

UNDERSTANDING THE NATURE OF RESEARCH IN VISUAL ARTS

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Abstract

The nature of research seem to be dynamic both in its type and approaches to data collection, mode of ingestion, analysis and interpretation across academic disciplines and human endeavour. The primary concern of this paper is to investigate the nature of research in the visual arts and possibly which research approach to data collection would be most preferred. Using both the primary and secondary data sources and an intensive review of related literature, findings shows that, research in visual arts is often experimental and explorative because, it is frequently concerned with the creative search for new media, techniques and form through the concept of constructivism as an interpretative strategy even as multiple realities and point of views are valid. However, the paper concluded that, any research approach; be it from qualitative, quantitative or even the mixed methods could be deployed as a tool for data collection as regards to research in visual arts. But this though, depends on the research question formulated for the intended study.

Keywords: *Visual Arts, Research Approaches, qualitative Study, quantitative Study.*

Introduction

Through time, research seem to have been the brainbox if not the driving force behind human advancement; from the period predating records, through the dark age, to the age of enlightenment, including the modern and the postmodern era. As if, nothing is permanent, but continuous change. This could be the very reason why, even now knowledge is subject to further interrogation or contestation. Literally, the research is simply to search and search again. As if answers are embedded in persistence. Consequently, in the academics research seem more scientific and procedural. No wonder it is said to be a systematic way of gathering information, documents, facts and rummaging for evidence for the sake of new knowledge even as it is ever shifting if not fluid. As if there is no final arrival. Maybe is because, every conclusion is already a problem for another research (Williams, 2007). There are different types of research and approaches to data collection which cuts across from flexible to rigid way of collecting, processing and interpreting information. For example, qualitative approach to research involve asking broad and general questions; collect data consisting of words or texts from participants; describe and analyse these words and texts to form themes and conduct enquiries on a subjective and biased manner. It is anchored on the concept of constructivism. Maybe the privilege for multiple realities and point of views (Adetero, 1997). And on the other hand, Quantitative method embraces the collection of numerical data that can be subjected to statistical analysis that includes performance task, personal measures, as well as content analysis. At the crossroad, is the mixed method that allows one to use the strength of one data type to mitigate the weakness of the other approach? This means that, a mixed method research design is a procedure for collecting, analysing, mixing both quantitative and qualitative research methods in a single study to fully understand the research problem. This is perhaps because, it often said- If one must see the Igbo masquerade clearly, one must view it from all sides. (Leeds and Ormrod, 2001). Against the

above background, it is possible that all schools across the academics may have their own unique way of investigation that would align with the nature of what they are known for. For example, in the humanities such as the visual arts where creativity is the watchword, research embraces the expression of ideas, feelings/ emotion, meaning and multiple points of view (Croswell, 1994). It is explorative and experimental as regards to the creative search for media, technique and form even as research here is often confined to the studio environment. As if that is not enough, research in visual arts can also involve the art historical paradigm- understanding the significance of a particular or various art movements and artist(s) across history even as it may concern careful study and analysis of artworks, media, technique form, period, style and context.

The complex nature of research in visual arts raises critical questions such as; which research approach to data collection fits the nature of research in visual arts especially in a case where everything is seem to be happening at the same time. Thus, this paper investigates the nature of research in the visual arts and as well, will attempt to explore the research approach to data collection that may be the most preferred.

What is Research?

The term research is an academic form of investigation with the aim of solving a creative problem. It is also a systematic way of gathering information, documents, facts and rummaging for evidence. Research on its own is systematic in that, it defines the objectives, manages data and communicates the research findings that occurs within an established framework which should be in accordance with the existing guidelines (Williams, 2007). To an extent, research on its own, is independent of the researcher and devoid of sentiment even as data is used objectively. There are three main research approaches; quantitative, qualitative and mixed method research respectively. Others includes experimental, survey, participant, observation, ethnographic, phenomenological, field research, grounded theory, inferential, experimental, simulation, narrative, case study, content analysis, descriptive, casual- comparative approach amongst others. (Leeds and Ormrod, 2001). Research types and approaches seem to be related but a bit different in their contexts especially in academics. Research approaches deals with the specific method and procedures used to collect, analysed and interpret in a given study. Research approach is a collection of procedures and plans that decide the overall process of a research. It shapes and decides the method of data collection, analysis and interpretation.

Quantitative Research

Quantitative research emerged around 1250 AD. It was driven by investigators with the quest and need to quantify data (Williams, 2007). What underlines a quantitative research methods is the numeric and statistical approach to research design even as it is built on existing theories. (Leeds and Ormrod, 2001). Others on the other hand, believes that, quantitative research maintains the assumption of an empiricist paradigm (Croswell, 2003). Quantitative research begins with a research problem statement and involves the creative formulation of a hypothesis, a literature review and a quantitative data analytical method to arrive at the findings from which conclusion is drawn. It is a type of educational research in which the research decides what to study; as specific narrowed questions, collect quantifiable data from the participants (often large number), analysing these numbers using statistics and conducts these enquiries in an unbiased and objective manner. This often adopts the concept of post-structuralism; singular reality. It is objective and however deductive in nature. All questions must be measured. It involves the collection of numerical data that can be subjected to statistical analysis that includes performance task, personal measures, questionnaires and content analysis. No wonder, data is often referred to as “Hard Data”.

Qualitative Research

It is a type of academic research in which the researcher relies on the view of the participants. It involves asking broad and general questions; collect data consisting of words or texts from participants; describe and analyse these words and texts to form themes and conduct enquiries on a subjective and biased manner. It is anchored on concept of constructivism. Maybe the privilege for multiple realities and point of views. It is biased and inductive. For example, it is often not concerned with how many? Or how well? But simply how? Perhaps it is because, it is exploratory in nature. Qualitative research method deploys a holistic approach that involves discovery. One identifier of qualitative research is the social phenomenon being investigated from the participant’s point of view (Croswell, 1994). In its own nature, it involves description, analysis and interpretation of data which is done subjectively, based on theory as a conceptual window. To a point, this research method is often conducted with a

post-structuralism paradigm maybe, it is because it builds its premises on inductive rather than deductive reasoning (Williams, 2007).

Mixed Method Research

As the name implies, it is a research approach that combines and integrates both quantitative and qualitative research approach in a single research study. It involves collecting and analysing qualitative and quantitative data to better understand a phenomenon and answer the research question. It is to further expand the visual evidence. It is simply to improve the credibility of the research findings. The mixed approach allows one to use the strength of one data type to mitigate the weakness of the other. It implies that, a mixed method research design is a procedure for collecting, analysing, mixing both quantitative and qualitative research methods in a single study to fully understand the research problem.

Experiment Approach

This refers to the method of investigating the cause and effects under a highly controlled condition, often involving hypothesis.

Survey Approach

In this approach, object respond to a series of statements or question in a questionnaire or an interview. This approach often involve a target population- the people who are core focus of the research. The most common example of the survey approach, is the questionnaire and interview. This approach is also applicable in the evaluative research paradigm. It simply aims to measure the qualities of a specific target population, considering a part of that population (sample) often by using a designed instruction called a questionnaire, and adopting statistical method. At the end, the part of the particular population, represents the ideas, believes, viewpoints, and possibly, the opinion of the whole population. Usually, the survey aspect considers the following approaches; sampling process, questionnaire design, administration of the questionnaire, data analysis process.

Participant Observation

This is the research approach in which the researcher systematically observes people while joining them at the same time, in their routine activities. This approach is characterized by fieldwork even as it is a participatory, exploratory and as well descriptive.

Ethnographic Approach

This is often rooted in qualitative research, it involves an in-depth study of cultural groups. It is usually deployed in the field of anthropology. This approach, at some point may involve participant observation. In order words, for a researcher to study a particular group effectively, he/she must become part of them through participation. Prolonged observations are used to achieve the descriptions and interpretations of cultural shaping groups. This approach considers both the process and the product and instead of focusing on the way data is gathered, it wears the lens of data interpretation (Taherdoost, 2022).

Phenomenological Approach

This research approach aims at identifying a view or theory, by analysing a behaviour of those who participate in it and their respective perception of it. This approach was birthed from the study of the philosophy of existentialism and behavioural theories. In this approach, the researcher often rely on, or collect data through in-depth personal interviews from participants, including their personal experiences among others. This approach employs individual viewpoints to perceive an experience and as well, apply inward apprehension, consciousness and the outward appearance of the experiences by utilizing diverse tools such as memory, meaning and image (Taherdoost, 2022).

Field Research Approach

This research approach aim to study the situation or event over a long period of time using interaction and observations. It often embrace the procedure of selection of event, observation of objects, as well as recording of findings. At the end, the collection of all, becomes a case-study report which would be analysed from where conclusion will be drawn.

Grounded Theory

This is a complex inverted approach of qualitative research that was developed by Glaser and Strauss in 1960. It aims to first determine what question(s) that needs to be answered. And then, extensively gather data that summarizes the said observation. It does more abstract theory, but that which is supported by in-depth observation that is based on facts. The word grounded in this context arises from the driven data which are collected from the research field and not from literature to develop theories (Taherdoost, 2021). The method of data collection here can be from on-site observations and interview to historical reviews of tapes and records (Williams, 2007).

Inferential Approach

Just as the name implies, this approach is used to infer conclusions from a set of data base. The condition here are often generic in nature. Thus, the researcher's aim is simply to link the characteristics of a sample population to the population at large. The aim is to analyse data and draw conclusion beyond the most obvious ones, and use descriptive statistics to describe this observations.

Experimental approach

This approach is used to study the effects of one variable over another when any of these variables is altered. This approach enables greater control over the environment under which the research is carried out. This approach often investigate the treatment of an intervention using an experimental research paradigm to achieve the result of the treatment on the group under study. Research design in this context include; pre-experimental design, true experimental design and quasi- experimental design.

Simulation Approach

Simulation approach is different from other quantitative approaches perhaps because of the environment it deals with. For example, while others are characterized by natural environment, this approach is concerned with an artificially created environment. For example, this approach was deployed to estimate study power for individual or cluster- randomized designs as contained in a research experiment in 2011 titled "*Simulation Method to Estimate Design Power: An Overview for an advanced Research*". Because of its flexibility, it is even said that, it is universally applicable for evaluating study designs used in epidemiologic and social science research (Arnold, et al, 2011),

Narrative Approach

This approach deals with series of individuals about themselves or a series of events. The aim is to discover the stories with focus on the characters. It scrutinizes people's lives, based on their own story (Hancoock, et al, 2007).

Case Study Approach

The focus of this approach is to achieve an in-depth exploration about people, events and perhaps programs. Thus, this approach often display multiple data collection methods, combinations of direct observation, archival documents, Artefacts, visual or audio sources.

Content Analysis

This approach aligns with quantitative research methods because, it is primarily focused on gaining frequencies and counting pattern. It involves the case study of detailed examination content systematically to gain patterns biases or theme.

Descriptive Approach

This approach aim to either explore the correlation between the phenomena using observation or define their attitudes. It explains events and situations exactly during their current status.

Casual- Comparative Approach

This is also called ex- post factor. This could mean, "from after the fact". It however, aim to study the problem using the variables which are in retrospect. It examines the cause- effects relation by ascertaining how the independent variables can over- shadow the dependent variables.

Visual Arts Research approach

Available research shows that there are three different research approaches; quantitative, qualitative and the mixed method. Though, they all seem to have/offer different research possibilities that has made each of them very unique in its own way. Because visual arts on its own self, privileged the expression of ideas, feelings/ emotion and meaning, it has become obvious if not clear that, the nature of visual arts embraces multiple points of views, as if there is no final arrival. It is explorative as regards to the creative search for media, technique and form. It is experimental and often confined to the studio environment. Research in visual arts can also involve understanding the significance of a particular or various art movements and artist(s) across history even as it may concern careful study and analysis of artworks, media, technique form, period, style and context. Thus, the above nature of research in visual arts seem to harmonize with the creative potentials offered by qualitative research approach and its possibilities depending on the research questions. For example, qualitative research is subjective, explorative and anchored on the concept of constructivism; multiple reality as it relates to participants and data collection, deductive reasoning, multiples stories even in its analysis and interpretation especially when anchored on a theory for conceptual insight. This has made it flexible than rigid in its nature. At this point, it has become clear if not obvious that the nature of research in visual arts aligns with qualitative research and its possibilities. Thus, the very reason why it is recommended in visual arts.

Analysis in Visual Art Based Research

Analysis is said to be a detailed examination of something that is often sophisticated in order to understand the components or parts that makes the whole structure. It is to deconstruct that which has been constructed for the sake of clarity. It is to tear apart a form, only to reveal other areas inside it, that gives live or support to it. In the visual arts, analysis could mean more than just identifying components of a form. It can also mean to describe something such as a work of art and how the elements and principles of art were used- this may include judgment and meaning depending on which theory one adopts for conceptual enlightenment (Barton, 2014). This implies that, analysis concerns the understanding of the formal components of a work of art such as painting, textiles, graphic design, sculpture, photography, installation, architecture, ceramic and pottery amongst other art forms. Through visual analysis, it is possible for one to gain meaningful insight by understanding and appreciating the complexities of a work of art (Fraase, and Sigman, 1993). It therefore means that, by engaging on a morphological analysis one such as the viewer, can uncover not only the artist intentions through media, technique and form used, but also have a chance effect of having a personal communication if not encounter with the work of art through subjective reasoning and as well, decode the deeper meaning that is embedded in the work of art (Stecker, 1994). However, approaches to analysis and meaning may differ due to the choice of theory appropriated. Some of these theories include formalism, semiotics, iconography, iconology, psychoanalysis, mimesis, and expressionism, postmodernism, amongst others (Lavender, 1995). Thus, theory has a great influence in analysing a work of art including the meaning or interpretation therein, perhaps there is no live without theory, and nothing is what it seems but a product of interpretation, says the German philosopher, Nietzsche (Campbell, 2003).

In this light, Odum and other artists such as Ibana, and Haruna respectively have all attempted visual analysis in their various ways and interpretative accents and approaches as shown below. However, the singularity is that their various arrival and submissions are testament of subjective encounter with the work of art.

Methodology

The study embraced the qualitative research methods using both primary and secondary data sources; personal observation/ interactions, academic journals and, dissertations, and books. This study is guided by the postmodernist theory that privilege multiple and subjective reality, as if to deconstruct linear narratives. This helped one to understand the complex nature of research in the visual arts including approach to data collection, analysis and interpretation (Trodd, 2012).

Artists and their various Attempts towards Visual Analysis

Fig 1, present the visual Analysis of El Anatsui's work titled "*Three Sightings*" as contained in Odum's writing elsewhere.



Fig. 1. Anatsui, *Three Sightings*, 2021.

Aluminum and Copper-wire, 280 X 807cm, (EA223)

Source; octobergallery.co.uk

Anatsui is famous and known for the mastery of his own technical handling of media such as copper wire and bottle tops to manipulate visual organic and abstract forms that are often very large in size which is not different in the work titled “*Three Sightings*”. What is interesting in this piece, is the juxtaposition and overlapping of organic forms in their different folds, drapery and formal structure to create visual tension that seems to underscore complexity. To create a sense of visual contrast, the forms positioned side by side, appear to vary in sizes, colour, texture and formal structure, as against the wavy horizontal bands of repetitive forms that seem to define and consume the entire picture plane. The polychromatic interplay of colours such as gold, silver, red, grey, brown, black and white, forms the negative spaces that has also found a way to breathe through, within and around only to integrate the overall complex visual composition. This technical distribution of colours creates a sense of visual drama, maybe of hope and of ecstasy. The overall formal structure appears flat but altered again by the presence of intaglios and emboss surface areas that seems to be continuous if not present everywhere. In this sense, the creative strategy deployed by the artist, is simply to capture the impression and the optical feelings of restlessness; of terror and of instability. What is noticeable here is that, even the dominant organic forms that seem to be charging at the viewers, is being held back again into the restless background very strongly by strand and stitches of copper-wires. It is as if, the troubled background has refused to let go, these contrasting forms. Possibly, what seems to be free has suddenly lost its freedom. Perhaps a visual reflection of imperialism or modern day slavery. At the end, Anatsui through his choice of media, raised the critical contemporal issue of hyper consumerism and the glorification of western products. It is in this sense, that the medium has become the message (Odum, et al, 2023).



Fig. 2. Untitled by Ibana Eleme, 2023.

Fig. 2, is an analytical attempt by Ibana Eleme as contained somewhere else *“Analysis at this point, is perceived as the act of making something such as an image clearer, as if to make open how this painting was composed considering the visual elements and principles of art and how they interact with each other as a composition. In line with this, one would adopt the formal or morphological analytical method where only the formal elements; line, form, texture, colour and shape in this picture will matter and nothing else.*

The above piece is framed into a rectangular pictorial composition showing what seem like an abstract expressionism painting, measuring about 4ft by 3ft in size.

The core characteristics of this painting that makes it unique, is the fusion of bold expressive brushstrokes that seem not to have a particular direction with the pouring technique that is controlled into vertical colour drips. To create rhythm in this painting, smaller brushstrokes are laid side by side with the larger ones so that they could complement each other even as they weave themselves into what one may call “a Creative Romance”. To create contrast, the brushstrokes vary in size and colours ranging from very bright to the darkest dark. To create visual weight in this painting, the area towards the baseline is treated with dark, opaque colours that is amplified by relatively large, vigorous brushstroke in their various visual accents. Finally, the optical sense terror and visual tension is achieved by the careful, vertical drips of bright red and greyish orange fluid colours in a way that, they spread from the middle ground only to announce their presence while they run and drip through the foreground. As if nothing is stable and permanent. But fluid only. What seem surprising in this piece is that, even the greyness of this fluid monster that appear to dominate the entire picture surface, is painted in different colours, shades and tones even as they drip down with no point of rest, only to end up outside the canvas surface. However, the visual drama in this painting is orchestrated by variables such as the restlessness in the brushstrokes, the interplay of light and shade (chiaroscuro), the greyness of the dominant forms and the sudden boldness and the unstableness of colour drips. All these, may simply be a hint into the current situation of Nigeria as a result of social, political, religious, economic and other kind of vices that become the order of the day, if not the new normal. Thus, the above painting is simply a pictorial reflection of a modern day Nigeria that is coded in the expressive gestures of action painting” (Ibana, 2023).

Fig. 3 and 4 are analytical attempt by Haruna as contained somewhere else.



Figure 3. ,The Prelude, Charles Haruna, (2021).

“This piece is characterised by suggestive figuration rendered in an expressionistic approach with all pointing to different directions. The composition is divided into two on the right hand side, filled with plastic figuration; while to the left there is an expressionistic brush strokes. To create a point of interest in the painting, this figure at the centre is painted with bright yellow and a warm red towards the right. To create a sense of visual movement, the brush strokes seem to gradually become more unstable as they move from the foreground of the painting to the left side of the middle ground as if to direct the eyes away from the painting. Most interestingly as against the crowd and background some figures are rendered in silhouette that re-echoes again on the foreground spreading towards the left perhaps to create a sense of visual harmony. In this sense, the first panel poses a form of asymmetrical balance because the major composition is held into the right hand side of the painting.

The most interesting component of the painting is the juxtaposition of these abstracted figures, figures that tends to be facing different direction but still having their backs tied to each other as if they are held under an inseparable bond. With this sense of pictorial handling, one might likely conceive that this painting tries to reveal the consequence of polygamy”(Haruna, 2021).



Figure 4 "Clannish Confab" by Charles Haruna (2021)

Acrylic on canvas

"The above plate (Figure 4) is characterized, by the juxtaposition of suggestive images that seem to be in a procession towards the right side of the painting. The compositional strategy of this panel tends to adopt the concept of "order" as if forms obey the law of gravity. By this, forms are arranged using a symmetrical form of balance with higher gravity (visual weight) towards the left hand side of the painting. To create contrast, the background is treated strategically with different shades of blue in their various tones and accent, such as, dark blue on the foreground, as against the subtle highlights of greyish orange colouration towards the right hand side especially at the top most area. At the middle ground, the centre area is characterised by sudden out-pour of dispersed brush strokes that gradually spreads to the right top part of the painting perhaps to create a sense of visual movement in the painting. To maintain the visual temperament, the brush strokes assume the neutrality of greyish blue, green and orange colouration. The left hand of the painting contains about two or more supposed figures with the first, blowing a horn trumpet faced downward while the rest of the images seem to be accompanying the seeming leader. This form of representation could make one conclude that the painting is a procession of family members out for a mission" (Haruna, 2021).

Summary

The nature of research in the visual arts is explorative and innovative as regards to the creative search for media, technique and form. It is experimental and often productive especially in the context where the production of a work of art such as painting, sculpture, ceramics and pottery, textile and graphics design is the research and the subject of research itself, even as it often studio based. Research in visual arts in the context of art history, involve understanding the significance of a particular or various art movements and artist(s) across history even as it may concern careful study and analysis of artworks, media, technique form, period, style and context. This therefore means that, nature of research in visual arts seem to harmonize with the creative potentials offered by qualitative research approach and its possibilities depending on the research questions formulated. This helps the researcher to explore and better understand the complexity of a phenomenon through post-structural paradigm, multiple reality, inductive reasoning, analysis and interpretation of words, images and texts. Consequently, the singularity here is that, the method of data collection and visual analysis in the arts seem more qualitative and flexible, as if everyone is entitled to his/her own opinion. Perhaps there is no central truth. This is visible in morphological analysis of Odum, Ibana and Haruna as captured above.

Conclusion

This paper concludes that, research in visual arts is often experimental, innovative and explorative in nature and as well qualitative towards approach to data collection even as it revolves around the creative search for new media,

techniques and form through the concept of constructivism/ multiple realities as an interpretative strategy. However, any research approach; be it from qualitative, quantitative or even the mixed methods could be deployed as a tool for data collection as regards to research in visual art. Nevertheless, this depends on the research question formulated for the intended study.

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