistic grounds.

Even in the First World, gender parity remains an uphill task alerting us to the immense work that still needs to be done to achieve equity in the arts. Women artists are given short shrift if affirmative action policies are not in place to remind curators of the male-privileging nature of artistic concepts, and to counter centuries old prejudices of erasure. Linda Abraham's statistical survey of the status of women artists in Canada corroborates this point, and helps us to make sense of Williams's hostile objection to Uwatse.[57] The survey demonstrates that even today art institutions continue to function as if gender equity policies are separate from structural issues of exhibition planning and scheduling and the evaluative considerations that fix the principles of acquisition. In spite of the presence of women in critical roles in the gallery and museum systems, Abraham's survey reveals that minimal progress was made in the overall status of Canadian women in the arts since the 1970s. The gender neglect and imbalance has practical and economic ramifications. It translates to a monetary undervaluing of women's art and their poor representation in gallery collections. Where, for instance, the highest amount spent in 1993 by the National Gallery of Canada for the acquisition of a work by a Canadian male artist (John Greer) was $85,500 the amount spent on the work of a Canadian female artist (Spring Hurlbut) was $35,000. Gender representation in permanent exhibits in the Contemporary Gallery is similarly skewed. In 1993, the number of women

57 Linda Abrahams, "Issues on the Status of Women in the Arts," Matriart: A Feminist Art Journal, vol. 5, 1 (1994): 6-18.

artists was 42, in contrast to 72 for male artists. While making a case for gender equity, Abrahams also established from the slow pace of implementation of equity policies that sexism is built into the very structure of institutions and the consciousnesses of officials. Consequently, it does not really matter that a woman is the museum director or chief curator, because institutionalized perceptions are calibrated to still assign artistic worth to men and to devalue women's creativity.

Abraham's statistical survey corroborates Hester Eisentein's statement that "[t]he structures oppressing women…were not dismantled. Rather, the changes that took place appeared to accommodate and co-opt feminists demands, in the familiar pattern of American liberalism, without making any basic changes in the structures of political, economic, or social life." [58] Against this accommodationist background, it becomes clear that Williams's position as director and her deployment of words like "quality" or "aesthetic judgment" functioned in male-privileging ways, and substantially devalued the professional worth of successful women artists who defy the picture of (African) womanhood privileged by the masculinist ideology in museums. For some of these politically charged reasons, the curation of an exhibition of contemporary African art must involve the interrogation of normative ways of seeing worth, of seeing women, and of doing business that reinforces and reproduces the picture of male privilege in Africa. We have to begin to consider how the decisions we make lend the weight of our credentials to the stabilization and preservation of gender biases that ought to be eradicated. Art institutions like the National Museum of African Art that claim to represent Africa must take the lead in breaking down these paternal relationships that subvert the contemporaneity of African art. Privileging the anthropological perspective and encapsulating contemporary African art within that disciplinary frame, rather than one defined by a socially critical standpoint, is no longer acceptable. Such a strategy obscures the strengths of the art, including what it has to teach Americans about the processes and strategies of negotiating ethnic plurality. Moreover, the U.S. audience misses learning the subversive counter-dictatorship strategies of *uli*, its politics of gender, its activation of history, its indeterminacy and transformatory potentials, its metaphysical dimensions, and its relationship to memory.

Tokenism: On Domesticity and Race

If gender bias is the issue in the elimination of Dike and Uwatse, what then accounts for Ada

58 This was done during her assessment of equal opportunities legislation in the United States. See Hester Eiseinstein, in Contemporary Feminist Thought (London: Unwin, 1984).

Udechukwu's selection? If the exhibition claims to offer a critical narrative of historical development of *uli*, what is Ada Udechukwu's contribution to the entire process that warrants her inclusion? How does she advance the stylistic form? Given that she lacks any significant profile as a visual artist in Nigeria, how is her inclusion justified? What validates her participation?

Ottenberg offers no justification for including a non-visual artist after excluding major female artists of *uli*. His response, essentially, was that he was instructed by Williams to cultivate a liking for Ada's work. He states:

> With regard to Ada Udechukwu, I stayed a number of times while in Nigeria with the Udechukwu's, and at one time took photos of works on the walls of their home, including one by Ada entitled Self-Portrait, a pen and ink work. Among other slides that I showed to Dr. Williams upon my return I showed her that one. I was mildly interested in it, but had not followed up on it while at the Udechukwu's home. Dr. Williams was quite excited about it and urged me to obtain photos of other works of hers, which I did on a later trip. I grew quite fond of her art, especially that on paper. Sylvia agreed, so that we decided to include her in the exhibition.

This response raises troubling questions of professional competence since no attempt was made to evaluate the strength of Ada Udechukwu's skill. One gets the impression from Ottenberg's narration that Ada Udechukwu would not have made it to the list had Williams not intervened through being "quite excited" about the *Self Portrait*. One sees too that he was "urged to obtain photos of other works of [Ada]," and then did so "on a later trip." In the process, he was literally nudged into growing "quite fond of [Ada's] art." It is instructive that he dutifully carried out Williams's instruction instead of informing her of Ada Udechukwu's minor status as an artist. This preferential treatment and untoward cultivation reveals a selection process gone awry. Given the very active role of Williams in this process, what, if any, was the objective of the exhibition as enunciated in the curator's proposal?

An answer to this question will be obtained by focusing on why Ada Udechukwu was included, and on the sorts of issues she brought into the exhibition. Domesticity and race are the two

ready issues that stand out in Ottenberg's presentation of the artist in the catalogue.[59] By domesticity, I mean the domestic character of Ada Udechukwu's life, which is defined by themes of privacy, homeliness, household affairs and duties, and devotion to home and family life. Ottenberg devoted extensive space in making this point, lending credence to the view that he had very little material on her art and artistic development. The centrality of her marriage, her devotion to home, and her role as a homemaker are the dominant tropes of engagement. The message conveyed is that African women artists must be evaluated by a domestic-feminine standard since they lack the time and dedication to pursue a career in the arts.

Ottenberg begins by informing us that Ada's plans for graduate school were abandoned because of lack of funds, and because she was planning to marry Obiora Udechukwu (206).[60] Then we discover that the birth of her first child was one of two very significant events in her life. It emotionally destabilized her "being young and still settling into marriage" (206). As Ottenberg tells it: "It was as if she had not quite caught her breath, feeling enveloped, a sense that has occurred to her a number of times since then" (206). The other momentous event occurred about 1983 when "she obtained from her husband a fabric paint tube with a ball point" (206). While this information may have been offered to tell us how she began to learn to paint on textile, its effect is to turn our attention to her marital relationship, and to speculate on the devotional, loving state of her marriage. This focus on homeliness underscores the busy nature of her household duties. Ottenberg explains that she "did little further textile cloth until 1990, being involved with children and the home" (207). At that time, he reveals "she felt dismembered herself, trying to balance her own expectations of herself with the reality of her life as she saw it—motherhood and family and the creative artistic aspects of her poetry and visual art" (207-208).

From Ottenberg's account, we see that family matters loom very large in Ada Udechukwu's consciousness and existence, while art comes in a very distant fourth after domesticity, reading, and poetry. Even her employment history tells a similar story. It consisted of working as a librarian for only two years in 1982 and 1983. Since then we are informed, she has primarily been a homemaker, working on her writing and art in her spare time. By his account, she loves solitude and creates only when that state can be attained. Then seemingly reflecting on the paucity of her art production, she

59 Simon Ottenberg, New Traditions From Nigeria (1997), 203-221.

60 All references in this section are from the exhibition catalogue--New Traditions From Nigeria.

reveals “I don’t produce as much work as I would like to. Not because I don’t want to, but because there really isn’t time or the solitude to do this” (212). Because solitude is vital to her art creation, Ottenberg deploys it to underscore some of the problems she encounters in her life of domesticity. He informs us that the conflicts represented in her works on paper reflect the conflicts in her life. He states: “There is the conflict of being a mother, wife and a person in charge of the household, where she has a strong sense of skillfully caring for its members” (212). Scrounging around for more conflicts to add, he speculates on “the gender conflict of being a female visual artist in a modern society, that has not been very accepting of women creators” (212).

Because domesticity defines part of the reference frame utilized in adding the lone woman to the exhibition, it tells us that this is just the sort of woman Ottenberg had been looking for all along to round off the male cast of artists. Dike’s peppiness definitely ruled her out of the race. Uwatse’s formidable and imposing stature was too threatening, and may have accounted for why Ottenberg could not muster the energy to challenge Williams’s decision. By contrast, the soft, feminine Ada Udechukwu possesses the requisite attributes of womanhood, even if she is professionally weak in the visual art department. What is important is that she is shy and demure, a silent partner to her husband, a good mother, an adept housekeeper, and a charming hostess. Whatever may have been Williams’s reason for including Ada Udechukwu in the exhibition, it definitely seems that for Ottenberg, she most succinctly represents an ideal of what the proper woman *should* be.

With the exposure of this patriarchal view of womanhood lurking in the background, it is time to turn our attention to the other concealed variable reinforcing the selection frame. Clues to the underpinning politics of race are contained in Ottenberg’s representation of Ada Udechukwu as a person of mixed race. This is conveyed by comments that her “Igbo father married her white American mother,” that she lived most of her life in Nigeria but with a crucial period of her childhood spent in the United States,” and that she “is more light skinned than many Nigerians” (212). Envisioning racial tensions he conjectures that “[p]erhaps the conflict [in her life] is reinforced by her physical appearance, which is more light skinned than many Nigerians” (212). Ordinarily, all this racial information would have been pedestrian, except that white scholars draw attention to the white racial identity only when they want to stake out an important position with it. Why is there this emphasis on skin pigmentation and color? And what is its objective? To whom is it directed: Nigerians or Americans?

That the racial politics is intended for the American audience rather than the Nigerians is

obvious in its manner of conceptualization and the mode of its deployment. Such racial issues do not register in the Nigerian scheme for two reasons. The first is that there are many light-skinned Nigerians (Fulanis come to mind), some of who are lighter in complexion than Ada Udechukwu. Hence there is nothing exceptional about Ada's skin pigmentation to warrant any play on it. Secondly, what is of prime importance in Nigeria is culture, not skin color. People are more concerned about whether or not individuals are culturally grounded. If they are not, they face public censure for being "*onye ocha*" (white person, a synonym for one who lacks knowledge of African culture) even if they have the darkest complexion. Critiques are directed more towards prodding them to cultural integration. The fixation on skin pigmentation animating race politics is a peculiarly American phenomenon that does not fly in the Nigerian context as Ottenberg used it.

In raising this issue of race, it is worthwhile to attend to the social framework of reception of the exhibition. This allows us to see some of the reasons for the decisions that were made and that explain the intersection of the curator's and director's subjectivities in the exhibition. In an attempt to give this exhibition an American flavor, Ada's white American mother is deployed as the connector that facilitates Americans' identification with the exhibition through showing them the American factor in *uli*. Through Ada and her mother, three segments of the American population—whites, blacks and mixed race—are invited to see themselves and their values in Africa. They are urged to identify with the life of a fellow American living in Nigeria, and through her, to see that living in "Africa" in this present world of globalization is a normal thing. Jazzed up, this scenario that already has the qualities of a talk-show segment, projects this American presence in Africa as a successful, fruitful interaction. We see its result in the birth of a daughter who is a major artist! This insertion of American concerns into Nigeria in order to "sell" the exhibition to the Washington D. C. audience is evidence of imperialism's asymmetrical relations of dominance in *The Poetics of Line*. This power relation has a negative impact since it obliterates what women artists of *uli* have to say about the significance of their practice, and its relation to their identity.

In a review of the state of African Studies in the United States, Paul Zeleza remarked upon the sometimes negative impact of American race politics in the study of Africa. He states "Given the centrality of race in American society and politics…the place of Africa in the American social imaginary was inextricably tied to the state of American race relations, so that more often than not,

definitions and defamations of Africa were ideological projections on Africa America."[61] Though it articulates the place of race in the American social imaginary, Zeleza's remark explains why extraneous issues of interest to Americans are brought in to overshadow legitimate African social concerns. While the institutional concern of marketing the exhibition is legitimate, the utilization of that to override Africa is not. As a trope for the exploration of whiteness and Americaness in *uli*, and a strategic connector to the multiple racial audience of Washington D.C., Ada Udechukwu's inclusion must be critiqued since the story she has been brought in to tell is not Nigeria's art story, but America's race story.

In conclusion, Olufemi Taiwo made some perceptive, important observations in his assessment of knowledge production in African studies that somewhat explains the thrust of this critique of *The Poetics of Line*. According to him, "African scholars have very definite ideas of what the study of Africa should be and what are appropriate aims and methodologies. These ideas do not often converge with those of African Studies in the American modes of knowledge production. [Consequently] tensions are generated by the relocation of African scholars from Africa and other places to the United States."[62] Taiwo contends that discomfiting questions are raised about the legitimacy of certain themes, the simplification of the complexity of life and thought in Africa, the gender exclusions, and the integrity of certain methodologies. He sees this as "[s]truggles over who should define the metric for measuring quality, determine the appropriateness of research themes, and moderate success in the area of production of knowledge about Africa."[63] In raising ontological and epistemological questions about the legitimacy of the underlying curatorial vision, premised as it is on an asymmetrical relations of dominance, the objective of this critique is to facilitate the elevation of the knowledge produced about African art, and to open up new ways of thinking critically about the history of visual culture. An expansion of this discourse beyond the narrow frames in which its dominant logic, narratives, criteria of relevance, believability and legitimacy had been held, firmly relocates African art history into the discipline, and makes it vital to other areas of art history.

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61 Culled from the essay of the lecture Zeleza gave at UCLA James S. Coleman African Studies Center in May 21, 1998. The Lecture was titled "Africans, Africanists and African Studies: Thoughts for the Future."

62 Taiwo (forthcoming 2000)

63 Taiwo (forthcoming 2000), 8