

## Pioneering Efforts and the Key Players of Political Activism in Nsukka Art School 1960-2000

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### Abstract

This study examines the pioneering efforts of Nsukka Art School in political activism. The school is noted for its Uli Art and exploration of installation art, gaining scholarly attention after the civil war in 1970. Two distinguished pioneers and two artists were selected to discuss activism trends. The study aims to highlight the painting styles of these artists, expressing the ideologies of the school and its political activism from the 1980s onwards. Qualitative research with a historical bias was adopted. The works of Uche Okeke, Chike Aniakor, Obiora Udechukwu, and Krydz Ikwuemsí are discussed, showcasing their contributions to socio-political history through activism. Nsukka Art School is recognized not only for its cultural traditions but also for its radicalism and political activism. The study recommends documenting these activism for posterity and advocates for using art to address societal issues.

**Keywords:** Pioneering Effort, Key Players, Activism, Politics, Art School.

### Introduction

"I and some colleagues came to the conclusion that as violence in this country was inevitable, it would be wrong and unrealistic for African leaders to continue preaching peace and non-violence at a time when the government met our peaceful demands with force. It was only when all else had failed, when all channels of embark on violent forms of political struggle."- *Statement at the opening of his defense in the Rivona Treason trial, April 20, 1964. Nelson Mandela.*

The University of Nigeria, Nsukka (UNN), founded in 1960 and by 1961 Fine and Applied Arts was included as a course of study. The University drew inspiration from the American education system, became the first institution to offer a degree course in the Visual Arts in Nigeria. The Nigerian college of Arts, Science and Technology, Zaria, a diploma awarding institution, was absorbed into Ahmadu Bello University (ABU), Zaria in 1962. Apparently, ABU started awarding degrees in Fine and Applied Arts. Subsequently, other institutions in the country were established in different parts of the nation which includes the University of Ife, now Obafemi Awolowo University, with the creation of the Department of Fine and Applied Arts of which they started awarding degrees (Chukueggu, 2010). Artists of Nsukka School are notable personalities and scholars who are well known for their visual art and

poetry works. The school history that culturally traced to protest art will not be completed without mentioning artists like Obiora Udechukwu, Olu Oguibe, and Krzdy Ikwuemesi, among others who have made the school proud through their protest art to address sensitive issues in politics. The indelible characters of these artists had made volume that posterity will like to learn about, each artist's artworks mentioned above would be discussed. However, this article will trace back with some evidence of artworks of the two major foundational art teachers of politics and protest, being the pioneers of Nsukka art School.

The University of Nigeria, Nsukka (UNN), founded in 1960, included Fine and Applied Arts as a course of study in 1961, becoming the first institution to offer a degree course in Visual Arts in Nigeria. The Nigerian college of Arts, Science and Technology, Zaria, later absorbed into Ahmadu Bello University (ABU), Zaria, also began awarding degrees in Fine and Applied Arts. Subsequently, other institutions like the University of Ife (now Obafemi Awolowo University) were established with degrees awarded in Fine and Applied Arts (Chukueggu, 2010). The Nsukka School's history of protest art includes notable artists like Obiora Udechukwu, Olu Oguibe, and Krydz Ikwuemesi, who have made significant contributions through their artwork. Pioneering efforts by Uche Okeke and Chike Aniakor laid the foundation for political and protest arts ideologies in the school.

### **Pioneering**

This involves accomplishments or activities that have not been done before, or developing or using new methods or techniques. The institution would not have been what it is today without the effort of the mature humanistic ideology of the department under Uche Okeke, which had clearly been well championed by some teaching staff who were also already an influence on their students. Some of the staff were, in addition to Uche Okeke, Chika Aniako, Obiora Udechukwu, Chuka Amaefunah, Paulinus Emejue, El Anatsui, Ola Oloidi, Lawrence Agada, and the technical hand Uzochukwu Ndubisi (Oloidi, 2017).

### **Key Player**

These are individuals regarded as heroes, embodying mythological or legendary figures often of divine descent and endowed with great strength or ability. In the context of this paper, a hero is the principal character and key player in a literary or dramatic work, typically referring to a male character. However, when contrasting artists with the effect of pioneering and political activism in the Nsukka School, there is a tendency to identify certain artists who are positively criticized during their service years, which is the focus of this paper.

### **Activism**

In this work, the term "activism" is used interchangeably with resistance, protest, and civil struggle, representing art that expresses dissent within a given society. According to Otu, Johnson, and Sani (2015), Nigeria, as a post-colony of British rule, has and continues to

experience a gradual rise in active participation in artistic activism. However, the artists under discussion, namely Uche Okeke, Chike Aniakor, Obiora Udechukwu, and Krydz Ikwuemesi, exemplify through their artworks the same impact that conventional activism has registered in the history of Nigeria.

### **Politics**

Politics encompasses not only the institution of governance but also serves as a mechanism for achieving societal goals. David Easton (1961) in Abia (2002) views Politics as “the authoritative allocation of values.” Andrew Heywood (2018) defines Politics as an “activity through which people make, preserve, and amend the general rules under which they live.” In most civilised societies, democracy, which allows for citizens’ participation, is considered the most ideal form of political governance. However, the Nigerian political experience has been characterized by intermittent disruptions due to military intervention in politics, a development that triggered critical responses and resistance from political and human rights activists, some of which included resistance.

### **Art School**

This term refers to the origin and development of art education within institutions of higher learning in Nigeria. The Department of Fine Arts and Industrial Design at Ahmadu Bello University is considered the pioneer and foundational institution of art education in Nigeria, followed by the University of Nigeria, Nsukka, and the University of Ife, now known as Obafemi Awolowo University. The primary objective of these institutions was to promote and expand art education across Nigeria. Today, numerous universities, polytechnics, and colleges of education have established art departments, each with its own unique ideologies and approaches to art education.

### **Literature Review**

Existing literature on related topics has been extensive, yet there are still notable gaps to be addressed. This paper delves into the influential roles of Uche Okeke and Chike Aniakor as inspirations to students' careers at Nsukka Art School. These two distinguished artists are credited with driving the school's success in political and protest art ideologies, for which UNN is renowned. Okeke and Aniakor's ideologies infuse politics and protest both in studio practice and scholarly essays, challenging the aesthetic norms of Western influence (Mbanefoh, 2004). Udechukwu (1981) asserts in the forward of his exhibition of drawings titled "No Water" that he vocally addressed the insensitivity of leaders to the scarcity of water in the university community and its surroundings. This incident of basic amenity unavailability extended beyond the institutions of learning, expressing grievances on a national scale, with a belief that fixing electricity could revive the country's economy. The proliferation of art schools in Nigeria can be attributed to the relentless efforts of first-generation pioneer artists such as Aina Ona, Akinola Laskan, Ben Enwonwu, Zarianist artists, Dele Jegede, among others (Chukueggu, 2010). These efforts have also led to the

enjoyment of scholarship grants in contemporary art education. The impact Africa has made on world culture is evident through visual art (Mbanefoh, 2004). Despite initial European rejection of traditional African art for selfish interests, the documentation of African antiquities eventually received scholarly recognition and grants by the late 1940s. However, the looting of African art, such as that of Benin, for souvenir exchange by Europeans (Fosu, 1993), has had lasting consequences, as seen in the absence of Fine Art in undergraduate courses at the University of Ibadan to this day (Oloidi, 2002 and 2011). In the history of Nsukka Art School, radicalism has not hindered students from achieving excellence. Noteworthy activists like Olu Oguibe have demonstrated both radicalism and scholarly devotion, leaving behind unmatched academic records in the art department (Ene-Oji, 2004). Art historians like Ola Oloidi have also made dynamic contributions to Nsukka Art School and modern Nigerian art at large (Asogwa, Odoh, and Odoh, 2023). Uche Okeke's efforts in reviving the historical development of Nsukka Art School after the disruption of the civil war are particularly highlighted (Asogwa, 2022), underscoring the pioneering success of the venture in Fine Arts at the degree level. The influence of the Zaria Art Department on the Nsukka Art Department is noted, with Emmanuel Okechukwu Odita and Oseloka Okwudi Osadebe being among the first graduates who taught as Teaching Assistants. Chike Aniakor recalls the intense creative experiments and the restless search for ideas and materials in mixed media, reflecting on the vibrant atmosphere of artistic exploration at Nsukka Art School.

### Statement of Problems

The pioneering efforts and the key players of political activism in Nsukka Art School 1960-2000 is an unending task to be discussed in academia. This study aims to explore styles of painting of the artists which express ideologies of the School beyond *Uli* Art of Uche Okeke and installation of sculptural art produced by El Anatsui. The element of radicalism and wealth of political activism functionality trends needed to be documented for posterity. Showing the role of academic artists in politics and how they used their artworks challenging inhuman in the society, is an advancement attribute of Nsukka School.

Exploring the path of political activism within the Nsukka Art School from 1960 to 2000 presents an ongoing challenge within academic discourse. This study seeks to delve into the diverse styles of drawing and painting employed by artists associated with the school, which serve as channels for expressing ideologies extending beyond the *Uli* Art of Uche Okeke and the sculptural installations of El Anatsui. The element of radicalism and the wealth of political activism trends require documentation for posterity. Highlighting the role of academic artists in politics and their use of artworks to challenge societal injustices represents an advancement in understanding the attributes of Nsukka School.

### Research Methods

This research adopts a close observation method to examine artworks that depict the ground-breaking activities and key figures involved in the interaction between art and

politics at Nsukka Art School. By directly studying paintings and drawings, the research aims to interpret the concepts conveyed through the artists' visual representations. This analysis of political and protest artworks created over the four decades of the school's history sheds light on how artistic expression has evolved within the institution's context.

### **Theoretical Framework**

This study employs semiotics, the theory of signs and symbols, as its primary theoretical framework (D'Alleva, 2005). Semiotics equips the researcher with tools to interpret the symbolic language embedded within paintings and drawings produced by artists engaged in political commentary. By analysing the use of symbols, icons, and indexes, semiotics allows for a deeper understanding of the artist's message beyond the surface representation. This analysis goes beyond simply identifying potentially offensive content; rather, it focuses on deciphering the complex layers of meaning encoded within the artworks.

### **Role of Visual Art in Political Protest (Activist)**

The role of visual art in political protest activism in Nigeria is significant and many-sided. With Nigeria's diverse and dynamic population, numerous challenges arise, often leading to protests. However, interpreting and documenting protests from artists over the past decades, spanning from colonial rule to the present, requires strategic caution due to Nigeria's dynamic nature. Historically, lack of responsible consultation between rulers and the people over policies has often sparked revolts against the government in power in Nigeria. As noted by Onwuakpa (2016), addressing certain issues through protest is essential for human existence, particularly when involving women. Uche Okeke emerges as a pivotal figure in the history of art schools in Nigeria, notably instigating the formation of the first non-formal revolutionary art association in the country while still a student. Okeke's efforts led to the establishment of the Zaria art society, laying the foundation for what is now known as "natural synthesis," attracting international interest. Notably, Okeke's relentless artistic exhibitions during the Nigeria Civil War garnered sympathy from Germany for the Biafran people. According to Wolf (2019), these exhibitions served not only as a means to attract funds for Biafra but also raised awareness about the struggle for independence. The Nsukka School has been nicknamed the "Department of Art and Politics" since the 1970s, reflecting its dedication to political activism within the school. Students like Obiora Udechukwu, Olu Oguibe, and Krydz Ikwemesi, inspired by Okeke and Aniakor, symbolise this ideologically resistant attitude, surpassing mere artistry to become artist-poets and fervent activists. The Uli Art group, a prominent group within the Nsukka School, has played a significant role in activism and development. However, it is essential to acknowledge other art groups' contributions to national growth, such as the Ona group led by Tola Wewe and Kunle Filani. In summary, the history of the Nsukka School and Nigerian visual art will not be complete without discussing the influential role of artists like

Uche Okeke and the impactful contributions of various art groups to political protest activism and national development.

### **Abridge Records of Art Instigated Protest**

Uche Okeke's powerful work, "Aba Women Riot" (Plate 5), commemorates the historic 1929 uprising in Aba, Nigeria. The painting depicts a crowd of unidentified women, their forms unified in protest against a newly imposed colonial tax that targeted women for the first time (Samantha, 2013). While the figures lack distinct facial features, their collective stance and raised arms convey a powerful sense of resistance. Okeke's approach emphasizes the collective action of the women rather than individual identities. Some may find the artistic style unconventional, but it avoids sensationalism and keeps the focus on the women's purpose – to challenge an unjust policy. "Aba Women Riot" stands as a potent symbol of female activism and a call to action for women to engage in matters of national importance. The prevalent players of political art and activism in Nsukka Art School could be traced to the students who are the products of the school. In the history of political and protest art in Nigeria apart from few ones who from other art schools in Nigeria, Nsukka is noted for political and protest art. One will use the works of Obiora Udechukwu, Olu Oguibe and Krydz Ikwemesi to discuss political activism among the Nsukka artists.

The Nsukka School, established in Nigeria in the 1970s, has become synonymous with political art. Nurturing a generation of socially conscious artists, the school's legacy continues the tradition of artistic activism in Nigeria (Oloidi, 2019). Here, we'll explore the works of three prominent Nsukka School graduates: Obiora Udechukwu, Olu Oguibe, and Krydz Ikwemesi.

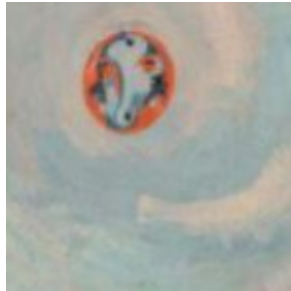
### **Uche Okeke**

Uche Okeke, a former Head of the Art Department at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka, made significant contributions to the development of visual art in Nigeria, both in political activism and academic advancement. Okeke, a painter, emphasized the importance of theoretical background to strengthen studio practice among artists within the department (Oloidi, 2003). In his role as an advocate for studio priority, Okeke pushed for a rigorous assessment of studio lecturers based on their exhibition history and scholarly contributions. Despite facing protests, particularly from the Faculty of Physical Sciences, Okeke fervently defended his proposals and succeeded in gaining approval (Oloidi, 2008). Okeke's influence extended beyond administrative duties. His teaching style and advocacy for indigenous African-oriented art left a lasting impact on the Nsukka Art School. His artworks, largely inspired by indigenous ideas, have been extensively researched by scholars. Egonwa (2001) acknowledges the richness of Okeke's works in lines and patterns, often stylising human and animal figures suggestive of Igbo Uli wall paintings. Described as a conscious culture artist, Okeke's artworks often feature intricate lines, themes, and stylised human forms, reflecting Igbo myths, cultural history, and social structures. Examples include "Maiden's Cry," "Anyanwu Agballa," and "Ite ofe Mbe." "Biafran Boys" stands out as one of Okeke's

notable works, depicting masked dancers adorned with traditional themes such as Uli ije agwo and Uli ugbo okwe, highlighting the authenticity of Igbo cultural heritage. Overall, Uche Okeke's artistic legacy exceeds mere aesthetic expression, serving as a link between traditional Igbo culture and contemporary art practices. His contributions to visual art in Nigeria, both as an artist and an educator, continue to inspire and influence generations of artists.



**Plate 1:**  
 Title: *Maiden's Cry*  
 Artist: Uche Okeke  
 Medium: Pen/Ink on paper  
 Year: 1962



**Plate 2:**  
 Title: *Anyanwu Na Agbala*  
 Artist: Uche Okeke  
 Medium: Guache on paper  
 Year: 1976



**Plate 3:**  
 Title: *Ite Ofe Mbe*  
 Artist: Uche Okeke  
 Medium: Pen/Ink on paper  
 Year: 1966



**Plate 4:**  
 Title: *Biafran Boys*  
 Artist: Uche Okeke  
 Medium: Oil painting  
 Year: 1970



**Plate 5:**  
 Title: *Aba's Women Revolt*  
 Artist: Uche Okeke  
 Medium: Oil on canvas  
 Year: 1965

### Chike Aniakor

Chike Aniakor who studied fine art from the Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria in 1960-1964 specializes in painting. His noble works gave his artistic identity and as a result of his experiences in the Nsukka School, in particular, his strong anticipation and participation in pioneering the formation of the modern *Uli* movement. He was given birth to in 1939 in his home town Abatete in Anambra State, Nigeria. Having joined and headed dance groups, his interest in Igbo culture particularly Igbo cultural myths such as; music, dance, rituals, visual arts and architecture are unshakeable (Ikwuemesi, 1991).

He served in a refugee camp during the Nigeria civil war and later served as art editor of the Biafran government newsletter. Most of his artistic drawings during this period was in *Uli* style, portraying the conflict situation of that periods. Most of the art he created at that were destroyed by termites. He received scholarship to further his studies at the Indian University USA where he obtained masters (1974) and doctorate (1978) degrees in art history. His thesis and dissertation focus on Igbo art.

Being a lecturer in Nsukka School, he ventured more into drawing but also experimented with oil painting, water colour and guache while still employing *Uli* motifs. He made design on Igbo wooden carved doors and contributed to those of *Uli* art forms. Adenaike (1982) and Ikwuemesi (2003) affirms that the variety of media used by the *Uli* movement in diverse techniques in the process of art making and that their versatilities and experiences made Aniakor and Udechukwu very instrumental roots to the success Nsukka artists received. The prolific accolade among equal and widely exhibited of the Nsukka group without the efforts of pioneering is not understated (Ikwuemesi, 2003). Some of the works of Aniakor revealed that his adoption and adaptation of Igbo culture influenced his students on protest art not only his painting and drawing, but also his technique and forms. This can be noticed in some of his works such as

- a. *Ikenga* (Plate 6)
- b. *Exodus* (Plate 7)
- c. *Music Makers* (Plate 8)
- d. *Elders* (Plate 9)

He illustrated by the *Ikenga* shown in plate 6 with raised hands is reminiscence of the real Igbo *Ikenga* carved wooden images. The raised hands signify uprightness, innocence, peace and a submission to the norms and ethnics of the society. The *exodus* in (plate 7), shows a dominant feature in the drawing showing the use of strong bold lines to depict the multiple human figures which are massed together. A derived from strong linear quality of Igbo *Uli* body art.

In His *Music Makers* (plate 8) he creates a dynamic compartment of free-flowing human images that runs from top to bottom of the picture that exemplifies his illustration.

In the *Elders* (Plate 9) the oval quality of the elder's face are suggestions of Igbo carved masks. *Uli* motifs identified in the picture include *uli agwolagwo* (concentric circle or snake



coil) used as border from top to lower corners of the picture. *Okwa uli* motif (*Uli* palette used by indigenous female *Uli* artists) is used to represent the elder's mouth.



**Plate 6:** Aniakor Chike, *Ikenga Artist*  
Medium: Pen/Ink on paper Year: 1962



**Plate 7:** Aniakor Chike, *Exodus Artist*  
Medium: Pen/Ink on paper Year: 1977



**Plate 8:** Aniakor Chike, *Music Dancers*  
Artist: Medium: Pen/Ink on paper  
Year: 1977

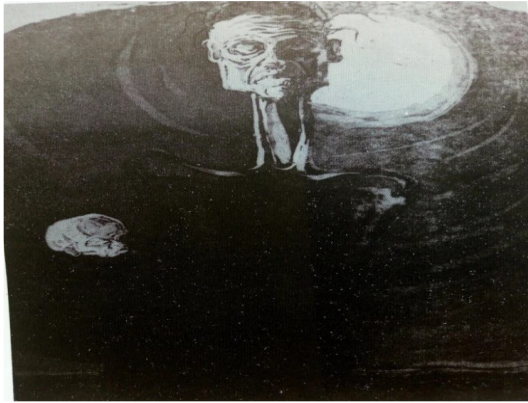


**Plate 9:** Aniakor Chike, *Elders Artist*  
Medium: Pen/Ink on paper Year: 1998

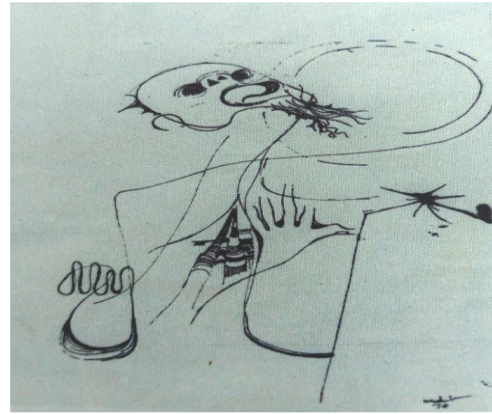
### Obiora Udechukwu

Obiora Udechukwu initiated his artistic journey at Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria, before transferring to the University of Nigeria, Nsukka, in 1966 due to the political crisis and devastation in Northern Nigeria during the Biafra-Nigeria Civil War. Influenced by his teacher, Uche Okeke, and his experiences during the war, Udechukwu excelled in protest art. However, frustrated with the political, economic, and professional environment in Nigeria, he eventually relocated to the United States, where he currently serves as a lecturer in an American university, reaching the pinnacle of his career. Udechukwu continued to practice in the Uli art tradition of Nsukka School, using his art to address political issues, particularly focusing on social and political activism amid Nigeria's deteriorating political and economic situation.

Primarily creating pen and ink drawings inspired by the Uli tradition, Udechukwu's artworks delved into themes of poverty among the common people, highlighting the challenges faced due to the lack of basic necessities such as water and electricity. He also depicted the extravagance of those in power and their mismanagement of the country's resources for the benefit of the people. Udechukwu often incorporated poetry into his artworks, exploring socio-political issues while maintaining their aesthetic appeal.



**Plate 9:** Obiora Udechukwu, *Refugee Mother and child*, 1985 Aquatint, 39.8x29.7cm. © So Far (exhibition catalogue), 1993.



**Plate 10:** Obiora Udechukwu, *Anguish and Solitude*, 1974, pen and ink. © CHRYSALIS: Aspect of African Spirit, 1988.

### **Krydz Ikwuemesi**

Krydz Ikwuemesi, a student of Obiora Udechukwu, graduated with First Class Honours in 1992 and later taught at his alma mater. Inspired by the Uli tradition, his paintings and drawings serve as tools for social and political commentary. With a diverse background in art, curation, teaching, history, and criticism, Ikwuemesi's artworks reflect his extensive travels and experiences.

Ikwuemesi's creations address various societal issues, serving as instruments for social and intellectual activism and cultural reaffirmation. His art critiques the military regimes of General Ibrahim Babangida and General Sani Abacha, attributing Nigeria's economic decay to their leadership. Additionally, he exposes widespread corruption and ethical depravity within Nigerian society through his artworks. Notably, the murder of Dele Giwa in 1986 and the subsequent issues surrounding Tell Magazine deeply affected Ikwuemesi, inspiring him to become a forceful advocate. His personal experiences, including a 33-month dismissal by Professor Umaru Gomwalk, further influenced his artistic choices, as seen in his exhibition titled "Golgotha" between 1996 and 1999.



Plate 11: Krydz Ikwuemesi, *The Nigerian Nightmare*, 1994, watercolour, Dimension unknown. © *Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, 1995.

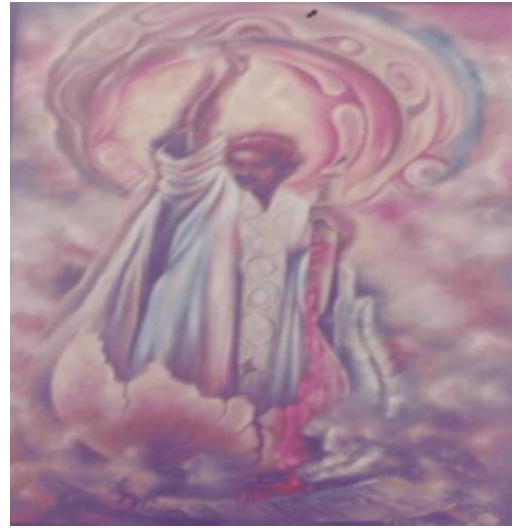


Plate 12: Krydz Ikwuemesi, *Dele Giwa Will Rise Again*, oil on board, 1992 © Radiance of the creative spirit, 2019.

### Conclusion

In conclusion, Nigerian artists have evolved from a cautious approach to protest art during the colonial era to actively using their creations as tools for political and social change in modern times. The Nsukka Art School has played a pivotal role in nurturing politically conscious artists who view art as a potent weapon for advocating social justice. This philosophy, instilled by key figures like Uche Okeke and Chike Aniakor, has permeated through generations of students, including Obiora Udechukwu and Krydz Ikwuemesi. The influence of Uche Okeke's mentorship is evident in Udechukwu's critique of the ruling class and their mismanagement of the nation's resources, while Ikwuemesi's work sheds light on the atrocities of military dictatorship and the struggles of the Nigerian populace. Okeke's own challenges, such as his forced retirement in 1986, serve as distressing examples of the ongoing struggle for artistic freedom and expression in Nigeria.

Overall, the legacy of protest art at Nsukka Art School underscores the belief that art should serve a greater purpose beyond mere aesthetics, advocating for societal change and challenging oppressive systems. Through their artworks, these artists continue to provoke thought, inspire action, and contribute to the ongoing discourse on governance, justice, and human rights in Nigeria.

### Recommendations/Findings

The works of Uche Okeke, Chike Aniakor, Obiora Udechukwu, and Krydz Ikwuemesi showcasing their contributions to socio-political history through activism. Nsukka Art School is recognized not only for its cultural traditions but also for its radicalism and political

activism. The study recommends documenting these activisms for posterity and advocates for using art to address societal issues.

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