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DISCREDITING THE NOTION OF UGLINESS AS AN AESTHETIC ALLUSION TO WASTE MATERIALS FOR SCULPTURE INSTALLATIONS AND ENVIRONMENTAL ENHANCEMENT

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Abstract

Waste materials and refuse dumps constitute serious environmental challenges and visual blights within the built environment, particularly when improperly managed. From an artistic and aesthetic perspective, however, the concept of waste is fluid and context-dependent, as materials considered useless or discarded may equally serve as valuable resources for creative production. This understanding has inspired the emergence of numerous sculptures and installation artworks created from discarded materials. Although some of these works have received attention in artistic documentation and exhibition catalogues, there remains limited scholarly interrogation of such artistic practices within the framework of environmental sanitation and sustainability. This study therefore examines selected sculpture installations created from waste and discarded materials by contemporary artists. Adopting a qualitative, studio-led methodology, empirical data for the study were sourced from periodicals, theses, exhibition brochures and internet materials. The study found that sculptures produced from waste materials not only enhance environmental aesthetics but also redefine the meaning of waste by granting discarded objects a renewed functional and symbolic life. In the process, such artistic interventions contribute to environmental sanitation by reducing the pressure of waste accumulation and environmental degradation. The study concludes that artists should be encouraged to further explore the creative adaptation of discarded materials as a means of promoting environmental sustainability and expanding artistic possibilities.

Keywords: Aesthetics, Environment, Reused Materials, Installation Art, Waste, Sculpture.

Introduction

The physical environment, within the context of ecology, constitutes a fundamental aspect of human existence and therefore cannot be undervalued. It shapes the quality of life of humans, animals, and vegetation alike, while also influencing social comfort, health, and well-being. Since the environment exerts such pervasive influence on human existence, there is a compelling need to address elements that diminish its optimal value. Waste, as an inevitable by-product of human activity, has become one of the major threats to environmental sustainability. When improperly managed, waste constitutes a serious problem to the ecosystem of the built environment and surrounding neighbourhoods. The consequences of poor waste management are often hazardous to human health and degrading to the environment. Studies have shown, for instance, that toxic wastes such as pesticides and heavy metals can seep into the soil and contaminate underground water sources consumed by residents. Such contamination may result in severe health conditions including lead poisoning, mercury poisoning,

and blue baby syndrome.¹ Consequently, the effect of waste as an environmental nuisance has become a major issue of global concern.

Waste has been defined as the useless by-product of human activities which may contain substances originally present in useful products.² Aesthetically however, the concept of waste assumes broader meanings. Waste may signify discarded or useless materials, but it may also represent resources capable of entering a cycle of renewed value and creative transformation, depending on the context in which they are assessed. This interpretation underscores the subjective nature of waste, as a material only becomes waste when its owner perceives and labels it as such. What one individual discards as useless may, for another, become a valuable resource within the framework of creative reuse and environmental sustainability.

The increasing accumulation of discarded materials, particularly non-biodegradable waste, has intensified environmental degradation across urban and rural landscapes. Streets, gutters, drainage systems and water bodies are often littered with enormous quantities of waste materials that negatively affect environmental aesthetics and public health. In response to these environmental challenges, artists have increasingly explored the creative reuse of discarded materials as a strategy for environmental intervention and artistic production. Through this process, waste materials are transformed into valuable works of art, thereby redefining the meaning and utility of objects previously regarded as useless.³

From earlier artistic epochs to the contemporary period, evolving artistic ideologies have continued to reshape perceptions about creativity and materiality. The emergence of conceptualism in the postmodern era introduced the philosophy of “anything goes,” thereby legitimizing the use of unconventional materials and processes within artistic practice. This ideological shift expanded the boundaries of sculpture and installation art, allowing found objects, discarded metals, wood, plastics and other unconventional materials to function as legitimate artistic media. Sculpture, within this context, may no longer be confined to traditional modelling or carving processes but may also involve environmental interventions, assemblage, and conceptual installations.⁴

The intellectual foundations for the creative use of found and discarded objects were laid by pioneering modern artists such as Marcel Duchamp (1887-1968) and Pablo Picasso (1881-1973), whose experimental approaches challenged conventional notions of art and artistic materials. Their innovations later inspired contemporary artists across the world to explore the artistic potential of waste materials. Among such artists is El Anatsui (born in 1944), the renowned Ghanaian artist associated with the Nsukka Art School, who transformed discarded liquor bottle caps into monumental installation works such as *Earth Skin*. Similarly, contemporary Nigerian artists including

¹ Environmental Solutions (VLS), “What Is Environmental Waste Management?” 2024, <https://www.vlss.com/stay-in-the-know/newsroom/what-is-environmental-waste-management/>.

² Ebikapade Amasuomo and Jim Baird, “The Concept of Waste and Waste Management,” *Journal of Management and Sustainability* 6, no. 4 (2016): 88.

³ S. Anthony Ekpe, “Adaptation of Discarded Aluminium Cans for Creating Sculpture Models for Public Spaces” (PhD diss., Department of Fine Art, Ahmadu Bello University, 2021).

⁴ L. Waheed Owoade, “Conceptualising Irregular Migration in Installations as Ontological Metaphor in Terracotta Sculptures” (PhD diss., Department of Fine Art, Ahmadu Bello University, 2023).

Dil-Humphrey Umezulike, Kenny Badaru, Adeola Balogun and Dotun Popoola have also employed waste materials in the production of sculptural installations.

Despite the growing body of artworks produced from discarded materials, scholarly attention has largely focused on the formal qualities, symbolism, and technical ingenuity of such works, with limited attention devoted to their implications for environmental sanitation and sustainability. This study therefore interrogates the concept of waste within the context of aesthetics and environmental enhancement by examining selected sculpture installations created from discarded materials by contemporary artists. In doing so, this study seeks to discredit the notion of ugliness traditionally associated with waste materials while foregrounding their transformative potential in contemporary sculptural practice and environmental preservation.

Waste and its Effect on the Natural Environment

Human activities inevitably generate waste within the environment. Once an object has fulfilled its primary function, it is often regarded as unwanted, useless, or no longer valuable to its owner. Such waste materials or refuse are commonly disposed of in bins, dump sites, gutters, and other open spaces. Waste may generally be classified into three major categories: liquid, solid, and gaseous waste, with solid waste being the most common form. Solid waste refers to waste materials generated through human activities that exist in compact or semi-solid forms and are discarded as useless products.⁵ These wastes are commonly produced through municipal, industrial, and agricultural activities and, unlike some other forms of waste, many do not easily decompose or disappear from dump sites.

Rapid urbanisation and increasing population concentration within city centres have intensified the challenge of waste disposal, particularly in areas with limited land space. Consequently, open dumping has become one of the most widespread methods of solid waste disposal in many parts of the world. Despite various interventions aimed at managing waste, little success has been achieved in controlling the nuisance and hazards associated with improper disposal practices. As a result, waste generation continues to increase at alarming rates, posing serious risks to society and the environment. The *Global Waste Management Outlook 2024*, released during the Sixth United Nations Environmental Assembly, warns that municipal solid waste may increase by almost two-thirds by the year 2050.⁶ The report further emphasizes that such alarming growth poses severe environmental, economic, and public health challenges.

In many communities, open burning remains a common and convenient method of waste disposal at dump sites. However, the harmful gases emitted during such burning create another layer of environmental hazards. These hazardous emissions contribute significantly to air pollution and climate change while endangering public health. The uncontrolled dumping and burning of waste have led to the degradation of valuable land resources and have been associated with numerous health conditions, including lung cancer, heart disease, cholera, and hepatitis. Furthermore, open burning of

⁵ Amasuomo and Baird, "The Concept of Waste and Waste Management," 88–90.

⁶ One Planet Network, "Beyond an Age of Waste: Turning Rubbish into a Resource," 29 February 2024, <https://www.oneplanetnetwork.org/news-and-events/news/beyond-age-waste-turning-rubbish-resource>.

waste has contributed substantially to urban pollution and global warming, thereby intensifying ecological instability and environmental degradation.⁷

To mitigate the adverse effects of waste, there is an urgent need for effective intervention strategies, either through improved waste control systems or through the creative reuse and adaptation of waste materials for alternative purposes. The objective of such adaptation is to create opportunities for the productive utilization of waste as recycled or repurposed material with new functional and aesthetic qualities. The utilization of waste materials offers significant benefits in several ways. First, it contributes to the reduction of environmental pollution by minimizing the accumulation and improper disposal of waste. Second, the reuse of discarded materials reduces dependence on natural or conventional raw materials, thereby promoting the conservation of energy, natural resources, and the environment. Third, waste adaptation creates the possibility of modifying the physical and chemical properties of discarded materials to produce new engineering, industrial, and artistic materials suitable for specialized uses.⁸

Sculpture Contemplation with Discarded Materials

Traditionally, sculpture has been associated with the manipulation of conventional materials such as wood, stone, clay, bronze, and wax. However, as artistic practices evolved in the twentieth century, contemporary artists began to experiment with found objects and everyday materials as legitimate artistic media. This development broadened the scope of sculptural practice and encouraged the use of synthetic products, industrial materials and other unconventional substances within artistic production. According to Ward, contemporary sculpture increasingly engages in activities that traditional sculpture was never expected to perform.⁹ Artists now replace conventional techniques such as carved stone and cast bronze with domestic and industrial materials commonly referred to as found objects. Consequently, sculpture evolved from a purely material-based practice into a multidisciplinary field encompassing a wider range of artistic activities. Sculpture may now exist as welded metal constructions, environmental interventions, landscape manipulations, performance-based activities, filmic expressions or conceptual instructions.¹⁰ This expansion of sculptural language also includes the adaptation of waste and discarded objects such as scrap metals, plastics, and found industrial materials for creative and environmental purposes.

The emergence of conceptualism through artists such as Marcel Duchamp and Joseph Beuys further transformed artistic production by emphasizing ideas and concepts above tangible forms.¹¹

⁷ Amasuomo and Baird, "The Concept of Waste and Waste Management," 88–90.

⁸ George Wang and Namhun Lee, "The Methodology of Utilization of Waste and Recycled Materials in Construction" (conference paper, 2012), 749–56, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/280580611_The_Methodology_of_Utilization_of_Waste_and_Recycled_Materials_in_Construction.

⁹ Lucina Ward, *Soft Sculpture* (Canberra: National Gallery of Australia, 2009), <https://nga.gov.au/Exhibition/SoftSculpture/pdf/softsculptureevents.pdf>.

¹⁰ Ibid.; see also Owoade, "Conceptualising Irregular Migration in Installations as Ontological Metaphor in Terracotta Sculptures," 10.

¹¹ Alina Cohen, "7 Artists Who Created Innovative Mobiles Beyond Alexander Calder," *Artsy*, 2018, <https://www.artsy.net/artwork/alexander-calder-double-gong>.

This shift privileged meaning, aesthetics, and social commentary over traditional artistic utility, thereby encouraging experimentation with unconventional materials and installation formats. Contemporary artists consequently introduced non-traditional sculptural forms including video projections, assemblages, and mixed-media installations that create spatial and conceptual experiences. Environmental sculpture, land art, and site-specific installation art similarly emerged as platforms for incorporating discarded objects such as metal scraps, wood fragments, and plastic waste into conceptual artistic expressions.¹²

As part of contemporary artistic discourse, many artists now employ sculpture installations to interrogate pressing social, political, and environmental concerns. Installation art, according to Asogwa, adapts elements of troubling societal realities to attract public attention and stimulate critical discourse.¹³ Among Nigerian artists associated with such environmentally conscious practices are El Anatsui, Tonia Okpe (born in 1961), and Ozioma Onuzulike (born in 1972), whose works engage with themes of materiality, consumption, waste, and environmental transformation.

Waste as a Resource Material for Sculpture Production

In complementing waste management strategies aimed at maximizing value recovery through recycling and repurposing, artists have increasingly joined global efforts to transform waste objects into resource materials for artistic production. This process involves granting discarded objects renewed physical, aesthetic, and conceptual functions within the framework of creative reordering. Ademuleya describes this process as “reusing again through repurposing,”¹⁴ emphasizing the transformation of materials that have already fulfilled their original purposes into objects of new value and meaning. Within this process, the artist assumes the role of a scavenger who identifies aesthetic potential in materials that society has rejected or abandoned. Through creative intervention, the artist visually reconstructs and reconfigures waste materials, thereby granting them renewed relevance and aesthetic significance. Materials once perceived as useless, unattractive or valueless are transformed into compelling artistic compositions with new meanings and functions.

Repurposing in art may involve both upcycling and downcycling processes. Upcycling refers to the transformation of valuable or functional materials into new forms without completely destroying their original structure, while downcycling involves refabricating materials into products of lesser quality or reduced functional capacity. In artistic practice, repurposing operates within a highly creative realm where discarded objects are reorganized and aesthetically elevated for expressive purposes.¹⁵ This may involve identifying latent visual qualities within waste objects and rearranging them into compositions that reveal previously unnoticed aesthetic potentials.

¹² Getty J. Paul Museum, *Working with Sculpture* (Education at the Getty, 2016), 53,

https://www.getty.edu/education/teachers/classroom_resources/curricula/sculpture/background1.html.

¹³ Ifeanyi F. Asogwa, “An Exploration of Sculpture Forms in Installation from the Contemporary Conceptions of ‘Omabe’ Tradition” (PhD diss., Department of Fine Art, Ahmadu Bello University, 2016), 14–15.

¹⁴ Babashinde A. Ademuleya, “Clement Adesanya’s Agba Ogboni: Repurposing Discarded Polyethylene Tanks as Medium of Artistic Expression,” in *The Heartbeat: PhD Exit Exhibition of Drawings and Sculptures*, by C. Adesanya (exhibition catalogue, Department of Fine Art, Ahmadu Bello University, 2024), 39.

¹⁵ Ibid.

For example, in the sculpture *The Cyclist*, a discarded pair of scissors was creatively repurposed to function as part of the motorbike structure within the sculptural composition. Prior to its incorporation into the artwork, the scissors existed as a rejected and discarded object devoid of apparent value. Through artistic transformation, however, the object acquired renewed aesthetic relevance and became an integral component of a visually engaging sculptural form. Such artistic practices demonstrate how waste materials can transcend notions of ugliness and uselessness to become powerful instruments of creativity, environmental enhancement, and aesthetic appreciation.



Fig. 1: “The Cyclist,” Yusuf AbdulRasaq, Found Metal Objects,1997, Image: Yusuf AbdulRasaq

In the quest to enhance aesthetic values while promoting waste minimization, contemporary sculptors increasingly explore artistic strategies that treat waste as a valuable resource for creative production. As artists become prominent utilizers of waste materials, their efforts not only reduce the environmental burden of refuse but also revive discarded objects by granting them a “second life” through aesthetic transformation. Through such artistic interventions, waste materials that once symbolized environmental pollution are converted into visually engaging forms capable of beautifying public spaces and stimulating ecological awareness.

Supporting this perspective, Wang and Lee argue that recycling significantly minimizes the quantity of waste requiring disposal through source reduction, material recovery, and reuse, thereby forming a central basis for integrated waste management systems.¹⁶ This approach aligns closely with

¹⁶ George Wang and Namhun Lee, “The Methodology of Utilization of Waste and Recycled Materials in Construction,” 749–56.

the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 12 on Responsible Consumption and Production, which emphasizes waste reduction through sustainable practices.¹⁷ Consequently, artistic engagement with waste materials has increasingly become part of contemporary efforts to promote environmental sustainability while simultaneously raising awareness about the creative possibilities embedded in discarded objects.

Materials, Methods, and Mode of Appraisal

The utilization of waste materials has become a significant artistic tradition within contemporary art practice. By employing discarded objects as creative media, artists blur the boundaries between waste and resources while simultaneously drawing attention to environmental concerns and aesthetic possibilities. The present study focuses on sculptors who deliberately employ waste materials as their primary media of artistic exploration. Using purposive sampling based on artistic prominence and ecological relevance, four artists were selected for appraisal: Ibrahim Mahama from Ghana, Miina Äkkijyrkkä from Finland, El Anatsui, and Waheed Owoade from Nigeria. These artists were selected because their works foreground ecological consciousness while demonstrating innovative approaches to transforming waste into meaningful artistic expressions.

The study adopts the art historical method of visual analysis in assessing the selected artworks. This approach facilitates detailed examination of the influence of waste materials on compositional structure, aesthetic quality, and conceptual meaning. As Barnet argues, art historical criticism provides a framework for clarifying visual accounts and generating critical interpretations of artworks within broader social discourse.¹⁸ The appraisal process therefore includes physical description, formal analysis, interpretation, and evaluation of the selected works.

In addition, the qualitative research approach was employed because of its suitability for interpreting subjective artistic and social phenomena. Qualitative inquiry prioritizes understanding the meanings attached to human actions and social transformations over time.¹⁹ Consequently, the selected sculpture installations were analysed in terms of form, aesthetic qualities, uniqueness of material adaptation, environmental significance, and conceptual context.

The artworks selected for this study were chosen specifically because of their reliance on waste materials as artistic media and their broader ecological significance. Beyond aesthetic innovation, these works contribute to environmental sanitation by transforming discarded objects into artistic installations capable of beautifying and revitalizing public spaces.

¹⁷ Chinyere Ndubuisi, “Innovative Sculptures and Environmental Stewardship: The Art of Clement Adesanya,” in *The Heartbeat: PhD Exit Exhibition of Drawings and Sculptures*, by C. Adesanya (exhibition catalogue, Department of Fine Art, Ahmadu Bello University, 2024), 8.

¹⁸ Sylvan Barnet, *A Short Guide to Writing About Art*, 9th ed. (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Prentice Hall, 2015).

¹⁹ A. Lasisi Lamidi, “Static Motion: An Exploration of Stilt Dance Postures in Mixed Media Sculpture” (PhD diss., Department of Fine Art, Ahmadu Bello University, 2015).

Holy Calf by Miina Äkkijyrkkä

The gigantic metal sculpture titled *Holy Calf* forms part of a duo composition created by Finnish junk artist Miina Äkkijyrkkä. The sculpture depicts a massive cow-like figure advancing forward with its head raised in motion, while another figure titled *Sampo Manninen* stands alert beside it. Measuring approximately four metres high and six metres long, the sculptures are composed primarily of discarded automobile parts painted in vibrant colours such as yellow, red, and blue.

The artist's inspiration derives from both her agricultural background and her long-standing engagement with cattle farming and art. Her practice effectively merges three interconnected dimensions: the environmental recovery of abandoned automobile parts, the representation of farm animals, and the imaginative reconstruction of animal forms from inorganic industrial remnants.²⁰ The sculptures utilize discarded minibuses as the body structure, metal scraps as legs, and disused side mirrors as ears, thereby transforming waste materials into expressive sculptural forms resembling living cattle. Through this process, the artist demonstrates an intimate understanding of bovine anatomy while simultaneously converting environmental refuse into monumental aesthetic objects. From the perspective of environmental sanitation, *Holy Calf* represents a striking artistic intervention in which pollution is transformed into adornment. By harvesting abandoned automobile parts from junkyards and integrating them into sculpture, the artist reduces environmental clutter while simultaneously beautifying the surrounding space. The work therefore balances ecological consciousness with aesthetic sophistication, demonstrating how discarded objects can be repurposed to enrich public environments while showcasing the imaginative potential of contemporary sculpture.



Fig. 2: “Holy Calf,” Miina Äkkijyrkkä, Waste Automobile Parts, 400x600x200cm Approx., Source: <https://www.pinterest.com/pin/424534702347087506/>

²⁰ Fairfood4u, “Immense Cow Sculptures from Finland,” 2015, <http://fairfood4u.com/immense-cow-sculptures-from-finland/>.

“Earth’s Skin” by El Anatsui

The metal wall installation titled *Earth’s Skin* was created in 2007 by El Anatsui, a Ghanaian-born artist closely associated with the Nsukka Art School in Nigeria. Renowned for drawing inspiration from the Uli artistic tradition of the Igbo people,²¹ Anatsui employs discarded materials to interrogate contemporary issues surrounding waste, consumption, and environmental consciousness. *Earth’s Skin* is a monumental installation measuring approximately ten feet in height and composed of thousands of discarded liquor bottle caps that were crushed, flattened, stitched, and reassembled into an expansive metallic tapestry.

The installation is characterized by elaborate draperies, mat-like textures, and shimmering bronze surfaces interspersed with patches of red, blue, and yellow generated from the outer and reverse surfaces of the bottle caps. Through this visual arrangement, the work evokes the rich motifs and colour harmonies associated with Kente cloth traditions native to the artist’s Ewe cultural background in Ghana. The sculpture therefore operates simultaneously as an environmental statement and a cultural expression, merging indigenous African aesthetics with contemporary sculptural experimentation.

Fundamentally, Anatsui transforms discarded materials into a new artistic medium by mediating between ugliness and beauty through sculpture. Drawing from both the artistic traditions of Ghana and the creative environment of Nsukka in southeastern Nigeria, the artist constructs a visual discourse that links waste, environmental critique, and aesthetic sensibility. Within this framework, waste is no longer perceived merely as filth or useless residue; rather, it becomes a repository of creative and symbolic possibilities. The installation therefore challenges conventional assumptions about ugliness by demonstrating that discarded materials can be repositioned within the realm of beauty and artistic value.

In this regard, Moore’s assertion, as cited in Owoade, that behind the outward appearance of objects lies an immanent spiritual essence becomes particularly relevant.²² The bottle caps, once associated with refuse and environmental degradation, are aesthetically reconfigured into a monumental sculpture capable of activating and beautifying interior spaces. Through this transformation, Anatsui elevates waste beyond its former state of rejection and redefines it as an instrument of environmental enhancement and cultural reflection. The artist, much like a scavenger or environmental custodian, metaphorically “mops up” fragments of the earth’s filth and converts them into visually compelling forms that inspire ecological awareness and aesthetic appreciation.

²¹ Amuche Nnabueze, “El Anatsui Creates Gigantic Artworks from Recycled Materials: Why the World Fell in Love with Him,” *The Conversation*, 2023, <https://theconversation.com/el-anatsui-creates-gigantic-artworks-from-recycled-materials-why-the-world-fell-in-love-with-him-202199>.

²² Owoade, “Conceptualising Irregular Migration in Installations as Ontological Metaphor in Terracotta Sculptures,” 43.



Fig. 3: "Earth's Skin" (Installations), El Anatsui, Discarded Aluminium and Copper Wire, 449.6 x 1000.8cm, 2007, Image: Chester Higgins Jr/_The New York Times.

***Non-Orientable Nkansa II* by Ibrahim Mahama**

The sculpture installation titled *Non-Orientable Nkansa II* was produced in 2017 by Ibrahim Mahama, a contemporary Ghanaian artist renowned for his large-scale installations created from discarded and industrial materials. Installed within the lavish vaulted salon of the Apalazzo Gallery, the towering sculpture was constructed from hundreds of abandoned shoe-shining boxes assembled together with leftover materials and customized through the addition of stickers, collages, and name tags. The boxes were collected from refuse dumps and littered urban spaces in Ghana through a network of assistants and collaborators working with the artist.

The title of the work references one of these collaborators, Nkansa, whose "non-orientable" disposition symbolizes resistance toward investing labour and resources into objects perceived as lacking practical function or material value. Through this conceptual framing, Mahama interrogates broader issues surrounding labour, dispossession, value, and environmental neglect. By foregrounding the material history embedded within the discarded boxes, the artist constructs a monumental installation that reflects the daily struggles of marginalised rural workers who migrate to urban centres such as Accra in search of economic survival. The work therefore becomes both a social document and an environmental statement, revealing the invisible labour systems that sustain urban economies while simultaneously exposing the material residues generated by such systems.

Mahama also reflects critically on his own position as an artist by transforming discarded shoe-shining boxes into monumental art objects. Through this act of aesthetic transformation, waste materials that once occupied neglected urban spaces are elevated into culturally significant installations capable of stimulating discourse on environmental sustainability and social inequality. The installation

demonstrates the potential of creative reuse in reducing environmental pollution while simultaneously redefining the cultural and symbolic meanings of discarded objects.

As an environmental intervention, *Non-Orientable Nkansa II* illustrates how contemporary sculpture can function as both aesthetic expression and ecological commentary. By adopting unconventional materials gathered directly from waste streams, Mahama transforms environmental refuse into a visually compelling structure that challenges conventional notions of utility, beauty, and value. The installation therefore underscores the role of sculpture in addressing contemporary environmental and social concerns through innovative artistic engagement with waste materials.



Fig. 4: “Non-Orientable Nkansa II,” Ibrahim Mahama, Shoemaker Boxes, Construction boards, Old Train Parts, 2017, Image: Delfino Sisto Legnani/Marco Cappelletti In Frieze, 2019.

***Exodus III* by Waheed Owoade**

The conceptual visual installation titled *Exodus III*, created by Waheed Owoade, is composed of discarded plastic materials, particularly empty bottles collected from various waste dumps within the environment. The sculpture employs these materials in a deliberately deformed and reconfigured arrangement, positioned in a linear sequence to suggest figures in motion. Through this composition, the work foregrounds the conceptual potential of waste in the production of contemporary sculptural forms while simultaneously engaging with pressing environmental and socio-political concerns. The installation draws on a popular Yoruba proverb that states, “what you go looking for at Sokoto is in your sokoto (trousers),” to emphasize the idea that solutions often lie within immediate surroundings rather than distant spaces. This cultural reference informs the artist’s conceptual framing of

abundance, sustainability, and overlooked local resources. By transforming discarded plastic bottles into sculptural figures, the artist repositions waste as a medium capable of carrying layered meanings about human movement, survival, and displacement.

The distorted forms of the plastic containers are intentionally crafted to evoke the harsh and often dehumanising experiences of migrants as they traverse deserts, forests, swampy terrains, and heavily policed borders in search of better economic opportunities. The material condition of the discarded plastics—once useful but now abandoned—mirrors the precarious journeys of irregular migrants who navigate dangerous and uncertain routes across regions such as the Sahara Desert toward North Africa and, in many cases, Europe. In this sense, *Exodus III* operates as both an environmental commentary and a socio-political metaphor. It reflects on the consequences of waste accumulation in contemporary society while simultaneously drawing attention to the lived realities of migration, inequality, and survival. The installation situates discarded plastic materials within a broader discourse of global mobility, illustrating how waste can be reimaged as a narrative device for articulating human vulnerability and resilience in the contemporary world.



Fig. 5: *Exodus III* (Installations), Waheed Owoade, Found Plastic Cans, Variable Dimensions, 2018, Image: The Artist, 2018.

Findings

From the selected works of the artists examined, several shared philosophical and material concerns emerge. Artists engaged in waste-based artistic practice demonstrate convergences in environmental awareness, creative experimentation, and media innovation. In all cases, the use of large-scale sculpture installations constructed from recycled materials opens up possibilities for promoting eco-friendly environments through artistic intervention.

The recycling and repurposing of waste materials in sculpture production also suggest pathways toward aesthetic renewal and environmental sustainability. This practice not only reduces pressure on landfills but also contributes to emerging circular economy principles by repositioning waste as a valuable resource for artistic creation. In this regard, sculpture becomes both a creative and ecological strategy for waste minimisation and environmental reorientation.

Conclusion

This study examined the concept of waste as an alternative material for sculpture installation art. Four selected works by contemporary artists were critically analysed in relation to the theme of environmental sustainability and artistic intervention. The discussion was framed within the context of the 2025 Waste and Environment discourse, highlighting how sculpture practice can influence environmental awareness and behavioural change.

The study demonstrates that art can function as a catalyst for public engagement with environmental issues such as waste reduction, sanitation, and sustainable urban development. Through waste-based artistic practices, artists contribute to reshaping public perception and encouraging responsible environmental behaviour. This, in turn, fosters greater awareness of the relationship between human activity and ecological well-being.

Furthermore, the findings suggest that exposure to such artistic expressions can influence attitudes and decision-making regarding environmental care. By engaging with discarded materials, artists transform perceptions of waste, encouraging society to reconsider its relationship with consumption and disposal practices. Ultimately, this study underscores the role of contemporary sculpture as a tool for environmental education, cultural reflection, and ecological responsibility.

In addition, the research highlights the aesthetic negotiation between ugliness and beauty as a conceptual foundation of waste-based art practice. It affirms that sculpture rooted in recycled materials performs a dual function: addressing ecological degradation while simultaneously producing visual and spatial beauty. In this way, contemporary sculpture extends its relevance beyond formal aesthetics to include environmental justice, cultural sustainability, and human well-being.