

# COMBATING ENVIRONMENTAL DEGRADATION THROUGH ART: THE USE OF DISCARDED PUBLIC FLEX POSTERS AS SUPPORT FOR PAINTING IN NIGERIA

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## **ABSTRACT**

Environmental degradation is globally getting worse as days go by and it is a truism that environmental problems such as poverty and insecurity provide a fertile breeding ground for social vices. In view of these, the researcher attempts at combating this problem by using art as an advocacy against environmental degradation and also as a means of sharing knowledge on art as a means of financial empowerment. The study employed a qualitative research. It also has a theoretical and practical aspects. The research design is exploratory. Data was gathered through both primary and secondary sources. Primary sources are oral interviews, group discussions and researcher's observation, while secondary sources are written sources, both published and unpublished. The study also employed descriptive and analytical research methods. The work reveals that art activism is a potent instrument in creating awareness about societal ills and environmental degradation. Also the use of discarded waste public posters as support for painting contributes to environmental management by getting rid of waste ubiquitous flex posters that deface Nigeria's environment, especially the urban centres.

**Key words:** Environmental Degradation, Flex Posters, Support, Waste, Painting.

## **INTRODUCTION**

Art in painterly and colour forms have featured through the ages till date, as activism movement that addresses societal malevolencies, such as destroying trafficking, racism and brutalities. While the term that many use for this kind of work, "artivism" (coined from art and activism), is predicted on the idea that artists also serve as activists and leaders of cultural change and it has a deep-rooted history (Carly, 2020), If there is one thing that unmistakably validates the impact of visual media and arts upon a society, it is the way in which it is handled by those who seek to gain domination. Bachmann (2008) states;

Art unites whereas tyranny separates. It is not surprising, therefore, that art should be the enemy marked out by every form of oppression. It is not surprising that artists and intellectuals should have been the first victims of modern tyrannies. Tyrants know there is in the work of art an emancipatory force, which is mysterious only to those who do not revere it

Paintings are powerful protest tools. Since the 1960s, they have been visual sponsors for major peace and activist movement across the globe. They lined the street of cities and communities to inform, educate, protest and beautify. Here, the researcher employed discarded public flex posters, which ordinarily would have been burnt or thrown into street gutters, or land, fills, as supports for painting to highlight the ills of environmental abuse, which equally hindered societal development. The creation of artworks using solid waste materials does not imply that the works are created with unknown concepts. Such works have various reasons for being created. An example is this study which is environmentally motivated, to mount an advocacy towards environmental abuse. Otikpa (2017) observes that "artists whose works are motivated by environmental concern have used

their works of art to inspire a more ideal future and comment on living conditions in the present”. In all, the study advocates for an attitudinal change in order to ensure a better world. It is obvious that economic hardship and lack of job opportunities contribute greatly to this problem of environmental degradation. In view of these, the researcher advances art advocacy as a means of enlightening Nigerian youths on the dangers of environmental degradation and also adopt the idea of waste to wealth, using discarded out-door posters as support for creating art mostly paintings. This idea of “waste to wealth” will equip the youths with skills required for economic gains.

### **Aim of the Study**

This study aims at producing paintings on discarded /waste public flex posters which can provoke condemnation and conversation on the menace of human trafficking and environmental degradation among the general public.

### **Objectives of the study**

The objectives of the study include the followings:

1. To evaluate the effectiveness of using discarded/waste outdoor flex banners as support for painting
2. To produce paintings whose form and theme highlight some societal ills against the environment
3. To exhibit the paintings created in the course of the study for evaluation by experts and enlightenment of the general audience, whose responses were collated and used in validating some claims made in the study.

## **REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE**

### **Waste and waste management**

Waste refers to materials that are considered useless or valueless. Interestingly, the idea of waste is diverse, hence waste means different things to different people, something that is useless to an individual could be useful to another person. In line with this view, often times, some wastes are given new lease of life through upcycling and reuse. Asogwa a et al (2013) aver that waste generation has frequently been on increase as a result of global population growth, amazing technological advancement and its resultant urbanization as well as industrialization. Waste could be classified into non-hazardous and hazardous wastes. Non-hazardous wastes are solid wastes which could be broken down into the following; plastic waste, paper/ card waste, tins and metals waste, ceramics and glass waste, textile waste, and organic wastes.

Hazardous waste include, radio-active wastes, industrial wastes, and electronic wastes, among many others. Wastes could be managed through adaptation, exploration, utility and aesthetics. Busari and Olayele (2007;243) aver “that the widely favoured scientific and effective approach to waste management is the adoption of three Rs- reduce, reuse and recycled, arranged in the hierarchal order of effectiveness”. Among all these available means of waste management, art could contribute by means of enlightenment and reduction of waste through upcycling and reuse approaches. Hence a lot of experts are calling for art based approach to waste management which is not only effective but can yield an immediate result.

In all, it is generally accepted that wastes are discarded materials that are considered to be useless or valueless and there is a relationship between art and waste. Artists can transform waste into wealth and this study tries to establish the synergy between art environmental protection.

## **Theoretical Framework**

### **Functional theory**

The functional theory is a sociological theory that understands society as a system, that is made up of interdependent parts. These parts, which includes agencies of socialization such as family, work, law, education, religion. All these parts need, to function properly for a society to run smoothly. Functional theory was propounded by August Comte (1798-1857) and Herbert Spencer (1820-1903). All the parts of the society maintain equilibrium and a state of balance under a perfect condition. However, when a problem arises, it is because a part of the social system has become dysfunctional, usually caused by some type of rapid change in any of the part which the other parts of the system are not able to adjust to, in order to maintain peaceful co-existence of the eco-system of the environment.

## **Theoretical Studies**

### **Studies on various media used by contemporary Nigerian painters as support**

This review shows a wide consultation of literature, theories and concepts. Due to the nature of the research which is largely visual, previous art works related to the subject of the research were also examined to ascertain their relatedness to the works produced by the researcher and also where they differ. This was very helpful in identifying gaps in the previous works by these artists/researchers, which this research tried to fill.

From the review, it was possible to establish that paintings in different forms and in from various geographical locations could have far reaching effect on the society and could be used to solve problems and proffer solutions in a given society. To the knowledge of the researcher that employed discarded flex posters as support for paintings with an eye on waste reduction and environmental beautification. This research fills a gap in this area.

### **Use of discarded flex material by contemporary Nigerian artists**

Flex banner or posters are now ubiquitous in Nigerian cities. The growing use of this flex materials in Nigeria appears to have gained traction in 2000s, coinciding with increase availability of digital printing equipment and the growing demand for vibrant weather resistant signage. Flex posters are made of PVC and had almost replaced printing on cloth use. This is because it offered a more robust and weather resistant options, making them ideal for promotional and advertising materials.

However, it appears that the use of flex materials among Nigerian artists is restricted to graphics communication artists and artists from other genres have not ventured into its use as an art medium. Contemporary painters in particular have explored several unconventional art media in order to invigorate their art. one of such is Ukwa (2023), who in his studio exploration on the uses of Igbo cultural elements and local materials for painting, employed hard board as support for his works. Flex material was not incorporated in any of his works.

A review of Obi Nnemeka Alfred Achebe's collection entitled "A King's passion: A 21<sup>st</sup> century patron of African Art (2023) presents over four hundred works of contemporary Nigeria painters. Apart from Juliet Osanwegie, Chuks Anyanwu, Emmanuel Inua, Chuu Kryds Ikwemesi and Gerald Chukwuma, who used board and wood as support for their paintings, the rest relied on canvas. In the entire Obi Achebe's collection of over five hundred paintings from Nigeria and other parts of Africa, none of the painters employed flex material as support for their works.

Egonwa (2011) in his Africa art; a contemporary source book" devoted a chapter to modern African visual arts. Works of members of the Zaria Art society (the Zaria Rebels)

were included alongside other prominent Nigerian artists such as, Clara Ugbodoga-Ngu, Ben Enweonwu, Aina Onabolu, Akinola Lasekan and Chike Aniakor. These pioneer Nigerian modern artists are mainly painters and a close look at their works included in the book reveal that they employed only board and canvas as support for their paintings and the use of flex by painters was completely absent in the book.

Post-independence Nigerian art was largely defined by its intellectual colonialism while forging a path of self-definition, experimentation and cultural resilience. Their works continued to shape the discourse of African modernism and remains central to global conversation.

However, Nigerian artists, since independence artists, especially painters have always relied on art media such as canvas, ceiling boards, woods and papers as support or ground for their works, but a tour of many art galleries and art exhibitions in Nigeria reveal that there is no instance of the use of waste out door flex posters as support for painting in different painting media and techniques.

## **METHODOLOGY**

### **Research Design**

This study employed qualitative and descriptive approaches. The researcher also included studio explorations. This type of exploratory research involves a procedure where a researcher solely initiates a process of action to arrive at a result. The aim is to apply artistic method to solve practical problems that require solution (Shein, 2006). Exploration research is leading by doing.

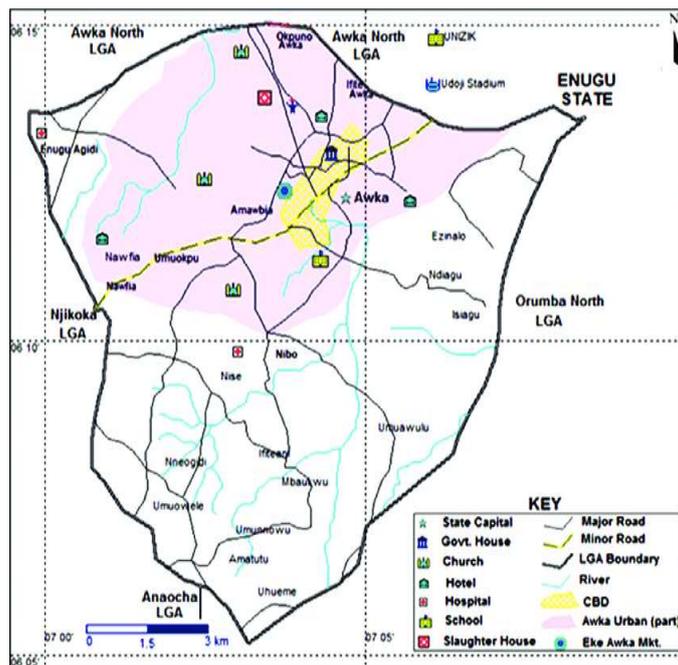
### **Area of Study**

The study was conducted in Awka, Anambra state. Awka is the capital of Anambra state and the administrative headquarters of Awka South Local Government Area. Awka is one of the Igbo towns with the highest population density, found in tropical Africa today, with a concentration of 1000-13000 per square mile. Awka town situates 22 miles from Onitsha and Enugu road to about kilometer 55 towards the south on the same road.

Awka is in the rainforest region with two seasonal climatic conditions, the rainy season and the dry season with a brief period of harmattan. Although Awka town has no major river, there are a number of streams and springs which supply water for household chores to the inhabitants. In addition, there is pipe-borne water and boreholes privately dug by the citizens.

**Economic life:** Traditionally, Awka people are not farmers but they are surrounded by agricultural communities that supply them with food all year round. These communities include; Okpuno, Mgbakwu, Isu-anocha, among others.

Awka people are mainly blacksmiths, hence Awka is often called the land of blacksmiths. In the time past, every Awka male grew up to become a blacksmith. Although Awka people also have some other ancilliary crafts, such as wood carving, mat weaving, among others, blacksmith held a pre-eminent position and Awka smiths could be seen in various parts of Nigeria and other neighbouring countries.



MAP 1: Map of Awka Town: Source:<https://images.app.goo.gl/wyfTM37pGzuV2AuD6>

### **Instrument for Data Collection**

The instruments for this study include questionnaires, tape recorder, camera and computers

### **Method of Data Collection**

Data for the study were gathered through primary and secondary sources. Primary sources are oral sources which include interviews, group discussions, photographs and the researcher's observation, while the secondary sources are written materials, both published and unpublished. They include online articles, dissertations, journal, textbooks, magazines, online encyclopedia and lecture notes.

### **Data Analysis**

The data obtained were analyzed using descriptive and analytical methods.

### **Tools and Equipment used for studio exploration**

Tools and equipment used in the execution of studio project include:

**Tools:** Scrapper, Pallet knife, Pallet, Cutter, Hammer, Nails, Gun tacker, Saw, Measuring tape:

**Equipment:** Easel, Computer, Camera, Printer

**Materials:** Acrylic Colours, oil colour tubes, linseed oil, **Flex Poster**, top bond, **Pencils**, and

**Paper:**

### **PRODUCTION**

#### **Stage One: Ideas and Concept Development**

This stage entails generating original ideas for the project. The artist explored ideas in series of sketches that strengthen her imagination on the concept and themes that suits the concepts. Several thumbnail sketches were produced of which the artist selected the best that describe her thoughts and ideas. Some of the preliminary sketches produced are as follows:

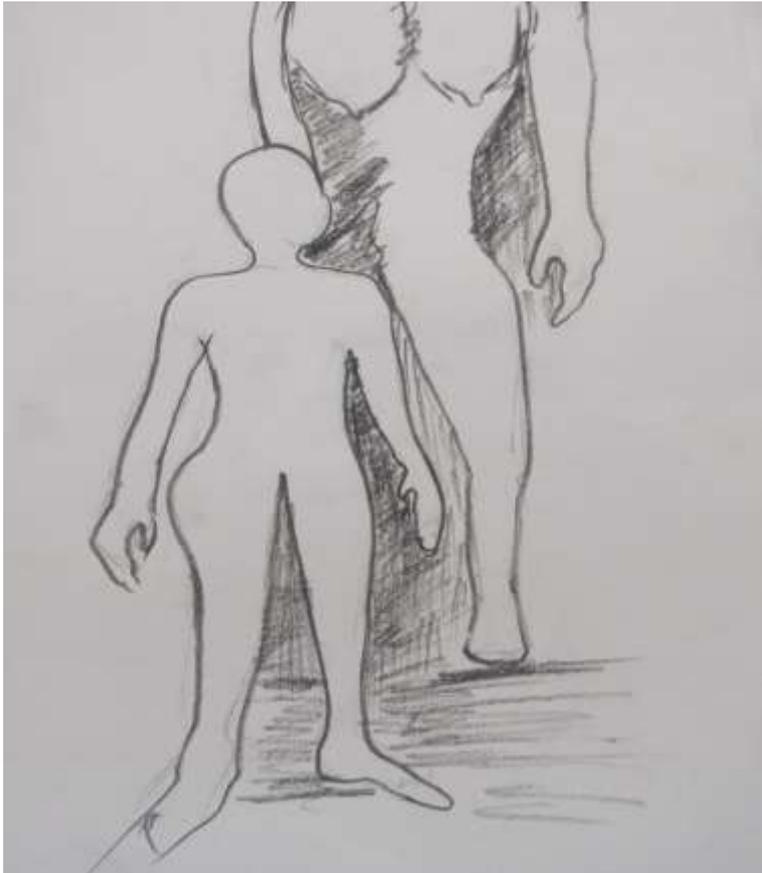


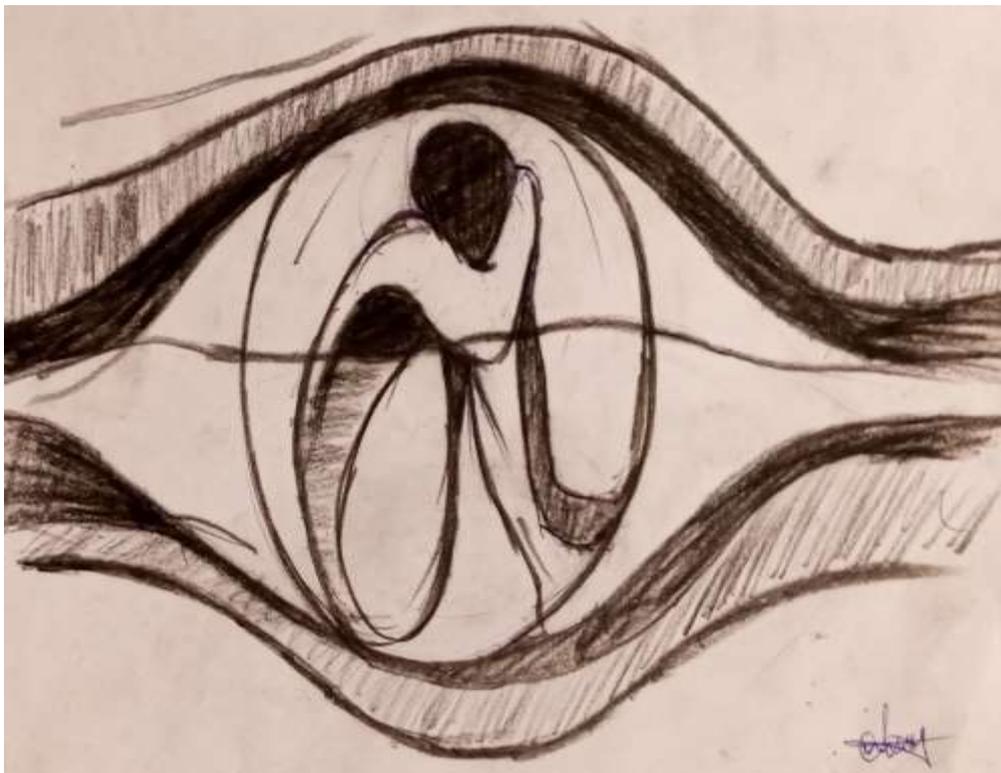
Fig 1.0: A sketch of Deceived



Fig 1.1 A sketch of betrayal



**Fig 1.2** A sketch of battered hope



**Fig 1.3** A sketch for Trapped



**Fig1. 4 A sketch for Anguished**



**Plate 1.5 Sketch for consequence**



**Fig 1.6 A sketch of lamentation**

### **Stage two**

#### **Preparation of support and ground for Painting**

The preparation of ground comes in the following stages .

**Stage 1** – the researcher starts by gathering discarded used flex posters from areas such as refuse dumps ,gutters and around the of streets. These posters constitute havoc due to improper disposal after usage and they also deface the environment when they are torn and still hanging on their frames.



**Plate 4.17 photograph a refuse dump with discarded flex poster  
Photograph by researcher**



**Plate 4.18 photograph of discarded flex dumped in the street of Awka  
Photograph by researcher**



**Plate 4.19 : Photograph of gutter filled with discarded flex**

**Photograph by researcher**

**Step 2** - Here the researcher dip the used posters into a large bowl of water, adds detergent and uses hand to wash it thoroughly. this is to ensure that all the dirt accumulated on the flex from the dumb where it was disposed are removed. After that, the researcher pour another clean water into the basin and add jik disinfectant, then put back the flex poster into the water, and allow to stay for fifteen minutes, this exercise is to disinfect and sterile the already cleaned waste public flex poster, making them free from microbes and vermin that must have been accumulated on the surface, as a result of bad disposal. At this point, the discarded waste public poster is ready for use.



**Plate 1.7 the researcher washing used flex posters.  
Photograph by Fredrick Nwogem**



**Plate 1.8 A clean used poster, ready for use**  
Photograph by researcher

### **Stage three**

#### **Construction of the stretcher**

The stretcher is attached on the support for painting. The production of stretchers in this study were carried out using pinewood. The researcher chose pinewood over white wood because of the good qualities of pinewood. A good pinewood is resilient and prevents intrusion and destruction by insects such as, ants and termite. Unlike the white wood, the pine is resilient, with even sides and cannot easily be infested by wood ants. Typically, dimension of the wood is about 2 inches in thickness to avoid warping in of stretcher due to pressure from extending the canvas. In addition, cutting of the wood to create standard dimensional length of 3 feet and 4 feet in width was carried out meticulously. Angular split ends of the woods are shaped at an angle 45°,hinged at both ends using adhesive and gun tacker.



**Plate 1.9 Already made stretchers, photograph by C. Okonkwo**

#### **Stage four**

##### **Stretching of flex as a support for the painting**

The support is measured with extra 2 inches on both end of the dimensional lengths and widths. The purpose of such extra dimension is to provide space for overlapping required for dragging and attaching of the support. The attachment begins, with fastening- in of the lengthy side of the flex to stretcher using gun tacker. The procedure is repeated on the other side, then the same thing is repeated on the shorter side until the stretching process is complete. The flex has two sides. The rough side and the smooth side. The researcher choses to use the rough side of the flex because of its texture and the ability of the rough side to hold and sustain colour.



**Plate 1.10 : A Stretched used flex poster, mounted on a stretcher,  
Photograph by the researcher**

The stretched form can be distorted into the shape of a rhomboid, which looks odd and makes framing of the complete work difficult, if the support is insufficient or when it is deficient, especially where suitable tools and equipment's are not used.

Then after, some quantities of oil colour will be mixed with kerosene and run through the canvas using big brush, this will make the colour to assimilate well into the background in the course of painting.

##### **Sketching on prepared support**

This process required studio creative production processes, which began with the transferring of the sketches to the support. The sketching involves a quick drawing with scanty details on the support using colour roughs, once the it is covered with colour, the artist allow the colour to dry.

##### **Stage five - Building of forms and treatment of colours**

At this stage, more coats of colour were applied in vertical and horizontal strokes, the artist engages her skills in the creation of visual forms that explains the concept. She uses paints, paint-brushes, pallet and pallet knife to bring out the forms and the colours. At this stage

more layers of colours are being added to get the desired composition and procedure continues until the painting is completed.

**The stages involved in the actual painting**

**The actual painting involves the following**

- A- Transfer drawing or thumbnail sketches from sketch pad to support
- B- Application of colours in layers
- C- Continuing application of colour in layers
- D- Finishing
- E- Framing

**Painting stages**

**Illustrations of steps followed in actual painting consequence  
step 1**



**Plate 1.12 illustration of steps  
one's initial drawing on support  
based on the idea from the  
sketch. Photograph by  
researcher**

**Step 2**



**Plate 1.13 illustration of step two: application of colour in layers. Photograph by the researcher**

**Step 3**



**Plate 1.13: illustration of the three step, finishing  
Photograph by the researcher**

**Step 4**



**Plate 1.14 Illustration of the fourth step: framing of the finished work  
Photograph by the researcher**

**Reflection: Step 1**



**Plate 1.15 illustration of initial step of drawing on  
Support based on the idea from the sketch  
Photograph by researcher**

**Step 2**



**Plate 1.16: illustration of the second step,  
Photograph by the researcher  
Step 3**



**Plate 1.17: illustration of third step , finishing  
Photograph by the researcher  
Step 4**



**Plate 1.18 Illustration of the forth step: framing of the finished work  
Photograph by the researcher**

### **Project Analysis**

Judging from the outcome of the studio exploration, it is possible to use discarded waste door poster as a support for painting. Some challenges encountered during the course of executing the painting include difficulty in stretching old flex posters due to the fact that they easily tear when mounted with pressure or stretched too much, probably, because it has been used before. Unlike the canvas that can be stretched very hard.

Flex does not absorb or retain colour easily during colour application due to its nylon nature. Therefore, it takes more layers of colour to cover the surface. This is not so with canvas because the canvas is made with cotton material which absorbs colour easily from the first coating. It takes a longer time for the colours to dry. This is because it is made from a synthetic material that does not absorb colour unlike the canvas that dries very fast.

Flex surfaces does not give an even coverage when laying of colour, as a result more layers is applied to get an even coverage. It has a very slow drying speed to compared to the canvas. However, It saves cost and time of sizing and priming unlike the canvas thereby, saves more money and time. Flex materials also offer a kind of improvisation that can take the place of canvas and still provide the same quality work as the canvas.

It is readily available because it can be picked anywhere and upcycled for usag

### **Summary of Findings**

The use of discarded flex posters for painting is an innovation that can replace the use of canvas and still produce the same quality work as the canvas. Waste reduction could be said to have been achieved by upcycling the used flex material. This improves environmental cleanliness that enhances healthy living and environment.

The use of figures to symbolize and interpret events was achieved in the research. This also includes the use of symbolic design elements to capture moods and sensations which characterized the subject matter and raised awareness on the issue of human trafficking.

## **Conclusion**

Based on these findings, the researcher concludes that creating paintings that address societal ill relies on the ability of the painting to possess sensational effects; which is practicable through symbolic representations and manipulations of colours in the painting. The data collection was achieved through a carefully multisource approach involving oral interviews, studio practice, online articles, dissertations, journal, textbooks, magazines and online encyclopedia. Studio production processes were actualized through the implementation of conceptualizations, sketches, drawings and painting, materials, tools and equipment.

Discussion and interactions with painting themes based in an effort to see a painting not as just a mere entertainment but a catalyst for positive reformation and change in society. Painting can now be seen as a means of keeping records of events and documentation of event and happenings of a given period, which can be transited to generations without a written record, paintings are not treated as a separate object but a significant tool that can provoke powerful responses, argument or discourse from viewers. Art becomes significant, not simply in the sense of recognizing what a given work embodies, but through the viewer's identification of its contents.

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