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## **Art for All: Filling the Yawning Gap of Visual Art Journalism in Ghana**

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**Abstract:**

*Professional Journalism in various fields of endeavour is phenomena felt daily in both electronic and print media, Needless to state; these journalistic contributions have their undeniable places in national development. This paper bewails the lack of Visual Art Journalists on the general landscape of journalistic practice in Ghana. Visual Art Journalism is identified as a vital missing link in the play-out of visual art and culture in the Country; a woeful deficiency, consequential in the shaping and refinement of the aesthetic tastes in the culture of the People. In looking at the possible cause(s) for the current state of affairs, critical observations were noted on the part of artists themselves, Government and other stake holders whose attitudinal posture become inimical to the development of the field. Finally, applicable recommendations that could lead to the training of skilful contingents of journalists to fill this critical gap are specified.*

**Keywords:** Visual Art, Journalism, Installation, Art Critic, Culture

### **1. Introduction**

Journalism is defined as collection and editing of news, which is of current interest for presentation through the media (Webster, 2011; Encarta, 2009). It is said that “Journalists report to you what is happening around you”. And it has become obvious, especially in recent times, how much effort journalists put into finding those facts, “news”, as we call them.

Journalism has been around for a good many centuries, all the way back to ancient Rome; and the profession, like many others, has advanced with the times. Where once we read the efforts of journalists from newspapers, magazines, and periodicals, it is available to us on the Radio, TV and the internet, dealing with all areas of life. Journalism is indeed one of the traditions that emerged in Europe and has since been adopted globally; having journeyed through many cultures and times to become what it is today.

At first, news, the essence of journalism, consisted mainly of that kind of information that engaged general human auditory appeal; sex, crime, and violence; it bordered on the sensational, and not all these were particularly relevant to the audience. But with time, news begun to take on some relevance, the essence of which made the information presented worth the time of the audience, it is this aspect of journalism that keeps the public engaged. But then, another era emerged in the history of news, yellow journalism, where newspapers, the foremost medium of journalism at the time, came to be focused on the making of profit. Then again, from the Depression through the Cold War in Europe and elsewhere, tabloids continued to give way to seriousness in reporting. The news products that people chose in the long term were those that provided them with the more relevant information, rather than entertainment. (Crutz, 2007)

The current additional medium of information dissemination should inure to the development of Journalism than impede it. Journalism brings us information about the world around us and this ‘news’ are relevant. They are so relevant that today, we can identify different categories of news to serve specific listening groups. And with the advent of information technology and the internet, the field booms with professionals and non-professionals alike. In this event much advantage is obtainable through competent and purposeful propagation than to frown on a system which treats the publications of both professionals and nonprofessional alike.

### **2. The Existing Types of Journalism**

Journalism in Ghana today is reflective of a field that focus on maximising service to targeted audience. Different forms of journalists are identifiable disseminating specific types of information tailored to specific audiences in society. Here in Ghana, one could recognise Political Journalism, Business and Financial Journalism, Sports Journalism, Entertainment Journalism, Citizen Journalism, in fact, in very current times, we have Celebrity Journalism and some forms of Investigative Journalism. To every one of these identified genres, there are various media through which the information especially sought and put together are presented

to the audience. Political information, tells of what's happening with politicians and their exploits or misdeeds in and without the country. One gets to know about sports in the country and abroad, one do not have to leave home or office to be abreast with sports news, business news or even entertainment news. Clearly there has been advancement within the dissemination of information; even to the point of public interaction where the individual could add her or his voice to the news by providing relevant information that is going on in personal perimeters, this is citizen journalism. These are good developments because it draws on a positive democratic and open participation towards nation building. By implication, the possible leadership role by Journalists in national development (or decadence) become extremely instructive. Journalists, writers, and media professionals have been at the front line of most of the political revolutions that have taken place over the past three hundred years and the advent of the Internet and its capacity to breach national borders has created new opportunities for citizen journalists and bloggers (Peter Graves). Intrepid reporters the world over take on similar roles, in sometimes more perilous situations, uncovering corruption and crimes committed by government officials. No era makes the adage truer that 'the pen is still mightier than the sword'.

The role of 'Media', which comprises the whole process of searching for and presenting relevant information, is indispensable for several reasons:

Information, the core of journalism is also core to many disciplines of eminence in society; therefore occupying a critical position in all phases of development. Journalism of all kinds provide access to relevant information, such as that of providing for and presenting from the marginalised and impoverished sector of society, information and perspectives that serve as the platform for the discussion of issues pertaining to their development. Journalism promotes economic growth, by again connecting business communities and creating an open flow of information to enhance trade and international correspondence. Journalism influences national attitudes and continent. Telling the people about what is going on in government creates a national atmosphere leading the citizens to desire institutional maintenance or change, which emphasizes accountability and responsibility on the parts of the nation's leaders.

Journalism and the information it provides in all its categories are indispensable to society, which is probably the reason why it should be desirable to correct a situation where certain aspects of our lives lack this apparently beneficial influences. Since the media, in this case, interchangeable with journalism, does shape public opinion and influence public tenets and taste, it follows that certain other forms of information, such as the information pertaining to the visual arts, an essential contributor to national culture should not be downplayed. Because indeed it is.

### 3. The Missing Link

One may be right to state that the function of Visual Art Journalism does not exist in Ghana! Yes here and there, once in a while, one hears of news on art exhibitions presented by daring journalists who strive to fit into the role but expose their incompetence amidst their deliveries. On the other hand, waves of visually artistic activities in the public domain would have forced some journalists to shape up in function. In the absence of such professional, the very benefits that the nation could have derived, had we a thriving visual art information platform, is absolutely lost on the ground. It could be observed that visual art's other counterparts within our culture, such as the performing arts, (albeit not at best practice levels) have a thriving media representation. This is apparently because the performing arts for their celebrative function easily filter through public programmes than the visual arts which are more contemplative and intellectual in function. The two forms require different kinds of preparations to experience, the latter being more cognitive than the former. It should therefore not be difficult to understand why one thrives above the other. However leadership is here needed to induce the required balance in order to guide and shape the taste and sensibilities of the nation for the better.

The Cultural Policy of Ghana (2004) especially outlines Government's commitment to meaningfully develop this sector by giving "...special attention and support to special art programmes in secondary and tertiary art institutions" (p 25). Ten years down the line, hardly could one prove the above on the ground.

What Tyler Green states of the situation of Art Journalism in present day America is something akin to what pertains in Ghana, or perhaps even worse.

*As arts journalism has fallen away, so too has the inclusion of the visual arts in the national dialogue. To be sure: Artists and visual arts leaders around America have a role to play in our nation's affairs, roles that go beyond the art world, it's just that those stories are told less now than ever before... (2009).*

He cites the correlation between the lack of journalists and that of visual art in national dialogue, this is an important observation. When visual art journalists flourish in the media, art conversations and discourses will flourish within the public and institutions of learning respectively, making the concerns of art integral with the people's culture. When art is supported to flourish in any culture, it will produce a refinement in the order of a personalities with mature and balanced emotions, and every nation should crave to have that.

### 4. Visual Art Journalism

Visual art journalism functioning in any country will have a process by which the nation stays abreast with information pertaining to the visual arts, not only as practised within the boundaries of the country but also without, because art, like any other fields of endeavour today, is definitely global. If we had a thriving platform for circulating and manipulating information on the visual arts, artists and audience beneficiary of the visual arts, would be rewarded with a richer culture, comparable with that of other nations. Here, reference is precisely made to contemporary art, art forms that are specifically visual in nature; painting, sculpture, assemblages, installations, graphic arts, ceramics, photography, printmaking and film making. The kind of celebrity journalism currently attached to the film industry is far from what visual art journalism is supposed to be.

The benefits of journalism in general, as stated above, are viable in the sector of visual arts journalism as well. In any country, particularly in a developing one such as Ghana, the practise will have the capacity to break out into the global community creating markets and creative opportunities for artists, both locally and internationally. It will give artists of all status, the encouragement they need to boost their skills and creativity in order to rub shoulders with their foreign counterparts. By searching, in order to present information about visual arts practise, visual journalists do stumble upon and give the public an opportunity to know about incredible art processes going on in the country and beyond, granting to the public the rare advantage in experiencing the exposure to unique projects available in contemporary art today.

In Africa, and Ghana in particular, there are wealth of human natural and cultural resources that remain untapped. Engaging in effective dissemination of artistic information is a major strategy to create opportunities to advance artistic desire, competence, and excellence inland and beyond. This is a pathetic situation when one considers the nature of art in the global community today set against Ghana's artistic potential as regards what could be accomplished by any well-meaning art institution. There is the need for a viable platform for the discussion and creation of opportunities dedicated to the advancement of visual arts in Ghana, the need for visual art journalism to highlight the works of budding artistic talents, to publicise and acclaim art functions, exhibitions, forums, and workshops. There is the need to create a stage for the discourse of art, book and exhibition reviews. Visual arts journalism should be present to make artists carrier established, feel needed, avail information that pay homage to the language of art; that makes visual art the phenomenological hub that it is, and an attractive enterprise to be a part of.

### 5. The State of Affairs

It is important that we take a critical look at the factors that account for the absence of this form of journalism in Ghana. Here are a few;

- It is a fact that in Ghana and in other developing countries, the visual arts and their processes are closed up fields. In Ghana, the case is usually that, unless one is an avidly practising artist, one is often oblivious to the art community out there. There are some that will even balk at the idea that there is actually an art community. There is of course, such a community; much as the visual arts programme has been integral to school curriculums from the most basic levels for several years. But if their efforts are not felt, who then cares what might be happening with them? This is one reason why there are no journalists avidly pursuing information pertaining to the visual arts.
- Now, the above phenomenon is a result of and a contributing factor in yet another unhelpful fact; that, the artists themselves lack the ambition and enthusiasm necessary to get the people's attention and elevate their own status. There are countries that have artists, whose very ambition and dedication to aspire and be acknowledged will move one to admiration. And in appreciating, one comes to see the significance in investing time and resources up to several billions of dollars in these arts. Until Ghanaian artists show that they value their own efforts, even if information about them is being disseminated, the worth of their attention may not be appreciated by the public.
- Again, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the practise of exhibiting art works, whether in Art museums or Ethnographic museums, is very integral to the eminence of the said art works, their creators, audiences and reviewers. And this being the case, we come to understand another factor debilitating artists' efforts and that of promoters of the arts. Because at this point, it is realised that the country is altogether, not the most enthusiastic exhibitor of art. There are Institutions like the Alliance Française, which indeed, although very active in this respect, is itself working in the interest of its prominent facilitator, the French Embassy. The effort of institutions like Ghana Commission on Chieftaincy and Culture, Centre for National Culture and Ghana Association of Visual Artists regarding exhibitions become almost lost to the public. And how about Ghana Museums and Monuments Board whose mandate include the preservation and exhibition of state-owned artistry?

This has been the trend of affairs; the nation does not seem to find value on the visual arts, and therefore has not created a constructive niche for it in our society; and yet, it is one of the most important aspects of our culture, contemporary or traditional.

### 6. Becoming a Visual Art Journalist

As in every scholarly endeavour pursuable today, education is indispensable. Here is a serious proposal to pursue a form of journalism in our country that gives voice to our visual arts. Groves notes that;

*Reporters keep the public informed of front-line cuts. Commentators call government policy and the cultural sector to account. And the army of writers still interviewing, previewing and reviewing on a daily basis ensure that arts stay on the agenda and, crucially, that audiences keep on coming.*

These reporters are like any other in every other field. They need expertise in their field of endeavour. Therefore, education is usually the first step required in becoming a journalist; education will help the visual art journalist gain the necessary knowledge required to present cutting edge information about the arts. (Grace, n.d.). This means that it is not only the trained artist who can become a Visual Art journalist; anyone with the passion, intellect and the required educational background can become a Visual Art Journalist. Most other practising journalists have a solid educational background, often comprised with a degree in journalism, English and /or Communications. It is not meant that anyone trained to be a journalist is viable as a Visual Art Journalist (Barnet, 2011), since there are specialties in the field, the fact should be appreciate that, this form of journalism is very much a specialty too.

Besides education, it is usually advisable to have some hands-on experience, usually gained in the form of participation in a collegiate newspaper or internship with a more advanced media organisations; both of which put the aspirant under the mentorship of professionals. This second step provides that the resultant journalist has had experience in the field and developed the necessary skills in the day-to-day operations of the profession.

It is also helpful to have practised some freelance publishing. This factor gives the journalist respect and recognition in his field, thus affording that material coming from them is worth the time of their audience.

### **7. Possible Specialties in Visual Art Journalism**

Again, as a broad field of journalism, Visual Art Journalism can also encompass and exist in several journalistic forms;

- Newspaper Reporting on the Visual Arts
- Investigative Reporting on the Visual Arts
- Foreign Correspondence for the Visual Arts
- Photojournalism on the Visual Arts
- Broadcast journalism on the Visual Arts
- Online journalism on the Visual Arts

And still, one should be able to have a training that will afford skills in more than one of these specialties. Therefore, being a visual art journalist could also mean that one is an experienced Visual Art Critic, Advocate, Collaborator, and Commentator of the Arts. And one can be either of these without specialized journalistic education in the Arts.

To summarize, Good formal preparation for a career as a journalist requires excellent writing, research and newsgathering skills, and some may need foreign language skills to be reporting from international locations.

### **8. The Role of Tertiary Institutions**

The fact that we have an Institution for Journalism in our country is not enough. In the same way that we have special curricula and courses for the various branches of study under a discipline, like Medical Science, we also need special curriculums in our journalistic Institutions to train Visual Art Journalists to write creatively. Because visual art journalists will not necessarily write in the same way as journalists in other fields. Important factors need be considered in teaching people to write about art, because they will not only be writing for an artistic audience, but also to stimulate interest in the general public for the arts.

#### *8.1. The Ghana Institute of Journalism*

This in Ghana is the main institution for the study of journalism and the various forms of news presentation in the country. The institution facilitates learning in journalism, media practise and advanced communication skills. It is therefore the very first institution we would expect to have the necessary resources to train Visual Art Journalists; after all, the journalists that graduate from there branch into the various specialties of the journalistic profession. The Ghana Institute of Journalism (GIJ) offers a wide range of courses pertaining to diverse specialties and media types in its journalistic studies; a factor which gives the incentive to propose the addition of studies in the Writing and presentation of Art News. Its presence would be integral to the other courses, taken at diploma or degree durations as the case may be. In this way, students under this discipline would graduate as 'Scholars' in art journalism instead of any other journalists who dabble now and then in art issues. This proposal is based on the fact that, the visual Arts are as much important as the very many others contributing issues in our country.

This Institution owns and operates collegiate publications that give students hands-on experience at their practise. The Institution has publications like the JOCMAS, Lifestyle Magazine and Communicator; all geared towards giving the students the above mentioned experience and development of skill and expertise. Likewise, in the wake of integrating courses on Art Journalism, a publication for the visual arts could be facilitated. And there will be no end to the number of readers this will find within our very own country, granted that the professional supervision is tailored towards its true visions of promoting the Visual arts.

#### *8.2. Polytechnics*

The above mentioned recommendations for the GIJ are viable for other tertiary Institutions in the country as well. The polytechnics in the country are far more than the Universities and will serve an important role integrating courses geared towards training visual art journalists. Diplomas in Art Communication, Authorities should strive to see passionate dedication to making this form of education available. Gone are those days when parents refused to pay for their children to study visual arts; and considering the length of time since visual arts has been part of Ghana's educational curriculum, it should not be a surprise that we put in more effort to make the arts more attractive and constructive to our society. After all, all around us today, visual art and its counterparts are taking the world by storm.

#### *8.3. College of Art and Social Sciences, KNUST*

It is a fact well known to many a student offering art in second circle schools that the College of Art, KNUST in Ghana is the most esteemed and fairly chosen facility in the country for furthering education in the visual arts. Technically, the College forms part of a broader school at the University, CASS, that is, the Colleges of Art and Social Sciences. Within which is also the English and Communications departments.

It is possible to create and enforce an Art Curriculum that would give Art students as well as English students an option of majoring in Art Journalism. It could be that, students studying English and communication studies would major in writing on Art or that students offering Art could branch into communication studies that foster a future career and expertise in art journalism. In this way, this prestigious College will contribute to the elevation of the Visual artists and the breeding of scholarly Art Journalists.

## 9. Recommendations

In order for the above measures be fruitful and for the nation to derive from a thriving visual art information platform, the above named Institutions, as well as all viable unnamed ones should take this proposition seriously and begin to erect the foundation of visual art journalism. It would be suggested that the nation's artists - who are the backbone of all that has been noted – begin to understand how important they and their contributions are to national development and react accordingly. It would be fatal, should these Visual Art Journalists graduate and find the Art community asleep.

Further, in the wake of all these proposals being actualized, all individuals with other relevant Ministries especially The National Commission on Culture accountable to the progress of the art community would have to keep close tabs on the information platform emergent and create to enforce policies in response to them. In doing so, the country can benefit from some of the real benefits of art practise in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Thus, we could access and respond to the true need for such amenities as prominent Art Museums, as well as enterprising and sponsored art shows and exhibitions.

The National Commission on Culture should be on the lead in realisation of this all important vision since it falls within its policy to auger for institutions and programmes for the “documentation, preservation, conservation, presentation, development and promotion of literature...” (Ghana Cultural Policy, 2004: p. 34) in both visual and performing arts.

Students should be given the opportunity to learn and train to meaningfully contribute to visual art journalism. Experienced and learned personalities in the arts who are versed with visual arts should be encouraged to contribute their knowledge and expertise to this burgeoning stage. There is far more potential to develop fine arts through journalism than what is being actualized.

In referring to African artists in the global community today, the very same names keep coming up at different events. “the same representative names are re-circulated from one show to the other, as if contemporary African Art were caught in a static granite frieze” (Wemega-Kwawu). Meanwhile great artists emerge each year from Ghana's Art Institutions, but they may be expected to remain in the dark for long, if the circulation of the nation's visual art information is solely left in the hands of foreign art journalists.

## 10. Conclusion

We have discussed Visual Art Journalism in its various aspects and have shown that its important role is virtually absent in Ghana. In looking at ways to arrest the current Problem, it was observed that fantastic avenues could be opened and fostered through effectively training contingents to manage this field. This was shown through the adoption of such proposed programmes by tertiary institutions in the Country, especially at the Ghana Institute of Journalism and the College of Art and Social Sciences in the Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology. “...access to participate in, and enjoyment of the arts is a human right and not a privilege; state funding should therefore give effect to this right.” (Duncan, 2007: 24). Visual arts journalism has a chance to really thrive in disseminating relevant news in the field, for art is the backbone of the economy of every nation (Abbey, 2008).

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