Exploring Visual Arts as a Catalyst for Promoting Sustainability in Nigeria: An Analysis of 'How Sustainable?' Exhibition

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Abstract

This paper explores the role of visual arts in advancing sustainability in Nigeria, with a focus on selected digital works in the "How Sustainable?" exhibition by Kehinde Shobukonla. As sustainability becomes an increasingly urgent global issue, the arts have emerged as a powerful medium for raising awareness, provoking dialogue, and inspiring action. Shobukonla's digital artworks, which address themes of environmental responsibility, social change, and cultural preservation, offer a unique perspective on how art can contribute to sustainability discourse in Nigeria. This study examines the ways in which Shobukonla's work challenges traditional views of sustainability and integrates visual culture to engage a diverse audience. By analyzing the exhibition's digital pieces, the paper highlights the innovative use of technology and artistic expression in communicating complex sustainability concepts. The research further discusses the potential of visual arts, specifically in Nigeria's context, to foster a broader understanding of sustainability, drawing attention to both environmental and social dimensions. Through a detailed review of Shobukonla's works, the paper argues that digital art exhibitions like "How Sustainable?" not only create an avenue for artistic expression but also act as catalysts for cultural and societal transformation towards sustainability.

Keywords: Visual/Digital arts, Sustainability, Environmental Responsibility, Social Change

Introduction

Art has long been recognised as a powerful medium for communicating complex societal issues and provoking thought. In the contemporary era, artists have increasingly used their works as a catalyst for sustainability, engaging audiences in conversations about environmental, social and economic issues (Thompson, 2019). Through innovative techniques and thematic exploration, art serves not only as an aesthetic tool but also as a platform for activism, encouraging reflection and action towards sustainable practices (Rohde, 2020).

Kehinde Shobukonla's solo exhibition, How Sustainable? provides an insightful contribution to this dialogue, using digital art to explore sustainability through a creative lens. The exhibition addresses critical themes such as environmental conservation, social justice and sustainable development, offering a reflective visual experience that calls for urgent action. By focusing on these interconnected sustainability challenges, Shobukonla's works serve as a mirror to societal concerns and global environmental crises.

This article aims to examine the role of Shobukonla's How Sustainable? exhibition in promoting sustainability through art, analyzing how his digital pieces reflect and address the pressing issues of our time. The objective is to explore how contemporary art can act as a powerful force for social change and sustainable practices, engaging diverse audiences in a global conversation for a sustainable future.

Contextualizing Sustainability in Contemporary Art

Sustainability, as defined by the United Nations, refers to meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs (UN, 1987). It encompasses three main pillars: environmental, social, and economic sustainability, which are critical in addressing modern global challenges such as climate change, social inequality, and economic instability. The relevance of sustainability in contemporary art lies in its ability to communicate these complex issues to a broad audience, prompting reflection and action through visual narratives that provoke thought and stimulate dialogue (Kagan, 2018).

Art plays a vital role in advancing sustainability by engaging in environmental, social, and economic issues. Artists can use their work to highlight the importance of environmental conservation, raise awareness about climate change, advocate for social justice, and critique economic systems that perpetuate inequality (Miller, 2019). Through visual storytelling, artists bridge the gap between abstract concepts and the lived experiences of individuals, making these global challenges more tangible and relatable to the audience.

Several notable exhibitions have integrated sustainability themes, further validating the connection between art and activism. For instance, Earth Matters: Land as Material and Metaphor in the Arts of Africa (2013) examined how African artists use their craft to engage with issues of land, climate change and sustainability. Similarly, The Ocean After Nature (2014) at the New Museum in New York brought together contemporary artists to explore the degradation of the ocean ecosystem and the impact of human activity on marine life.

Moreover, art serves as an effective tool for communicating the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). By visually representing issues such as poverty, inequality and environmental degradation, art acts as a powerful mechanism for raising awareness and inspiring action towards achieving these global objectives (Daly, 2020). Through exhibitions like Shobukonla How Sustainable? art aligns with the SDGs, making the abstract goals more accessible and impactful.

"How Sustainable?" Exhibition: An Overview

The How Sustainable? exhibition, created by Kehinde Shobukonla, is a compelling exploration of sustainability through the lens of digital art. The exhibition addresses the complex and urgent issues of environmental degradation, climate change, and socio-political transformation. It reflects the artist's commitment to engaging with these global challenges, using the medium of digital art to evoke awareness, stimulate critical thinking, and promote sustainable practices. The thematic focus revolves around humanity's impact on the environment and the role of art in advocating sustainable solutions.

The exhibition features a range of artworks that utilize software such as CorelDRAW and Photoshop, which bring a fresh perspective to the topic of sustainability. Shobukonla's innovative use of the digital applications allows him to merge traditional African visual elements with contemporary digital methods, creating pieces that are both culturally significant and forward-thinking. The colour palette in the exhibition draws from earthy tones, emphasizing the connection between nature and the need for its preservation.

Key pieces in the exhibition, such as "The Earth Speaks" and "Resilient Future", are designed to engage the viewer directly, creating a dialogue about the state of the planet and the role of individuals in fostering environmental responsibility. In "The Earth Speaks", Shobukonla uses abstract digital imagery to represent the earth's wounds, metaphorically illustrating the environmental destruction caused by human activity. In contrast, "Resilient Future" highlights sustainable solutions and emphasises the importance of collective responsibility for creating a better future for coming generations.

The exhibition effectively blends aesthetics with activism, employing artistic techniques and mediums that amplify the message of sustainability, making it accessible and impactful to a broad audience.

The Role of Digital Art in Promoting Sustainability

Digital art has emerged as a powerful tool for promoting sustainability by engaging audiences in meaningful dialogue about environmental and social issues. Through its accessibility and visual impact, digital art can effectively communicate complex themes such as climate change, resource depletion, and social inequality. Artists like Kehinde Shobukonla, who use technology to amplify their messages, are helping to bridge the gap between creativity and advocacy for a sustainable future. Digital media enables artists to reach a global audience, making it easier to spread awareness and foster collective action for environmental and social causes.

The rise of technology in art production has significantly influenced how messages about sustainability are communicated. With tools such as computer-aided design (CAD), 3D modeling, and digital painting, artists can create immersive and

interactive works that engage audiences on a deeper level. These digital platforms also allow for the rapid dissemination of art, making it possible to share sustainability-themed artworks worldwide, especially through social media and online galleries (Smith, 2021). This democratization of art not only amplifies the message but also facilitates collaboration among artists, activists, and the public.

Several case studies illustrate how digital art has been used to advocate sustainability. For instance, the Earth Hour campaign by the Worldwide Fund for Nature (WWF) uses digital art to promote climate awareness globally. Similarly, The Plastic Pollution Project by digital artist Christopher Schardt visualizes the harmful effects of plastic waste through data-driven art, encouraging action toward reducing pollution (Schardt, 2020). These examples show the potential of digital art to influence conversations about sustainability on a global scale.

Engaging the Audience: Social and Educational Impact

Kehinde Shobukonla's "How Sustainable?" exhibition plays a critical role in engaging audiences through art to promote awareness about sustainability. By using digital mediums, Shobukonla offers an interactive and dynamic experience that resonates with diverse audiences. His innovative approach allows viewers to engage directly with his works, creating a more personalized connection to the themes of sustainability. Digital art, being accessible and easily distributable, has the power to reach a broad audience, enhancing its capacity to inspire change in attitudes and behaviors towards the environment and social responsibility (Norris, 2021).

The educational impact of the exhibition is evident in its ability to communicate complex sustainability issues in a visually engaging manner. Through his exhibition, Shobukonla's artworks provide an entry point for discussions on climate change, resource conservation and social justice, making these topics more approachable for a wide range of viewers. Art institutions, such as galleries and museums, play a crucial role in fostering this educational environment. They act as platforms for raising awareness, facilitating public dialogue and inspiring action toward sustainability goals (Baker, 2020).

The exhibition's social impact extends beyond the gallery, influencing public attitudes toward environmental sustainability. Art serves as a catalyst for social change by shaping perceptions and stimulating public conversations. Shobukonla's work, which challenges audiences to rethink their relationship with nature, aligns with the goals of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly in areas related to responsible consumption and production (UNESCO, 2021).

By addressing sustainability through creative expressions, the exhibition highlights the essential role of art institutions in not only preserving cultural heritage but also contributing to a more sustainable future.

The Intersection of Art and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)

Kehinde Shobukonla's "How Sustainable?" exhibition aligns strongly with several of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), showcasing the transformative power of art in driving global conversations on sustainability. Art, especially digital art, provides a unique lens through which complex issues related to the environment, society, and economy can be explored and communicated. Shobukonla's exhibition directly addresses multiple SDGs, including Goal 12: Responsible Consumption and Production, Goal 13: Climate Action, and Goal 10: Reduced Inequality, using his work as a medium to engage and inspire action towards a more sustainable future.

One of the key SDGs addressed in the exhibition is SDG 12 (Responsible Consumption and Production), which emphasizes the importance of minimizing waste and fostering sustainable consumption patterns. Shobukonla's use of digital mediums allows for the exploration of sustainability in the context of consumption, particularly highlighting the need for responsible digital production and resource management (Johnson, 2020). Through the exhibition, Shobukonla advocates for mindful consumption in an era of technological abundance, urging individuals to reconsider their ecological footprints.

Furthermore, the exhibition reflects SDG 13 (Climate Action), with artworks that reflect environmental degradation and the urgency of addressing climate change.

His digital works feature vivid representations of nature's fragility, encouraging dialogue on how art can influence public attitudes towards climate action (UNDP, 2021).

By engaging with the SDGs, Shobukonla's work contributes significantly to the broader conversation on sustainable development, positioning art as an essential tool in advocating for social and environmental responsibility. His exhibition exemplifies the role of art in mobilizing global awareness and action, emphasizing that sustainability is not only a political or scientific issue but also a deeply cultural one.

Analysis of Selected Works



Figure 1: Minimum Wage, Digital Art, Kehinde Shobukonla
Source: The artist, screenshot, 2017

The 2-D digital art piece Minimum Wage uses black-and-white abstract forms to powerfully critique Nigeria's minimum wage situation, while subtly referencing the challenges outlined in the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The fragmented shapes and harsh contrast evoke the stark economic disparity faced by millions of Nigerian workers. By using minimalistic colours, the artist emphasizes the bleak and monotonous existence of those living on wages that

fail to meet basic needs, drawing attention to SDG 1 (No Poverty) and SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth).

The jagged, uneven forms in the piece symbolize the instability of the Nigerian economy and the vulnerability of the labour force to rising inflation and economic shocks. This directly ties to SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities), underscoring the widening gap between the rich and the poor. The lack of colour in the composition suggests a lack of hope and opportunity, highlighting the socio-economic challenges many workers face in trying to achieve a higher standard of living, in line with SDG 2 (Zero Hunger) and SDG 3 (Good Health and Well-Being).

Through this abstract representation, the artist calls for reflection on the systemic inequalities in Nigeria's economic policies and the need for reforms to ensure fair wages and the realization of the SDGs.



Figure 2: Terrorism, Digital Art, Kehinde Shobukonla
Source: The artist, screenshot, 2017

The vibrant and abstract depiction of a wild cat's head in the artwork, powerfully critiques the devastating effects of "Terrorism" in Nigeria. The intense colours and chaotic forms in the piece represent the untamed violence and instability caused by terrorist activities, evoking a sense of fear and unpredictability. The wild cat's head, with its piercing eyes and jagged features, symbolizes the menacing and unpredictable nature of terrorism in the country, disrupting the lives of millions and leading to widespread insecurity. This directly resonates with SDG 16 (Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions), emphasizing the need for stability and security in Nigeria.

The use of bold, contrasting colors highlights the emotional and psychological impact of terrorism on affected communities, illustrating how the constant threat of violence can cause fear, trauma and social unrest. It reflects the challenges of achieving SDG 3 (Good Health and Well-Being), as terrorism severely impacts mental health, leading to widespread anxiety and stress. Furthermore, the piece draws attention to SDG 1 (No Poverty) and SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth), as terrorism hinders economic growth, displaces families and disrupts livelihoods.

Through this abstract representation, the artist calls for global attention to the urgent need for peaceful conflict resolution, socioeconomic recovery and stronger governance to achieve long-lasting peace and security.



Figure 3: Individuality, Digital Art, Kehinde Shobukonla
Source: The artist, screenshot, 2017

The vibrant and colorful abstract artwork, representing the theme of Individuality in Nigeria, uses dynamic forms and bold colors to reflect the nation's diverse cultural landscape and the importance of personal identity. The fluidity and fragmentation within the piece symbolize the rich, yet sometimes conflicting, expressions of individuality found across Nigeria's ethnic, cultural, and religious groups. The artist's use of colour emphasizes both the unity and diversity of the nation, while simultaneously addressing the challenges individuals face in asserting their identities in a complex socio-political environment. This theme is closely tied to SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities), as it highlights the ongoing struggles for marginalized voices to be recognized and valued.

The artwork also resonates with SDG 5 (Gender Equality), as it draws attention to the varying opportunities and barriers that women and other marginalized groups encounter in expressing their individuality in Nigeria's societal structure. The powerful use of color represents the strength, resilience and creativity of individuals, urging the viewer to appreciate personal identity as a key aspect of social progress.

Through this vibrant abstract work, the artist critiques how individual expression is shaped and sometimes constrained by cultural and societal norms. It underscores the necessity of inclusivity and equal recognition of diverse identities to foster social cohesion and personal empowerment, in alignment with the sustainable development goals.



Figure 4: Green Exlposion, Digital Art, Kehinde Shobukonla
Source: The artist, screenshot, 2017

The digital art piece Green Explosion uses abstract forms and vibrant green hues to symbolize the rapid and sometimes chaotic environmental and agricultural changes happening in Nigeria. The explosion of green suggests both the country's rich natural resources and the challenges of harnessing them sustainably. The artist's use of bold strokes and dynamic lines emphasizes the tension between Nigeria's vast natural potential and the destructive consequences of unsustainable practices such as deforestation, oil exploration, and inadequate waste management. This work directly speaks to SDG 12 (Responsible Consumption and Production), highlighting the urgent need for sustainable practices in resource management. The chaotic nature of the artwork also represents the environmental degradation

resulting from rapid urbanization and industrialization, which have led to pollution and loss of biodiversity. The explosion of green symbolizes both the opportunities for agricultural growth and the threats to the environment. The contrast within the piece invites the viewer to consider the balance between economic growth and environmental preservation, which aligns with SDG 13 (Climate Action).

Furthermore, Green Explosion invites reflection on SDG 2 (Zero Hunger), as sustainable agricultural practices and food security are intricately linked to Nigeria's environmental health. The piece emphasizes the critical need for urgent action to address Nigeria's environmental issues, encouraging a shift toward sustainable development to ensure a healthier, more prosperous future for all.

1. A Chase in the Shadow



Figure 5: Chase in the shadow, Digital Art, Kehinde Shobukonla
Source: The artist, screenshot, 2017

The digital art piece A Chase in the Shadow captures the tension and uncertainty in Nigeria's socio-political landscape through abstract forms and dynamic movements. The composition of dark, shadowy shapes pursuing lighter, more abstract figures represents the constant struggle between progress and the challenges that impede it. The Chase in the Shadow art-piece evokes a sense of urgency and confusion, symbolizing the pursuit of development and justice in a nation marked by corruption, insecurity, and inequality. This aligns with SDG 16 (Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions), reflecting the country's ongoing fight for transparency, governance, and strong institutions. The contrasting colours and forms in the piece suggest the ongoing battle between hope and despair, with the shadows representing obstacles such as political instability, economic challenges, and social inequality. This speaks directly to SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities), highlighting how the marginalized often find themselves in a continuous chase for opportunities and fairness, while systemic inequalities remain entrenched.

Additionally, A Chase in the Shadow can be interpreted considering SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth), where the work suggests that growth and prosperity in Nigeria are often hindered by corrupt practices and lack of access to equal opportunities. The abstract nature of the artwork reflects the complexity of the nation's socio-economic issues and urges the viewer to reflect on the necessity for systemic change and accountability to achieve sustainable development and equity for all.



Figure 6: Left behind, Digital Art, Kehinde Shobukonla
Source: The artist, screenshot, 2017

The digital art piece Left Behind uses abstract forms to represent the social and economic exclusion faced by marginalized groups in Nigeria. The piece features fragmented, disjointed shapes that appear to be moving away from the central, vibrant figure, symbolizing the growing divide between the privileged and the disadvantaged. The dark, muted colors contrast with the bright sections, underscoring the isolation and neglect of those Left Behind by the nation's progress. This work speaks to SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities), which calls for a more inclusive society where every individual has equal access to opportunities. The piece also highlights the social exclusion that results from a lack of access to education, healthcare, and economic resources. The isolation depicted in Left Behind aligns with SDG 4 (Quality Education), as many individuals, particularly in rural areas, remain without access to basic educational services, limiting their chances for upward mobility. Additionally, the fragmented composition alludes to the disconnection felt by these communities, which often face barriers to social integration and growth.

Furthermore, Left Behind engages with SDG 1 (No Poverty) by visualizing the economic disparity between different societal groups. The artwork calls attention to the need for inclusive policies and interventions to uplift marginalized communities, ensuring that no one is left behind in Nigeria's pursuit of sustainable development and national progress.



Figure 7: Secret place, Digital Art, Kehinde Shobukonla
Source: The artist, screenshot, 2017

The Secret Place is a compelling digital abstract art piece that delves into the complexities of privacy, refuge, and hidden struggles within Nigerian society. The artwork features layers of dark, enclosed spaces interspersed with bursts of light, symbolizing the tension between vulnerability and protection. The "Secret Place" represents the emotional and physical spaces where individuals, particularly those facing systemic oppression or violence, seek solace. This aligns with SDG 16 (Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions), which emphasizes the need for peaceful, inclusive

societies and access to justice. The abstract forms suggest an ongoing internal conflict, with individuals seeking escape from the harsh realities of insecurity, economic hardship, and social exclusion. The contrast between light and dark in the piece suggests the ongoing struggle for safety and peace in a nation beset by political instability, insecurity and social fragmentation. The Secret Place calls attention to the necessity of providing safe spaces for marginalized individuals, which is critical to achieving SDG 11 (Sustainable Cities and Communities).

Additionally, the work reflects the lack of access to adequate social services, such as mental health support, as many Nigerians suffer in silence. By addressing these issues, The Secret Place encourages reflection on the need for greater social welfare programs, community development, and equitable access to opportunities, as outlined in SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities).



Figure 8: Mandate, Digital Art, Kehinde Shobukonla
Source: The artist, screenshot, 2017

The Mandate depicts a "Maze" and illustrates the concept of leadership, governance and the authority entrusted to those in power in Nigeria. The artwork features bold, overlapping shapes and fractured lines, symbolizing the complexity and often fragmented nature of political mandates. These geometric forms create a sense of tension and movement, reflecting the delicate balance between authority and accountability in Nigerian politics. The piece speaks to SDG 16 (Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions), which advocates for effective, accountable, and inclusive institutions at all levels of governance. The abstract representation of power dynamics in The Mandate highlights the difficulties in fulfilling promises and the disconnect between leaders and the citizens they serve. The sharp contrasts and jagged edges in the artwork allude to the political instability and social unrest that can arise when governance falls short of expectations, particularly in a diverse and rapidly evolving nation like Nigeria.

Moreover, The Mandate invites reflection on SDG 17 (Partnerships for the Goals), emphasizing the importance of collaboration between government, civil society, and the private sector to achieve sustainable development. By critiquing the lack of transparency and accountability, the artwork calls for the strengthening of democratic practices and the empowerment of individuals to hold leaders accountable, thus contributing to Nigeria's long-term progress.



Figure 9: Behind the mask, Digital Art, Kehinde Shobukonla
Source: The artist, screenshot, 2017

Behind The Mask is a striking digital abstract art piece that addresses the theme of identity, societal expectations, and the hidden struggles that individuals, particularly in Nigeria, often face. The artwork portrays fragmented shapes and layers, symbolizing the masks that people wear to conform to societal norms or to protect themselves from the harsh realities of life. This piece aligns with SDG 3 (Good Health and Well-being), as it subtly critiques the mental health challenges faced by individuals who feel pressured to hide their true selves. The contrasting colors and dynamic forms in Behind the Mask evoke the emotional complexity that comes with suppressing one's authentic identity. This is particularly relevant in a society where cultural, religious, and familial expectations often force people, especially women and marginalized groups, to conceal their true selves for fear of judgment or discrimination. The artwork serves as a metaphor for the mental health issues that stem from such societal pressures, such as anxiety and depression, which are prevalent but under-reported in Nigeria.

Additionally, the piece connects with SDG 5 (Gender Equality) by alluding to the gendered expectations that shape individual identities. Behind The Mask encourages reflection on the importance of fostering a society where people can express themselves authentically without fear of discrimination, stigma, or violence, promoting well-being and equality.



Figure 10: Fertility, Digital Art, Kehinde Shobukonla
Source: The artist, screenshot, 2017

Fertility is a powerful digital abstract art piece that delves into the deeply rooted cultural, social, and economic significance of fertility in Nigeria. The artwork's intricate layers and fluid shapes symbolize the connection between the land, women, and the continuity of life. The piece incorporates organic forms, vibrant

colors, and dynamic curves, reflecting the natural processes of reproduction and growth, both on an individual and societal level. This piece resonates with SDG 2 (Zero Hunger), emphasizing the importance of sustainable agricultural practices that support fertility, as well as SDG 3 (Good Health and Well-being), which addresses the health challenges related to fertility in women.

In the context of Nigeria, Fertility critiques the societal pressures placed on women, particularly in rural areas, where high expectations around childbearing are often coupled with limited access to reproductive health care. The abstract imagery suggests the tension between cultural expectations and personal autonomy, underscoring the challenges women face when their fertility is treated as a societal mandate rather than a personal choice.

Furthermore, the artwork highlights the connection between fertility and environmental sustainability. The fertile land that nourishes crops, livestock, and communities is integral to Nigeria's economic future. The piece underscores the importance of preserving natural resources to ensure long-term prosperity, contributing to SDG 12 (Responsible Consumption and Production). Fertility thus encourages reflection on both individual health and collective responsibility in achieving a sustainable, equitable future.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Kehinde Shobukonla's solo exhibition, How Sustainable? stands as a testament to the potential of art to engage and provoke critical conversations surrounding sustainability. The exhibition's central theme, addressing pressing issues such as environmental degradation, social inequality, and global sustainability, was communicated through digital art, a medium that not only reflected contemporary concerns but also demonstrated the flexibility and reach of modern artistic practices. Through his work, Shobukonla effectively employed digital mediums to make abstract concepts accessible, prompting both reflection and action within the audience regarding sustainability challenges.

Art has long been a powerful tool in promoting social change, and this exhibition further proves that visual art can play a pivotal role in raising awareness and

stimulating conversations about sustainability. As Shobukonla's work exemplifies, art can transcend geographical boundaries and engage global audiences, bringing attention to the interconnectedness of social, environmental, and economic sustainability. However, for art to fully harness its transformative potential, it must remain accessible, relevant, and responsive to the evolving global discourse on sustainability (Bishop, 2012).

To ensure that art continues to promote sustainability effectively, it is essential that future art practices embrace both digital and traditional media, fostering an inclusive dialogue that engages diverse audiences. Furthermore, future exhibitions should continue to incorporate sustainability themes into their core narratives, with an emphasis on collaboration between artists, curators, and sustainability experts.

Ultimately, Shobukonla's How Sustainable? exhibition reinforces the transformative power of art. By encouraging individuals to reflect on their role in global sustainability, art can inspire meaningful change, fostering a more sustainable future for all.

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