

Artis(+)an

A brief reflection by Zoë Chinonso Ene

Ma Victoria turned the ball of clay over in her hands deftly as she spoke, her eyes remaining fixed on us. We sat in a sheltered portion of her compound, beneath a low tin roof. She placed her ball of clay in a mould made from the broken bases of older pots, elevated them on a paint bucket, and started a new pot. Behind her, a heap of clay waited to be pounded.

"If not for this rain, we used to go to market every week. If it's dry season now, I'll go four times or five times before month's end." She gestured to an uncompleted concrete building. Inside, the floors of both rooms were covered with completed pots and two gentle goats in a corner, all sheltering from the drizzle.

Ma Victoria is a potter in the *Isiagu* community, on the border of *Enugu* and *Ebonyi*. Her mother-in-law taught her to make; she has since taught her daughter, Mmesoma. In the time it took to tell us this, she'd made two pots.

Mmesoma knows the process inside out. Before we sat to watch her mother work, she'd walked us through the lifecycle of their pots: from the reused cement bags that bring in the raw clay, the clay heap for pounding behind her mother, to the grassy open pit for firing, then the rooms of pots waiting for the fire and pots already through it. She adds her own signature to her work — three or four short scars just below the rim, repeated around the pot.

Ma Victoria's other daughter, Chidinma, stood behind her sister, just outside the shelter, listening and leaning on one of the beams that held up the tin roof. As the conversation turned to improvements, she became the most vocal. *"Me, I'm not an artist, but I like business!"* Though her mother and sister were content, from her vantage point, she could see the whole process.

"A machine to pound the raw clay would be so good. It will make everything faster"

Chidinma was asking for time. The hours a machine would return to her artist family.



Back in Enugu city, the same two things were missing. We spoke to Mr Chibueze Ogba, a welder in Industrial Layout, as an "artisan". He proudly calls himself an "engineer". We also spoke to "artist" Sunday Chukwu, whose thirty-foot *Ijele* – the king of all *Igbo* masquerades – towers over the traffic at the Onuasata (Obiagu) roundabout. He calls himself a "metal-sculptor," and approaches his craft with cultural responsibility.

Sunday's grounds are a sculpture garden and forest of imagination. Dancing metal figures of all sizes greet you at the entrance. Near the back wall, his weld shop sits behind an expansive maroon gate, a tall tree spreading its canopy between the two. In that space are odds and ends, welded and unwelded metal, and all of this experimental energy. He wields his welding torch like an HB pencil, pulling his ideas into mid-air and onto a rebar armature frozen in pose. Beneath a bust depicting Achebe's *Okonkwo* mounted high on the back wall, he speaks excitedly about bringing *Igbo* cosmology, ideology, literature, and proverbs into a state you can touch, in a material that lasts.

The two welders work together on Sunday's pieces, each lending the other what he has more of: Chibueze's precise technicality, Sunday's creative spontaneity. Sunday works with the engineer to apply his art to doors and railings. Engineer Chibueze wishes he could spend more time at Sunday's compound. "*He is on another level.*"

But *ego òì mkpa*. Money is important. Money must be made.



The movement between who we call “artisan” and “artist” is not a promotion in one direction, or a litmus test for creative impulse. Flexibility, or the potential of it, exists between both states. Chibueze can't afford **time** away from his business, and Sunday wants the same thing from the other direction: **space**, and the quiet to use it. Electricity is unstable, schedules fill, family life naturally interrupts flow.

But, again, *ego òì mkpa*.

At a residency in Ghana, he made more in a week than he usually does at home.



What Chidinma in *Isiagu* named as a preference, the two welders in Enugu city experienced as a limit to growth. Business, once started, must keep moving. Across three engagements in Enugu in early August, this was the constant: **time**, and the **space** to use it.

It is not the artis(+)'s job to help MOWAA, or designers with ideas, define what ethical engagement looks like. That work belongs to the engager. It would be romantic to ask more creativity of people who have expressed a desire to stretch their skill and capacity. At our final convening at the Centre for Memories, an audience member asked the *Isiagu* potters whether they had ever thought of making something else. They stuck to what they know. The potential is there, but so is the need to fend for oneself. An institution, or a designer, that expects invention under those conditions is asking a craftsman to carry a cost it can see and they cannot afford. It also tempts a takeover of creative control, because one can see all the potential.

Engagement here has to be built as skill investment, not procurement. This can run in two modes.



The first is to simply provide **time and space**. A less commission-minded approach to residency, funded well enough that several artis(+)ans can sit together, observe each other's skill, work with technical partners, build confidence and points of view, learn, critique, practise, fail, and create. All without counting the weeks or measuring success by sellable output. The output will come, as a result of skill development rather than a condition of it.

The second is **recording the process**, for the participating artis(+)ans and beyond. Ma Victoria cannot say what her many pot styles were originally called, though her mother-in-law is more likely to know. The names, the processes, the skill and knowledge held in the folds of old hands can be captured while artis(+)ans are on campus, and through site visits to their own communities; A residency without borders, then given back through public forums and live demonstrations.



The (+) is the margin beyond survival: the time and space to develop a practice, and to move between artist and artisan as one chooses. It is a catalyst for the growth of craft, and everyone benefits from it. But it is an investment, trading immediate output for lasting quality. The hours Chidinma wants back from a machine. The afternoons Chibueze wants behind Sunday's gate. The week in Ghana. MOWAA can invest in that margin at a scale no single practice can.

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