

WALKING DIMENSIONS AND INTERPRETATIONS IN ART: DISSECTING THE PERFORMANCE ART OF WURA-NATASHA OGUNJI

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Abstract

Walking is a physiological action necessary for survival. In performance activities, walking is a vital instrument of communication, particularly when it is calculated. Based on this study's approach, other than the established steps conceived for, and as, walking paces, performance art exhibits five other movement forms captured as the five abstract types. To be still is walking frozen. To crawl is walking impeded. To jump is walking suspended. To run is walking hastened. To fly is walking levitated. An analysis of Wura-Natasha Ogunji's performance art is used as illustration to establish this claim from a poetic, directional and determinative angle of walk(ing). The abstract, shifting and hybridised dimensions of Wura's works help, analytically, in the navigation of her engagement with several walk(ing) styles in relation to space, womanhood and race. The way her audience is often trapped-walk in a performance is also highlighted. To achieve these goals in the study, the social phenomenology theory has been applied for the analytical examination of the five performances exemplified. The study submits that whatever is the significance of performance art to the audience, the performer and the intended benefactors, application of appropriate walking types help the perfect determination and synchronization of theme, space and performance with the meaning(s) intended. If a walking type efficiency is appropriately articulated before embarking on any performance, among other things, the contextual success of most performance arts will already be half solved.

Keywords: *Wura-Natasha Ogunji, Performance art, Walking, Woman and burden, Time and space, Ambulation.*

Introduction

If you can't fly then run, if you can't run then walk, if you can't walk then crawl. But whatever you do you have to keep moving forward
—King Jnr. (1960)

The excerpt above, which is taken from Martin Luther King Jnr's speech to Spelman College students during a rally, enlivens the words: walking, moving and working. These words are automated activities of human behaviour. The excerpt further resonates the connotative value behind some performance arts as ambulatory acts (Simbao, 2016: 1-26; Brown and Shortell, 2015). It could also be seen as protests that take different dimensions, media, performers, audiences and contexts. Movement particularly is the motivating force of walking and working. It has always shaped some of the forms of our human survival. It has, therefore, allocated the best of manipulative gifts for re-creation, re-direction and, above all, human physiological and locomotive development of the eco-system (Amato, 2004). But walking embodies the abstract-real phenomenon of human "transversality". It is of a nature that enfolds the characteristics of the individual force, which contributes to human personality differentiations.

Thus, when walk is engaged for other functions than attending to short-circuiting distance, stronger meanings and engendering must have ensued or must have been envisaged be it positive or negative (Walser, 2012). Walking is used in several imaginable ways in the act of performance. As such, in many performance and videography arts, walking can be utilised in its most expressive form (Anogwih, 2015: 188). In African rites and religions, at least among the Nigerian people, traditional ceremonies and entertainment activities elaborately utilise performances to enhance value, meaning and structural dimensions (Onipede, 2016: 26). Thus, the African contexts of application of the performance art must, therefore, not be undermined. Onipede (2016: 26), however, goes further to reiterate the claim that performance art is not new as a visual art instrument. He expresses that from the 20th century, the scope of the visual arts embraces the performance art into its fold. Equally too, the performance art has, over time, gained a gradual, global validation and vitalisation.

As art, the performance art can be described as a creative action that condenses the activities of man—though playfully—but in a technically artistic composition: in performance, short video, script, installation, photograph and so on. This study encapsulates the formulation of principles for performance art as abstraction, veiling, lowliness, metaphoric and individualistic. Symbolically, performance art is a transient creative action; it is instantaneous and transcendental. Consequent upon all this, performance art can be defined as a methodically acted-art of by the body, with or without aid, which qualifies performance art as an art dramatised within the concepts of the visual arts, but not the theatre nor the dramatic arts.

The joy of a performance artist can be condensed into two: one, right sourcing the most suitable space for the performance (whether confine or free); and two, successfully manipulating the time that frames this acted-art in a three- or two-dimension equation that involves the artist, the performance tools and the target audience. The most accessible medium to carry out the performance, usually, is the body, and the performance communication symbol is actualised in movement or a supposed non-movement. In whichever form the human body can accentuate its most essential parts, a performer will activate his or her walking senses to creative levels that can abridge, veil, explain or address the subject or import of performance. However, this action is sometimes aided by the objective and tools needed to actualise the theme or performance. Thus, walking is usually physical. But it can also be abstract when construed and manipulated to suit our metaphysical and spiritual states, and the space of circumbulatory activities in humans. Therefore, as the body paces in a space-medium to deliver the performance art, walking takes up the varied format in the assessment of the morphological and phenomenological essences. The foregoing accentuates the position of this study; that is, a human's regular-paced walking can activate other types of walk(ing).

Aside from the regular submission of walking as a known means of short-circuiting distance, walking has been studied as a means to other ends (Simbao, 2016 and Anogwih, 2016). Solnit also sees walking as a means that people explore to create and achieve aesthetic, historic and socio-political ends (Solnit, 2001). Solnit proposes that we should endeavour to reserve "time and space" to engaging in walk(ing), noting that many great achievers around the world have engaged in walking to address, redirect and ignite creative, mental processes. Amato (2004) is historical in his study of walking. Claiming that no distance is without the reach of man, even before

modern technology, he reiterates that walking has been the principal source of human movement. This submission further anticipates some secondary or irregular types of human movement. Thoreau (n.d.) is more emphatic on the benefits of walking, which he elevates to an act of art. He traces the history of the artistic inclinations of walking and argues that walking for leisure or fulfillment of a third-party instruction is not considered as walking. As such, taking a walk suggests taking a chance walk and, in some cases, not knowing where it may lead. While partially aligning with Thoreau's concept of walking, Derleth (2009) focuses on his study of the communal activities of the Wisconsin River people and their environment. Walser (2012) discusses walking as an inexhaustible experience aiding the growth of man.

Walking for leisure, for instance, is like taking a walk. However, this takes specific forms and contexts. Instances abound where an individual who takes a walk needs to take a run or a jump over an object. There may be a need to crawl beneath obstacles or a need to take a stop to view other activities and so on. This cumulates into a process of fulfilling complete walking. In essence, walking can be defined as the totality of a physically engaging space with the body and mind. The physiology of a person also creates a forced type of walking.

Invariably, scholars have been discussing walk and the process of walking from the point of view of the principal source of movement. Walking, principally, is defined as moving or journeying on "legs and feet, alternately putting one foot a comfortable distance in front of, or sometimes behind, the other and usually proceeding at a moderate pace" (*Encarta World English Dictionary*, 1999: 1997). A deeper sense of the meaning of walk(ing) is, however, conceived in this study. This study proposes other types of walk(ing) that assist the principal type of walk(ing), in order for a performer to fully accomplish its process of human spatial connection. They are here classified as subordinate walk(ing). A subordinate walk(ing) is a redirection of the legs and feet in a more dramatic way of moving the body to aid interpretation in performance art. It is as simple or complex as understanding walk or walking in its superlative and extended terms and applications. It is like saying: walk away, walk on, walk over, walk out, walk tall, walk through, walking corpse and several other walk(ing) qualifications. Through these usages and applications, walk(ing) derives abstract imports based on these qualifiers. It is from this background that the subordinate walk(ing) will evolve for the purposes of weighing and analysing meanings in most performance arts and some dance dramas.

In the quest to actualise walk or walking as art, therefore, five human actions in the environmental space have been contextualised and activated as forms or variations of walk(ing). That is, when one remains still, walking is frozen; when crawling, walking is impeded; when jumping, it is suspended; when running, it is hastened; and when flying, walking is levitated. This study classifies these motions as subordinate walking types in performance art. Again, it is germane to reiterate that apart from these subordinate walk(ing) types, the principal, regular and undisputed walking type that stands as the alpha of the walking group is based on walk or working dictionary definition. It is this regular-paced walking on foot from which the five derivations are conceived. Therefore, from the perspective of this study, the principal walking type is taken to be natural and sacrosanct. It serves as the fore-line for other walking considerations and variations. From this point of view, it would be agreed that the five subordinate walk(ing) types have not been given noticeable scholastic consideration in the analytical process for performance art; an art form that extensively uses all these walking types to achieve its thematic meanings. More so, this art is fast growing among the range of the visual arts (Onipede, 2016). It is the adequacy of application of these varied walk(ing) types in performance art that this study focuses on. How walking relates, intersects and interrogates the space in performance need regular scholarly attention.

The ubiquity of space can become overwhelming when confronted with our walking dimensions. The scope and choice of space are chequeredly manipulated in life generally and among scholastic disciplines particularly. Thus, the application of space has ultimately been enriched through its several users. The application and management of space are equally of the utmost essence to the performance artist. This is because within proper utilisation and scope of the theme performed, space dictates who the first set of audience in a performance, or what the performance is set to achieve or address through the use of walking. In this state, and in most times, walking is combined with any other object or tool that aids in giving a performance its meaning. For whatever time allotted it in performance space, walking invariably needs to be carefully calculated for its own morphological and phenomenological essence, and the desirable expressivity of motion. It has been variously established as one of the many weapons of the performance artist. Walking must, as such, be comprehended in

its full manipulative possibilities; that is, in its immediate, enlarged and/or profuse forms. The foregoing discourse elaborations on space, walking and walking dimensions direct the conceptualisation of analytical and theoretical frameworks for performance art in this study.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework of this study is based on a sociological direction of phenomenology, in the understanding of human actions (Alegre, 2017; Ajiboye, 2012; Maso, 1983; Heap and Roth 1973; Overgaard and Zahavi, n.d.). The theory operates from a base-line noted by Husserl in Wagner (1970: 5), which affirms that activities of man lead to experiences he “apperceives and interprets” of a world he partakes in and understands. This denotes, as Husserl further clarifies, the need to be conscious of some things in our world. Sociological Phenomenology recognises the importance of working in our day-to-day activities, of which “performance” or “action” can “subjectively” be “overt” or “covert” (Schutz, 1970: 125-127). Working, thus, presupposes movement, of which walking can also be a form. Working can either be “action performed” or “action imagined”. In either circumstance, several forms of knowledge are requisite. As explained by Schutz, these include, but not limited to, the place of action; relationship with other actions; means of accomplishment, levels of actor’s control; “desirable” and “undesirable consequences”; relationship with “secondary effects and incidental consequences”; and accessibility of tools (Schutz, 1970: 137). Critically, when such an action is socially motivated and “directed towards other people” (Schutz, 1970: 137), then other kinds of knowledge arise:

...The interpretation or misinterpretation of his own act by his fellow man....The reaction by the other people and its motivation....All [the earlier mentioned types of knowledge], which the actor, rightly or wrongly, attributes to his partners....All the categories of familiarity and strangeness, of intimacy and anonymity, of personality and type...in the course of the organisation of the social world (Schutz, 1970: 137).

The conditions of human action become relevant in the actualisation of an action or the intended action. Any performance, whether successful or not, is, thus, crystalised on the application of these knowledge types. Because performance art relies on these knowledge types in its comprehension, the phenomenological theory helps in the analysis of the walking types employed by performers and audience suitability in performance art. Some of Wura-Natasha Ogunji’s performance arts have been used in this study to illustrate and amplify the suitability of the theory.

The Study and Wura-Natasha Ogunji

Wura-Natasha (figure 1), simply called Wura, is a Nigeria Diaspora performance artist who shuttles between Texas, USA and Lagos, Nigeria. She got her first degree in anthropology in 1992. She also did a second degree in photography in 1998 (Ogunji, n.d.). Her experience in photography adds some creative steam to her exploration of videography and the recapitulation of her performances in photographic scenes. Her performances exemplify Stangos’s (1994: 258, 266, 286) description of the aesthetically pleasing inherent in the non-object, fleeting arts. Walking and the human body, the major sources of exploits in her art, have turned into a cherished, professional act and art appreciated for their graphical, though fleeting temperedness, of a presentation of flight of vision in an illustrated story. These two sources serve as the major artistic media she use to either confine or open spaces for the purpose of realising the essence of her art and convening her message. The performance art, which Stangos sees as mainly a “free-for-all” art (Stangos 1994: 256), is usually satirical and it is directed into several activities of a society or the self. It is a cartoon that briefly stretches in motion for meaning. Wura is one of the foremost Nigerian performance artists, though a diaspora. Others include Jelili Atiku, Emeka Udema, Odun Orimolade, Lanre Tejuoso and Yussuf Balogun. Existentially for Wura and other performers, walking has physically, and sometimes calculatedly, become a twist in levitation; a symphony of impediments; a travesty of sounds, freezes and suspensions; and an objectified tools to which the body regularly responds as its willing canvas to be (re)used, (re)interpreted and (re)evaluated.



Figure 1

Wura-Natasha Ogunji from digital video, *The Epic Crossings of an Ife Head* (2009).

Source: <https://currentsnewmedia.org/work/the-epic-crossings-of-an-ife-head/>

This paper focuses on the use of walking as a major tool of understanding, albeit assessing, Wura's performance art. It directs our minds to the possibility of analyzing the mode of walking in performance art as a means of researching the suitability of theme, space and audience participation. Four of the five alternative dimensions of walking, in their functions for explicating the performance ideas, are examined, using phenomenology as a guiding theoretical framework. The four performances are *Beauty*; *Can't I Just Decide to Fly?* *Epic Crossings of an Ife Head* and *Will I Still Carry Water When I'm a Dead Woman?* The paper shows the shifting and hybridized dimensions of Wura's performance works. It discusses the interactional behaviour of walking, space, time and audience *vis-à-vis* the actualisation of some of her themes that delve on womanhood, race, the human body and the self-otherness. It is, however, desirous to note that this study takes regular paced walking as neutral, natural and sacrosanct. It is the baseline for other walking conditions or variations: It is only the modification or re-creation of it that gives concern for consideration in this study.

Walking and Spatial Analysis of Four Performances by Wura

Walking, in the creation of *Beauty* (performed at Obalende Motor Park, Thursday 11th April 2013, 2:00 p.m. - 6:00 p.m.), started with the unsuspecting audience that will likely perceive the preparation of *Beauty* as out-of-door drama for another Nollywood film. Space, in *Beauty*, shrinks around the five performers, stylists and audience (figure 2). A clear conception of walking is here engaged as motion frozen. At that preparatory stage, Wura and her team have started walking in metaphoric and spiritual forms, at that open but confined space. An interference with that space around the performers prepared for *Beauty* will be clear, noticeable interference with a deliberate spatial separation that creates some reverential awe. In a similar circumstance of audience behavioural tendency, Marina Abramovic reiterates her experience with stillness in one of her performances: Here everything was about stillness and about literally doing nothing and being in the present.... And I think especially the community—how the people actually started meeting each other around the work, how this circulated and how they continue to get into kind of a friendship situation—that was a really new thing to me (Abramovic, 2010).

Though the space is created by the audience that is unsolicited, it is a stage that will be naturally created and, as such, expected. The convergence created at varied levels of this spatial beauty is conceptualised as an area where regular (principal) walking is temporarily suspended and the subordinate stillness takes over. Walking is now extended and actualised in the audience minds. And if any regular walking interferes with such space, it becomes expressly noticeable and unconsciously sanctioned by the audience itself. Thus, where a spatial dimension is revered, the space becomes equally occupied and unoccupied at the same time. The stillness of a present observer or participator transcend been still: the mind and intention creatively move to occupy space. Therefore, the spatial adaptation in *Beauty*, based on its thematic concept, is creative and laudable.

Figure 2

Beauty. Performed at Obalende Motor Park, Thursday 11th April 2013, 2:00-6:00pm Braiding and interlocking the performers' hairs.

Photography: Soibifaa Dokubo. Videography: Ema Edosio.

Source: www.wuraogunji.com

As noted earlier in this study, walk frozen is a powerful tool of expression in performance. It could be used to create complex navigational instrument for the contextual narratives of beauty, ugliness and neutrality. It is

therefore important to understand the multilayered dynamics of stillness or frozenness when employed as a symbolic communication device in global and communal circumstances. This may further raise questions as to the appropriateness of frozen beauty in the socio-cultural environment where *Beauty* is performed. Take for example, if *Beauty* is performed in United States of America by Chinese as shown in Figure 3, how will a Chinese and a non-Chinese audience react ordinarily (or even contextually or complexly) to beauty or the beautiful in *Beauty's* frozen state with the bonded or tied hairs? It is most likely that the literate and fair-minded Chinese audience will be willing to hear the interpretation of the performance from the perspective of another culture, though non-Chinese may be misguided in their understanding of the act. This shows that culture understanding is very germane when communicating with a group of people (Papastergiadis, 2010). So what is the contextual appropriateness of walking frozen and the circumstance of tying the hairs of the five heads together?

Figure 3

Photographs from the Performance Installations titled *Marina Abramović: The Artist Speaks*
Photography: Jonathan Muzikar

Source: https://www.moma.org/calendar/exhibitions/964?installation_image_index=58

The bond in tying together the bonded female hairs of the performers, the relevance of gender pronouncement, spatial relationship and acquisition among the performers on the one hand, between the performers and the audience on the other are addressed in *Beauty*. While the exaltation of woman essence in togetherness is technically addressed in *Beauty*, the pronouncements of the need for constant arbitration between the reasoning of the performer and the audience in a patriarchal environment should also be considered scholastically. Bringing together or tying compatible things together suggests agreement and cooperation, from a regular perspective of concord. Therefore, in *Beauty* a conception of soul mate is envisioned. And if beauty can broadly imply a perfect unison, for Wura to bond the performers is conceptually rightly constructed. But let us also briefly interrogate the concept of Ori (*Head*) in Yoruba cosmology, because *Beauty* is performed in a Yoruba-dominated spatial environment. Among the Yoruba, the Ori is usually dignified by its overriding size, decoration and respect, as it is overwhelmingly portrayed in traditional Yoruba sculpture and Yoruba aesthetical consideration. (See figures 3 and 4; and read Lawal, 2012). It is recognised as the seat of wisdom, power, and identity (Foláránmí and Umoru-Oke, 2018; Ademuleya, 2007 and Lawal, 1985). There are also Yoruba sayings that eulogise Ori: “Ori mi gbemi de bi re” (*Let my head move me to my good destiny*), “Ori laba bo, kaa to bo Esu” (*It is advisable to appease the Head first than Esu*), “Ori eni ni gbe ni” (*It is our Head that protects us*), “Ori inu mi ko ma ba tode je” (*Let not my Inner Head destroy my Outer Head*) and several others more. The head is, thus, conceived cosmologically as the driver taking the mental, physical and metaphysical being of a soul (individual) to the chosen, positive destiny. It is the primary source of the human beauty. This, then, logically suggests that the head is in perpetual mystical motion, but it can also be interrupted in its journey in the cosmic axis.

Figure 3

Stone Figure of Esie, Igbajo, Yoruba, Nigeria
Source: Visona, Poynor and Cole, 2008: 247

Figure 4
Male Onile (“Owner of the House”), Terracotta, Height: 76.5cm
Source: Visona, Poynor and Cole, 2008: 242

Also with aforesaid background of Ori, the beautiful should not be entirely conceived as a physical phenomenon: it should be seen as expressed in silence, introspection, hope, suspense and, most of all, common goal that is achievable by coming together of like-minds. Beauty or the beautiful then becomes partly metaphorical in its appropriation. Critically, when *Beauty* is eventually performed in its frozen steps, audience participation also freezes along with it through the creation of the artificial barrier in physical space (figure 5). While womanhood, gender space in the public space, suspense and physicality are supposedly claimed in *Beauty*'s performance, *Beauty*'s occupation of space in time is strongly felt. However, from its perception and point of focus, the theme has been expressed through the domineering attribute of the Ori as the centre of wisdom, identity and beauty.

Again, the interlocking of performers' hairs could have been intended to signal agreement and unity, on the one hand. On the other hand, it could denote disagreement if perceived in the context of “locked horn”. The lock horns can be conceptualised as being locked in perpetual bondage, or joint destiny as in the case of the peoples or tribes in or of Nigeria. But from a Yoruba assessment (the performance having taken place in Yoruba cultural setting and taking cognisance of the cosmology and cosmogony of the Yoruba concept of her universe and structures within and without it), how would the performers' Ori take them to their destinies (or united destiny) when they moved motionlessly: frozen, undisturbed? This contradicts the feminist's aspiration towards all forms of liberation. Also, walking frozen would have created uneasy stillness and suspense in the audience. How can this be aligned and or linked with beauty as a theme and the capillaries connecting this to sub-themes such as romance, smiles, sex, elegance, woman shape or body, etc., since all this in its connectedness evokes varied movements?

Figure 5
A clip from *Beauty*. Performed at Obalende Motor Park,
Thursday 11th April 2013, 2:00-6:00 p.m. The is performance is walking frozen.
Photography: Soibifaa Dokubo. Videography: Ema Edosio.

Source: <https://www.mandatory.com/living/973027-visual-artist-wura-natasha-ogunji-explores-femininity-history-arts-role>

Although stillness can create its own eulogy in shocking euphoria, tension and apprehension in a social space, which can be a counterpoise for expressing beauty in another form; that is, holding spellbound (reassess figure 2). The surrounding space immediately becomes exploded in our heightened imagination. Technically therefore, walking frozen could be anticipated of the experiencer of an action resulting from beauty itself, while the person creating the experience/action is anticipated to use another form of walking to ignite beauty sensing. Action creating beauty or otherwise, and the experience of such beauty or otherwise, cannot mentally or socio-psychologically be sensed on the same 50/50 frequency. For one part to perfectly ignite the other, one part must take a higher wavelength to effect noticeable impact. As such technically, when *Beauty* is holistically analysed, walking frozen can be anticipated in the audience in its experience for the performance, though may be oblivious of the thematic content. However, walking frozen cannot easily be anticipated in the apprehension of *Beauty* itself in the concept of beauty as a creative medium in performance. Thus, the appropriateness of walking frozen to communicate beauty's ordinariness in this performance art work is highly debatable. Another walking type (and critically speaking, varied working types) would make *Beauty* more easily accessible and understandable in its intended narrative.

However, the next three performances are rightly conceptualised in their different walking choices. *Will I Still Carry Water when I Am a Dead Woman?* and *Can't I Just Decide to Fly?* used the same impeded walking type. *Can't I Just Decide to Fly?* performed in South Africa is a follow up of *Will I Still Carry Water when I am a Dead Woman?* which was performed in Lagos. Wura says that these performances are part of the serial on the determination of presence, time and space, womanhood and her concept of physicality.

Nevertheless, the twist in these three performances is multi-attributable and the poetic imports enacted are elegiac and heroic. Both inferences are based on the culminating experiences of the performances on exertion, persistence and the repetition of screeching sounds produced by the dragged kegs of burden. This is because all of this converges throughout the time and space the performance covered. They were also parodies and parables, based on the trajectories they navigated: the trajectories of life and death, of hope after condemnation, and of individuality and generality. They can also be seen as performances reflecting the psychologically caged woman. The tools of performance of ...*Decide to Fly?* on the 5th of September 2014 are stylish costumes and impeded walking, while those of 6th of September 2014 are casual costumes also performed in impeded walking. But that of ...*When I am a Dead Woman?* is an “Afrofuturistic costume”, notwithstanding the performance walking type is equally impeded. Both performances symbolically create impressions of a theme that cuts through feminine boundaries: burden and suppression and their place in woman’s liberty.

An attribution from ...*Decide to Fly?* and ... *I am a Dead Woman?* is the anguish and hardship women experience at different periods in different countries around the world. However, the strings of anonymity and veiling are potent forms that aid conceptual actualisation. Wura regularly employs these schemes to shift minds away from their particularities and contemporary idioms. Wura stylishly presents these types of women as still needing freedom. The thematic questions raised by her are rooted in three of the socio-psychological interconnected situations of human beings generally—pity, anguish and contempt. Foot dragging and crawling in these performances become flight in contemplation: in its otherness, in the needed—levitating in mystical and metaphysical forms are appropriated for a freedom perceived. Impeded walking, which is used as a form of transfiguring element for levitated walking, is here utilised as setting free a resilient bird in captivity.

Furthermore, each performer in ...*Decide to Fly?* and Wura in *I am a Dead Woman?* drags her burdens—the body mass of a person is matched against her conceived paired-mass of burden to determine her possibility to set herself free from impediments and struggles (figures 6-8, 10 and 11). This denotes the implication of will power and a call for women to metaphorically carry their burden on their wings and fly. Walking, in its regular paced form, is adopted in ...*Decide to Fly?* but the strains of burden (represented by the paired plastic kegs) have slowed down and altered movements of the performers. This has resulted in their chequered, irregular pacing that accentuated the appropriateness of the impeded walking type chosen for the performance of these themes. All of this is an angle to analysing the two performances.

Figure 6

Wura-Natasha starting *Will I Still Carry Water When I am a Dead Woman?* (2011). Performed in Lagos.
Shooting: Jelili Atiku.

Source: https://wuraogunji.com/artwork/2006713_Will_I_still_carry_water_when_I_am_a.html

Figure 7

At the middle of the performance, all parts of her body communicate with the earth. (2011)
Shooting: Jelili Atiku.

Source: https://wuraogunji.com/artwork/2006713_Will_I_still_carry_water_when_I_am_a.html

Figure 8

Wura finishing *Will I Still Carry Water When I am a Dead Woman* (2011).
Shooting: Jelili Atiku.

Source: https://wuraogunji.com/artwork/2006713_Will_I_still_carry_water_when_I_am_a.html

There is also another slightly different dimension that would also enhance our aggregation of the evaluation of these two performances. In this analysis, the questions that Wura raises towards conception of these performances are germane. Conceptualising philosophies for joy and justice are easier conceived with subjects and frameworks that affect empirical circumstances of judgment reflecting the person and people around him or her. These circumstances can be real or abstract in their conceptions. Enacting this through performance art will demand a high sense of abstraction, knowing that this art is abstract in its total make up. Again, creating parallels

between struggle and injustice, with beauty and poetry through the superimposition of physical labour will be a herculean task. Nonetheless, it is at this point that all forms of twist in parody, satire, allegory and cultural metaphors play vital role in the understanding and management of a performance art. The elements and principles of the performance art are employed at their fullest interpretations, in order to drive home the concept of performance. Wura then asks the way in which the body can best be used in achieving or illustrating all of this.

Figure 9

After concluding the performance, Wura took photographs with children of the community (2011). Shooting: Jelili Atiku.

Source: https://wuraogunji.com/artwork/2006713_Will_I_still_carry_water_when_I_am_a.html

Her choice of plastic kegs filled with substance to illustrate burden is conceptually laudable. In many less developed countries, kegs are mostly used as burden containers of scarce items like fuel, water and sometimes food grains. Heavy stones could as well be used as item representing burden. But of what importance would it serve in Wura's context of physicality? Also, her connection of the human flesh with descending (or humbling) and ascending (or condescending) is poetic, spiritual and abstract. The question she raises is that, what will her struggles and the physical body result to when dead and when long gone in her metaphysical ascension (or even resurrection)? Wura's employment of impeded walking creates a fascinating functionality for the walking type. The audience in *...I am a Dead Woman?*, even the shortest in the group, look down to watch the performer; while in *...Decide to Fly?*, the audience's eye level is mostly maintained. While thematically death is far closer to the masses or the village (satirising through the performance location), flight is taken towards the city: the elitist's locational view. The costume of death and lowliness is presumably black; while that of success, though achieved through some burden of hard work, is "flying colours". As such, the performer of *...I am a Dead Woman?* looks tough, short and native; while the performers of *...Decide to Fly?* look tall-framed, elegant and contemporary.

Characteristically, the foregoing processes and analogies are true-to-type in human society. And since all about struggle is impediments releases and failures in-between the process of success, Wura's choice of impeded walking for these performances are calculated and commendable. Going back to the question of "developing philosophies for joy and justice through performance": If it is possible to analytically assess the type of walking use in a particular performance, as it is established in this study, then methods of developing philosophical ideas for creating and measuring elements and principles of performance art can easily be envisioned and systematically generated for aesthetical appraisal.



Figure 10

A clip from *Can't I just decide to fly?*

Performed on Friday 5th September 2014.

Source: <https://www.contemporaryand.com/person/wura-natasha-ogunji/>

Figure 11

A clip from *Can't I just decide to fly?*
Also performed Saturday 6th September 2014.
Photo: Khanyisile Mbongwa
Source: <https://kkh.se/en/event/what-is-a-mask/>

The final analysis is on *The Epic Crossings of an Ife Head*. Just like Holland Cotter puts another performance and installation exercise by Marina Abramovic, which is titled [Marina Abramovic: The Artist Is Present](#), Wura's *The Epic Crossings...* is also a "combination of stressed-out flesh in documentary films and live bodies..." (Cotter, 2010). It is impossible to conceptualise any form of journey, whether real or metaphysical, abstract or intended, without anticipating at least a form of movement in space and the accumulation of a time frame. The reason being that, physical journeys of the human being are underscored through exercising the privilege of walking, again, whether generally aided or not. In *The Epic Crossings...*, Wura engages several forms of walking as alternating walking media of addressing migrations and introspections. A discourse in space, boundary and inter-boundary movement of people, and their socio-political and environmental import (Lamont and Molnar, 2002: 167-195; Khademi-Vidra 2014, 109–120; Nakhil, 2015: 15-22) is loaded in this performance. This makes *The Epic Crossings*'... videography a perfect, abstract submission of the poetic, determinative narrations, as well as directional processes, of exemplifying walking as an inescapable process in the life of man. Her idea of migration makes her walking choices—levitation, suspension and stillness—particularly adequate (Faires, 2017: 25). On the one hand, the performance illustrates how walking can be deeply contextualised in performance art; it creates, as well as emphasises, the relationship that exists between man and the three supports that make walking functional, that is, land, water and air. On the other hand, diasporic perception is relayed from a shocking conceptualisation of African ancestor (represented by the personification of an Ife ancestral sculptural head) searching for his or her descendants across geographical boundaries. This seems metaphorical.

The *...Ife Head* could as well be searching for natives of its clan and descendants who are offspring of many Yoruba slaves taken in captivity by the Europeans during the slave trade. When someone searches frantically for a thing, he or she uses all arsenals at disposal, including all the types of walking necessary. Wura's adoption of levitations, stillness and suspensions as walking types, and in several ways and repetitions, with the introduction of digital recordings, make the performance successful and highly modern in technical rendition. Though Wura links Yoruba people's totality to the Ife head, she vested authority to Ife, the supposed cradle of Yoruba civilization. She places on paramount rulers, presumably the Ooni of Ife as foremost (see Figure 12), the responsibility to search the Diaspora for the Yoruba identity (or propagate the identity). (Compare Figure 1 with Figures 13 on facial scarifications. They express agreement in ethnic identity.) The *...Ife Head*, when identified with Ife king, is also saddled with the responsibility to protect Yoruba artifacts from further scavenging by the Europeans. It is decided to search the world for its crafts (her creative people) through metaphysical, spiritual and metaphorical links. It is the paradox of the home-front beckoning on and recognising its descendants. This validates Wura's submission that the ancestors "could walk on water, or ...could fly". She says that the "stop-motion animation techniques give the character a sense of strained and staccato flight that is marked by truncated breathing and cacophonous sounds" (Faires, 2011: 25). The performance symbolises both a call for the Afro-American Diaspora personality to look historically inward and a journey of the soul that awakens a Yoruba diaspora's mind.



Figure 12

Oba Adeyeye Enitan Ogunwusi, Ojaja II, Ooni of Ife.
Source: <https://www.pulse.ng/lifestyle/food-travel/ooni-of-ife-oba-adeyeye-enitan-ogunwusi-and-his-burning-passion/3xsdded>

Figure 13

Ife head, Bronze.

Source: http://rubens2.anu.edu.au/new/england/london/museums/british_museum/sculpture/africa/yoruba/IMG1122.JPG

This entire aside, *The Epic Crossings...* can also be analysed from another plausible angle: the Yoruba mythological concept of creation, where the crossing of Oduduwa from the heavenly realms to the earth are narrated. Though several conflicting versions of the Oduduwa creation in Yoruba cosmology abound (Lawal, 2012: 12; Ogunwusi, n.d.; Ibeabuchi, 2012; Rosenberg, ed., 1999), most of the versions concede to the fact that there was a crossing of the Yoruba progenitor (most likely Oduduwa) from heaven with the aid of rope or gold chain to a virgin earth that was filled with vast waters and marshy land. The myth emphasises that where these progenitors and their objects of earthly expansion first landed became known as Ile Ife, the “navel of the world” (Visona, Poyner and Cole, 2008: 229). The story goes further to declare that it is from this landing spot that the expansion of the world and the first form of migration of people started (Ogunwusi, n.d.). The head in *The Epic Crossings of an Ife Head* can be likened to that of the Yoruba progenitor, who seeks enquiry into the existence of life on earth (Figure 14). Oduduwa, invariably, was the first to make the epic crossing, as there are several of crossings as displayed and performed by Wura. This scenario can be reconciled with the several perceptions and submissions of some scholars on the identity and migration formation of the legendary Oduduwa (Bondarenko, and Roesse, 1999: 543-548; Apter, 1987: 3; Adesoji, n.d.: 52-59; Biobaku, n.d.: 63-65). The art of walking created, whether consciously or otherwise, becomes important in the summation of progress in spatial navigation that Oduduwa first took. *The Epic Crossing...* performances, as such, are emblematic of multiplication and procreation, spatial extant and boundary, time and constancy, narratives and counter-narratives, migration and identity. Wura’s visualisation of a contemporary Oduduwa’s earthly movements in various walking types is, therefore, logical and adequately conceptualised.

Figure 14

A clip from one of the *Epic Crossings of an Ife Head*.

By extension, again, the contemporary movement of some Yoruba people from West Africa to Europe and other parts of the world is further linked to the aforesaid concept. Thus, the *Epic Crossings...* are symbolic and iconographic (Figures 15, 16 and 17). Symbolic in the sense that the incorporation of the Ife head into the story highlights both traditional and contemporary idioms. It is traditional in the sense that the ancient Ife bronze and terra cotta heads have been acknowledged as unique classical symbols that establish the reverence for Ife art tradition. This tradition has equally been interrogated widely by scholars. It is also iconographic and contemporary in the sense that the Ife king remains the arrowhead of Yoruba socio-cultural narrative determinants. The introduction of facial striped painting and videography that is aided with sound in *Epic Crossings’...* accentuates the duality that Wura visualises in the conceptualisation of the performance.

Figure 15

A clip from *The Epic Crossings of an Ife Head* (2009)..

Source: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qMCWx4Zxdwg>

Figure 16

A clip from *The Epic Crossings of an Ife Head* (2009).

Source: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8jeZl4YSfhE>

Figure 17

A photograph from performance stills of *The Epic Crossings of an Ife Head* (2010).

Photographer/Artist: Sonsereé Verdis Gibson

Source: <https://sonsereevgibson.com/artwork/1288326-Untitled.html>

Conclusion

Nakhal (2015: 17) emphasises that place and culture influence our conscious and unconscious desires and ideologies. She also quotes Martina Löw: “Gender and space alike are a provisional result of a—invariably temporal—process...” (Nakhal, 2015: 17). Therefore, observing the interactional behaviour of Wura-Natasha Ogunji and the environment (that is, people or audience) that she is trying to communicate with, on the one hand; and the environment’s behavioural interaction with Wura, on the other, there is a high probability of either situation receiving different signals, while both are communicating different signals altogether. The choice of her walking type at any of the performances becomes vital in the determination of the message intended. This is because, when outdoor performances take place at locations (physical and social environments) involving varied audience knowledge and interests, message communication and assimilation are noticeably uneven. More so, if the messages are advanced and their contexts are abstract, the walking dimension utilised must be rightly conceived and factored into the whole performance. This position takes us to the significance of performance art towards: one, its audience; two, its performer; three, its message; and four, the actual benefactor of the performance’s message. What determines the adequacy of the walk(ing) type, stage/place, time/day and audience towards a theme of performance art? Invariably, the multi-dimensional capability inherent in this art will always be put to test as the whole body becomes the message signifier, the context explorer, the ubiquitous manipulator and amplifier of the audience’s thought. In whatever direction that a performance is conceived, the art of walk(ing) add significantly to the colour of performance itself.

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