The challenges of reinvigorating democracy through visual art in 21st century Nairobi

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Abstract

This study examines the potential for contemporary visual art to reinvigorate democracy in 21st century Nairobi, Kenya, through an interdisciplinary investigation. The new millennium ushered in fresh hope for democratisation in the postcolonial East African country. In 2002, Daniel arap Moi's 24 years of authoritarian rule ended. The opposition were victorious at the ballot box, instilling a belief amongst the electorate that formal political processes could bring change. However, the post-election violence of 2007/8 shattered such convictions. But, from this election result came a progressive Constitution and with it possibilities for creating change. These momentous events underscore Kenya's topsy-turvy path towards democracy – a path whose trajectory is charted in the experience of ordinary Kenyans who believe in democracy's value and their right to participate in politics and civil life.

Artists, too, have been at the forefront of this ongoing struggle. This study draws on empirical research to demonstrate contemporary visual art's capacity to expand ways of practising, experiencing and understanding democracy. It does so through examining a range of art forms (painting, photography, installation art, graffiti, and 'artivism') in gallery type settings and public urban spaces. The research makes apparent the challenges artists face which include the commercialisation and donor-driven influences within Kenya's artworld, moments of institutional censorship and State suppression of activist initiatives. Nevertheless, the methods and techniques discussed often enabled new means of political engagement, the construction of social and political consciousness, and the expansion and animation of Kenya's public sphere.

Outcomes of this research include the potential to empower artists and cultural workers with strong evidence to inform the use of art in finding solutions to local and global issues and in promoting liberal freedoms. It has implications for policy debates, emphasising the value of art in strategies for revitalising public participation in political and civic life.

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List of abbreviations

A2ES	Arts to End Slavery
BSHG	Berlin Self Help Group
C&	Contemporary And
CBD	Central Business District
CNN	Cable News Network
CORD	Coalition for Reforms and Democracy
DIY	Do it yourself
FORD	Forum for the Restoration of Democracy
HAART	Awareness Against Human Trafficking
HRW	Human Rights Watch
ICC	International Criminal Court
IMD	International Museum Day
JCC	Jobless Corner Campus
KADA	Kenya Artists and Designers Association
KANU	Kenya African National Union
KCB	Kenya Commercial Bank
KICC	Kenyatta International Conference Centre
KMS	Kenya Museum Society
KNADS	Kenya National Archives and Documentation Services
KPU	Kenya People's Union
LGBT	Lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender
MP	Member of Parliament

NARC	National Rainbow Coalition
NASA	National Super Alliance
NGLHRC	National Gay & Lesbian Human Rights Commission
NGO	Non-governmental organisation
NNM	Nairobi National Museum
ODM	Orange Democratic Movement
PEV	Post-election violence
PNU	Party for National Unity
RaMoMA	Rahimtulla Museum of Modern Art
SAMOSA	South Asian Mosaic of Society and the Arts’
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation
USAID	United States Agency for International Development
VOA	Voice of America

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Introduction

This thesis aims to explore the challenges of reinvigorating democracy through visual art in 21st century Nairobi, Kenya. Following this East African State's move to multipartyism in 1991 and its subsequent democratisation, I ask in what ways expanding notions and practices of contemporary art in Nairobi's burgeoning art-scene relate to democratic understandings. To explore this I examine how an unprecedented period of social and political unrest (following Kenya's disputed 2007 election) fuelled a fresh idiom of political consciousness in society. More so, I argue this period led to increased critical art practices which effectively expanded spaces for democratic ideals to be articulated and forged in Kenya's public sphere. These expressions are considered through the context of a decidedly liberal and forward-looking Constitution that was promulgated in 2010. Whilst the narrow time-frame of this examination (2013-2017) provides temporal specificity it was chosen to coincide with the first government elected to oversee the Constitution's implementation. In 2013 this fell to the Jubilee Alliance led by Uhuru Kenyatta, Kenya's fourth President. Over Kenyatta's first 5-year term in office he and his party stand accused of rolling back democratic gains (CIVICUS 2015; Smidt 2018). This underlines that while Kenya's new Constitution created the possibilities for change and democracy's deepening, it in no way guaranteed it. Rather, paramount for the Constitution's realisation is not only the backbone of political leaders, but also pressure from civil society groups and citizens, in what becomes a continuing struggle to protect liberties and hold those powerful accountable - giving significance to the notion of 'reinvigorating' democracy.[2] It is within this political and cultural moment I research the possibilities for contemporary visual art to serve as a means and mechanism through which democracy is strengthened.

This thesis comes at a time when notions of democracy and its value are being challenged world-wide. In 2018, Freedom House (an American democracy watchdog) reported the thirteenth consecutive year in which global freedoms declined, suggesting 'democracy is in retreat' (Freedom House 2019: 1). A rise in populist movements and leaders with authoritarian inclinations, and instances of citizens' increased apathy to democracy's value, point towards

[2] According to the Oxford English Dictionary, 'reinvigorating' means: 'to impart vigour to; to render vigorous; to fill with life and energy; to strengthen, animate'.

peoples' impression of a democratic deficit (Herbst 2001, Diamond 2015). The fall in both quality and support of democracy are a cause for concern; however the threats these pose to its resilience have been contested (Levitsky 2015; Skaaning & Jiménez 2017). As considered in fuller detail later in this Introduction chapter, in the face of democracy's challenges academic attention has gained momentum in examining art's capacity to extend and deepen people's experience of it. Having said that, and notwithstanding some important studies on the relationship between art and politics in Africa (discussed below), there is a dearth of research into the ways in which contemporary visual art animates democracy on the continent. This is in spite of increasing global interest in contemporary art from Africa, which has received important scholarly attention (Oguibe & Enwezor 1999; Kasfir 1999; Enwezor & Okeke-Agulu 2009; Savage 2014). Critically, however, because of contemporary African art's inexorable march to the mainstream, a significant portion of interest relates to its growing value on the art market where capital becomes the mover. Whilst these influences are considered, this research principally focusses on more progressive and critical art practices which are less susceptible to appropriation by the market forces.

Before moving forward, it is necessary to flag that throughout this thesis (although particularly in Chapter 1) I discuss what democracy signifies for Kenyans. With this in mind, democracy - in the way that I use the term in this thesis – broadly relates to all people in society meaningfully being included in the public participation of generating narratives, discourse and decision-making about the matters that effect their lives and shape society. One significant arena which allows for this, and therefore becomes central in democracy's reinvigoration, is the public sphere. In this study I take the position that, rather than a coherent whole, the public sphere is one of fragmentation and is inherently conflictual in nature 'both in the sense that participating in the public sphere revolves around continuously trying to open up to new, divergent ideas and actions, and a struggle in the sense that the public sphere is constantly being shaped and transformed by "external" economic, social and political forces.' (Bax, Gielen & Ieven 2015: 16). As will be expanded upon, I am particularly drawn to Chantal Mouffe's concept of 'agonistic pluralism' and understanding the extent to which critical art practices fashion agonistic interventions within Kenya's public sphere.

The remainder of this chapter is split into five sections. I begin with a primer to the metropolis of Nairobi and the possibilities that abound in this creative and politically dynamic place. I consider why Nairobi is a significant site for this study but also draw attention to the implications of this spatial focus when discussing democracy in Kenya. Following this, attention turns to the study's

research framework and research questions. The concept of the public sphere and art's potential to animate it is considered, with emphasis placed on Mouffe's agonistic pluralism. This leads into discussing the rationale of this study's four sub-questions. After this I provide the research and literature context which situates this thesis in the existing field of study. How this research was conducted and the methodologies used is then looked at. Lastly, I introduce the structure of the thesis by briefly outlining the objectives of each of the remaining six chapters.

Why Nairobi?

The geographical focus for this study is the metropolis of Nairobi – the capital city of Kenya. It has been suggested that 'when we talk about post-independence Kenya, we talk about Nairobi' (Herz et al. 2015). Such a statement overlooks the topographical variety, and peoples' distinct lived experiences, of this East African country of approximately fifty million inhabitants.[3] However, perhaps what this statement gets at is not that Nairobi represents what Kenya is, but rather Nairobi - which began life at the turn of the twentieth century as a British colonial rail depot (Morgan 1967) - provides a vantage point from which to consider the energies, diversity, contradictions, ingenuity and polarities of this urbanising country.[4] Today Nairobi is estimated to make up close to 9% of Kenya's population – with those aged under 35 constituting 78% of citizens (NCPD 2017: 5). The city's growth is set to continue and by around 2030 Nairobi can expect to contain more than 6 million people (World Bank 2016: 4).

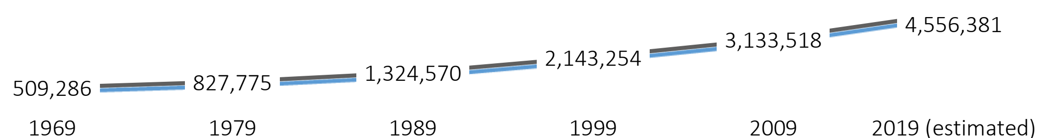


Chart 0.1. Nairobi province population (census results)[5]

[3] The last census to be taken in Kenya was in 2009, when it was recorded that Kenya's population totalled 38,610,097. In 2019 Kenya's population is estimated to be 52,717,501 (Source: World Population Review, http://worldpopulationreview.com/countries/kenya-population/ accessed 14/08/2019).

[4] It is estimated that by 2050 about half of Kenya's population will be living in cities (World Bank 2016:3).

[5] The 2019 estimate for Nairobi's population comes from 'World Population Review', which is calculated using expected annual population growth rates - http://worldpopulationreview.com/countries/kenya-population/ (accessed 14/08/2019).

The city's significant size is partly why it was chosen as the site of this study. Nairobi is three times larger than Mombasa (Kenya's next-largest urban centre) and considerably bigger than the smaller cities of Nakuru, Kisumu, and Eldoret. However another reason, and one more significant, is that Nairobi is the focal point of politics in the country. Whilst Kenya's 2010 Constitution devolved power and responsibilities from the national government to 47 elected county governments, Nairobi remains the seat of government, and it is where the judiciary, presidency, and most government ministries, are headquartered. Thus, Nairobi is a centre where authority and power are located - something which has been understood well by change-makers - where since colonial times individuals, social movements and civil society have articulated their interests and laid claims to their own political and social space (Maupeu 2010). Such renderings chime with art historian and curator Okwui Enwezor's suggestion that 'the African city is the site for the challenge to the political and at the same time the location for negotiations and agreements where new organizations and services, freedoms and autonomous spaces are emerging and developing' (Enwezor 2002: 8). The potential for artists to use the site of the city to mount a challenge to democracy's erosion has, in the words of Kenyan scholar Simon Gikandi, found vivacity in the 21st century because 'beneath the dying infrastructure and the traffic jams, Nairobi has been going through an important cultural revival if not renaissance.' (as quoted in Cuff 2010). Nairobi is the epicentre for contemporary art in Kenya (and to a large extent the region), offering artists great opportunities (Jaroljmek 2015: 25). This is because Nairobi's numerous art spaces and agents involved in enabling art's production, distribution and reception (what I otherwise refer to as Nairobi's artworld), is considerably more established than anywhere else in the country. Evidently, then, together these characteristics point to a distinctiveness of Nairobi which makes it a compelling site for studying the potential for art to reinvigorate democracy. Yet, in many ways, whilst this may point to some form of uniformity, Nairobi is anything but.

It is difficult to speak of Nairobi as a single space because it reflects the diversity of the people who live there. Generations of families have claimed the city as their home - challenging past assumptions that Nairobi was simply a place of transit before one 'returned' to their place of ancestry. Additionally, Kenya's capital continues to draw people from across the country and region, offering access to chances not available elsewhere. As a gathering point, Nairobi fosters no single economic status or exclusive ethnic affiliation (Rahbaran et al. 2013; Kassa 2019). Thus, a defining feature of Nairobi is its heterogeneity - it is socially, ethnically, racially, and culturally cosmopolitan. However, while today people living in the capital identify as 'Nairobians', what this identity constitutes is as varied as the conglomerate of personalities and fluctuating identities

that abound in this fragmented city (Charton-Bigot & Rodriguez-Torres 2010).[6] As Kenyan academic Mbugua wa Mungai notes, 'it does not make sense to say one is a Nairobian without specifying what part of the city one comes from' (Mungai 2015).

Nairobi's diversity and fragmentation is revealed in its steep inequalities as well as its spatial segregation - a legacy of colonialism but which continues today through the function of class, ethnicity, gender and sexualities (Granqvist 2004; K'akumu & Olima 2007; Spronk 2014; Ombagi 2019). Approximately 150 informal settlements occupy just 5% of Nairobi's residential land but house more than half of its population (World Bank 2016: 95). As Kenya's principal economic driver, Nairobi generates 21.7% of the country's GDP, more than three times that of any other county (KNBS 2019: 7). However, whilst 84% of formal households in the city have access to a piped water connection, only 36% of slum households have the same (World Bank 2016: 7). Kenyan academic Godfrey Chesang has spoken of such contradictory dimensions which characterise postcolonial Nairobi through the analogy of 'postcard' images and 'shoe-shiners' (Chesang 2007). He suggests that in Nairobi, 'everyone knows where the "First World" ends and the "Third World" begins, but what you see on the official map is Moi Avenue' (Chesang 2007: 44). In other words, whilst the compartmentalisation of Nairobi is not always delineated by physical barriers (although in some instances it certainly is – notably the gated communities and surrounding public roads of upper-class areas) the city is nevertheless segregated in many ways. Nairobi's 'postcard' side is that which espouses affluence, order, formality, and generally provides citizens better services such as sanitation and security. It is, as Chesang states, 'the domain of the rich' (2007: 47). Thus, the other side of the city is disorderly, unsafe, often lacking in decent public utilities, faces large-scale neglect, and constitutes unplanned developments and informality (Badiane 2010; Mundia 2017). Chesang writes how the boundary between these two worlds is demarcated by an army of shoe-shiners who play at least three roles: being aesthetic gatekeeper of the 'postcard' image by implementing the social rule that 'it must not look dusty, muddy or poor'; demonstrating entrepreneurial spirit by cashing in on the 'aspirational yearnings of the visitors to the postcard areas'; and showing the linkages between the 'postcard city' and the 'shanty town', and how they both co-evolve and shape each other (Chesang 2007: 49-50).

[6] Here I want to acknowledge that my understanding of Nairobi was greatly enriched through my time spent working at the British Institute in Eastern Africa (BIEA), Nairobi, for 10 months (2017-2018) as the 'Nairobi Becoming Fellow'. Joost Fontein (BIEA's Director), among others, initiated the project *Nairobi Becoming* which focusses on the diverse, contradictory and constantly changing city-scape that is Nairobi. For more information see https://www.biea.ac.uk/nairobibecoming/ (accessed 20/09/2019)

The above account does little to justify the complex urban issues of Nairobi but rather its purpose is to emphasise the notion of there being not a singular Nairobi but many 'Nairobis'. The implication is that in this study certain art practices and where they are performed are, in effect, open to the same registers of inclusion/exclusion and urban sensibilities of whichever Nairobi is in contention. Additionally, this brings into question the extent to which this study can truly speak about democracy when the geographical focus is limited to Nairobi. Of note, and emphasised throughout this thesis, is that whilst the focus of this research is on artistic activities that take place *in* Kenya's capital city, artists do not limit their demands to Nairobi-centric (or indeed urban) issues, but rather recognise and act upon matters of shared public concern. Furthermore, in the context of increasing internet access, coupled with artists taking advantage of using platforms such as Facebook, YouTube and Instagram to share their work, the terrain on which contemporary arts reach national audiences is expanding. This is particularly evident with artistic interventions in activism which purposefully target the news media as a medium through which their work will be channelled to a broad audience (through print, TV, and online platforms).

If, then, there are many Nairobis, this study concentrates on those where both democratic action and art manifest. Such a reading, I suggest, ties to research that has paid attention to the role creativity plays in processes of urbanisation in Africa, and how urban spaces generate new expressions in art and culture (Pinther, Förster & Hanussek 2012; Obrist, Arlt & Macamo 2013). As has been enthusiastically emphasised by scholars, the 'African' city is more than its built environment: it is also an infrastructure of people who, despite obstacles, produce artistic, aesthetic and social spaces that can spur inventiveness (Enwezor 2002: 7; Nutall & Mbembe 2008: 7; Simone 2004, 2012; Förster 2013). Several scholars have demonstrated this through their writings on Nairobi and popular culture (Nyairo & Ogude 2003; Ogude 2007; Mungai 2008; Nyairo 2015), which has included research on the city's distinct sub-cultures - such as the highly stylised public transport minibuses, *matatu* (Mungai 2013; Mutongi 2017), the urban dialect of *Sheng* which is continually refashioned by the city's youth (Githiora 2018), and the Kenyan rap genre dubbed *genge*, which emerged in Nairobi (Wasike 2011).

For some, Nairobi will be a place that offers a means to an end but for others the city offers a freedom that can only be found in urban life, containing what writer and curator Simon Njami says is 'an essential form of magic that drives the imagination. It remains the place of all possibilities' (Njami: 2005: 151). The 'possibilities' that this thesis explores concern a potential increase in people's agency and participation in civic and political life through generating narratives and discourse in the public sphere which help form opinions and enrich public debate - in other words, the possibilities for reinvigorating democracy in Kenya. Specifically, this thesis

looks to contemporary art's potential contribution in these areas. Drawing on anthropologist and art historian Till Förster's (2013) argument that it is by no means certain that creativity will blossom from the heterogeneity of a city, I suggest similarly that contemporary arts' contribution to new democratic experiences in Nairobi should not be assumed. However, it thrives in a politically dynamic space. To that extent there are clearly opportunities that abound in Nairobi to realise such possibilities.

Research framework and research questions

Overarching question: *How does contemporary visual art in Nairobi contribute to reinvigorating democracy?*

The main research question of this thesis is discussed through art's potential to animate the public sphere. Early concepts of the public sphere, initially informed by Jurgen Habermas, defined it as a space for dialogue and rational argument in which private citizens gather to form a public opinion (concerning power relations operating within a given social order) and arrive at a consensus over courses of action to be taken (Habermas 1989). This spatial relationship between people achieved through a particular form of communication is claimed to have emancipatory consequences. According to the political theorist John Keane, the public sphere has the effect of 'de-sacralizing power relationships' and it is a vital area in social life for 'naming the unnameable, pointing at frauds, taking sides, starting argument…[and] shaking the world, stopping it from falling asleep.' (Keane 1998: 170). The social scientist, Michael Edwards, claims such debates occurring in the public sphere 'are the very stuff of a democracy' (Edwards 2012: 65). And, it is understandable why this is so. An animated public sphere represents the will of citizens to openly communicate with one another, to hold and express opinions publicly, and for the populace to exercise the freedom to engage in discourse candidly about the issues and conditions affecting their lives and those of others (Parkinson 2012: 47). This is critical because, as Edwards suggests, 'if only certain truths are represented, if alternative viewpoints are silenced by exclusion or suppression, and if one set of voices is heard more loudly than those of others…then no genuine sense of the "public" interest can be negotiated' (Edwards 2012: 64).

Such actions – which contribute to social debates and catalyse new thinking that can activate social and political change - closely align to concepts of tolerance, dissent, and freedom, which

include freedom of expression, creativity, and speech (Sen 1999).[7] However, criticisms concerning the discourses which take place in the public sphere have been raised in regard to whether they do indeed enrich public debate and understanding of issues, or their ability to be co-opted, manipulated and censored by different powers in society (Dahlgren 2018; Nyabola 2018: 157-178). As such, rather than a coherent whole, the public sphere is one of fragmentation and instability where interests, opinions and actions sometimes connect but at other times collapse.

In this study I am drawn to the kind of public sphere political theorist Chantal Mouffe proposes is required for a vibrant democratic society. According to Mouffe, in *The Democratic Paradox*, the search for a consensus without exclusion has to be abandoned (Mouffe 2000). This is because it requires constructing an 'us' without a corresponding 'them', thus reducing the variety of voices from the public sphere (Mouffe 2000). Mouffe argues that building consensus, together with a dislike of confrontations, leads to apathy and a disaffection with political participation. However if, as Mouffe suggests, the constitution of an 'us' requires the demarcation of a 'them', under certain conditions this can become transformed into antagonism – where one sees the other as an 'enemy to be destroyed' (Mouffe 2000: 102). The crucial issue for Mouffe is how to make the 'us/them' dichotomy compatible with pluralist democracy. She envisages this through her 'agonistic pluralism' approach in which conflict does not take the form of an 'antagonism' (struggle between enemies) but the form of an 'agonism' (struggle between adversaries whose ideas are to be challenged). Thus, rather than suppressing or eliminating passions, conflict and the airing of opposite views - by rendering a rational consensus – they are considered part of democracy and indicate it is being kept alive and inhabited by pluralism. A functioning democracy, therefore, requires agonistic spaces and arenas for these differences to be expressed.

[7] These democratic principles are often included in major national and international human rights laws, such as:

- Article 19 of the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, which states 'everyone has the right to freedom of expression'.
- The *UNESCO 2005 Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions* reaffirms that 'freedom of thought, expression and information, as well as diversity of the media, enable cultural expressions to flourish within societies'.
- Article 27 of the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* acknowledges that everyone has a right to cultural life.
- Article 19 of the *Covenant on Civil and Political Rights* which lays down the right to freedom of expression and to hold opinions without interference.
- Article 9 of the *African Charter on Human and People's Right*s states that 'every individual shall have the right to receive information, and every individual shall have the right to express and disseminate his opinions within the law'.
- African Union's *Plan of Action on the Cultural and Creative Industries in Africa*, agrees to 'guarantee freedom of expression for creative and performing artists'.

The work of Mouffe is largely premised on European contexts. That said, she relinquishes the claim that democratisation requires the global implementation of the Western liberal model and several scholars have analysed the application of 'agonistic pluralism' and its relevance to the Global South (Kapoor 2002; Mouffe 2013: 28-29; Purakayastha 2013). I discuss Kenya's democratisation in Chapter 1 but it is necessary to acknowledge here that I find the agonistic approach relevant to its study because it relates to Kenya's postcolonial situation which is characterised by divisive politics, continuous fissure, political feuds, and fierce political antagonisms which have at times contributed to significant periods of violence. In this context, discussions on Mouffe's 'agonistic pluralism' could be especially beneficial for understanding Kenya's current and future democracy.

This is particularly relevant because Mouffe argues that critical artistic practices play an important role in agonistic interventions within the context of counter-hegemonic struggles (Mouffe 2013: 88). Mouffe does not believe it useful to make a distinction between political and non-political art because artistic practices tend to either play a role in maintaining the given order or challenging it – bestowing on art a political dimension. Instead, Mouffe is concerned with the different ways in which various 'critical art' practices contribute to the construction of new subjectivities and perceptions, causing us to see things in a different way, and to make us perceive new possibilities (Mouffe 2013: 97). This does not equate to practices of denunciation in which art shows how awful and wretched things are. In fact, Mouffe suggests such a tactic is not critical at all because it 'aspires to lift a supposedly false consciousness' (Mouffe 2013: 97). To be sure, 'critical art', according to Mouffe, 'is art that foments dissensus that makes visible what the dominant consensus tends to obscure and obliterate. It is constituted by a manifold of artistic practices aiming at giving a voice to all those who are silenced within the framework of the existing hegemony.' (Mouffe 2008: 12). Thus, by entering a multiplicity of public spaces critical art facilitates counter narratives which contribute to unsettling the dominant hegemony and play a part in the creation of a vibrant 'agonistic' public sphere.

What Mouffe's writing brings to the fore is not only the contested ideas of the public sphere but also art's positioning within it to animate democracy. However, for the public sphere to be kept alive it must be reiterated, reaffirmed and reinstated in order to exist; in other words, 'it must be *constituted* in each and every moment, through each and every gesture, through each and every institution that adopts its principles and aspirations' (Bax, Gielen & Ieven 2015: 11). The scope for art to keep alive an agonistic public sphere and in doing so reinvigorate democracy in Kenya is, I suggest, connected to certain influences. I have made these influences apparent in the conceptual framework below - which is useful as it explains 'the main things to be studied – the

key factors, concepts or variables - and the presumed relationship among them' (Miles & Huberman 1994: 18). I now briefly expand on these influences which, in turn, introduce the remaining four sub questions that this thesis asks.

Chart 0.2. Conceptual framework

Artist

Thirty years ago the East African philosopher and poet Okot p'Bitek published a collection of essays entitled *Artist, the Ruler* (p'Bitek 1986). p'Bitek argued that it is the artist who creates fundamental ideas for society and who takes risks and shapes thoughts which point to new meanings and possibilities (p'Bitek 1986: 38-41). The writing of p'Bitek poetically aligns itself with the concept of artists as change-makers. The views of p'Bitek - and indeed other thinker such as postcolonial theorist Edward Said (1994) and Marxist philosopher Antonio Gramsci (1971) - are shared by Kenyan historian Maurice Amutabi who, in *Kenya, the Struggle for Democracy*, describes artists as 'general intellectuals' (2007: 208). Amutabi identifies an intellectual as 'a highly informed, opinionated individual in public life who is capable of generating ideas for society, shaping social change and development positively or negatively through public action, speeches, writing and dissemination.....[who] represents the voice of the people' (Amutabi 2007: 199). For the author, intellectuals can be seen as 'agents of social change', who are 'sources of ideas and revolution' and are seen as 'role models' (Amutabi 2007: 197). It is these characteristics,

Amutabi says, which make the intellectual influential in political action and practices in Kenya (Amutabi 2007: 197).

I find the notion of locating artists in the field of intellectuals and recognising their roles as potential change makers, activists and antagonists compelling because it moves beyond the romanticised idea of artists as makers of beautiful things, but not great thinkers; and it also recognises their contribution to the public sphere through producing work they hope the world will respond to (Becker 2013: 16-18). Additionally, whereas Kenyan artists such as playwrights, comedians, and authors, have been discussed through the prisms of intellectual activity, visual artists have been on the periphery of such debates (Musila 2010). However, I also err on the side of caution to these potentials because - perhaps for the reasons mentioned above - governments, corporations and those who exploit their power understandably become suspicious of, and antagonistic towards, intellectuals and what their work can conjure in the public psyche (Freemuse 2016, 2017; Negash 2003: 134). As such, the first of my four sub-questions asks:

1. *To what extent can it be suggested that contemporary visual artists are agents of change?*

Artwork

At a broad level various forms of contemporary visual art have been championed for their potential to catalyse change. It is widely acknowledged that art produces new perceptions of who we are and of the world around us (Edelman 1995: 5; Murphy 1999: 126). Art's affective qualities have been linked to its role in nourishing and extending the capacity for empathy (Nussbaum 2010, Crossick & Kaszynska 2016: 42), in addition to its position as a strategic tool to be used in areas of activism (Duncombe 2016: 118). As a knowledge-forming discipline it has been argued that art broadens opportunities to study the known and unknown, creating openings to inform and shape opinions, envision possibilities and raise critical consciousness (Hanley 2013: 5). Art can break down social barriers and strengthen social cohesion, playing a significant role in the formation of groups, organisations and movements – creating arenas in which new forms of subjectivity, selfhood and agency are explored (Bishop 2012: 36; Clammer 2012: 24). But, if it is judged the arts have the capacity to instruct and persuade (Stern & Seifert 2009: 22) and influence people's understandings and actions, then art can seemingly also be used to spread propaganda and division. It must not be lost, therefore, that there is also the possibility that art can prohibit democratisation and undo democratic gains. One only has to look to the twentieth

century to see how fascist dictators used the arts as propaganda to induce their ideologies to collective consciousness (Flint 1980).

Thus, there is clear potential for art to engage with and (re)define the public sphere. Such possibilities have been raised by Chika Okeke-Agulu and Okwui Enwezor in their significant book *Contemporary African Art Since 1980*, in which they suggest 'art not only depicts, it also creates the conditions for a lively space of social engagement, activism, and civic identification' (Enwezor & Okeke-Agulu 2009: 30). Furthermore, they detail how since the 1980s a range of art practices have been used by artists from across the continent in the development of the public sphere (Enwezor & Okeke-Agulu 2009: 30). These include conventional object-based art forms (such as paintings, sculptures and photography) created to be experienced from the standpoint of a spectator, in addition to art being a form of action, focussing on constructive social change involving process-based experiences.

These various approaches are evident in Nairobi today where methods and techniques employed by contemporary artists have become much more diverse than a few decades ago. Rather than privileging one form of art over another I am interested in understanding the extent to which they constitute a 'critical art', in the Mouffean sense discussed above. In this thesis I examine: painting, photography, installation art, graffiti, street art, murals, participatory art, artivism, and art-based community outreach projects. These art forms are, in part, reflective of Nairobi's dynamic art scene today. Additionally, however, each of their approaches make different demands upon the public, often occur in different locations, and therefore reach alternative audiences. These distinctions highlight a benefit of considering them alongside one another as it enables a fuller picture to answer this study's second sub-question:

2. *In what ways does contemporary visual art represent democratic aspirations?*

Space, spectators and participants

For the arts to function in society they require sites for their performance. In other words, without the possibility of distribution – which gives art a place to be experienced by a public - works of art lack agency (Maneen 2014: 143). In their study on the intersection of art and politics the political scientists Nancy Love and Mark Mattern (2013) argue that the arts pluralise political communication and expand current, or fashion entirely new, sites for political participation (Love and Mattern 2013: 9). The authors go on to claim that such sites create arenas in which decision making and opinion formation take place, acting as alternative civic spaces where ordinary citizens are drawn into political engagement and action (Love and Mattern 2013: 9). Thus, what

is apparent is the paramount necessity of space for art's performance and indeed for democracy to be performed. This leads to the third sub-question of this thesis:

3. *How do the sites which make art public in Nairobi assist in animating the public sphere?*

The myriad of spaces discussed in this thesis include the concrete sites (in the very literal sense) of galleries, cultural institutes, art-centres, and museums; in addition to more temporal and often ephemeral spaces that (re)emerge in the city as a result of artistic interventions. These are the sites in which the art forms discussed above are made available to a public in Nairobi. However, in this study, they are also examined through the prism of their potential to be 'agonistic public spaces' in the Mouffean sense 'where everything that the dominant consensus tends to obscure and obliterate can be brought to light and challenged' (Mouffe 2013a: 51). Fostering the multiplication of agonistic public spaces is indeed what Mouffe calls on in order to revitalise democracy. Yet, the desire to make art available at a multiplicity of public spaces also comes from the want of artists to reach different segments of society. Clearly, however, caution needs to be exercised: each of these sites have their own registers of inclusion and exclusion, and no doubt apply their own particular ideas as to what art is and who the audience should be. As such, this brings to the fore the last sub-question of this thesis:

4. *How does public engagement with contemporary visual art enrich democracy?*

Market, social and political context

The remaining sections of the conceptual framework discuss the role of the market and other forms of patronage as well as the wider socio-political context in which contemporary art and artists operate. The expanding art market and Kenya's growing middle class offer certain possibilities for artists to gain national and international presence. However, the artworld is often criticised for its primary focus on wealth creation, capital and serving the market instead of using art to engage with the fabric of everyday life and working for the needs of humanity (Krause 2011). Furthermore, as argued by Alana Jelinek, when the role and social value of art is determined by the operations of power, the market and neoliberalism, the status quo is maintained rather than challenged (Jelinek 2013: 113). Clearly then, if this is the case for Nairobi, this would have implications on the possibility for a critical art to emerge and/or contribute to the forming of agonistic public spaces.

Furthermore, artists are required to navigate a rise in patronage from NGOs and foreign donor bodies. Partly in response to UNESCO's approach to culture and development, there is an identifiable global shift in which the arts, culture and creative industries are being used in global policies for sustainable development (Clammer 2014). Responding to this shift, a growing body of literature has emerged which takes a critical stance on development funding of the arts in the Global South (Stupples 2012; Stupples & Teaiwa 2015). In the context of how artists across Africa have turned to these patrons in pursuit of funding, and indeed how NGOs have turned to artists in order to have greater public reach, the volume *The Art of Emergency: Aesthetics and Aid in African Crises* is noteworthy (Ndaliko & Anderson 2020). The authors of the volume, are critical of 'NGO-sponsored creativity' because art production tends to become constrained to a dominant, and often foreign, moral economy which provides artists with little freedom for nuance or experimentation (Ndaliko & Anderson 2020: 13). A consequence to the relationship between artists, NGOs, donor funders and the cultural sector more generally, is that it has potential to dramatically realign who has authority over aesthetics of local creativity. During the first decade of the 21st century foreign donor agencies significantly impacted Nairobi's cultural scene and NGO funding has increasingly aligned itself with artistic interventions. As such, these alternative forms of patronage, alongside those of the art market, are critically consider throughout this thesis and alongside the study's four sub-questions.

Additionally, the overarching question and four sub-questions that are asked in this thesis can only be understood in relation to the broader social and political context in which they are located. As mentioned above (and disused in more detail in Chapter 1) this relates, in part, to Kenya's new Constitution and the Jubilee Government's implementation of it. The subject of Kenya's 2010 Constitution may raise questions to its relation with Mouffe's 'agonistic pluralism' given that it involved consensus building during its drafting process and required a majority to vote for its adoption during a national referendum. On this point it is necessary to state that Mouffe does not all out reject consensus - suggesting that it is indeed needed but must be accompanied by dissent (Mouffe 2000: 113). This may, for some, come across contradictory; however, what Mouffe gets at is that a consensus is needed for the frameworks and institutions that are constitutive of democracy. In the case of Kenya, while the importance of the Constitution is largely agreed upon, there is often disagreement as to its interpretation and indeed it implementation, as will become apparent in the subsequent chapters.

The research and literature context

The past few decades have seen a growing amount of scholarly work draw attention to the potential of the arts to extend and deepen people's experience of democracy - building upon, or making connections with, the longer standing study of art and politics (Edelman 1995; Rancière 2006, 2007, 2010; Mesch 2013), activist art (Felshin 1995), and participatory, or socially-engaged, art practices (Kester 2011; Bishop 2012a). Notable research emphasising the intersection between art and democracy includes the anthology *Global Activism: Art and Conflict in the 21st Century*, in which Peter Weibel goes so far as to say strategies of art and activism represent a type of 'performative democracy' which may be the first new art form of the 21st century (Weibel 2015). Similarly, the book *Doing Democracy: Activist Art and Cultural Politics*, edited by Nancy S. Love and Mark Mattern, demonstrates the multiple and complex ways that art practices (including photography, cartoons, monuments, memorials, and performance) are used to increase the capacities of ordinary people to effect change and strive for a more democratic future (Love & Mattern 2013). Additionally, Mattern's *Anarchism and Art: Democracy in the Cracks and on the Margins,* is notable for analysing how popular art forms (such as graffiti and street art) contain hints of democratic possibilities through their anarchist values of autonomy, equality, horizontal forms of power, and direct action by common people (Mattern 2016). Likewise, Olivier Dabène's (2019) comparative study of public art in five South American cities, in the book *Street Art and Democracy in Latin America,* argues public art promotes forms of urban citizenships that can foster democracy. Another notable comparative study is Anna Brzyski's *Art and Democracy in Post-Communist Europe* which investigates the relationship between art, politics and public space, and how this contributes to the struggle for a freer and open society following communist rule (Brzyski 2012).

Despite the geographical span of the studies mentioned above, research focussed on contemporary art and democracy in Africa is left wanting. Having said that, important academic work has taken place examining artists' responses to postcolonial conditions and how various art practices have been used as a means to awaken the populace's critical consciousness. Prominent examples include Elizabeth Harney's (2004) *In Senghor's Shadow: Art, Politics, and the Avant-Garde in Senegal, 1960–1995* and John Peffer's (2009) *Art and the End of Apartheid.* Notable work has also been done analysing artistic reactions to, and representations of, conflict and war in postcolonial Africa. This includes the anthology *Art and Trauma in Africa: Representations of Reconciliation in Music, Visual Arts, Literature and Film,* edited by Lizelle Bisschoff and Stefanie van de Peer (2012). Additionally, there has been more specific studies of visual arts' role in healing

post-conflict societies, including those on Rwanda (Feinstein 2005; De Becker 2012) and Mozambique (Schwartzott 2018). Furthermore, there is a breadth of academic work on public art in contemporary South Africa, which examines art's potential in areas of reconciliation, nation-building and the creation of a shared public history. Important work has been produced by Sabine Marschall (2002, 2009), Annie Coombes (2003), and Kim Miller and Brenda Schmahmann (2017). Additionally, in 2013 the arts journal Third Text published a special edition titled 'The Art of Change in South Africa' (edited by Nomusa Makhubu & Ruth Simbao) in which contributors examined the political potency of art in South Africa and the ways in which artists have responded to, and proactively challenged, societal injustices (Makhubu & Simbao 2013).

The correlation of Nairobi as a site for politics and democratisation on the one hand, and its positioning as an arena for the production and distribution of contemporary art on the other, has been peripheral to analyses of visual arts' contribution to democracy. This is despite there being a rich quantity of material on Kenya's democratisation (discussed in the following chapter). Certainly there has been an increasing amount of scholarly work on contemporary art from Kenya. For example in 2017 *Critical Interventions* (a journal of African art history and visual culture) dedicated an entire issue to Kenyan artworlds. Similarly, in 2015 the online journal *Third Text Africa* dedicated its fourth volume to East Africa, with several articles focussing on Kenya. Other notable examples of scholarly work on contemporary art from Kenya include the series of books, *Contact Zones NRB*, published by the Goethe-Institut. Launching in 2012, *Contact Zones NRB* includes books whose subject is individual artists, including Sam Hopkins, Peterson Kamwathi, Ato Malinda, Syowia Kyambi, and the art collective Maasai Mbili. Each book contains a collection of academic texts focussing on aspects of the artist's practice and work. *Contact Zones NRB*'s final publication was *Ink & Pixels*, in 2017, which provided an overview of comic art in Kenya.

Despite the growing interest in, and body of published material on, contemporary art from Kenya, the vast majority of academic work has tended to focus on art workshops, training and artistic networks (Kasfir 1999; Gerschultz 2013; Labi 2013); the emergence, development and mapping of Kenya's artworld (Miller 1975; Agthe 1990; Nyachae 1995; Orchardson-Mazuri 2006; Mboya 2007; Swigert 2011; Vierke & Siegert 2013; Bounakoff 2017; Court 2017); the transnationalism of contemporary art and artists from Kenya (Jäger 2011; Marcel 2013); or the trajectory and life histories of individual artists (Kuona Trust 2003; Goethe-Institut 2011, 2011a, 2011b,2014, 2015). This work has been vital in that it has expanded understanding as to the webs of cooperation through which art happens, and critically assessed the art forms and practices present in Kenya. However, there has been little scholarly literature dedicated to how contemporary visual art in

Nairobi contributes to the core questions of this thesis relating to ways of practising, experiencing and understanding democracy.

What can be cited are the 1980s art movement *Sisi kwa Sisi* and its associated exhibitions and activities which have been regarded as a form of cultural activism in postcolonial Kenya (Enwezor & Okeke-Agulu 2009: 32). Etale Sukuro (one of the movement's members) has provided numerous accounts of *Sisi kwa Sisi* - placing it within the broader developmental traits of art in postcolonial Kenya (Sukuro 1990; 1995; 2018). Sukuro's writing frames the social and political content of artworks as a tool for instruction - 'art should communicate and educate, whether the picture is beautiful or not' were *Sisi kwa Sisi* members' intentions, he says (1995:285). The tone of Sukuro's account presents *Sisi kwa Sisi* as liberating for both artist and ordinary Kenyan because of its contribution to the public sphere at a time when civic space was curtailed. That said, Sukuro's account of *Sisi kwa Sisi* included in the book *Seven Stories about Modern Africa*, received criticism by fellow *Sisi kwa Sisi* member Miano Kahare, partly because he felt the movement was being presented as having superficial impact, but also because of its lack of perspective from other members. In Chapter 2 I build upon Sukuro's narrative by incorporating the views and opinions of other artists involved in *Sisi kwa Sisi*.

The artistic response to, and impact of, the 1998 al-Qaeda terrorist attack on the United States embassy in Nairobi has also been the subject of relevant research. Sidney Kasfir (2005) documents the exhibition *The Bomb Terror* held at Goethe-Institu by visual artists from Banana Hill Studio and Kuona Trust. The exhibition constituted the varied ways this tragic event came to be interpreted and remembered by those participating artists. Kiprop Lagat's University of East Anglia PhD (2014) - R*emembering the 1998 Nairobi Terror Attack: Cultural and Trauma Memory and the Reconciliation of a Nation* - furthers this line of inquiry and suggests the memories of the attack are constructed and mediated through visual and performance art. Of significance to this study is Lagat's analysis of *The Daily Billboard* public art project, in which he focusses on the project's facilitation of public participation through soliciting written responses to the attack. Lagat suggests the project became a 'shrine' for expressions of collective grief, thus making a significant contribution to Kenya's public sphere and the possibilities for art to act in contexts of commemoration and memorialisation. The research provided an insight into the ways in which artists have engaged with historical memory in order to broaden public debate about socio-political issues in Kenya (such as political violence, identity, terrorism and Kenya's positioning in the modern world). In Chapter 2 I draw on Lagat's study of *The Daily Billboard* project but frame it within the activities of Kuona Trust and its significance as one of the earliest forms of participatory art in Nairobi's public spaces.

Art's use in memorialisation is also dealt with in the book M*anaging heritage, Making Peace*, in which Annie Coombes examines artistic acts of commemoration following Kenya's 2007/2008 PEV (Coombes et al. 2014). This assessment includes community peace building initiatives in Kibera slum by the art collective Maasai Mbili. Coombes frames Maasai Mbili's painted peace messages and art workshops, which involved painting ruins (that came about as a consequence of the violence), as alternative monuments/memorials which contributed to reconciliation efforts at the time. Notably, Coombes characterises these activities through their emphasis on process, rather than end product, something scholars writing about contemporary art form Kenya neglect. Additionally, the coverage of the project is significant as it represents the first response by visual artists to this tragedy which came to profoundly shape Maasai Mbili's future work – and indeed that of other visual artists. Furthermore, this project marked the start of an outpouring of art-based approaches to peacebuilding, which became particularly palpable in the run up to the 2013 election and which is further discussed in Chapter 2.

The use of art in areas of activism in Kenya has been raised by Kenyan academic Mokua Ombati. In *Public Artworks: Creative Spaces for Civic and Political Behaviour in Kenya* Ombati examines the 2012 *MaVulture* graffiti campaign occurring in Nairobi (Ombati 2015). Ombati states *MaVulture's* illegal murals highlight economic and political injustices and depicts them as 'an important tool of peacebuilding' (Ombati 2015: 30). However, the association of *MaVulture* to peacebuilding initiatives is fairly weak given that the overwhelming discourse of peace during the run up to the 2013 election was passivity and not the forms of confrontation that the murals presented (Cheeseman, Lynch & Willis 2014). The value of Ombati's article lies in the framing he provides of graffiti as a form of protest and resistance which is echoed by the insights provided by artists involved in the campaign and the authority's and public's response. In Chapter 5 I re-visit this campaign adding to Ombati's observations by providing significance to the locations used, the response of this campaign by the media, and the implications of this project on those involved.

In *Gifts of Art for Kenyan (M)Pigs': Festival of Resistance Against Elite Impunity in Kenya* Ombati describes the utilisation of art in the 2013 *Occupy* protests in Nairobi (Ombati 2017). Discussing their significance, symbolism and meaning, Ombati suggests various art forms (street theatre, flyers and placards) functioned as powerful tools in creating spectacle, excitement, fun and dialogue. Critically, this research makes serious claims to the possibilities of artistic actions in protest. There are nevertheless clear omissions to the study, such as how the *Occupy* protests sit with other protests in Kenya; what the authority's responses were; how these protests are mediated by international and local news; and the extent to which these tactics were able to

mobilise support, or indeed alienate people from their cause. These omissions are perhaps recognised by the fact that Ombati calls for more research to be undertaken (Ombati 2017: 213), and in Chapter 6 I do so by examining the *Occupy* protests and a series of other protests which utilise artistic and creative approaches.

In 2013 the GoDown Arts Centre initiated the citywide festival *Nai Ni Who?* (Who is Nairobi?), exploring identity and belonging in Nairobi's different zones (made up of multiple neighbourhoods). The festival, now an annual occurrence, involves activities taking place in public space (art exhibitions, street performances, parades, discussions, and walking tours). Two articles examining the 2013 *Nai Ni Who?* festival suggest it 'made the city more democratic', by providing platforms for interaction and exchange between city dwellers, and creating opportunities for residents to engage in acts of (re)claiming urban spaces (Mboya 2014: 68; Mboya & Oluoch-Olunya 2017: 69). In *Nai Ni Who?: Exploring Urban Identity, Place, and Social (Re)construction in Nairobi*, the authors present impressive outputs of the festival - such as the observation that 60% of Nairobi's population was reached through the project's publicity and 1% of Nairobi's population participated directly in the festival. But there is an overall vagueness to the account of the festival's activities (Mboya & Oluoch-Olunya 2017: 68- 69). In the other article, *Nai Ni Who? (Who is Nairobi?): Collective urban vision development,* consideration of the festival's impact is provided which, it is suggested, includes expanding residents' appreciation of their city's diversity, improving social cohesion, sparking interest in Nairobi's history, and enabling residents to participate in making the city their own (Mboya 2014: 68-69). However, anecdotal accounts notwithstanding, deeper insights into the ways this was achieved is lacking. Furthermore, the reader is cautious of bias because of the articles' authors direct involvement (Joy Mboya being the GoDown's director and Garnette Oluoch-Olunya who was part of the 2013 co-ordinating team for *Nai Ni Who?*). While the authors' positioning arguably provides a knowledgeable engagement with the doings of *Nai Ni Who?* there is a seeming lack of constructive criticism. Given the breadth of art practices and heterogeneous neighbourhoods involved in the festival, reflection on the pertinence of certain art practices over others, or the challenges of working in the city's public spaces is neglected. Additionally, and in line with the project's claim to make the city more democratic, the articles provide little analysis into how agency is performed in these spaces, and the wider democratic/political implications such initiatives have for resident's urban experience. Of significance, however, is the authors' contribution to documenting the possibilities of art's use in the city through unconventional approaches. Notably both articles reference *The Kenya Urban Areas and Cities Act* which emphasises citizens' participation in the making of their city and urban space (Mboya 2014: 69; Mboya & Oluoch-Olunya 2017: 70). In Chapter 6 I follow similar lines of

enquiry by examining the possibilities for urban residents to define themselves and claim their right to the city through neighbourhood graffiti projects.

How this research was conducted

Research for this PhD happened in three phases. The first phase (which lasted 9 months) was desk-based at the Sainsbury Research Unit, at the University of East Anglia, UK. This phase consisted of conducting secondary research, developing a research framework for the thesis, and the planning and preparation for research to be undertaken in Kenya. The second phase (which lasted 20 months) principally involved direct work in Nairobi. Outputs from this include, but are not limited to: 85 in-depth interviews with artists, activists, cultural workers and others; 150 survey/questionnaires with the general public; participation/observation in 4 protests/street demonstrations; 10 focus group discussions with artists and/or the public; attendance at over 25 art exhibitions; the building of a large archive of photography documenting artists, artworks, art projects and social movements; the collecting of a large amount of material from art events, such as exhibition catalogues, and publications relevant to this study that are unavailable to purchase in the UK. The final phase (which lasted 19 months) comprised the analysis and writing up of all research conducted. During the final phase an additional research trip was made to Nairobi for 1 month, in order to collect further information. This section provides reflection on research conducted in Nairobi and a summary of activities undertaken whilst in Kenya.

Research strategies and methods

Research conducted for this thesis involved both a variety of quantitative and qualitative strategies and methods. At times these were used together in a mixed-methods approach, or what is also known as a multi-strategy design. A benefit to this approach is that it produces a fuller account and comprehensive picture of the subject of research (Bryman 2006). Additionally, throughout the thesis when I am discussing significant case studies I employed a triangulation method, which corroborates between different forms of qualitative and at times quantitative research (Jick 1979). The reason for choosing this approach is that it seeks to provide a 'more in-depth nuanced understanding of research findings' (Mertens & Hesse-Biber 2012: 75). Aside from Chapter 1, which is essentially constructed from secondary source material, a brief summary to the various research methods used in each chapter is as follows:

- In Chapter 2, I use secondary source material such as newspaper articles reporting on art exhibitions, semi-structured interviews with artists and cultural workers, visual analysis of artworks, and focus group interviews with community members and artists regarding specific art projects, in order to provide a historical overview to the development of contemporary visual art in Nairobi.
- In Chapter 3 and 4, I resort to semi-structured interviews with artists and cultural workers, attendance at and observation of art exhibitions (including a visual analysis of artworks) and statistical data of artists' representation at commercial galleries, for an investigation into the role that art institutions and their associations play in governing art production and distribution.
- In Chapter 5, I draw on observational methods during street protests, social media statistics and messages on Twitter, semi-structured interviews with artists and activists, visual analysis of art from (and the mediated images produced as a result of) protests and demonstrations, and an analysis of newspaper reports, to better understand various forms of art and activism.
- In Chapter 6, I use questionnaire data from members of the public, participant observation during public art projects, focus group interviews with community members, analysis of graffiti images, and semi-structured interviews with artists, as a means to examine neighbourhood graffiti projects.

Interviews

Interviews were conducted with artists, cultural workers (gallery owners, curators, directors of art-centres, managers at cultural institutions, journalists, and workers at non-governmental organisations), activists, members of civil society groups, and participants in and audiences of art exhibitions and community art projects (including members of the public). All formal interviews were face-to-face and the majority were conducted in English and recorded using a Dictaphone. Where interviews were conducted in Kiswahili (which was with residents from neighbourhoods where public art project took place - discussed in Chapter 6) I used a local research assistant. Interviews followed a semi-structured approach, with the majority of questions being largely open-ended. This approach offered a flexible way of conducting research as it enabled the possibility of modifying lines of inquiry and immediately following up on interviewees' responses. Interviews typically lasted between 1-3 hours, during which time I remained alert to the likelihood of 'respondent fatigue' (Axin & Pearce 2006: 42). All interviews were prepared for carefully. Before the formal interviews took place I had met on several occasions the vast majority of people

interviewed (a notable exception to this was when interviewing members of the public, for which a local assistant who had a respected standing in the community accompanied me in the process). Each recorded interview was transcribed, either by myself or a research assistant (associated with the BIEA). While interviewing and transcribing was a time-consuming process, this approach produced a rich amount of illuminating material. Additionally, informal rapid interviews took place during street protests, neighbourhood graffiti projects and during art exhibitions and these were recorded as field notes. The results of interviews need to be understood not as the unmediated expressions of respondents' real opinions, but rather as products of the contingencies of the interview situation (Houtkoop-Steenstra 2000). For examples of interview questions and a list of all formal in-depth interiews conducted see Appendix I.

Focus groups

Focus group discussions were conducted with art collectives, activists, and the public. Chapter 2 reflects on focus group discussions with: eight artists from Maasai Mbili which concentrated on their involvement in art-based peace-building initiatives in 2008; five participants from a 2013 public art project run by Kibera Hamlets and twelve members of the local community who provided reflections of the same project following a film screening of its activities. Chapter 5 is informed by a focus group discussion I conducted with a group of activists who were engaged in organising and attending street demonstrations. For Chapter 6, I undertook five focus groups with residents in four different neighbourhoods where public art projects took place. For the same chapter I conducted a focus group discussion with artists involved in these projects.

The number of participants in each focus group ranged from 4-12, and each lasted between 1-2 hours. Similar to the interviews above, they were conducted in Kiswahili and English (with the use of a local research assistant and/or local moderator when required) and involved semi-structured and generally open-ended questions. Aware that certain group dynamics and power hierarchies had the potential to affect who speaks and what people say, I drew on the advice and expertise of local NGOs when organising community focus groups with neighbourhood residents. The purpose of this method was to elicit participants' views and opinions (Wilkinson 1998). Focus group discussions enable participation of those who may be reluctant to be interviewed on their own (Kitzinger 1995: 299), prompt group interaction that produce insights less accessible with individual interviews (Morgan 1988: 12), and facilitate large amounts of information to be gathered on a specific topic in a short period of time (Smithson 2008: 358).

Questionnaires

A questionnaire was used in three neighbourhoods of Nairobi where a large-scale neighbourhood graffiti project had taken place (see Appendix II). In total 150 respondents completed the questionnaire which contained a series of closed questions with possible answers ranging on a scale from strongly disagreeing to strongly agreeing to various statements. This method enabled the collection of standardised data in statistical form from large numbers of people. A sound questionnaire is essential for data gathering with questions that are understandable and answerable by the respondent (Leeuw 2008: 315). The questionnaire was constructed with assistance from local organisation Berlin Self-Help Group, who provided guidance with language and who conducted pre-testing, after which some of the terminology used for questions was edited. Local research assistants (one male and one female) were trained and employed to distribute questionnaires and assist the public in their completion by ensuring they understood the questions and providing additional explanation and/or instruction if required. The demographic of those who answered the questionnaire was a 50/50 male/female split with the majority of people being between the ages of 18-50.

Observation/participation

Observational methods in research, writes Colin Robson, are 'pre-eminently the appropriate technique for getting at "real life" in the real world' (2011: 316). Observation during research in Nairobi involved watching the behaviour of people, what they do, and how they react to situations. Observation and participation took place during street protests and demonstrations, during the creation of public art in neighbourhood graffiti projects, on the occasion of art projects and at art exhibitions/events. This was recorded through field notes, digital photography and video recording, which was later analysed and interpreted. Observation records what actually happens, or what people do, rather than just relying on what is said. The events I observed generally took place over a short period of time, with the shortest being exhibition openings or street demonstrations that typically lasted a few hours, to neighbourhood graffiti projects that lasted one week. All the activities that I observed were open to the public.

All of these research methods were undertaken in compliance with UEA's ethical standard and advice.

Thesis structure

In Chapter 1, I chronologically outline the more significant aspects of Kenya's democratisation, revealing how its current state in the 21st century shows continuities with, but also changes from, the past. The characteristics of democracy in Kenya, and how this is envisioned and experienced by the ordinary Kenyan, is considered. I argue that Kenya's 2010 Constitution and its progressive Bill of Rights is a central pillar in deepening democracy. However, I suggest continuing infringements upon people's freedoms and liberties imply Kenya's democratisation will be an ongoing struggle. The chapter, therefore, provides necessary historicisation and engagement with what the term democracy means in the Kenya context.

A concise description and historical overview of the development of contemporary visual art in Nairobi, from the ending of British colonialism up to 2013, is provided in Chapter 2. The objective is to contextualise the emergence of visual art practices in a period when notions of democracy itself were being formulated. In doing so it recognises the fact that visual art is shaped by social influences and, equally, influences society, sometimes in fundamental ways. The chapter introduces the argument that, during the 21st century, Nairobi has seen a proliferation of critical socio-political artworks animating Kenya's public sphere. More so, it starts untangling the broad framework that artists in 21st century Nairobi are operating within and identifies tensions, possibilities and limitations of a range of artistic strategies and spatial practices for democracy's reinvigoration - paving the way for the four subsequent chapters that are both narrower in time frame (2013-2017) and focus.

In considering contemporary visual art in Nairobi the role that institutions play in governing art cannot be ignored. Chapter 3, then, examines art institutions and their critical role as gatekeepers. Specifically, I place emphasis on art exhibitions taking place within the walls of commercial art galleries, museums, art-centres, and foreign cultural centres – spaces which characterise Nairobi's contemporary art landscape. I examine what their potential is to create not only sites for artistic expression but also arenas where opinions may be forged, freedom of expression experienced, awareness raised, and new meanings constructed and disseminated. In particular, I am interested in understanding the extent to which exhibitions can be recognised as avenues open for political engagement where critical art manifests agonistic public spaces.

In Chapter 4 I continue to consider the role of art institutions but I move the analysis on to exploring market considerations and the extent to which the artworld's fixation with profit and commerce impact the production and distribution of critical art practices. In addition to this, I

provide an analysis of development organisations funding of art exhibitions and suggest this can lead to artists adopting an 'NGO aesthetic' in their work. Lastly, I ask whether Nairobi is experiencing a 'curatorial turn' by considering instances of curatorial activism which aim to challenge the dominant hegemony. A central feature throughout this chapter is the notion of who has agency, and who is setting the agenda, which in turn effects art's possibilities to animate the public sphere?

Attention then shifts to art practices which take place outside the confines of artist's studios and the walls of art institutions in the belief that art can play a role in bringing public issues back into public spaces. Chapter 5 approaches this by exploring the possibilities and limitations of deploying art in areas of activism in the fight for justice. Specifically, I examine efforts made by those associated with the organisation PAWA 254 through its use of 'artivism' through protest graffiti and carnivalesque street demonstrations.

In Chapter 6, I continue to study art happening within Nairobi's streets and its potential to empower urban-dwellers. Specifically, two graffiti projects are examined which were initiated by young artists who felt disenfranchised from official decision-making arenas. I assess the extent to which these projects offer an avenue to empower citizens in the participation and appropriation of their neighbourhoods and the possibilities for these to engender a more engaged citizenry. Throughout the chapters discussing art's potential to reinvigorate democracy I continually consider the various elements of the conceptual framework (discussed above). In the Conclusion I return to these questions to reflect specifically on their implications.

Chapter One

Characteristics of democracy in Kenya

'Democratization can be imagined and attempted in all corners of the globe'

(Whitehead 2002: 190)

It has been almost three decades since the 'Third Wave' of democracy started sweeping across sub-Saharan Africa in the 1990s (Huntington 1991). A combination of internal and external factors compelled authoritarian regimes to introduce multi-party elections (albeit of widely divergent quality). Accompanying this wave was a general trend of improved social and political rights, and better civil liberties and freedoms. The extent of this democratisation was quite remarkable; in 1988 there were only 9 states in Africa holding multi-party elections but 10 years later this had risen to 45 (Thomson 2010: 245). This period was described by academics as Africa's 'second independence', whilst other scholars enthusiastically believed the Third Wave represented a global transition towards liberal democracy, thus marking the 'end of history' (Fukuyama 1989).

Democratisation across Africa has provided citizens with both a framework to address societal problems and opportunities for their participation in political life (Lynch & Crawford 2012; Cheeseman 2015; Mattes 2019). However, the ebb and flow of democratic gains in Africa, and across the world, since the Third Wave have demanded caution be taken when assessing what democracy means for ordinary people. Notably, it has made apparent that democracy is more than the holding of elections as it also entails a long-term process, shaped through ongoing struggles and continuing battles in which the people collectively push for change and hold those with power accountable (Ake 1992: 70).

The process of democratisation has been described as:

> 'Political change moving in a democratic direction from less accountable to more accountable government, from less competitive (or non-existent) elections to fuller and

> fairer competitive elections, from severely restricted to better protected civil and political rights, from weak (or non-existent) autonomous associations to more autonomous and more numerous associations in civil society' (Potter 2000: 368).

This process is principally aligned with notions of Western 'liberal democracy' (Dahl 1989: 233), proponents of which have revered its worldwide value (Lipset 1960:404; Leftwich 1996:4; Sen 1999a; Feng 2003; Halperin et al. 2005; Collier 2010: 8). However, other political analysts are more guarded about Western liberal democracy's universal application in a 'multipolar' world and recognise the absence of a one-size-fits-all model (Chan 2007: 55-57; Pollack 2011: 88; Mouffe 2013: 19-41). Thus, as argued by the late Nigerian political scientist Claude Ake (1993: 244), 'democracy has to be recreated in the context of the given realities in political arrangements which fit the cultural context, without sacrificing its values and inherent principles.' So, in taking these views into consideration, what might democracy mean in Kenya?

Answering this question in any comprehensive sense is an ambitious task, perhaps too ambitious for the scope of this thesis. As such, this chapter has a more limited intention – it aims to outline the more significant aspects of Kenya's democratisation. In doing so it chronologically frames the struggle for democracy in Kenya, revealing how its current state in the 21st century shows continuities with, but also changes from, the past. The chapter draws on a range of secondary sources and Afrobarometer data. The Afrobarometer is an independent, non-partisan research network who have conducted regular surveys in Kenya (and the rest of Africa) for almost two decades. The surveys measure public attitudes on economic, political, and social matters in Africa - offering a valuable source for understanding what ordinary people want, think and believe; making it possible to see whether citizens think that the quality of democracy in their country is increasing or decreasing.

Comprising six sections and a conclusion, I begin by considering how following independence Jomo Kenyatta, Kenya's first President, was at pains to secure a broad support base across the country. However, I suggest his effort failed expectations because in its place a form of governing similar to colonialism emerged. I then discuss the violent and repressive regime of Daniel arap Moi and the people's mobilisation for democracy during his 24 years as President. This leads onto discussion about a period initially seen as hopeful in regards to the country's democratisation, following the opposition's victory at the ballot box in 2002. However, as I will argue, whilst gains were made promises of significant reform and change failed to materialise in ways in which the ordinary Kenyan had expected. Kenya's 2007 election and the subsequent violence is then given attention. I discuss that it is following this period that the drive for a new Constitution was granted

urgency. In 2010, Kenya's Constitution was promulgated and I contend that its progressive Bill of Rights is a central pillar in deepening democracy in Kenya. However, I suggest that even though the Jubilee coalition that came to power in 2013 had the responsibility of implementing the new Constitution, infringements upon freedoms and liberties imply Kenya's democratisation will be an ongoing struggle.

Hopes and discontent following Kenya's independence

Democracy in Kenya cannot be understood in separation from its colonial experience. The principal purpose of the colonial state in Kenya was to extract wealth; something it did through domination, imperialism, and developing pervasive patron-client relations. 'We must never forget', writes Bruce Berman, 'that the colonial state in Africa was an authoritarian bureaucratic apparatus of control and not intended to be a school of democracy.' (Berman 1998: 329). After a long and bloody battle against British colonialism Kenya gained independence in 1963. Kenya's first president, Jomo Kenyatta, inherited the British colonial 'divide and rule' system of ethnically homogenous administrative boundaries separate and mutually suspicious (Oucho 2002: 38; Ogot 2005). A challenge for Kenyatta and the political party he led - Kenya African National Union (KANU) - was to find a common identity amongst the State's ethnically diverse society, comprising more than forty ethnic groups. While no single group forms a majority, some of the largest today include the Kikuyu (17.2%), the Luhya (13.8%), the Kalenjin (12.7%), the Luo (10.5%), Kamba (10.1%), and others such as the Somali, Kisii, Mijikenda, Meru, Turkana, and the Maasai (The Republic of Kenya, 2009 Census Report).

It has been suggested that Kenya's independence Constitution (crafted at Lancaster House, United Kingdom) offered a framework to promote political and economic reform, as well as national unity (Ghai 2014: 119). Favourable conditions and forthcoming Western financial aid contributed to a decade of high economic growth (albeit unevenly distributed) and political stability (Throup & Hornsby 1998: 22). Despite this, however, Kenyatta's regime neglected consensual policies that had motivated anti-colonial struggles. Instead, Kenyatta entrenched ethno-nationalism, leading to a form of governing remarkably similar to colonialism (Leys 1975; Ajulu 2002; Wamai 2014: 68; Thompson 2015: 238).

A characteristic of KANU under Kenyatta was the party's favouritism for the Kikuyu ethnic group (particularly the elite) to the effective exclusion of others - tactics ensuring the supremacy of KANU (Gertzel 1970: 44; Muigai 1995: 99). Hopes for a multiparty system soon evaporated.

Political opposition parties were banned, such as the Kenya People's Union (KPU) in 1969 - associated with their left wing calls for redistribution of wealth and Luo ethnicity. The KPU's leader, Oginga Odinga (a Luo), was arrested and detained.

When the regime could not contain opposition and dissent they resorted to using force, intimidation, detention and assassination. Once a hallmark of colonial rule these methods became tools of governance (Branch 2011: 72-73). Cultural stereotypes also came to be used politically as a means of othering (Thompson 2015: 244). Prominent political actors who agitated against the state were assassinated, which included: Pio Pinto (1965), Tom Mboya (1969) and J.M Kariuki (1975).

The destructive force of what historian John Lonsdale calls 'political tribalism' became a defining characteristic of Kenyan politics, which has continued throughout the Sate's postcolonial history (Lonsdale 1994: 132). This divisive practice equates to competition for State power and resources by the political class who claim to speak specifically for their own ethnic group. A legacy of this is that ethnic, or 'tribal', labels and boundaries institutionalised under colonial rule have largely remained and political coalitions frequently appeal to these identities, rather than to the idea of the nation state (Haugerud 1995:40).

It has been suggested that there were occasional 'fragments of democracy' noticeable during Kenyatta's time in office (Cheeseman 2009: 96). However, more often than not, the regime's use of violence, coercion, 'political tribalism', and fraught personal rivalries, occupied spaces that might have otherwise been filled with the formation of citizenship and more democratic practices (Lonsdale 2004: 91; Thompson 2015: 249).

Agitating for democracy in the face of authoritarianism

After Kenyatta's death in 1978 his Vice President Daniel arap Moi (a member of the Kalenjin) became Kenya's second President. Just as Kenyatta had promoted disproportional privileges to the Kikuyu community, Moi also continued the practice of patronage and ethnically biased distribution of State resources for his community (Ajulu 2002; Berman 2004; Stewart 2010). Following an attempted coup in 1982, a constitutional amendment formally made Kenya a one-party state. The 1980s were considered to be more violent and repressive than previous decades (Throup & Hornsby 1998). Those criticising the state were arrested, detained and tortured, whilst some were forced into exile. Corruption became endemic and the state authoritarian (Southall

1999, 2005). It is estimated that by the time Moi left office he, his government and cronies, stole $3-4 billion (Ayodele et al. 2005: 3). Unlike Kenyatta, Moi could not hush his critics with resounding economic growth. Partly as a result of the disastrous imposition of Structural Adjustment loans provided to Kenya by the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, Kenya's economy declined and stagnated – the rate of economic growth went from 6% in 1973 to 4%in 1990 and to 0% in 2000 (Zeleza 2014: 29).

It is against this context that the demand for democracy and constitutional reform in Kenya has its roots (Murunga 2014: 145). Kenya's Constitution from independence was no longer credited as being suitable by those seeking reform because it lacked legitimacy in the eyes of the people, due to it having been amended tens of times by the political elite in order to quash dissent and sustain authoritarian rule (Wamai 2014: 68). As the 1990s was dawning the people's vociferous demands for reform and democracy could no longer be ignored. A key demand made by agitators of democracy was the repeal of Section 2(a) of the Constitution - which mandated Kenya a one-party state. The driving force for this initially stemmed from the church - an area of civil society the State could not easily suppress. Others also coalesced around pro-democracy reforms, such as a group of youthful professionals from the field of law, academia and politics who came to be known as 'the Young Turks' (which included: Peter Anyang' Nyong'o, Paul Muite and Gitobu Imanyara). Organisations too provided support, notably the Law Society of Kenya and the recently founded Kenya Human Rights Commission (Murunga 2014: 150-151).

The authority's response to people's mobilisation for political reform became increasingly aggressive. For instance, multi-party advocates organised a mass rally at Kamakunji grounds, Nairobi, on July 7th, 1990. The rally was attended by thousands of supporters, but was brutally dispersed by police and security forces, sparking off three days of rioting, known as the *Saba Saba* demonstrations.[8] Over twenty protestors were killed and more than a thousand were placed in detention, marking a new chapter of political violence in Kenya's postcolonial history (Branch 2011: 194; Ruteere 2014).

Western nations, which had otherwise turned a blind eye to Moi's regime in a game of Cold War politics, attentively observed Kenya's pro-democracy movement. As did the World Bank. Together they demanded Kenya embark on democratic reforms or else they would suspend government aid (Branch & Cheeseman 2009: 10; Branch 2011: 196). Moi bowed to national and international demands. Section 2(a) of the Constitution was repealed in December 1991,

[8] *Saba Saba* is Kiswahili for 'seven seven' which denotes the day it took place - July 7th.

effectively dismantling the one-party system. The decade which followed saw an increased opening of the public sphere, the liberalisation of the media, and a burgeoning civil society bringing the human rights agenda into focus (Adar & Munyae 2001; Mutua 2008; Okello 2010; Ogola 2011a: 84; Nasong'o 2007, 2014).

The opposition were united in their common grievances against President Moi and KANU and the re-introduction of multi-party elections provided a legitimate means for both their removal from power. When acknowledged to be free and fair, elections have been credited with offering possibilities to enhance competition, open up political space, and offer vertical accountability (Lynch & Crawford 2012: 8). Additionally, it is claimed that elections provide a 'foundation stone' for further democratic reforms, whilst elections in Africa have been linked to positively impacting human freedoms and democratic values (Carothers 2002: 8; Lindberg 2006). That said, multi-party elections have also received criticism. This is because elections have been seen to encourage political elites' building of 'vanity parties' based on personalities rather than policies and their use to create and deepen antagonisms between groups within society (Ake 1993; Wiseman 1996: 107).

Chiming with this last view Moi was determined to prove multi-party elections would cause violence and breed ethnic strife. The 1990s saw Moi orchestrate his 'Kalenjin warriors' and the State's paramilitary capability to counter multiparty democracy and incite ethnic group rivalries, which had the effect of escalating mistrust and hostility between groups. The two elections held under Moi in 1992 and 1997 were characterised by widespread vote rigging and violence which saw over 3,000 lives lost and more than 300,000 people displaced (Throup & Hornsby 1998; Cheeseman 2008: 170). Moi's provocation of violence in both elections contributed to him retaining presidency in both elections (Grignon & Maupeu 1998: 14-16; Zeleza 2014: 31). However, this was also compounded by the fact that the opposition were divided in how best to strategise in order to successfully mount a strong campaign against KANU (Grignon & Maupeu 1998: 14-16; Zeleza 2014: 31).

The effect of the opposition losing two elections in a row dashed the hopes of a new political order becoming established. As historian Daniel Branch (2011: 250) notes, a decade of democracy without change left many Kenyans cynical towards their political system. That said, a knock-on effect was that it stirred the opposition, civil society and public into viewing constitutional reform as a necessary precondition for change (Muhula & Ndegwa 2014: 83). Mounted pressure ensued and parliament caved-in to beginning the process of a constitutional review in 2000.

The 2002 election, in which Moi was barred from contesting following the Constitution's two term-limit, proved to be a decisive moment in Kenya's history. The opposition united under the inter-ethnic National Rainbow Coalition (NARC). Mwai Kibaki (a Kikuyu) led NARC and Raila Odinga (a Luo) supported him, in agreement that Kibaki promised to create a prime ministerial position for Odinga if they won the election. This coalition represented what many Kenyans felt was an opportunity for real change and with it came NARC's leading campaign promises - to complete the Constitution-making process within 100 days of coming to power.

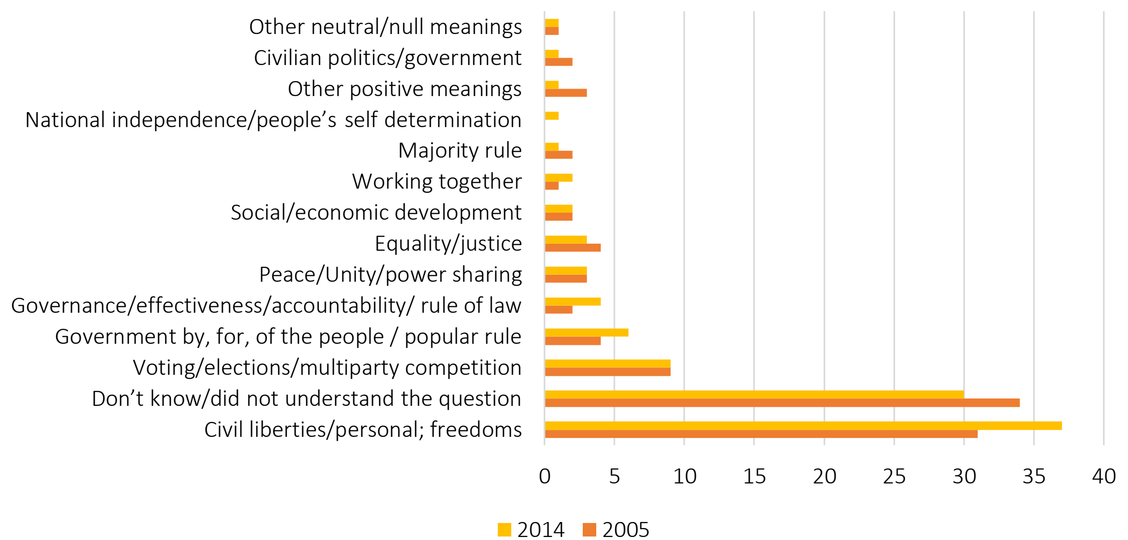
Most observers agree the 2002 election was freer and fairer than in 1992 and 1997, and significantly more peaceful (Anderson 2003: 338). Kibaki received over 60% of votes, approximately twice that of his principal rival Uhuru Kenyatta (son of Jomo Kenyatta) who Moi hand-picked to run for KANU. Moi's 24 year rule, and KANU's position in power since independence, came to an end – representing Kenya's first democratic transfer of power. This seismic shift in the way that elections and democracy played out in postcolonial Kenya instilled belief amongst Kenyans that political change through formal processes was feasible (Anderson 2003; Murunga, Okello & Sjögren 2014: 2-3). According to a 2002 *Gallup* poll, Kenyans were reportedly the most optimistic people on earth.

Once the euphoria settled 'Nothing-Actually-Really-Changed'

NARC were swift in making some popular reforms as they entered government. One such example is the implementation of free universal primary education introduced in 2003. Kenya's economy also started recovering, however those who benefited most were part of the middle class (Zeleza 2014: 33). Democratic space expanded. A vigorous press blossomed and public debate of politics in a variety of settings thrived (Branch 2011: 251). In this context it is worth asking what democracy might have meant for Kenyans. Obviously, such a question could result in many different answers. However, findings from a 2005 survey of 1,278 Kenyans undertaken by Afrobarometer (2006) suggest that civil liberties and personal freedoms were at the core of people's perceptions of democracy (Chart 1.1). Kenyans next associated democracy with elections, voting, multi-partyism and issues of equality and justice. A smaller portion of respondents cited peace, unity, government by and for the people, and social and economic development. When the same survey was repeated in 2014 very similar results were recorded, suggesting civil liberties and personal freedoms are central pillars of democracy for many Kenyans

in the 21st century. What the public expect from democracy is, however, not what they always receive.

Chart 1.1
What if anything does democracy mean to you?



The initial euphoria felt amongst the populace following NARC's election victory soon subsided, slumping to 'disenchantment and despair' (Murunga & Nasong'o 2006). Across the country, it quickly dawned on Kenyans that the Government was unable to fulfil pledges it made to the electorate. Kibaki even reneged on his promise to create a prime ministerial position for Odinga. Moreover, Kibaki's assurance to fight corruption remained not only a broken promise but proved to the contrary. Grand scale government corruption scandals, many inherited from KANU, surfaced with impunity (such as Anglo-Leasing and Goldenburg).

In 2005 the Government's leading anti-corruption official, John Githongo, quit in despair and went into de facto exile (Wrong 2009). In the same year Kenya ranked lowly (144 of 159 countries) in Transparency International's annual Corruption Perceptions Index. The lack of action in response to investigating and acting upon corruption undermined public confidence in the Government's commitment to tackle this issue. For instance, in a 2005 Afrobarometer survey 51% of survey respondents stated that the Government was doing very badly, or fairly badly, in fighting corruption (Afrobarometer 2006). Additionally, 90% of respondents thought that ordinary Kenyans would be punished if they evaded tax or committed another serious crime, whilst only 25% believed it be likely that the Government would punish a top government official for doing the same (Afrobarometer 2006: 5). These disparities suggest Kenyans feel that a culture of impunity exists for political elites and government officials. Public attitudes about Government

corruption worsened over the years. Afrobarometer surveys between the years 2008-2016 reveal that approximately 70% of Kenyans consistently believed the Government was doing a bad job in fighting corruption, and that a culture of impunity existed. Thus, corruption has often been described as being an infliction on Kenyans under each regime since independence (Bachelard 2010).

Godfrey Mpembwa, one of the most recognised editorial cartoonists in the region (going by the pen name Gado), writes that it is only in Kenya where high profile scandals are soon forgotten by the electorate in what he cites as 'regular episodes of massive collective amnesia' (Gado 2012: 155). That said, some strong voices, such as the justice and human rights advocate Reverend Timothy Njoya, maintained their watchful eye on the State's abuse of power. This role of watchdog was, however, in short supply because many of those who had been keeping a check on Moi and the KANU regime in the 1990s found positions in the new NARC Government. Paradoxically, this weakened the capacity of the civil society sector to monitor the Government's performance and compliance with human rights (Karuti 2011). Furthermore, disturbing raids on the media in 2006 and 2007 by those associated with Kibaki were clear attacks on fundamental principles of democracy (Ogola 2011: 123). In his assessment of the Government's early performance Njoya stated 'We now know what "NARC" means…"Nothing-Actually-Really-Changed"!' (quoted in Branch 2011: 258).

Njoya's scathing critique of the Government's performance also extends to what was, perhaps, the most significant promise made to Kenyans by Kibaki – that being a new Constitution. The process of making this happen, however, proved to be critically divisive amongst those in the coalition. Agreements over issues such as devolution and reducing presidential powers couldn't be reached which split NARC. Odinga left the party. A constitutional referendum was held on 21st November 2005. Kibaki and his supporters campaigned for the Constitution's approval. Odinga and dissatisfied members of KANU campaigned against its adoption, opposing the proposed Constitution's strengthening of Presidential powers. The 'No' campaign were victorious, receiving 58% of votes cast. As Raymond Muhula and Stephen Ndegwa (2014: 87) note, the campaign for the referendum came to reflect deep ethnic fissures. In essence Kibaki's Kikuyu community were pitted against Kenya's other ethnic groups (Muhula & Ndegwa 2014: 87). This was starkly revealed in the referendum result. The Kikuyu stronghold of the Central Province, was the only place where the 'Yes' vote won a majority.

Reflecting on the transfer of power in 2002, and a peaceful referendum in 2005, Branch (2011: 260) suggests that some optimists viewed this as evidence of democracy's consolidation.

However, a consequence of Kibaki accepting the referendum result was that the drive for reform was put on hold, meaning the existing Constitution and its protection of presidential power and the apparatus of central government remained (Branch 2011: 258-259). The Government's procrastination over the Constitution revealed the extent to which those in power go in order to resist change and maintain the postcolonial structures created by successive governments (Muhula & Ndegwa 2014: 91).

Concerns that Kenya's deep divide along ethnic lines could trigger conflict if not addressed were made in 2006 by the African Peer Review Mechanism report. Despite this, when compared with its neighbours (often plagued by civil unrest and insurrections) Kenya was described as 'a haven of stability and prosperity' (Economist 2007). Such a narrative would soon be challenged.

Elections, violence and the brink of State failure

The 2007 election campaign ran on familiar lines to previous ones in that political parties forged strong ties to ethnic affiliation and were largely ideology-free (Wrong 2009: 296-7). A lack of constitutional reform sustained citizens' belief that having 'one of our own' in power meant access to State resources for the incumbent's group - giving meaning to the popular phrase 'it's our turn to eat' (Wrong 2009).

The two principal contenders in Kenya's 2007 presidential election were Kibaki and Odinga. The incumbent President Kibaki led the Party of National Unity (PNU), which the Kikuyu ethnic group broadly backed. Odinga's party, the Orange Democratic Movement (ODM), ran on a rhetoric of '41 tribes against 1' – with the one being the Kikuyu (Kagwanja & Southall 2009: 265-267). Having said that, it should be noted the 2007 election campaign also mobilised around other identities such as youth and religion (Cheeseman 2008: 168). Support harnessed by appealing to these identities did however fail to deliver votes in the same ways as ethnicity.

As the tallying of votes got underway, following the 27th December General Election, Odinga took a healthy lead. As such, upon announcement of the result (30th December) it shocked many to hear Kibaki had won by just over 200,000 ballots (taking 46% of votes against Odinga's 44%). It appeared 'Kibaki had fiddled' and well-grounded allegations of vote tampering meant the electorate were robbed of knowing the true outcome (Gibson & Long 2009; Branch 2011: 271).

Almost immediately upon hearing the election result chaos erupted in many parts of the country. Aggressive confrontations broke out between supporters of ODM (infuriated by the result

believing vote tampering had occurred) and PNU supporters (who felt strongly that the result should be accepted). (ICG 2008: 2). Over a space of two months conservative estimates suggest at least 1,100 people were killed, 600,000 displaced, thousands of women raped and property widely destroyed. Kenya's 2007/8 post-election-violence (PEV) - as it has come to be called - is said to have 'brought one of Africa's most promising democracies to the brink of state failure' (Kagwanja 2009: 365).

The 2007 election and subsequent violence have been extensively discussed.[9] It is, however, necessary to briefly mention its origins. The ethnic dimensions to the PNU and ODM political parties are said to have 'fuelled the flames of inter-ethnic violence' (Jacobs 2011: 1). And, as Branch suggests, many Kenyans seized upon ethnicity in an attempt to understand what had happened (Branch 2011: 275). However, a number of scholars have pointed to several other underlying causes, whilst suggesting the disputed 2007 election provided the ripe conditions for their surfacing (Mueller 2008: 186). These underlying causes were multifaceted - comprising the legacy of colonialism, weak institutions, manipulation of ethnic identity, poverty and inequality, youth unemployment, a centralised presidency, historical grievances (particularly around issues of land), and the mobilisation of armed militias (Kagwanja 2009; Kagwanja & Southall 2009; Mueller 2008).

Following both domestic and international pressure the violence ended when a power sharing agreement (or National Accord) was brokered between the main opponents. Odinga accepted Kibaki's electoral 'victory' and took up the position of Prime Minister in a 'grand coalition government'. Although peace (in the form of an absence of overt violence) returned to Kenya, what the PEV made apparent was the political and social flaws in the country (Kagwanja & Southall 2009: 260). Furthermore, the PEV exposed how citizens had lost confidence in the ability of State elites and successive regimes to represent and work for all of society (Muhula & Ndegwa 2014: 82). After the signing of the National Accord and the formation of the grand coalition, demand for a new Constitution from both above and below accelerated. A new Constitution, it was felt, would help restore the public's lost confidence in Kenya's democratisation, act as a vehicle for social cohesion, spur necessary change, and provide the means to move away from the politics of 'tribalism' (Ghai 2018).

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[9] For example see the special issue of the *Journal of Eastern African Studies,* 2, 2 (2008), titled 'Election Fever: Kenya's Crisis'

A new Constitution and the dawn of Kenya's second republic

After many years of struggle, a new Constitution for Kenya became officially promulgated on 27th August 2010, following its being approved by 67% of voters (with a turnout of 70%) in a referendum held on 4th August 2010. Civil society organisations and other reformist actors played a critical role in developing the Constitution (Maingi 2012; Nasong'o 2014). The process was not, however, harmonious. Fractures between proponents of the status quo and those who had another, what some term 'progressive', stand emerged (Muranga 2014). This became apparent during debates about the far-reaching Bill of Rights, which acknowledge the civil and political rights of all Kenyans. More specifically, some provisions included in the Bill of Rights are: people's right to freedom of expression and association; the right of every citizen to have access to information, to freely make political choices, and the freedom of conscience, religion, belief and opinion; various rights given to the media; the promotion of gender equality and the rights of minorities and marginalised groups; to provide individuals protection against undue interference and discrimination by the state.[10] Consequently, for the progressives the Bill of Rights represented a central pillar in deepening Kenya's democracy (Muranga 2014: 159). For the conservatives however, the freedoms and protections provided by the Bill of Rights led to certain paranoias – notably that people outside of the supposed heterosexual norm would be given greater rights, thus threatening their perceived 'African family values' (Muranga 2014: 159).

The 2010 Constitution made significant strides to accommodate the challenges that have tormented Kenya since independence. It was written to serve the people, enhance the rule of law, impart checks on power, and lead to devolution in which counties would have greater control over their development agenda (Ghai 2014: 119; Murunga, Okello & Sjögren 2014; Wamai 2014: 67). Kenya's 2010 Constitution - alongside the South African Constitution - is often seen as being one of the most progressive in Africa (Glinz 2011).

It has been suggested that without longstanding demands for democracy, the referendum and the Constitution would not have come about (Murunga et al. 2014: 7). For many Kenyans, the momentous occasion of adopting a fresh Constitution indicated a 'new start' as it altered the terrain for political struggles and the deepening of democracy (Branch 2011: 288). Others described it as the dawn of Kenya's second republic (Zeleza 2010; Nasong'o 2014: 100). In essence it created the possibilities for change but it did in no way guarantee this change would happen,

[10] See Chapter Four—The Bill Of Rights, The Constitution of Kenya

yet it had the popular support of the Kenyan people who believed it was 'likely or very likely to make their country more democratic' (Kramon & Posner 2011: 99). An early test for the new Constitution would be the 2013 election.

Prospects for democracy following Kenya's 2013 election

In the build up to the 2013 election, the atmosphere was in many respects strikingly different from that in 2007. Not only were the recollections of what had occurred 5 years prior in peoples' minds, but a number of social and political transformations had been put in place. Notably the adoption of a new Constitution, and its promise to reform the electoral bodies and the judiciary, helped to regain the confidence of the Kenyan people. That said, a number of underlying issues (such as security sector reforms, inequality, youth underemployment, and land injustices) had yet to be addressed, whilst intercommunal trust persisted (Lynch 2014b). There was also going to be a change of leadership owing to Kibaki reaching the end of his two-term limit. Two main alliances formed, bringing together former rivals.

The Jubilee Alliance was led by Uhuru Kenyatta and his running mate William Ruto – past adversaries whose associated ethic communities (the Kikuyu and Kalenjin, respectively) were pitted against one another during Kenya's PEV. Both Ruto and Kenyatta (among others) were implicated by the Waki Commission as instigators of violence and stood indicted by the International Criminal Court (ICC) for crimes against humanity (Lynch 2014). The other alliance, the Coalition for Reforms and Democracy (CORD), was headed by opposition leader Raila Odinga alongside his running mate Kalonzo Musyoka (who previously had been a long-time political opponent of Odinga). However, rather than joining forces in order to promote national good the purpose of these alliances was to capture State power (Karuti 2014: 23).

As noted by Kenyan academic Yash Pal Ghai, the electorate paid little attention to the record or policies of candidates and instead the fundamental criterion for selection was ethnicity (2014: 132). The new Constitution was meant to transform this type of 'tribalism' and encourage policy-driven parties instead of those created specifically for the purpose of elections. There was, however, little evidence of this, thus 'it was politics as before, another name for tribalism and corruption' (Ghai 2014: 132).Having said that, whilst the strong role that ethnicity plays in election results has captured significant scholarly attention, a number of academics have suggested that Kenya's middle-class voters might offer new dynamics into understanding public perceptions of, and engagement with, democracy.

Kenya has an established middle class and a recent IPSOS study states 49% of Nairobi's population fall into this category (IPSOS 2018: 5).[11] Through an analysis of 2011 Afrobarometer survey data, Nic Cheeseman (2015) argues that middle class Kenyans are more critical of the Government and are more supportive of democratic rule. A significant factor in this, he suggest, is the central role education plays in 'generating more critical citizens who are infused with democratic spirit' (Cheeseman 2015: 660). Yet, the prominence individuals and groups place on their various identities changes over time and in Kenya this is particularly noticeable during periods of political competition in which ethnic identities are strengthened (Eifert et al. 2010). This was revealed in a study by Dominic Burbidge (2014), based on diary entries made by young middle-class Kikuyus in Nairobi before the 2013 election. The entries revealed people's voting decisions were more reflective and critical than simply being based on loyalty to a leader from the same ethnic group. However, as the day of the election drew nearer attitudes fell closely in line with ethnic affiliations. Something that also becomes heightened during election campaign periods is the spectre of violence.

Kenya's history of election-related violence, with few brought to justice, raised the prospect of whether the 2013 election would pass peacefully. This became a primary concern. A nation-wide peace campaign was launched (Elder, Stigant & Claes 2014; Lynch 2018: 32). As the Kenyan political commentator and cartoonist, Patrick Gathara (2013), blogged: 'As the elections approached we were assailed with unceasing calls for peace and appeals to a nationalism we knew to be to all too elusive.' On the one hand, the frequent messages of peace embedded across Kenyan society were credited with contributing to a culture of non-violence (Akpedonu, Lumsdaine & Sow 2013). On the other, owing to peace becoming such a priority some commentators suggest it was politically manipulated to generate a 'peaceocracy,' in which political discourse was constrained, frank discussions suppressed, and dissent delegitimised (Cheeseman et al. 2014: 11-12, Gustafsson 2016; Lynch et al. 2019). In other words, peace was prioritised to the detriment of other democratic values.

The 2013 General Election passed without mass violence but not without controversy. Kenyatta won by the slimmest of margins, taking 50.07% of votes in an election that had a very high turnout (85.91%). His win meant that three out of the four post-independence heads of State have been Kikuyu. The Supreme Court rejected two separate petitions (by Odinga's coalition and civil society

[11] The task of defining the African middle class has always been difficult due to the lack of availability of, and access to, quality data. In their definition, IPSOS uses income as a rough guide, but also brings in other criteria to further refine their definition – examining the attitudes people hold regarding money, tradition, brands, nutrition, education and aspirations, including how individuals see their wealth in relation to others.

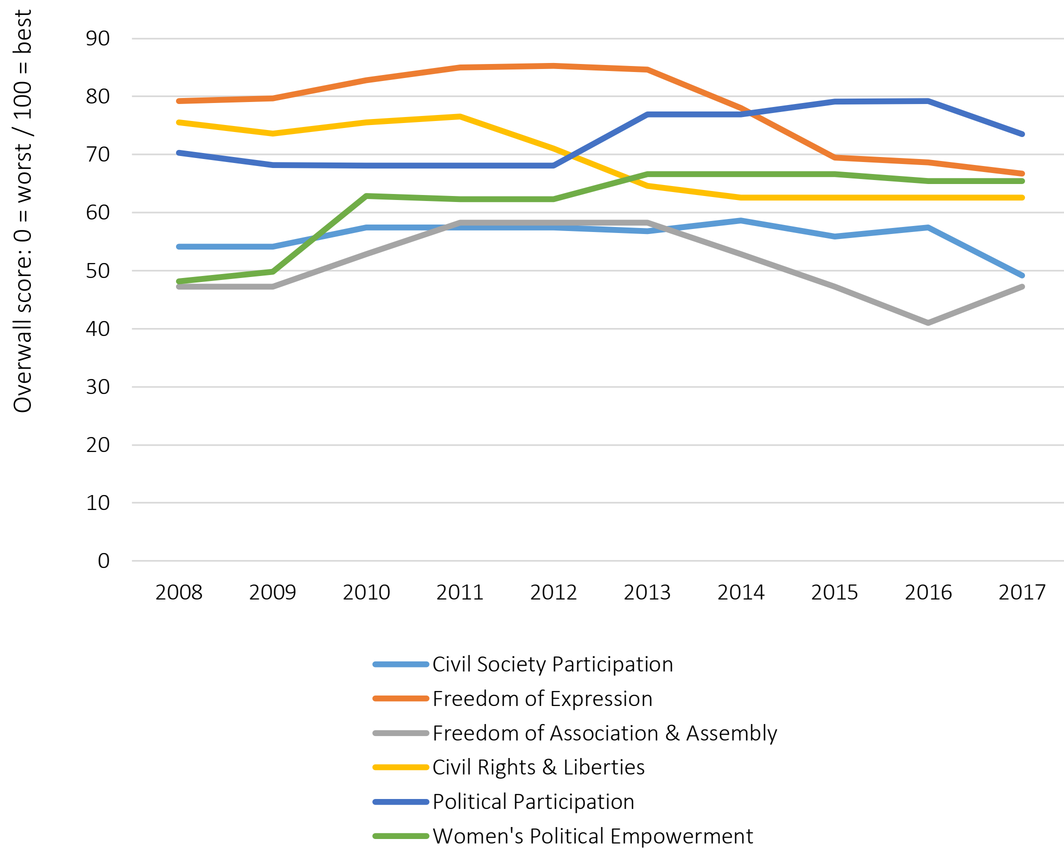
organisations) which disputed the number of votes Kenyatta achieved and questioned the integrity of the election. In a poll conducted amongst Kenyans in May 2013, over a third expressed the election was not free and fair (Shah 2015: 52). In the same poll a third of respondents reported a low level of confidence in the Supreme Court, the Chief Justice, the Independent Electoral and Boundaries Commission (IEBC), and the judiciary - representing a drastic drop in the confidence of these institutions compared with levels before the election (Shah 2015: 52). Furthermore, the victory for Kenyatta and his deputy Ruto came when both were still facing criminal proceedings at the ICC (cases later dropped owing to allegations of witness bribery and intimidation, and government refusal to co-operate). As Human Rights Watch noted following the 2007 election, 'the political manipulation of ethnicity is almost a tradition in Kenyan politics, along with impunity for those implicated in fomenting political violence' (HRW 2008: 17). This observation remained relevant for the 2013 election. Likewise, it has been suggested Jubilee continued the behaviour of previous governments in that positions in the cabinet were skewed in favour of the president's and deputy president's community (Karuti 2014: 13).

The responsibility to implement the new Constitution fell on the Jubilee Government – members of which (such as William Ruto) had been against its adoption in 2010 (Ghai 2014: 130-131). Perhaps unsurprisingly, early questions were asked about the resolve of Jubilee to uphold the Constitution (Ghai 2014a). Despite momentous efforts by civil society in ensuring a peaceful 2013 election, following Jubilee's victory the Government did not bring civil society organisations on-board as strategic partners in the strengthening of human rights, constitutional principles, and nation building. Instead, civil society groups faced numerous obstacles and suffered restrictions - related to preventing their scrutiny and criticism of the Government (Wood 2016). Furthermore, there are reports that the Government increased acts of harassment and intimidation against human rights defenders and NGOs, used excessive force against peaceful demonstrators, and purged hundreds of registered civil society organisations (CIVICUS 2015; Smidt 2018). The police force, writes Yash Pal Ghai (2014: 135), continued to be undermined by corruption, criminality and brutality. What promised to be a new beginning turned into 'business as usual' (Karuti 2014: 7).

The Jubilee Government's pretext for certain infringements upon people's freedoms has, in part, been rationalised through anti-terrorism measures – as a consequence of a string of terrorist attacks across the country (2013 Westgate Mall; 2014 Mpeketoni attacks; 2015 Garissa Attack). However, this does little to ease what many see as increased government influence of the media and in particular a hampering down of editorial freedoms and independence (Ghai 2014: 140). For example, in 2016 the senior editor and cartoonist for the Daily Nation (Dennis Galava and

Gado, respectively) were both dismissed. The reason Galava and Gado provide is, in short, because of their critical assessment of the Jubilee Government. Furthermore, it has been suggested that media houses in Kenya today often forfeit critical reporting because they are under the ownership of current and/or former politicians, or because they rely on advertising revenue which comes from corporations whose commercial interests rely on remaining on favourable terms with the Government (Omidyar Network 2018). This landscape presents challenges for Kenya's media and its ability to question the actions of government and their policies.

Yet, Kenyans continue to demonstrate resilience and have found ways to circumvent confrontation with, and/or censorship by, the establishment; often through various forms of popular media and/or more recently through technological advances, such as the internet (Peck 2013; Ogola 2011; Nyabola 2018). That said, how might the ordinary Kenyan interpret these breaches in liberties which the new Constitution seek to protect? Well, data analysed from Afrobarometer surveys conducted in Kenyan in 2008 and 2016 reveal that over this period there has been a decline in citizens' perceived level of freedom of expression (Logan & Penar 2019). Such perceptions are not unfounded. According to data from The Ibrahim Index of African Governance (which assesses governance performance in African countries) a number of indicators measuring human rights and freedoms in Kenya have stagnated or declined from 2013 to 2017 (Chart 1.2).



It has been argued that the supply of democracy in Kenya has not kept pace with its popular demand, which in turn has contributed to peoples' dissatisfaction with its progress (Bratton & Richard Houessou 2014; Kivuva 2015; Burbridge 2015). Following on from over two decades of democratisation in Kenya, it is reasonable ask whether there is still a strong claim for democracy from the people. Turning to data from Afrobarometer surveys, in 2016 over two thirds (67%) of respondents stated that democracy is the preferred form of government - a reduction from 80% in 2003, shortly after Moi's long period of authoritarian rule ended. Still, there appears to be a sincerity to these 2016 readings given that in the same survey types of non-democratic regimes (such as one party rule, military rule, and one-man rule) are strongly rejected by the populace. Thus, while there has often been a sobering reality to Kenyans' expectations of political change and the Constitution's implementation it remains that democracy is an ongoing process, but one that has been hard fought and won over the decades by citizens.

In August 2017, the country once again went to the polls and the result saw Uhuru Kenyatta of the Jubilee Party receive 54.2% of the vote, beating his principal rival and opposition leader Raila

Odinga of the National Super Alliance (NASA). The election was not without controversy. A week before the polls Chris Msando – the Independent Electoral and Boundaries Commission's head of information technology – was abducted and murdered. Furthermore, Odinga challenged Kenyatta's victory in court and on the 1st September Kenya's Supreme Court ruled the election illegal, null and void as it was not conducted in accordance with the Constitution. A fresh election was ordered and held in October 2017 but this was boycotted by Odinga, who argued that necessary reforms had not been addressed. The election still went ahead and Kenyatta was declared as the winner receiving 98.3% of votes with an official turnout of just 39% - which undermined the credibility of an election that was also marred by serious human rights violations by Kenyan security forces.

Conclusion

This chapter has covered a lot of ground in a short amount of space but what has been emphasised is that democracy in Kenya (like anywhere else) is (re)negotiated over time, going through episodes of struggle and change, reflecting people's demands and shifting global currents. As a means to summarise this chapter I briefly consider the characteristics of democracy in Kenya discussed above.

Evidently, competition for the capture of the State has largely been played out through the mobilisation of ethnic groups. This has principally been done through the political elites' practice of 'political tribalism', promoting ethnic animosities which at times have taken an antagonistic form. The chapter demonstrated how tactics by Kenya's political 'big men' are rooted in the country's colonial and postcolonial histories but are also rationally supported by citizens, who see it as their chance to 'have a seat at the table' - or in other words, acquire access to the State's resources. A consequence to the appeals of ethnic identity is that political parties have failed to institutionalise. New coalitions are frequently formed for elections, previous opponents become allies, and loyalties languish as the elite hop between coalitions. Thus, political parties are ephemeral in nature and rarely do they mobilise support through ideological or policy platforms. However, as also noted, Kenyans see themselves through many identities – such as: gender, youth, class, religion - and influencing these also shapes democratic choices.

What might be said about political parties' appeal to ethnic identities over democratic ideals, the State's brutally excessive use of force against citizens, impunity, and the pervasiveness of corruption, is that Kenya's democratisation is characterised by continuities with past political

processes. Yet that only tells half the story. Democratisation matters in Kenya and for decades its people have struggled and suffered for it. And it is because of that there are many reasons for optimism. Kenyans showed resilience in coming back from the 2007/8 PEV. The promulgation of a new Constitution, and its progressive Bill of Rights, protect the civil liberties and freedoms central to people's perceptions of democracy. However, whilst the new Constitution represents a progressive move to further consolidate democracy, public vigilance and robust engagement by Kenyan civil society is required to protect these gains. Recent attacks on Kenya's vibrant civil society and media demonstrates the need for the Constitution's defence, otherwise it is likely that Kenya's democratisation will continue to be characterised by a lot of back-and-forth.

In the subsequent chapters I argue that through their work visual artists show great inventiveness in coming up with new ways to reinvigorate democracy, performing it in the here and now, whilst also signposting what they see as its potentiality in society. However, in the immediate chapter that follows, I establish that just as Kenya's democratisation has been (re)informed and (re)evaluated through experiences from the past to the present so too has contemporary visual art. More specifically, I argue that throughout Kenya's first 50 years of independence the visual arts have been shaped by the socio-political conditions and influences in which they are made, but so too equally, influence society, occasionally in important ways.

Chapter Two

Fifty years of art and change

> ‘Is there contemporary art in East Africa?
>
> Yes! There is a great deal of contemporary art in East Africa – art that is defined by individual and collective logic, distanced yet not antagonistic towards the exigencies and exercise of western visual art practice. Contemporary art in East Africa draws inspiration from myth/reality; execution is figurative/symbolic, derivative/pure, contained/unruly. In other words, contemporary art in East Africa is the same inspiring fusion of paradoxes as is expected and accepted of contemporary art in other parts of the world.’ - Wanjiku Nyachae (1995: 161).

The above quotation comes from the occasion of Britain’s *Africa 95* arts festival and Kenya’s inclusion in what was perhaps the most influential of all its exhibitions, *Seven Stories About Modern Art in Africa*. Held at the Whitechapel Art Gallery, London, the exhibition was one of a growing number held in Europe and North America signalling an increased global interest in contemporary art from Africa at the end of the 20th century. Nyachae’s words, and the context for their uttering, make apparent efforts towards the dismantling of the periphery positioning of artists from the Global South on the world’s stage – something which has continued into the 21st century (Belting et al. 2013). Indeed, these are transformative developments. Yet, the concern for this thesis is to examine the extent to which contemporary visual art in Nairobi reinvigorates democracy. Thus, because the possibilities of this being achieved through Kenyan artists’ participation in distant ‘blockbuster exhibitions’ and biennales is tapered, focus shifts elsewhere. Still, Nyachae’s quote holds additional meaning because it reveals fragments to a plurality of contemporary art in an era of unprecedented globalisation. In other words, it suggests that regional and country developments do not occur in isolation to movements and ‘currents’ happening across the world (Smith 2013: 17-19). In a similar vein, African art historian Sidney

Littlefield Kasfir, argues that contemporary art develops through a process of 'bricolage' in which new processes and genres are grafted onto pre-existing structures (Kasfir 1999: 9). Therefore, an understanding of contemporary art in Nairobi today, and its potential to animate democracy, cannot be conceived outside it historical condition.

Thus, this chapter provides a concise description and historical overview of the development of contemporary visual art in Nairobi, from the ending of British colonialism up to 2013. [12] This timeframe covers the first fifty years of Kenyan independence. The objective is to contextualise the emergence of visual art practices in a period when notions of democracy itself were being formulated. In doing so it makes apparent the concept of bricolage and provides recognition to the fact that visual art is shaped by social influences and, equally, influences society, sometimes in fundamental ways. However, the chapter has a further aim. It will bring to the fore the argument made in the Introduction that over the 21st century Nairobi has seen a proliferation of critical socio-political artworks animating Kenya's public sphere.

Structured chronologically and divided into nine sections and a conclusion this chapter analyses specific instances in which art and ideals of democracy converge, whilst, at times, examining factors complicating this. I begin by discussing Kenya's fight for independence from British colonial rule. A series of subversive murals created during this period is analysed, which provide an apt reading of the socio-political changes happening at that time, and arts potential in resisting imperialism. Attention then turns to the immediate two decades following independence and to the type of venues and cultural platforms that supported an art that met the aspirations of Kenyans (as opposed to art produced for tourists). I use the example of *Joe* magazine to demonstrate that visual artists successfully enhanced the public sphere with social and political commentary, despite a culture of restricted freedoms. Reflections are then offered on the State's investment in art - with efforts to establish a national art gallery as an illustration of this. An increasingly repressive environment, spurred further by an attempted coup in 1982, coincided with a period of significant questioning of the role of art in postcolonial Kenya. This is examined through the work of visual artists associated with the early 1980s *Sisi kwa Sisi* movement. Attention then moves to the arrival of new donors and art-centres in the 1990s, and their role in offering alternatives to the existing means of art production and distribution. Following this the chapter focusses on the 21st century which brought huge political changes that reverberated in

[12] For a chronology of art venues in Nairobi and some significant moments in the emergence of modern and contemporary art in Kenya - dating from the early 20th century up to 2013 – see both Olivier Marcel's (2013) article *From Theatre Royal to Pop-up Galleries Timeline of Art Venues in Nairobi* and Elsbeth Court's (2017) article *Annotated Chronology for the Emergence of Modern Art in Kenya*.

the field of visual art. I argue that this period saw the uptake of conceptual art strategies and a belief that artists can use their work to forge new sites for the articulation of politics. Emphasis then turns to artists' re-evaluation of the potentiality of art in response to societal and political ruptures brought about by Kenya's 2007/8 post-election violence (PEV). I consider bottom up approaches to peace activism taking place in Kibera during and immediately after the PEV and question the extent to which these contributed to a reduction in violence, or provided opportunities for healing to occur. Two photography exhibitions displaying images from Kenya's 2007/8 PEV are then discussed and I examine their aptitude in creating spaces for reconciliation and remembering. Lastly, I discuss how during Kenya's 2013 election campaign a large peace consensus emerged. I suggest that whilst this co-opted some artists to create rather unchallenging work, for others it created opportunities where alternative forms of civic engagement developed. Together, instances in this chapter reveal throughout Kenya's first fifty years of independence the possibilities for visual art to rouse democratic ideals amongst the populace has been met with innovation but also a broad range of challenges.

Subversive murals during the Mau Mau uprising

I begin this chapter by considering the work of Tanzanian born artist Rekyaelimoo (Elimo) Njau, a graduate of fine art from Makerere University in Kampala, Uganda.[13] This is perhaps an odd starting point given Njau's roots and education in Kenya's neighbouring countries. However, in 1956, during the Kenya Land and Freedom Army's fight against British colonialism (also known as the Mau Mau uprising), Njau was commissioned to paint a series of murals to commemorate Christians killed in the conflict.[14] In 1959 Njau completed the murals (five in total) inside the

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[13] A significant development in visual art for East Africa was when in 1949 English woman Margaret Trowell founded the School of Fine Arts at Makerere College, Uganda. Trowell claims to not have forced her own ideas, style or form, on students but instead attempted to see 'the visual world through African eyes' and aimed to unlock the creativity of those whose outlook was untainted from modernist movements in Europe (Trowell 1957: 28). Trowel retired in 1958 and her successor Cecil Todd shifted the educational focus and encouraged 'European styles' (Mount 1973: 101). The school provided artists, many from Kenya, with possibilities to seriously engage in their practice and many graduates became teachers, and mentors to the younger generation of artist from Kenya.

[14] The conflict began in 1952 and ended in 1959. Writing about the Mau Mau uprising the historian David Anderson summarises: 'In the midst of the war, draconian anti-terrorist laws were introduced suspending the human rights of suspects, imposing collective punishments, facilitating detention without trial, permitting the seizure of property of convicts, and vastly extending the death penalty to a wide range of offences. Between 1952 and 1956, when the fighting was at its worst, the Kikuyu districts of Kenya became a police state in the very fullest sense of that term.' (Anderson 2005: 4).

Saint James and All Martyrs Cathedral, located in the central Kenyan town of Murang'a (known as Fort Hall in colonial times). The *Murang'a Murals* – as they came to be known - are credited with representing a shift from prevailing codes and styles of religious imagery in Africa, due to Njau's adoption of distinct 'African' Christian idioms (Mugambi 1992: 17-18; Nicodemus 1999: 84; Miller & Foster 2014: 25). As this section will argue, the striking murals can also be credited as being an early example of an artist using their work as a means of resistance against oppression, injustice, and violence.

The *Murang'a Murals* narrate Christ's life and reference material culture of the Kikuyu people in the landscape of central Kenya. Each measuring 3.5 by 4.5 meters, the *Murang'a Murals* are titled: *Nativity*, *Baptism*, *The Last Supper*, *Agony in the Garden*, and *Crucifixion*. Njau first visited Fort Hall in the mid-1950s in order to design the murals, and interact with locals, British settlers and soldiers, and Mau Mau members (Stinton 2007: 11). Whilst there, Njau was hosted by the Reverend Obadiah Kariuki who felt it was right that people fight for their own freedom in their own country, but did not agree with the Mau Mau's violent tactics (Miller & Foster 2014: 25). Furthermore, Njau was aware, and likely uplifted, by the process of decolonisation occurring on the continent - sentiments which I suggest crept into Njau's mural designs, offering nuanced and subversive readings of the Mau Mau uprising, social tensions, and the fight against imperialism.

In the mural titled *Nativity* (fig. 2.1) a hillside is occupied by a detention camp – one of a network set up by the British colonial Government (Baggallay 2011). Official figures claim 80,000 suspected Mau Mau fighters were imprisoned in a network of such camps, but David Anderson's (2005: 5) estimate is 150,000, whereas Caroline Elkins (2005: xi) suggest the true number is between 160,000 and 320,000. In the foreground of *Nativity* a black Jesus is born to black parents in a 'traditional' Kikuyu hut – something which Kenyan academic Jesse Mugambi (1992: 17) suggests as challenging ideals over white supremacy. A number of academics have noted this being radical for the time because it went against missionaries' common portrayal of Jesus as white and Satan as dark or black (Stinton 2007: 12; Gachihi 2014: 231). Njau has claimed that the representation of white as good and dark as evil had the effect of making Africans hate themselves (Mugambi 1992: 17). Thus, through his *Murang'a Murals,* Njau was challenging the status quo and making apparent what he saw to be the possible role for an artist in society. As explained by Njau, 'society is the mirror of the artist. When the image in the mirror is blurred, unclear, the artist will protest.' (Njau 2005: 283).

Other imagery within *Nativity* depicts the ongoing uprising and deep societal inequalities, but hope is not lost. This is made most evident through a new life entering the scene. Inspired by

Njau's mural of the same name, Pheroze Nowrojee's poem 'Nativity' aptly invokes this optimism and the profound implications of this given that Kenya was on the cusp of independence from Britain, saying: 'This birth of opposing power…The patrolled land will be vacated, For all tyrannies are temporary. In the artist's welling verdance and triumphant palette…Is the promise that hope is constantly around, Before and After this Birth.' (as quoted in Miller 2014: 15).

Figure 2.1. *Nativity*, by Elimo Njau, 1959, the first of Njau's five murals painted on the interior wall of the Saint James and All Martyrs Memorial Cathedral in Murang'a, Kenya.

Of the five murals painted by Njau, Mugambi writes 'anyone who has suffered direct imperial subjugation, anywhere in the world, will immediately identify with the characters in Njau's murals, even in the absence of commentary.' (2014: 43). Given that over fifty years on from their original creation the *Murang'a Murals* remain, Mugambi's remarks come across as particularly poignant, decidedly so when there are otherwise few memorials that have been created in Kenya to the Mau Mau.[15] Christianity continued to be a great inspiration for many visual artists in Kenya

[15] In Nairobi a statue of Field Marshall Dedan Kimathi Wachiuri, was unveiled at the junction of Kimathi Street and Mama Ngina Street on 18th February 2007 - fifty years on from his execution by the British (Coombes 2011). Eight years later, on 12th September 2015, another sculpture to the Mau Mau was inaugurated in Nairobi, this time in Uhuru Park –showing a Mau Mau fighter being brought food by a woman fighter during the uprising. It was a 'Memorial to the Victims of Torture and Ill-Treatment During the Colonial Era (1952–1960)'. Both sculptures were

(Agthe 1994). However, what Elimo Njau's *Muranga Murals* offer is more than an innovative religious imagery; they also provide an evocative example of the possibilities for art to explore communal trauma and memory in Kenya (Kurtz 2016).

'Kenya, where are we going?'

Kenya attained independence on 12th December 1963, with Jomo Kenyatta – who had been imprisoned during the Mau Mau uprising – as first president of the newly-formed Republic.[16] Shortly after, in 1965, the Paa ya Paa art-centre was founded by Elimo Njau and Rebecca Njau, Hilary Ng'weno, James Kangwana, Jonathan Kariara, Charles and Primila Lewis, Terry Hirst and Pheroze Nowrojee (Hirst 2014: 60).[17] The philosophy of Paa ya Paa was to 'rise above' art created for tourists (Court 2002: 23).[18] In 1968 Hilary Ng'weno wrote how Kenya had been in the midst of a tourist boom following independence which resulted in artists turning to commercial work rather than purely artistic work. The reason for this, Ng'weno writes, is because 'it is mementos that the tourists want, not art, but the unfortunate thing is that right now the tourist is the only steady patron of art in the country' (Ng'weno 1968: 69). Thus, Elimo Njau declared: 'we wanted some place where the serious artist can exhibit his works without worrying about tourist tastes' (as quoted in Ng'weno 1968: 69). An implication of this, writes the cartoonist Terry Hirst, was that Paa ya Paa provocatively introduced modern art to Kenya (Hirst 2014: 60-61). The art-centre became the main focus of creativity in East Africa, furthering art of a kind that stimulated intellectual critique, becoming a hub for visual artists, writers, poets, playwrights, and intellectuals.

These preliminary remarks about the Paa ya Paa art-centre introduce some of the key issues at the crux of discussion in this section; those being how patronage, or the lack of, impact the work artists produce. I will argue that in the first two decades of independence the lack of government

designed by the Kenyan artist Kevin Oduor. For sites of commemorating the Mau Mau in other parts of Kenya see the book *Managing Heritage, Making Peace* (Coombes, Hughes & Karega-Munene 2014).

[16] Jomo Kenyatta's detention gave credence to the colonial fabricated myth which identified him as the brains behind, and the leader of the Mau Mau movement.

[17] The Paa ya Paa art-centre followed on from the short lived artists' and writers' club *Chemi Chemi Cultural Centre* – which established in 1961 and became fully operational in 1963 until 1965 (Mount 1973: 66).

[18] In Kiswahili 'paa' means both 'rise' and 'antelope'. This loosely translates as 'rising above the antelope' – a reference to the centre's philosophy of rising above the confines, styles and intentions of art created and dictated by tourists (a wooden antelope figure was a popular mass-produce carving acquired by visitors to Kenya at the time).

support for artists and cultural workers contributed to an undeveloped art infrastructure and a narrow market. Whilst patronage from tourists provided opportunities for visual artists to make a living, I suggest it came at the cost of making work that could have been more critical and radical in nature. Evidently, the restrictions in freedoms contributed to this, however I contend that there were instances in which visual artists successfully enhanced the public sphere with social and political commentary through methods of satire.

Paa ya Paa stands in contrast to what were otherwise sluggish developments in the visual arts following independence. Despite their value being formally recognised in national development plans, seemingly more pressing issues channelled government resources away from culture and art.[19] Unlike newly independent states elsewhere in Africa (which were supportive of art's role in the project of nation building) government patronage of art in Kenya was scant (Miller 1975: 21).[20] State support for the arts did, however, occasionally take place. In 1965 the Government supported a national art competition for the *Kenya Freedom from Hunger Campaign*.[21] Artist Elkana Ong'esa won first prize in the sculpture category for his soapstone carving, entitled *Daily Bread*, which depicted an emancipated man eating a cob of maize; the winner of the painting category was reportedly President Kenyatta's daughter (Manyuira 2015). Yet, whilst more often than not the Government seldom promoted visual art, the President did allow for himself to be the subject of artworks (Miller 1975: 21 Agthe 1990: 79).

Two statues of President Kenyatta were the first and only monuments to be erected in postcolonial Nairobi during his presidency (between 1963 and 1978). Both monuments were designed and sculpted in England (Larsen 2011: 264). The historical geographer Laragh Larsen writes of how the monuments of Kenyatta were 'deliberately portrayed as synonymous with the independent country. No other ideals or ideologies were visualised in the creation of a Kenyan identity.' (Larsen 2011: 264-265). In other words, the monuments were about the president asserting his power. After the initial euphoria of independence, the idea that peace and unity

[19] Culture's value was recognised in Kenya's 1970-74 national development plan as contributing to the 'realization of national unity and cohesion and the creation of national pride and sense of identity among our people.' (Ndeti 1975: 35).

[20] For example in Senegal the President Leopold Senghor set up *Ecole des arts du Senegal* – a national school for drama, music, fine art and architecture; with the state buying the best work of the graduates. Senghor devoted 25% of the state budget to culture and regularly spoke of the contribution that artists from Senegal could make to national development (Harney 2004).

[21] The Ministry for Agriculture and Animal Husbandry initiated the formation of Kenya's *Freedom from Hunger Campaign* and it is likely that the art competition was used to fulfil the campaign's objectives of 'stimulating public interest and support for the campaign' (Kenya National Assembly Official Record (Hansard) Nov 2 - Dec 10, 1965: 729).

would follow quickly evaporated as the president and his party - the Kenya African National Union (KANU) - stamped their authority and clamped down on opposition (Khapoya 1979). In 1969 the poet Abdilatif Abdalla, was imprisoned in solitary confinement for three years after writing the pamphlet *Kenya: Twendapi?* (Kenya, where are we going?). Abdalla's pamphlet critiqued the dictatorial tendencies of Jomo Kenyatta and his KANU Government (Kresse 2016). What remained consistent were the monuments of Kenyatta, with their overbearing gaze – an instance of French Marxist philosopher and sociologist Henri Lefebvre's warning that monuments have an ability to 'mask the will to power and the arbitrariness of power beneath signs and surfaces which claim to express collective will and collective thought' (1991: 143).

The Kenyan Government wasted opportunities to work with local artists. For instance, Sam Wanjau's triumphant concrete Mau Mau *Freedom Fighter* statue, which embodies social and political identities and Kenyan history, was rejected after initially being commissioned by the then Attorney General Charles Njonjo to stand outside Kenya's Parliament (fig. 2.2).[22] By excluding local artists in the creation of the first forms of public art in postcolonial Kenya, the Government effectively legitimised existing inequalities and injustices found in Nairobi's artworld. The majority of art galleries in Nairobi were run by, and catered for, a non-indigenous population. For instance, in 1969 Gallery Watatu was opened by artists Robin Anderson, David Hart and Jony Waite – all of whom were non-black Kenyans or expatriates who made Kenya their home and successfully marketed their artwork at the gallery. Gallery Watatu, writes freelance art writer Judith Von D. Miller (1975: 42), operated as 'a Western-style art gallery' which, despite exhibiting local as well as international artists, principally attracted tourists and expatriates.[23]

[22] The statue came to rest in the grounds of the Paa ya Paa art-centre where it has proudly stood ever since. However it currently faces the risk of being lost as a consequence of being severely damaged in 2018.

[23] Artists exhibited at Gallery Watatu included: John Dian'ga, Jak Katarikawe, Theresa Musoke, Ancent Soi, Etale Sukuro, Samwel Wanjau- and Robin Anderson and Jony Waite.

Figure 2.2. *Freedom Fighter*, 1970-71, reinforced cement, by Samuel Wanjau.

Other developments at the time included the then established *University of East Africa* which provided opportunities to undertake various art courses. However, this was short lived and ceased in the early 1970s due to political upheaval and new art education and training bodies being established.[24] An undeveloped art infrastructure and narrow market dissuaded some from pursuing an artistic career.[25] In order to make a living many artists produced work reflecting the prevalent concepts of 'Africa' desired by tourists, rather than work for a critical audience (Mount 1973: 39-61). In a 1975 UNESCO report entitled *Cultural Policy in Kenya* Kivuto Ndeti (the Kenyan academic and author of the report) criticised an overemphasis on paintings depicting 'exotic ethnic groups', 'wildlife' and 'landscapes' – which the author described as a 'hangover from colonial times' that 'catch the eye of the tourist but say nothing of any interest about Kenya's cultural history' (Ndeti 1975: 57). That said, a number of artists' work reflected honestly on

[24] In 1963 the Universities in Nairobi and Dar es Salaam joined with Makerere in Kampala to form the University of East Africa. Subjects covering the arts would be allocated across the institutions with an agreement to exchange students whose subject was not taught in their country (Nyachae 1995: 165). Nairobi taught 'applied arts and industrial design', Dar es Salaam covered 'theatre arts' and Makerere 'fine art' (Picton 2002: 10-11).

[25] An example of this was evident just outside Nairobi when in the 1960s a group of talented painters from Ngecha (a community which later becomes famed for its home grown artists) moved to the Rift Valley to start farming due to finding little appreciation or market for their work (Ngugi 2004: 36).

aspects of everyday life relevant to most Kenyans – such as that of John Diang'a, Rosemary Karuga, Edward Njenga (fig. 2.3), Francis Ndigwa, and Elkana Ong'esa.

Figure 2.3. Edward Njenga, *No Vacancy*, 1970 Terracotta, which recalls the period of high unemployment in Kenya when desperate people would flock to factories and companies in the hopes of finding work.

Nevertheless, criticisms mounted regarding visual art's detachment from social and political commentary during this period. For instance, in *Art in East Africa: A Guide to Contemporary Art* Judith Von D. Miller could reflect:

> 'Perhaps the most striking omission in the art of East Africa is the art of social comment. Where does an artist express feelings about African unity, African freedom fighters, African socialism or protest or social comment of any sort? Only a few artists have touched on these subjects at all. Most tend to present life as they see it, with no inferences drawn. It seems to point to a degree of fatalism or perhaps a sense of powerlessness, certainly a psychological holding back. Emotions are kept in check, opinions kept inside. Perhaps anger and protests are yet to come.' (Miller 1975: 19)

Miller and Ndeti's assessments of visual art a decade on from Kenya's independence is in contrast to the novels, plays, poetry and stories being produced over the 1960s and 1970s, which at the time were said be 'a new source of inspiration in protest' (Ndeti 1975: 48). For example, the Kenyan cultural analyst and academic Joyce Nyairo writes of how popular songs in the mid-1970s reflected an angry response to the draconian measures of Kenyatta's regime – which in 1969 had banned any opposition, keen to consolidate power without rivalry (Nyairo 2015: 70-73). Having said that, one clear anomaly to the suggestion that art lacked social comment was the launch of *Joe* magazine in 1973.

Each issue of *Joe* magazine - Kenya's first humorous periodical - brought a mixture of writing and artwork to an audience of approximately 200,000 Kenyans (Frederiksen 1991: 154). Numerous short stories and articles (which revolved around social issues of the day) were illustrated and the magazine included cartoon strips portraying urban life (fig. 2.4 & 2.5). The cartoonist Terry Hirst - a founder of *Joe* magazine along with Hilary Ng'weno - illustrated the artworks together with Kimani Gathigiri, Edward Gitau, Oscar Eshikati and Frank Odoi, among scores of other visual artists (Frederiksen 1991: 140-142; AwaaZ 2017: 8). *Joe* magazine, which ceased publication in 1979, has been credited with 'unlocking the potential of cartoons as social and political commentaries…serving as an inspiration for a whole generation of cartoonists' (Lent 2008: 163). What set *Joe* magazine apart from other Kenyan publications which included the work of cartoonists was that it 'did not shy away from the political' and 'unlocked the potential of cartoons to discuss any issue' (Gathara 2004: 21).[26] Furthermore, the academic of culture and politics Bodil Frederiksen (1991: 152) suggests the magazine constituted 'a fairly open and democratic public sphere, perhaps one of the few which was accessible' at the time. The reason for this is that *Joe* magazine was on the whole drawn and written by Kenyans, covered themes relevant to an urban population, and encouraged the habit of discussion and dialogue (Frederiksen 1991). Notably however, Frederiksen highlights limitations to *Joe* magazine's enhancement of the public sphere, which relate to it being printed in English and covering political issues in a humorous manner rather than in serious ways that could have attracted governmental censure (Frederiksen 1991: 154).[27] Other forms of art and culture, most notably theatre, cannot be accused of steering clear of political issues, despite State harassment.[28]

[26] Cartoons started appearing in the 1950s in East African periodicals *Mambo Leo* and *Tazama*. The 1970s and 1980s saw the newspapers *Taifa Leo*, *Daily Nation* and *Nairobi Times* increasingly publish indigenous and foreign cartoons of a political and social commentary nature (Khasandi-Telewa 2014; Lent 2008).

[27] In 1974 Ng'weno left *Joe* magazine and set up the *Weekly Review.* One of the reasons for Ng'weno's departure was because he was dissatisfied with the tactic of using humour to deliver important social and political news stories and instead wanted to create an alternative platform for this to happen (Ogola 2017: 62).

[28] The popular fiction column, *Whispers*, which was written by Wahome Mutahi and published in local newspapers from 1983 to 2003 is one such example. *Whispers* was a site of social, cultural and political expression whilst interrogating the 'performance of power' in the country (Ogola 2005).

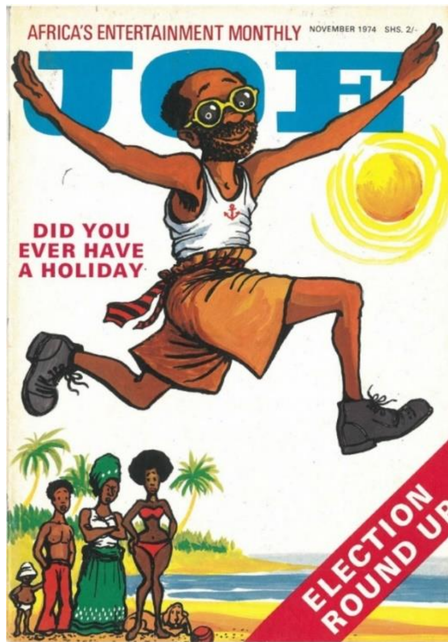

Figure 2.4. Front cover of *Joe* magazine November 1974, this issue provided an 'election round up' – note that when the election on 14th October 1974 took place the country was a de facto one-party state, Jomo Kenyatta ran unopposed, although some cabinet ministers lost their seat.

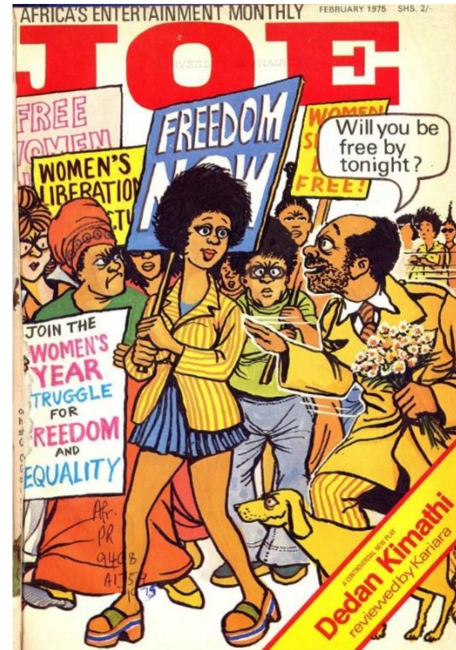

Figure 2.5. Front cover of *Joe* magazine February 1975, the front cover references International Women's Year which was the name given to 1975 by the United Nations.

University lecturer, playwright and novelist, Ngugi wa Thiong'o, was a persistent critic of the Kenyan Government – as were many university lecturers and students in Nairobi during the 1970s. Kenyatta's regime, rattled by a growing stand against the Government, became increasingly intolerant of dissent. Thiong'o's 1977 performance of *Ngaahika Ndeenda* (I Will Marry When I Want) provoked his arrest. Thiong'o's interpretation of Kenyan politics and use of writing and fiction to take on the postcolonial state, corruption and vice among the political elite of Kenya, proved too much for the authorities. Following his imprisonment he went into exile. The freedoms of artists and cultural workers receded, prompted by the succession of Daniel arap Moi as president following Kenyatta's death in 1978.

As Moi took office, he replaced the national motto of *Harambee* (let us pull together) with the phrase *Nyayo* (footsteps). The notion of *Harambee* stressed the active participation of the people, although in reality the Kenyatta regime only paid lip service to this idea. In contrast to *Harambee*, the essence of Moi's *Nyayoism* is submission, which 'orders the people to follow passively wherever the leader's footsteps might lead' (Index on Censorship 1983: 27). The result of this was the limitation of democratic space and restrictive censorship which lasted over twenty years. Those who tried to provide counter narratives to the Government's rhetoric faced detention

without trial. Political opposition groups were banned leading to a *de facto* one-party state. An era of cultural suppression ensued in which creativity was described as going into 'hibernation' (Mboya 2007: 170). For the artist this meant working in an environment of fear, restriction, paranoia, and risk. Playwrights and poets were detained, drama performances and theatres were shut down, certain publications were banned, and a number of cultural workers and intellectuals became compelled to live outside Kenya.[29] These conditions stifled the determination of progressive cultural activists, artists, and intellectuals in redefining the social role of art in Kenya's postcolonial society (Enwezor and Okeke-Agulu 2009: 32).

During this period of suppression, the visual art movement *Sisi kwa Sisi* ('for us, by us' in Kiswahili) emerged.[30] The movement's roots lay in the 1970s when university theatre productions with rebellious undertones faced bans by the oppressive authorities (Sukuro 1995: 285). But *Sisi kwa Sisi* is also connected to efforts made in the late 1970s and early 1980s to initiate a national art gallery in Nairobi, and the holding of a notable national exhibition of art and material culture at Nairobi City Hall in 1981. Attention now turns to these significant events.

State investment in visual art

In 1972 African Heritage, the first Pan-African Gallery, was established by former Vice-President Joseph Murumbi, his wife Sheila and the American Alan Donovan.[31] At a speech for African Heritage's opening, Joseph Murumbi stated: 'I have been trying for a number of years to get our Government interested in allocating a piece of land in the city of Nairobi for the construction of a national art gallery, but I am afraid that although so much is said about the preservation of African culture, this aspect is entirely neglected' (as quoted in Thurston 2015: 290). Murumbi, went on to say: 'we have amongst us several brilliant artists whose works should be preserved in a national art gallery for the benefit of present and future generations' (as quoted in Thurston

[29] See Index on Censorship - Volume 12, Number 4, Aug 01, 1983 – for a brief overview on censorship and suppression of freedom of expression faced by those in the field of the arts in Kenya from independence up to the early 1980s. Index on Censorship is a forum for reporting, monitoring, analysing and discussing freedom of speech around the globe. It is a non-profit organisation that was founded in 1972 and is known for publishing work by censored writers and artists.

[30] The literal translation of *Sisi kwa Sisi* is 'For us by us' but Etale Sukuro a participating group member of *Sisi kwa Sisi* says that in effect it means 'For Kenyan artists and their Kenyan audience by Kenyan artists and their inspirational sources – the Kenyan people' (Sukuro 1995: 283).

[31] African Heritage was foreseen by Joseph Murumbi as a place 'where artists and craftspeople from across the continent could meet and display their creativity as well as exchange ideas' (Donovan 2007: 8). The World Bank is said to have described it as 'the most organised wholesale and craft operation in Africa' (Vigne and Martin 2001: 26).

2015: 290). In this section I discuss the quest for a national art gallery in Kenya. In doing so I reveal tensions that became apparent as to whether the gallery should have a national or pan-African focus. I go on to argue that a government sponsored national art exhibition in 1981 demonstrated the value of State patronage for both artists and the public. Specifically, I suggest this exhibition provided rarely afforded opportunities for displaying artworks articulating Kenya's post-colonial situation to a large, and largely Kenyan, audience. However, I go on to reveal that whilst this represented a departure from the modus operandi of Nairobi's commercial art galleries, the State's intolerance to some artworks exposed the limitations of using such a space to articulate viewpoints critical of the Government.

In the late 1970s a national art gallery was under serious discussion. The Kenya National Archives and Documentation Services (KNADS), which had previously been located at Jogoo House was reportedly given the Kenya Commercial Bank (KCB) building for the purpose of a national gallery, following the Kenyan Government purchasing it from KCB in 1977.

A budget for a national art gallery was duly included in Kenya's development strategy document *Planning for progress: our fourth development plan, 1979-1983* and work by artists for the inaugural exhibition began to be canvassed. An article entitled *The Mystery of the National Gallery* - published in *The Weekly Review* (February 1982) - claimed that since 1978 the Kenya Artists and Designers Association (KADA), the Central Art Club of Kenya, and the KNADS had been planning a major national exhibition which would be the inaugural event for the national art gallery.

However, plans soon changed as decisions were made for the KNADS to occupy the KCB building. In addition to this the building would also house Joseph Murumbi's enormous collection of artworks and artefacts from across the continent – only a fraction of which was work from Kenya (Agthe 1990: 81). Furthermore, the KNADS withdrew their sponsorship of the planned exhibition in favour for housing the Murumbi collection, although it continued to hold out the promise of using the KCB building as an exhibition venue at some point. Having already contacted artists from around the country for their work to be submitted for a national art exhibition at the proposed national art gallery, KADA felt frustrated with KNADS' decision to house the Murumbi collection. A letter written on 21st August 1981 from KADA to the permanent secretary in the Ministry of Constitutional and Home Affairs stated:

> 'Now to feature foreign art in the national gallery would be against the very principle that motivated us to work for a national art exhibition. In the event of preference being given to the Murumbi collection over national art, we feel that we have no alternative but to

> withdraw the works which we have brought under the custody of the Kenya National Archives. We had committed ourselves to the artists and designers in Kenya that their work would feature in the inaugural exhibition of their national gallery. We feel that we should not be held responsible to the artists and to the Kenyan society for the exhibition that does not reflect the great artistic traditions of our forty-five nationalities.'[32]

The establishment of a national art gallery never materialised and, to date, the closest the Government has come to fulfilling this has been the opening of the *Gallery of Contemporary Art In East Africa* at Nairobi National Museum (NNM) in 1986.[33] When the realisation of a national art gallery and its inaugural exhibition failed, artists turned to the newly formed Ministry of Culture and Social Services whose director turned out to be James Kangwana, one of the founding members of Paa ya Paa. In a short time, the committee of artists and the Ministry of Culture and Social Services organised the significant exhibition *Utamaduni wa Sanaa*, which opened in December 1981, at Nairobi's City Hall (Sukuro 1990: 146).

Utamaduni wa Sanaa was a remarkable event. Public institutions in the past had shown little interest in promoting the work of Kenyan artists from across the country so this act appeared to signal an awakening from this dormancy. A review of *Utamaduni wa Sanaa* in Kenya's *Daily Nation* newspaper stated:

> 'By organising and sponsoring the kind of exhibition that opened at City hall yesterday, the Ministry of Culture and Social Services has given local artists a forum to express themselves and a Kenyan audience a chance to view, appreciate and share truly Kenyan works of art based on ideas that bind us together as a nation.'[34]

Hundreds of paintings, sculptures and material culture from across Kenya were included in the exhibition and it received thousands of visitors and considerable coverage in the national press. The reception of *Utamaduni wa Sanaa* by the Kenyan public was notable, which is partly because it took place outside the commercial domains of Kenya's artworld. In 1981 the Kenyan visual artist Dianga explained the situation of commercial art galleries in Nairobi as being exclusive places where Kenyans could not walk in freely, thus representing closed shops that were not in the

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[32] Quoted in the Kenyan publication *The Weekly Review*, February 26, 1982: 42.

[33] According to Etale Sukuro, who was on the organising committee of artists for the National Gallery, the Gallery of Contemporary Art In East Africa 'was nothing like what we had wanted. We artists no longer had a say in the way the gallery would be run.' (Swigert 2011: 82).

[34] Quote from article titled *An awakening to Kenyan culture* in the *Daily Nation* newspaper, Tuesday, December 15, 1981, pg.6.

interest of the nation (Muthai 1981a: 10). *Utamaduni wa Sanaa* differed from this. The exhibition catalogue described the philosophy behind the display of the artworks as being 'a vehicle for discharging information and opinion which are aesthetically expressed by Kenyans about Kenya and to a Kenyan audience'. The timing of the exhibition was also significant, coinciding with the national holiday Jamhuri Day (Republic Day), thus offering a time for Kenyans to reflect on the country's achievements and failures. And many of the artworks did just that.

Writing in the *Daily Nation*, Wahome Mutahi says the artworks in *Utamaduni wa Sanaa* fell into two categories with the most distinct being 'artists of anger who are disenchanted with the present society and bring out the ills that are eating away the social, economic and political fabric' (Mutahi 1981). Artists in this category included Kibacia Gatu, Gakunja Kaigwa, Chege Kahari, Henry Mundia, Gikonyo Maina and Kang'ara wa Njambi, whereas other artists such as Fred Oduya and Etale Sukuro produced work reflective of rural life and traditions.

Painting was the favoured medium of artworks in *Utamaduni wa Sanaa*. It was, however, the artwork's subject matter that came across as most striking and in complete contrast to suggestions just five years previously that most art exhibited in Nairobi steered clear of political narratives and critiques. This did not go unnoticed by the authorities who, according to Etale Sukuro, removed two of the artist Kibacia Gatu's paintings (Sukuro 1995: 285). The reason being was that the artworks' subject matter was deemed seditious because Gatu's paintings unapologetically depicted the inequalities and injustices which the ordinary Kenyan faced in postcolonial Kenya (fig. 2.6).

It is worth briefly recalling here of one of Gatu's paintings, titled *Dugu Monica Njeri* (Comrade Monica Njeri), exhibited at *Utamaduni wa Sanaa*. The painting portrayed the story of Monica Njeri who was working in Mombasa as a sex worker to support her family, when in 1980 she was murdered and robbed by Frank Sundstrom - a US naval officer. Despite pleading guilty to manslaughter, Sundstrom was fined $70 and let go. Such an injustice rightly infuriated many Kenyans. The story of Njeri, and indeed Gatu's portrayal of it and his use of symbolism – such as his painting of an American eagle shooting arrows at ordinary Kenyans – can be interpreted as a critique to the Kenyan Government's support for US imperialism. It was, after all, in 1980 when the Moi regime signed a pact with the US Government to allow its military to use land, air and naval facilities in Kenya.

Gatu's *Dugu Monica Njeri* painting was bought by the Ministry of Culture. The artist had hoped that it would be kept for a future national gallery. However, in interview with Gatu he told how he has, unfortunately, not seen the painting since it was purchased – believing it to have

disappeared, or even destroyed in an act of censorship by the State.[35] If true then what a loss for appreciators of visual art from Kenya and the country's history. *Dugu Monica Njeri* did nevertheless enter the public domain once again and, in doing so, inspired others to use art as a means of highlighting injustices. For instance, in the early 1980s, *Viva* (the first women's magazine published in East Africa) printed Gatu's *Dugu Monica Njeri* painting on its front cover (Williams 2017). Upon seeing this, the writer, artist, and human rights activist Zarina Patel states it ignited a new a direction for her artistic endeavours which launched her into creating protest art (Patel 2018: 19-20).

Figure 2.6. *The fed and the hungry*, painting by Kibacia Gatu which was exhibited at the 1981 City Hall exhibition *Utamaduni wa Sanaa*.

The support given by the Ministry of Culture to hold *Utamaduni wa Sanaa* shows the impact that State patronage can have for the visual arts and indeed the wider Kenyan public. However, despite the success of *Utamaduni wa Sanaa*, promises from the Ministry of Culture that this would become an annual event failed to materialise in a way that the committee of artists who worked in realising the exhibition had envisioned (Sukuro 1990: 146, Court 2002: 23).[36] As such, the status quo remained, which meant art simply did not reach the majority of Nairobi's urban dwellers, nor was most of the visual art produced intended to do so.[37] That said, an obvious

[35] Interview with Kibacia Gatu at Paa ya Paa art-centre (30/01/2018).

[36] Over this period there were also changes within the Ministry of Culture, notably its director James Kangwana who was very sympathetic to supporting visual artists left the ministry in 1982.

[37] In 1981, the artist Ong'esa stated 'commercial art galleries take 30-40% commission from the sale of our works when we exhibit there. If the Government established a gallery this would not be the case' (Muthai 1981a: 10). However, it should be noted that these galleries (and indeed the French and German cultural institutes) enabled

exception to this was the general publics' exposure to hand painted signs and murals, used to advertise businesses and commercial activities in the city.[38]

With non-Kenyans largely controlling Nairobi's galleries, discontent grew regarding their influence on Kenyan cultural production. Frustrated by the cultural and political climate - and looking to create a wider art-appreciating society and expand the role of art in a postcolonial environment - a group of mostly university-trained artists came together, which included: Etale Sukuro, Mwaniki wa Gichia, Kang'ara wa Njambi, Kahare Miano, Gikonyo Maina, Kibacia Gatu and Pheroze Nowjojee. These artists mobilised their resources and took their art into Nairobi's neighbourhoods and directly to the people in a series of exhibitions and activities which came to be known as *Sisi kwa Sisi*.[39]

Art by and for the people

This section examines the possibilities and limitations of using art to mobilise Kenyans' participation in the public sphere in an era of authoritarianism. Specifically, it will discuss the valiant efforts of *Sisi kwa Sisi* - a group of self-organised artists, who employed art as a form of protest, as a means to create social awareness, and to explore understandings into postcolonial urban society.

Sisi kwa Sisi involved organised exhibitions at schools, social halls, markets, on Nairobi's streets and public parks. This tactic made artwork accessible to people who otherwise might feel

many artists to find a market for their work, thus giving them a livelihood. For example, the visual artist Etale Sukuro regularly exhibited at Gallery Watatu.

[38] Incorporating written and figurative elements, the work of sign-writers represented the desire for visibility of both the urban population and small enterprises mushrooming in the city context. Sign-writing is an urban phenomenon. Without the rapid growth of Nairobi and other urban centres during and after the colonial period, sign-writing in Kenya would not exist. The visual landscape of Kenya's capital city, Nairobi, began transforming in the 1950s with the advent of sign-writing, and has continued in subsequent decades, thanks to the emergence of this material practice (Sukuro 1990). As a reaction to changing urban cultures and economic shifts in the 20th Century the profession of sign-writing developed and cultivated local styles. According to Sidney Kasfir, it is 'a practice firmly situated within Kenya's informal sector, on the street, and within a matrix of entrepreneurial activity' (Kasfir 1999: 38). Learnt skills and artistic freedom of sign-writing afforded many young artists an avenue to earn an income while developing their own artistic style. In Kenya a number of internationally well-known and established artists started their careers and art exposure through sign-writing (these include: Ancent Soi, Joel Oswaggo, Richard Onyango, Joseph Bertiers, Otieno Gomba, Otieno Kota, Ashif Malamba, Michael Musyoka, Wycliffe Opondo, Kevo Stero). In 21st century Nairobi sign-writing is under threat of extinction as a consequence of new technologies.

[39] These artists were already familiar with one another as a consequence of their roles in fighting for a national art gallery and because of their organisation and participation in the 1981 City Hall exhibition.

excluded from, or were unaware of, settler-owned galleries and/or art spaces such as Paa ya Paa – which was anyway in effect an elitist space.[40] This approach effectively acted as a means of using art to communicate with the masses.[41]

Artworks included in *Sisi kwa Sisi* exhibitions addressed issues pertinent to Kenyan society with themes covering colonialism, postcolonialism, disappearing traditions, inequality, oppression, corruption and greed (Sukuro 1990: 147, 1995: 285, Picton 2002: 11-12). In interview, Kibacia Gatu recalled 'we became left in our thinking and adopted socialist approaches to art and expression. Art was not something for leisure, it had to have a purpose…we needed to use our art for more than pure aesthetics but for action.'[42] Gatu's paintings portrayed significant moments in Kenya's postcolonial history and were created in a style he describes as 'social realism'.[43] The purpose of his paintings, Gatu says, was to create 'social awareness and provoke, you would call it a kind of protest art…we were protesting against the system and of course the solution that some of our paintings offered was peoples' power'.[44] Zarina Patel (the formidable Kenyan writer, activist and artist of South Asian descent) briefly interacted with *Sisi kwa Sisi* members and replicated the process of taking art to the people in Mombasa, sharing similar sentiments to Gatu.[45] In the early 1980s, Patel became involved in activities aimed at raising public awareness of the deteriorating political situation of the country, saying: 'in this period of gloom and fear, I turned to art to remind both myself and fellow Kenyans of our history of

[40] At times artwork that had been exhibited at Gallery Watatu, the Goethe-Institut Nairobi or the French Cultural Centre – such as Etale Sukuro's studies on ethnic groups, which drew similarities to the romantic artwork of Kenyan 'tribes' by conservationist and artist Joy Adamson – were exhibited at the *Sisi kwa Sisi* exhibitions; thus emphasising the idea that Kenyans appreciate and enjoy artwork found in the city's exhibition spaces and art is not a matter only for the elites. However Sukuro's work of ethnic groups also highlight the different position of artists in *Sisi kwa Sisi*. That is because Sukuro was one of the few artist that was making a living through selling his work in Nairobi's galleries and cultural institutions, whereas other artists like Kibacia Gatu had a salaried job so he did not have to produce work that was commercially orientated.

[41] It has been suggested that these exhibitions attracted up to 12,000 visitors per day - though this figure and level of engagement is questionable (Sukuro 1990: 146-147, Nyache 1995: 181). Records and comments of those who attended the exhibitions were kept however these have lacked analysis and are unpublished. Where a small number of quotes from six respondents was published they expressed: Happiness that these exhibitions had come to their communities; that Kenyans could be artists – not just foreigners; and that there should be greater opportunities to learn art in school (Sukuro 1990: 147).

[42] Interview with Kibacia Gatu at Paa ya Paa art-centre (30/01/2018).

[43] Ibid.

[44] Ibid.

[45] Interview with Zarina Patel from her home in Nairobi (02/02/2018).

resistance. Thus, I had impulsively launched into a project of protest art.' (Patel 2018: 20).[46] Gatu and Patel's work demonstrates an adopted approach to realist paintings which articulated narratives from colonial and postcolonial Kenya to depict the rising up of the people, and highlight injustices faced by the ordinary Kenyan. These artists' subversive approach chimes with Okwui Enwezor and Chika Okeke-Agulu's observation of art produced in Africa in the 1980s that 'realism was not only a representational device and method of picturing the malaise of crisis, it was also an important strategy of ethical identification and participation in the public sphere.' (Enwezor & Okeke-Agulu 2009: 30).

Figure 2.7. *Makhan Singh leads Trade Unionists*, painting by Zarina Patel, circa 1980s. The image narrates actual events from 1937 and depicts the founder of Kenya's trade union movement, Makhan Singh, leading a demonstration along what is today Moi Avenue. The demonstrators are carrying placards demanding better working conditions and higher wages.

Figure 2.8. *Hawkers*, painting by Zarina Patel, circa 1980s. Image portrays women hawkers in 1979 along Tom Mboya Street who decided that 'enough was enough' and rose up against city council askaris (guards) who regularly harassed them.

[46] Zarina Patel describes protest art as 'art produced by activists or social movements which highlight injustice, prejudice, good versus evil, rich versus poor and all matters of social, political and economic discord. The aim is to raise public awareness and to promote human rights and social change. Protest art keeps the discussions termed subversive or seditious alive during the times when state suppression is at its highest.' (Patel 2018: 20).

According to another artists involved in *Sisi kwa Sisi*, Gikonya Maina, 'we were not interested in selling the paintings. We would exhibit them with the intention of moving the same exhibition to different places in order to enlighten the people.'[47] Maina states that for him '[*Sisi kwa Sisi*] was expressing what was going on in our time in history…it was a group that was really committed to enlightening people on the goings on during the Moi era.'[48] It has been suggested that during the Moi regime visual art faced less censorship (real or perceived) than other art forms (such as literature and theatre) 'because the ruling powers never really took them seriously' (Karmali 2013: 4). The same cannot be said for the artists of *Sisi kwa Sisi* and their conviction that painting could be used as a critique to the postcolonial state. As stated by Enwezor and Okeke-Agulu (2009: 3) '…Sisi kwa Sisi speaks to how self-organized groups of artists sought directly to motivate and inspire popular participation in the public sphere through the instrumentalisation of art.'[49] However, the extent to which 'protest art' was able to directly engender a collective critical consciousness amongst the populace never reached its full potential given the political climate at the time.

On the morning of 1st August 1982 a group of soldiers from the Kenya Air Force sought to overthrow President Daniel arap Moi's Government (Branch 2012: 154-159). A statement prepared by those who organised the attempted coup read:

> 'Over the past six months we have witnessed with disgust the imposition of a de jure one-party system without the people's consent, arbitrary arrest and the detention of innocent citizens, censorship of the press, intimidation of individuals, and general violation of fundamental human rights… Rampant corruption, tribalism, [and] nepotism have made life almost intolerable in our society. The economy of this country is in shambles due to corruption and mismanagement.' (quoted in Branch 2012: 154-155)

[47] Interview with Gikonyo Maina at Nakumat Junction, Nairobi (11/10/17).

[48] Ibid.

[49] At times authorities questioned the motives of *Sisi kwa Sisi* with some works censored or exhibitions shut down, highlighting discomfort over the works' content and possible concerns regarding the undertones of the *Sisi kwa Sisi* movement (Sukuro 1995: 285, Enwezor & Kkeke-Agulu 2009: 32). Talking about *Sisi kwa Sisi* Kibacia Gatu says 'unfortunately it was not very popular with the state, individuals thought we were showing the ugly parts of life, but if artists sing about jot then they must also sing about pain and suffering. It is the knowledge of the two that gives the other meaning.' (Interview with the artist at Paa ya Paa art-centre 30/01/2018). However the shutting down of exhibitions should not be understood chiefly because of the artwork's content but rather as a product of the State's paranoia to public gatherings of any sort during, and the absolute absence of civic space at the time, following the attempted 1982 coup.

The coup's message cites the same contradictions in society which the *Sisi kwa Sisi* artists made apparent in their artwork - which *Sisi kwa Sisi* artist Etale Sukuro described as portraying 'a culture of haves and have-nots, oppressed and oppressor, the hungry and well fed , the greedy corrupt and the poor' (Sukuro 1995: 285). The consequence of the failed 1982 coup, writes the historian Daniel Branch, was that it 'presented Moi with an opportunity to consolidate his hold on power and to marginalise his rivals' (Branch 2012: 158). Following the coup, Moi turned to suppression and, according to the underground dissident movement *Mwakenya*, the country became a 'democracy of the police boots and the torture chamber' (quoted in Branch 2012: 161). That *Sisi kwa Sisi* operated during this time whilst circumventing the strictures of freedom of expression, is testament to the artists' resilience, sacrifices and determination (Gona 2014: 118).

While the narrative of *Sisi kwa Sisi* frames the movement as the visual arts' equivalent of the subversive theatre productions of the 1970s (Enwezor & Okeke-Agulu 2009: 32),[50] there are additional readings of *Sisi kwa Sisi*, ones often missed from written records.[51] *Sisi kwa Sisi* emerged at a time of great experimentation, seeking ways to articulate the postcolonial situation. The artists of the period looked inwards, but not just to express themselves as individuals but as a product of their complex history and contemporary society. During this period, and indeed throughout the previous decades, African and cultural nationalism was being challenged and the artists interviewed who were engaged in *Sisi kwa Sisi* state they were drawn together through the literature being produced by African writers expressing such issues.[52]

One year, *Sisi kwa Sisi* artists designed Christmas cards conveying Kenyan cultural and environmental references, thus challenging the prevalence of Western-themed cards. According to Kibacia Gatu the making of Christmas cards was a means of expressing notions of cultural nationalism.[53] Also of relevance to *Sisi kwa Sisi* artists (most of whom were born in rural areas to parents who lived under colonialism), were developing experiences of urbanisation. 'We were a

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[50] In interview with Kibacia Gatu he mentioned that he occasionally painted backdrops for the plays put on by the Kamirithu theatre group. Gatu also states that for him 'the idea [of *Sisi kwa Sisi*] was to bring art with a social commentary because the literature people had been clamped down.' Interview with Kibacia Gatu at Paa ya Paa art-centre (30/01/2018).

[51] This is principally because the written history of *Sisi kwa Sisi* is one which has largely been narrated from the perspective of Etale Sukuro, who was one of *Sisi kwa Sisi*'s members (Sukuro 1990, 1995, 2018) – a narrative which has been challenged by other members of the *Sisi kwa Sisi* group.

[52] Interview with: Kibacia Gatu at Paa ya Paa art-centre (30/01/2018), Gikonyo Maina at Nakumat Junction Nairobi (11/10/17), Kahare Miano, Kilimani (04/03/2018), Etale Sukuro at Nakumat Junction, Nairobi (16/01/2018), and Zarina Patel from her home in Nairobi (02/02/2018).

[53] Interview with Kibacia Gatu at Paa ya Paa art-centre (30/01/2018).

mishmash of a postcolonial urbanising society and were grappling with purpose and meaning' says Kahare Miano.[54] These circumstances posed challenges regarding the social transformations occurring at the time.[55] One of these, Gatu says, 'was developing an African identity. You come into Nairobi and it does not look like you are in Africa. Why produce a city from the West in Nairobi. We lost the consciousness and the awareness of ourselves. So *Sisi kwa Sisi* was an element of trying to get that back.'[56]

The space of the metropolis of Nairobi and the role of aesthetics in imbuing a place with character which need not be based essentially on foreign idioms, were matters that particularly concerned Miano: 'I was much more driven by the idea and meaning of urban spaces, using what we were doing to try to understand what these environments mean to people because we as everyone else was caught up in the throes of urbanisation and what it means to be an urban people'.[57] Thus, the *Sisi kwa Sisi* exhibitions were conceived as a platform for experimenting with the potential of art in the imagining and renewal of urban space (fig. 2.9). Yet, after several years of 'being together', the artists associated with *Sisi kwa Sisi* went their separate ways – 'it didn't have any end as such it just dissolved like a sweet in the mouth', recalls Miano.[58] What didn't end, however, was Moi's rule.

Figure 2.9. Photograph of urban residents in Nairobi attending one of *Sisi kwa Sisi*'s open air art exhibitions in the city's suburbs.

[54] Interview with Kahare Miano, Kilimani (04/03/2018).

[55] The population of Nairobi province grew from 509,286 in 1969 to 1,324,570 in 1989.

[56] Interview with Kibacia Gatu at Paa ya Paa art-centre (30/01/2018).

[57] Interview with Kahare Miano, Kilimani (04/03/2018).

[58] Ibid.

In regard to the development of the art in Kenya, Moi is often credited with the introduction of art in primary schools, providing a basic foundation in the field (Court 1985: 35; 2002: 23). [59] That said, criticisms over the Government's promotion of nationalistic cultural activities surface because it tended to present culture in a fossilised form (Opondo 2000). Given contemporary visual art's 'modern' association – thus contradicting notions of 'traditional' or perceived influence from outside - its value and function were underestimated by a government still riven with issues of 'tribalism'.[60] Johanna Agthe, the German anthropologist and museum curator, argues that these qualities could have been beneficial as 'in contemporary art the concerns of the individual ethnic groups are not of such importance, and therefore it is precisely this art that could serve as a medium of integration.' (1990:82).

Democracy on the march

In this section attention turns to the growing prominence of Gallery Watatu (a commercial art gallery) and Kuona Trust (a non-profit art-centre). Both spaces demonstrate various gatekeeping functions of art institutions in Nairobi's artworld. I argue that Gallery Watatu's patronage enabled many to seriously pursue a career in the arts, but the gallery also created a hierarchy of taste which effectively delegitimised other developments in the field. I then suggest that with the introduction of multi-party politics came an influx of donor funding. Such donor funding contributed to Kuona Trust pursuing a non-commercial model in which art-making and the process of creating took centre stage. I argue this paved the way for artists to have increased opportunities for training, collective experimentation, and exposure to new forms of contemporary art.

In 1985, Gallery Watatu was taken over by German-born Ruth Schaffner (until her death in 1996), who continued its commercial principles. Well-known artist Shine Tani described Schaffner's Gallery Watatu as 'the beginning of a revolution' (as quoted in Ngugi 2004: 36). This, in part, was because Schaffner profoundly shaped Kenya's art market (nationally and internationally) through

[59] This was part of the new national 8-4-4 curriculum; 8 years of primary and four years for both secondary and university.

[60] Artists working in more recent times may be limited to visual traditions they can look back to or use as a stimulus for their own art practices. However traditions in Kenya are not static and have influenced contemporary artists such as ceramicist Magdalene Odundo whose work is placed within the tradition of pottery and created through the age old technique of coiling, while painters such as Jak Katarikawe and Kivuthi Mbuno have drawn on rich oral traditions as inspirations to their work (Nyachae 1995: 163, Agthe and Court 2001).

her promotion of particular styles and artists.[61] Schaffner believed Africans had a different way of seeing and that an otherwise untrained artist became corrupted with 'Western' techniques (Nyachae 1995: 182). This resulted in fewer university graduates' work being shown - with work appearing overly 'Western' being excluded and more seemingly 'naïve' artworks promoted. [62]

Occasionally, Gallery Watatu exhibited work expressing subtle socio-political criticisms; however, the gallery's commercial drive catered to a predominantly non-Kenyan audience and artworks exhibited reflected this (Agthe 1990: 121). Thus, artists compromised between producing artworks of a critical nature and 'traditional' scenes, with the latter being more regularly accepted by Nairobi's commercial galleries (Agthe 1990: 92). Such a scenario impacted what artworks were produced and distributed; in the late 1980s Margaretta wa Gacheru, a journalist covering the Kenyan art scene, reflected:

> 'People who want to use art to say something more about the pressing issues at hand, who want to be the conscience of the nation and decolonize the mind, are quiet with empty tummies, or they have left art, or they have died.' (as quoted in Rule 1988).

Schaffner's nurturing of 'naïve' or 'primitive' art was criticised for encouraging the adoption of a self-conscious 'primitivism' which inevitably inhibited the emergence of other styles or genres (Nyachae 1995: 182). Etale Sukuro felt this 'set back Kenyan art decades' (as quoted in Swigert 2011: 88) because it often meant shifting to a commercial operation which detracted from an art practice which the artist felt was more critical in focus (fig. 2.10 & 2.11). Agthe expressed similar sentiments, stating 'total dependence upon the market, upon the taste of foreigners, leads to the suppression of artistic creativity.' (1990: 92). An increasingly artificial division began to appear between so-called 'self-taught' artists and those with academic training, highlighting the power of galleries and 'gate keepers' in creating a hierarchy of taste. Given Gallery Watatu's prominence in presenting representations of contemporary visual art as 'primitive' or 'naive' and successful artists as 'self-taught', Schaffner was responsible for creating a new 'authenticity' and marketability of contemporary visual art which simultaneously delegitimised other aspects and developments in the field. That said, Schaffner was instrumental in developing artists through her

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[61] Artists represented by Gallery Watatu participated in a number of international art exhibitions in the 1990's. These included: Wegzeichen – Signs (1991); Africa Explores (1991-1994); Africa hoy/Africa Now (1992-1993); Recontres africaines (1994); Johannesburg Africus (1995); Seven Stories About Modern Art in Africa (1995-1996); Osaka Triennale (1993); Dakar Biennale (1993, 1996).

[62] It has been suggested that under 20% of artists represented by Gallery Watatu were university graduates (Kasfir 1999: 78).

patronage which enabled many to pursue art as a serious career (Kasfir 1999: 80-81).[63] In addition, Schaffner established the *Watatu Foundation* which provided financial support, art materials, workshops and guidance both to artists starting out and others more established (Nyachae 1995: 182-183, Court 1996: 18).[64]

Figure 2.10. *Shore Scene*, by Etale Sukuro.

Figure 2.11. *Matunda ya Uhuru*, by Etale Sukuro.

Both paintings above were created by Etale Sukuro in the 1980s. *Shore Scene* was painted for exhibition at Gallery Watatu, whereas *Matunda ya Uhuru* (the fruits of freedom) was made for display at non-commercial venues with the hope of raising a 'critical consciousness' (Vogel 1991: 17). Speaking of *Matunda ya Uhuru* Sukuro states: 'The basic idea here and the question is: even after fighting for that independence, who is actually benefitting? You find it's actually the minority. The majority is still in pain. Their life is just uphill, depicted by the man pulling the cart…the freedom fighter…is weeping because of what he is seeing after fighting for independence.' (Agthe: 1990: 414)

In the 1990s Kenya's civil society was on the move. Jaramogi Oginga Odinga, a political opponent of Moi - who later co-founded the opposition party *Forum for the Restoration of Democracy* (FORD) - warned the president 'democracy is on the march' (Nyairo 2015: 129). Foreign donors

[63] Of note is Gallery Watatu's monthly 'artists' day' in which anyone could show up to the gallery and present their work to either Schaffner or one the gallery's employees. This was extremely popular and Rob Burnet, who worked at the gallery, recalls there being sometimes 50-60 artist coming to the gallery on those days. (Interview with Rob Burnet, from the Well Told Story office, Nairobi (27/11/2018).

[64] Beneficiaries included an artist group in Ngecha who in 1995 formed the Ngecha Artists Association, and the Banana Hill Art Studio that formed in 1992 – both of which are located in Kiambu County. A great many artists attribute their national and international success and development, in part, to Ruth Schaffner, which include: Sane Wadu, Eunice Wadu, Meek Gichugu, Wanyu Brush, Francis Kahuri, Sebastian Kiarie, Zachariah Mbutha, Kivutho Mbuno, and Joel Oswaggo (Court 1996: 18).

took greater interest in supporting democracy in Kenya, funding local human rights and pro-democracy groups. In addition to the liberalisation of politics, the field of media was also going through changes – which, accelerated by globalisation, lowered the Government's capacity to control information, leading to some expansion of civil and political freedoms. This increased freedom was visualised by cartoonists, who had been working in a culture of self-censorship, but now had greater leeway in depicting politics, and caricaturing the President (Salmon 2002: 2; Lent 2008: 181).

During the 1990s and into the new millennium, foreign donors also became sources of funding in the field of art and culture, helping to initiate and sustain art organisations which contributed to widening of visual artistic practices.[65] In the words of Kenyan author and gay rights activists Binyavanga Wainaina, (the founding editor of the Kenyan publication *Kwani?)* the move towards democracy 'led to the growth of many, many, many independent artistic institutions and artist production houses….enabling people to imagine things for themselves' (Wainaina 2014). An example of the nexus between art organisations and donor funding is the establishment of Kuona Trust Visual Arts Centre in 1995 - by ex-Gallery Watatu employee, and British national, Rob Burnet.[66]

At Gallery Watatu Burnet oversaw *Watatu Foundation*'s art workshops, which often ran from a studio at Dagoertti Corner. The workshops were in contrast to the gallery's commercial operations - which Burnet describes as being 'a bit soulless' because 'it felt Gallery Watatu was just another highly polished tourist trade.'[67] Burnet (who at the time was in his mid-twenties) says he quickly became interested in the making of art over the selling of work.[68] Limited by space for art workshops at Dagoertti, Burnet found an alternative venue, through Wendy Karmali, at the Nairobi National Museum (NNM). Karmali was a member of the Kenya Museum Society (KMS) – which in 1986 started the Gallery of Contemporary East African Art at NNM. Additionally, the KMS

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[65] These donors included the British Council, Dutch Embassy, Hivos, Duon Foundation, GTZ, Heinrich Böll Foundation and the Ford Foundation. The Ford Foundation has supported through grants; Kuona Trust, RaMoMA, the GoDown Arts Centre, Kwani, Sarakasi Trust, Changamoto. Nairobi's art infrastructure is supported greatly by donor backing and as a result questions arise regarding their influence on Kenya's cultural agenda. Dependency implies relationships of power. At times, however, the conditions imposed by donors fall short of the ideologies of art groups. For instance Margaretta Swigert (2011: viii) cites the Nairobi-based Hawa Women's Art Group refusal of a substantial amount of donor funding to build a fully-equipped art studio because the conditions imposed by the donor were too far removed from the group's own terms and conditions.

[66] Kuona Trust received significant funding support from Hivos, the Dutch Embassy and the Ford Foundation.

[67] Interview with Rob Burnet, from the *Well Told Story* office, Nairobi (27/11/2018).

[68] Ibid.

ran a popular annual arts festival and were keen to do more activities with the museum involving the arts.[69] Consequently, Karmali and Burnet organised a large two-week long printing workshop at NNM, and following its success persuaded NNM's director to let them use a vacant building (which KMS had raised funds to refurbish) in the museum's grounds. Still an employee of Gallery Watatu, Burnet proposed to Schaffner that *Watatu Foundation* relocate its base to NNM. However, Schaffner declined. This prompted Burnet to resign and in a matter of days he registered Kuona Trust in order to receive the KMS funds and secure the vacant building. Thus, Kuona Trust was born.[70]

Kuona Trust became a space in which tens of artists gathered and grew as a community outside Nairobi's commercial artworld. This was important to Burnet because, he says, 'in Nairobi in the early 1990s the only spaces easily accessible to artists were the galleries, whose unavoidable commercial imperatives discouraged artists from interacting together and inevitably drove the work towards a style appealing to tourists who made up most of the clientele.' (Burnet 2002: 38). Kuona Trust sought a different model and central to this was Burnet's emphasis on promoting the making of art and the process of creating (rather than primarily focussing on selling) which led to the facilitation of local and international artist's workshops (Swigert 2011: 217; Savage 2014: 72-72).[71]

While the location of Kuona Trust offered artists an opportunity to sell their work to the museum's visitors, the workshops and residencies associated with Kuona Trust – and in particular the internationalism of these - created a social space of learning and interaction (Gerschultz 2013). These social spaces enabled artists to learn 'through one another and not necessarily from one another' and fostered relations with actors outside artists' immediate context (Kasfir & Forster 2013: 12-18). In the words of artist Michael Soi 'Kuona Trust no doubt provided us with an education in the arts that no university in the region could even fantasise about offering' (Soi 2013: 10). These aspects exposed artists to new forms of art and how art could be used in diverse ways (fig. 2.12 & 2.13). Notably, Kuona Trust started organising a number of art projects in

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[69] The Kenya Museum Society's art festival took place in the second week of March each year. A report from the 1994 festival claims that over 4,000 people attend which, Kenya Museum Society claim, 'confirms that it is becoming even more popular with Nairobi 's population and is becoming increasingly important to the Society as a fund raising event….[and] 103 artists exhibited their work' (Kenya Past and Present 1995: 5-6).

[70] In 2004 Kuona Trust moved from NNM to the GoDown Arts Centre and then in 2008 moved again to its own site in Hurlingham where it remained until its closure in late 2016 (see Part II).

[71] An example of this can be seen with the workshop – *Wasanii* - instigated by Kuona in 1997 and held multiple times since (Loder 2002: 31-35). *Wasanii* brings together international and national artists, building partnerships and fostering mutual exchange (Crane 2015).

Nairobi's public spaces, and frequently used Jeevanjee Gardens in Nairobi's Central Business District (CBD) as a site for this – which in 1991 had been saved by Zarina Patel from land-grabbers (Patel 2010: 23-24). Taking art to the public contributed to Burnet's aim to 'build audiences for Kenyan contemporary culture' (Burnet 2002: 41).

Figure 2.12. Arch installation in Jeevanjee Gardens, Nairobi, 1999, by Ghanaian artist Atta Kwami, who at the time was on an artist's residency at Kuona Trust.

Figure 2.13. *Exodus*, 1998, painting by Sane Wadu. This work was made in response to a Kuona Trust workshop in refugee camps. The painting aimed to help raise awareness in Kenya about the conditions and plight of those in the camps, many of whom are from Kenya's neighbouring countries (Picton, Loder and Court 2002: 66).

What turned out to be a significant public art project associated with Kuona Trust and funded by the Dutch Embassy was the *Daily Billboard Project* - which happened in 1998 and was run by the Dutch artist Rene Klarenbeek and Kenyan artists Thom Ogonga and Patrick Mukabi. Starting in August 1998, the *Daily Billboard Project* took place along the prominent street *Agha Kahn Walk*, in Nairobi's CBD. The project invited public participation through enlisting their remarks on matters of public interest, which were written on paper sheets and attached around a billboard which measured approximately 4 by 4 meters. The billboard itself was regularly covered in imagery – that was painted and over painted on an almost daily basis by Klarenbeek, Mukabi and Ogonga - reflecting the public's comments. According to Patrick Mukabi 'the idea was that a painting, or work of art, should not be imprisoned in a gallery. It should be brought out to the people, so it can be about them and things that happen in their life.'[72] Prominent topics and stories covered by the project included: the public's response to the police killing of university student James Ochola Odhiambo in a case of mistaken identity, and nation-wide strikes by teachers to protest the Government's failure to implement their promised salary increase. By far the most significant, but also tragic, event that figured in the project was the horrific August 7th 1998 United States embassy bombing in Nairobi by al-Qaeda. Aga Kahn Walk is a short distance from the bomb site and over a matter of weeks the *Daily Billboard Project* received thousands of messages from the public. Recalling this time Rob Burnet states in 'the days following the bomb blast we had hundreds of people queueing up to write their incredibly heartfelt terrible testimonies.'[73] According to Kiprop Lagat the messages left by the public principally revolved around national unity, pain and grief, condemnation of terrorism, personal experiences, and US culpability (Lagat 2014; 2018: 5). Consequently, Lagat writes, the *Daily Billboard Project* became 'among the very first efforts towards capturing the memory of the Nairobi terror attack. Writing on the board became part of communal action in the creative expression of grief, and also a way for people to start making sense of the events.' (Lagat 2018: 3). Following the *Daily Billboard Project* an installation of the publics' written responses on paper was created inside NNM and in 2001 Ogonga and Mukabi replicated the concept in Mombasa, under a project titled *Images in Transit*.

[72] Interview with Patrick Mukabi at the Dust Depot, Nairobi (26/01/2018).

[73] Interview with Rob Burnet, from the *Well Told Story* office, Nairobi (27/11/2018).

A new-found spirit of enthusiasm

In this section I suggest that the advent of new sites for art production and distribution in 21st century Nairobi signified a widening of cultural and democratic spaces. I go on to argue that Kenya's PEV triggered a shift in artists' attitudes - becoming noticeable through the uptake of conceptual art strategies and a belief that artists can use their work to forge new sites for the articulation of politics.

The political and social climate in Kenya was fundamentally changing at the turn of the millennium. In the words of Kenyan Nobel Prize winner, environmental activist and campaigner for democracy Wangari Maathai (2010: 131):

> 'A new-found spirit of enthusiasm pervaded the country; in fact, there was so much goodwill when the new government was formed that something extraordinary happened: across Kenya, the "social machine" began to move again.'

As part of a fundamentally changing society Kenya's artworld was changing too. Art spaces such as Paa ya Paa and Gallery Watatu decreased in prominence and relevance for an emerging generation of young artists.[74] New art venues opened. These included the Rahimtulla Museum of Modern Art (RaMoMA) in 2001 which had several art galleries, engaged in a large amount of community outreach work, and produced a glossy quarterly art magazine;[75] the Maasai Mbili art-centre started in 2001 which is based in the informal settlement of Kibera (Goethe-Institut 2015); and the opening of the interdisciplinary arts venue GoDown Arts Centre in 2003, which has artist studios and a gallery (Mboya 2007).

As in earlier decades, artists questioned the role of art; who it is for and what purpose it serves, thereby contributing to art practices being (re)informed and (re)evaluated (Jager 2011). Authors have noted that the 21st century gave artists from Nairobi great possibilities for the cross-fertilisation of ideas and artistic practices (Jager 2011; Ogonga 2011; Marcel 2013; Vierke & Siegert 2013). Art commentators have described this period as a 'renaissance' in Kenya's visual

[74] In 1998 a fire at Paa ya Paa destroyed a huge archive of art books, resources and artworks at the centre.

[75] RaMoMA began life at the Rahimtulla Towers Art Gallery in Upper Hill; in 2008 it moved to new lager premises in the suburb of Parklands until its closing in 2010. RaMoMA received significant funding from the Rahimtulla Trust and Ford Foundation and a contributing factor to its end has been attributed to the withdrawal of donor financial support.

art (Ogana 2003: 11; Swigert 2011) while artists have called it a 'cultural awakening' (Jager 2011: 418).

Kenya's so called art 'renaissance' largely bypassed government patronage of the visual arts which remained patchy and often shambolic (Wakanyote 2006: 24-25; Maina 2006: 37-8; Zaugg & Nishimura 2015).[76] However, progress occurred in 2007 when Kenya ratified the 2005 *UNESCO Convention for the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expression* (UNESCO 2005). This policy recognises art and culture as being indispensable for peace, security, and fundamental freedoms and human rights (UNESCO 2005: 1). Additional landmarks came in 2010 with the Kenyan Government's launch of the *National Policy on Culture and Heritage* and Kenya's 2010 Constitution, both of which formally recognise culture's positive contribution to areas of Kenyan social, economic and political life.[77] That said, whilst this represents an acknowledgement of arts' role in society, artists in Nairobi suggest they have yet to see any tangible evidence that this is being taken seriously by the Government and relevant departments.

In his detailed analysis of modern Kenyan history, Daniel Branch (2012: 251) writes of how in the 2000s 'the extent of public debate of politics in a variety of settings and forms was unprecedented.' I would argue that the visual arts and their associated spaces were settings where such debates and deliberation occurred.

The Kenyan artist and curator, Jimmy Ogonga, has described the changes occurring thus far over the 21st century as enabling the emergence of a new generation of artists whose 'discourses make it apparent that old formulas are no longer useful in expressing the new and complex visions of our socio-cultural reality' (Ogonga 2011: 235). This emergent group of artists, says Ogonga, engage in fearless forms of experimentation which transcend technical and thematic conventions resulting in a new wave of work (Ogonga 2011: 235). Artwork produced by artists such as Sam Hopkins, Syowia Kyambi, artists from Maasai Mbili, Mbuthia Maina, Ato Malinda, James Muriuki, Jimmy Ogonga, Michael Soi and Gor Soudan exemplified contradictions in modern Kenyan life

[76] The potential for art's development in Kenya has also been hindered by the changes in school curriculum. Since 2002 the teaching of art has been de-emphasised in primary schools (Wakanyote 2006: 26).

[77] The *National Policy on Culture and Heritage* states: 'It is through art that society can react with understanding and interpret its physical and social environments…Appreciation of the creative arts in their entirety and the role of the artists in society in particular awaken and contribute to the development of the individuals in imaginative perception and insight into a wide range of life.' (GoK 2009: 21). The policy goes on to assert 'painting, sculpture and the graphic arts play an important role in fostering cultural identities, cultural dialogue and cross fertilization of ideas, styles and practices.' (GoK 2009: 117). Kenya's 2010 Constitution recognises 'culture as the foundation of the nation and as the cumulative civilization of the Kenyan people and nation' in which the state will 'promote all forms of national and cultural expression through…the arts' (GoK 2010: 16).

(Goethe-Institut 2011, 2011a, 2011b, 2014, 2015). Peterson Kamwathi, one of Kenya's leading visual artists, describes these changes saying:

> 'There is a lot more happening to the arts, a lot more brave expressions. Not striving to serve the tourist market, more engagement with socio-cultural issues. This generation of artists is more visible and assertive than the older one…There are a lot more opportunities to address these issues' (Kamwathi 2011: 102).

A contributing factor to these transformations has been the technological advances, increased globalisation and the internet revolution, which have both brought Nairobi's citizens together and linked them to the world like never before. This opened new possibilities for artists to connect and become instantly exposed to trends, projects and movements happening globally. Those fortunate in being able to travel, such as the artists mentioned above, developed their art practice in new and interesting directions. However this access is greatly unequal and it has been suggested that those not afforded this opportunity at important and formative stages in their careers 'risk becoming focussed on commercial success in the local and predominately expat market for art in East Africa and thereby compromise their development' (Jaroljmek 2015: 11).

Another factor which attributed to a shift in artists' outlooks, as for very many other citizens, was Kenya's 2007/8 PEV. Writing of this period the Kenyan political analyst, Nanjala Nyabola states: 'The 2007 election in Kenya fuelled a thirst for a new politics, new discourses and new places to have them' (2018: 29). Nyabola has provided an exceptional account into the online spaces in which these discourses take place. Similarly, it has also been suggested the PEV triggered an increase in the production of critical socio-political artworks (Jager 2011: 421). This resembles what Kenyan academic George Ogola describes as a new idiom of political consciousness appearing after the PEV, which saw alternative discursive practices and sites for their expression forged (Ogola 2011: 132-133).

Speaking with artists in Nairobi about the effect of the PEV, it is evident that in trying to come to terms with what happened, and how one should or could respond, many turned to express and question this through their work. One such example is Peterson Kamwathi's *Sitting Allowance* series which was exhibited at the Goethe-Institut Nairobi in 2009 (fig. 2.14). The series was made up of eight huge charcoal works on paper, each focussing on an institution closely associated with the botched 2007 election – which included the Electoral Commission, the Government, media, international community, and police. In his assessment of *Sitting Allowance* the Ugandan arts journalist David Kaiza states it 'was immense, inspiring depths of comment and analysis rarely

accorded to artists in Kenya', going on to suggest the exhibition 'provided ample reflective space' for pondering on the matters affecting Kenya (Goethe-Institut 2011: 10).

Choosing not to sensationalise the brutally of Kenya's PEV (as done at the time with the photography exhibitions *Kenya Burning* and *Picha Mtaani*, discussed below), Kamwathi's *Sitting Allowance* exposes the fragility of democracy when its pillars are weakened. Writing for the *Daily Nation*, the Kenyan academic Tom Odhiambo (2009) reflects on the exhibition saying: 'one is left wondering: what is the work of the police or why have a police force which became the face of violence and death instead of "policing" the confrontation and conflict arising out of the December 2007 presidential election results?' Odhiambo goes on to argue that *Sitting Allowance* requires the audience to ask themselves what they are doing (both individually and collectively as a society) to reform, change, unite, reconcile, or heal Kenya. What I find most striking about Kamwathi's exceptional charcoal drawings is that whilst they speak of institutional failings in Kenya, they also remind the spectator of the need to protect institutions, demand better of them, and to keep them alive, so that the PEV never repeats itself. Considering the exhibition occurred when public debates about the new Constitution were taking shape meant that the 'reflective space' created from the *Sitting Allowance* exhibition was particularly pertinent.

Figure 2.14. Charcoal on paper work from the series *Sitting Allowance*, 2008/2009, by Peterson Kamwathi.

Kamwathi's chosen medium for *Sitting Allowance* was consistent with the prevalence of painting and sculpture exhibited in Nairobi's gallery spaces; however the majority of emergent artists

mentioned above explore temporal and spatial dimension through a myriad of mediums. At times this has involved artists taking their practice outside galleries and into various urban spaces. One such example is Ato Malinda's 2010 public performance *Is Free Dumb*.

Is Free Dumb was funded by the Goethe-Institut Nairobi. Taking place outside the National Archives in Nairobi's CBD, Malinda's performance was set in a large cage where she sat at a table and read aloud from the magazines DRUM, True Love, and African Woman (fig.2.15 & 2.16). In effect, the artist was personifying the patriarchal role of the 'modern (passive) Kenyan woman' whilst commenting upon the legacy of constraining social mechanisms women are forced to live with and face (Mwangi 2013). In placing the performance in public space the artist was staking her claim to Nairobi's streets, which are otherwise largely claimed (and often violently) by men (Wamai 2014a). *Is Free Dumb* quickly drew a crowd of intrigued onlookers and the performance was planned to run for three days. However, on the first day *Is Free Dumb* was halted by the authorities, who claimed Malinda was holding an illegal gathering (despite the artist having acquired the relevant permit). This led to her arrest. The consequence of this and the cutting short of *Is Free Dumb* was not only ironic but revealed contradictions in the very notion of freedom and female liberties in 21st century Kenya.

Figure 2.15. *Is Free Dumb* by Ato Malinda, 2010.

Figure 2.16. *Is Free Dumb* by Ato Malinda, 2010.

The examples discussed above expound the notion that in the 21st century artistic expressions of political consciousness and the sites in which these are assembled contribute to a widening of cultural and democratic spaces in Nairobi. Furthermore, I suggest this period represents a rupture in contemporary art from Kenya as a consequence of conceptualism making its impact on Nairobi's art scene. According to Alex Alberro:

> 'The conceptual in art means an expanded critique of the cohesiveness and materiality of the art object, a growing wariness towards definitions of artistic practice as purely visual, a fusion of the work with its site and context of display, and an increased emphasis on the possibilities of publicness and distribution' (Alberro 1999: xvii).

However, this rupture did not come out of nowhere. As already discussed in this chapter, examples of conceptualism were evident in Nairobi since at least the 1980's. Notably, *Sisi kwa Sisi* demonstrated how artists denounced Nairobi's principal art institutions for distancing the everyday Kenyan from visual art. By staging exhibitions in more publicly accessible sites for the masses *Sisi kwa Sisi* demanded art not be a privilege, hung only in gallery spaces, but instead considered a weapon for social and political enlightening. Such tactics, as discussed by Salah M. Hassan and Olu Oguibe (2001: 18), were also prevalent in Sudan and Nigeria in the 1970s and 1980s. Indeed, both authors argue that, while it is difficult to trace a definite chronological account of conceptualism on the continent, there are clear examples of conceptual art practices beginning in Africa in the 1970s (Hassan & Olu Oguibe 2001: 18). The West's account of conceptualism emerged earlier in the 20th Century - through artists such as Marcel Duchamp. However, scholars have noted that strategies adopted by Western artists (such as using found

objects and the ephemeral) having been evident beforehand in Africa and other non-western settings (Enwezor 1999: 109; Essel & Acquah 2016).

Ultimately conceptual art is a global phenomenon. Why this rupture is so apparent in Nairobi now is because at this time (more so than any time before in postcolonial Kenya) contemporary artists are interrogating conceptualist strategies and art practices that include performance, video art, and installation. The possibilities for this to take root firmly, however, have been limited in scope because the additional art forms of conceptualism mark a shift from the dominant situation of art production in Nairobi, which has principally been for commercial galleries and their foreign buyers. Thus, support for conceptualism and its production and distribution comes from limited sources – chiefly the Goethe-Institut Nairobi and art grants from various funding bodies. Of note, however, is a move made by Kuona Trust to support 'conceptual exhibitions' that often go beyond the mediums of painting and sculpture. This move can be traced back to the 2009 group exhibition *Stereotypes*.

Curated by the artist John Kamicha the idea for the *Stereotypes* exhibition came about as a consequence of artists being displaced during the PEV and the toxic stereotypes which took a particular ethnic tinge during this time. The exhibition, which included work by John Kamicha, Thom Ogonga, Anthony Okello, Michael Soi and Sam Hopkins, was used to question critically issues to do with ethnicity, stereotypes and how these have been, and continue to be, used by those in power to entrench politics of 'tribalism'. Kuona Trust, whose director at the time was Danda Jarolimek, provided a production budget for the exhibition – which was somewhat unheard of at the time. A consequence of this, says Jarolimek, is that the work was experimental, sometimes gimmicky and often not well refined; but the idea was for artists to be able to develop strong concepts for an exhibition and to produce work that reflected this.[78] These 'conceptual exhibitions' have remained a fairly consistent fixture at Kuona Trust, as will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter 3. For now, however, given the immense impact that Kenya's PEV had on artists, and indeed the whole of society, attention turns to several significant artistic responses to this.

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[78] Interview with Danda Jaroljmek at Circle Art Gallery (26/05/2017).

Art in a time of social and political upheaval

Nairobi was one of the areas severely affected during the PEV, with the bulk of the violence taking place in the city's poorer suburbs. In response to the PEV, artists were amongst civil society actors at the forefront of reconciliation efforts (Mboya & Ogana 2009; Coombes 2014: 171-174). It is claimed that through appealing to the consciousness of ordinary Kenyans through calls for coexistence and resistance to violence, artists 'contained ethnic violence and prevented a potential spill over into genocide' (Mani 2011: 113). The informal settlement of Kibera (whose area MP was Raila Odinga) experienced some of the most ferocious violence in Nairobi. It is here where the artist Solomon Muyundo (whose tag name is Solo 7) painted hundreds of simple and direct peace messages (in English and Kiswahili) in public places. Solo 7's colleagues from the art collective Maasai Mbili (founded in 2001 by sign-writers Otieno Gomba and Otieno Kota) also launched efforts to restore peace to their fragmented society through an art-based community outreach project.

In this section I examine how the chaos of Kenya's PEV became a source of motivation for Solo 7's activism and localised peace-building efforts by Maasai Mbili. The extent to which these interventions contributed to a reduction in violence, or provided opportunities for healing to occur, is assessed. I argue that both responses portrayed the artists as performing the role of 'good citizens' due to their rejection of 'political tribalism' and prioritisation of unity. However, before attention turns to these artistic responses to Kenya's PEV I first provide some context to Kibera.

Located a few kilometres from the centre of Nairobi, Kibera is regarded as one of the largest slums in Africa. Comprising a space of approximately 2.5 square kilometres, Kibera is divided into a number of 'villages'[79] crammed with mud-walled and corrugated iron sheet shacks, housing anywhere between 170,000 to 1 million people.[80] Bordered by middle class estates the slum itself is characterised by unplanned infrastructure, poverty, and successive governments largely ignoring it. Whilst most villages in Kibera contain members from all of Kenya's ethnic groups, it is

[79] Kibera's villages include Kianda, Soweto West, Raila, Gatwekera, Makina, Kisumu Ndogo, Kambi Muru, Kichinjio, Mashimoni, Laini Saba, Lindi, Soweto East and Silanga.

[80] Estimates for Kibera's total population differ dramatically. The Government's 2009 census suggest there are approximately 170,000 people living in the slum but this figure is contested. In 2008, the Map Kibera Project used sampling to produce an estimate of 235,000-270,000, which seems to be the most realistic estimate still today. The extraordinary figures that are closer to 1 million are often legitimised by NGOs, the media and some politicians.

often one group who is dominant. Consequently, Kibera tends to be observed as a microcosm of Kenya.

When violence engulfed Kibera and aggressive confrontations broke out between supporters of ODM (the opposition party) and the PNU Muyundo initially joined angry ODM followers in their demonstrations, painting their rallying slogan 'No Raila, No Peace' on walls and buildings. His rationale for doing so was to protect his own life, implying his associated Kikuyu identity could have portrayed him as an adversary if he did not join the demonstrations. This only lasted a few days and upon self-reflection Muyundo decided instead to try for solutions to the ongoing violence. His thinking was partly shaped by noticing that structures publicising ODM loyalty were left largely undamaged by their rampaging supporters. In response Muyundo collected charcoal and hastily scrawled 'ODM' phrases on people's property regardless of their political orientation, saying: 'when I came back I realised that no one had looted where I had written…this made me think that during this chaos slogans could be used to change people's behaviour'.[81]

In mid-January, 2008, ODM called on their supporters to take part in three days of mass action. This call escalated tensions, particularly so in Kibera between Odinga's substantial support base and others (notably PNU factions and the General Service Unit - a paramilitary wing in the Kenya Police Service). Along with his peers from the Maasai Mbili art collective, Muyundo was alarmed at the amplification of violence and the ethnic aspect to this, recalling:

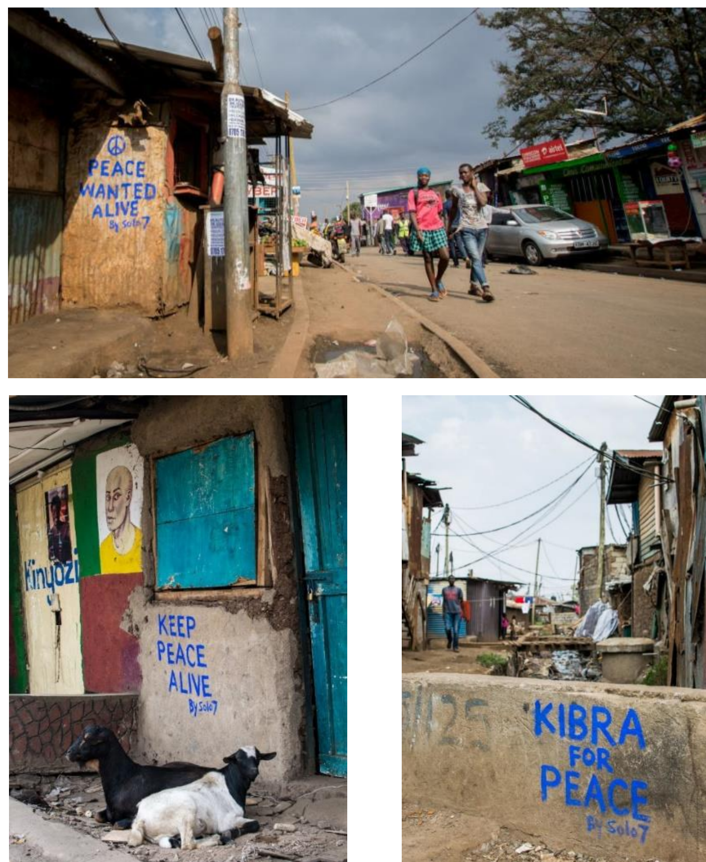
> 'When people heard ODM's call they came out in large numbers. But they did not come out peacefully. The mood changed. I was very much terrified. Raila's supporters started targeting the Kikuyu people. I am a Luyha and also a Kikuyu. I was scared and wondered if they could do any harm to me. Some were carrying crude weapons like stones, batons and machetes – anything that can be used to harm someone.'[82]

Other accounts describe the balkanisation of Kibera into zones only safe for particular ethnic groups (Barasa 2011: 44). This was brutally enforced and resulted in the displacement of inhabitants. Armed and disillusioned youths set upon their neighbours; shops, makeshift kiosks and houses were looted; dozens of women and girls were raped; some men encountered forced genital mutilation (ICG 2008; Smedt 2009; Kihato 2015). Checkpoints manned by thugs were set up and if your surname, or ID, distinguished you as a member of the wrong group you were in trouble.

[81] Interview with Solo 7 at Annex Pub Kibera (06/04/2017).

[82] Ibid.

The profound change in direction from a neighbourhood that had otherwise been fairly harmonious - whereby Luo, Kikuyu, and other ethnic groups had lived together peacefully for many years – to one of disorder, turbulence and violence, represented a rupture in ordinary life. Recalling this period, the artist Otieno Gomba says: 'I came to the studio and looked at my artwork and I felt I am cheating the world. Inside here [the Maasai Mbili art-centre] it was calm and peaceful. But, outside there were ruins, people angry, kids traumatised. At that time there was nothing going on and we are the artists so I asked myself "what is it that artists can do?"'[83] Discontented with sitting by idly, members of Maasai Mbili convened and discussed the need to utilise their aptitude as artists to spread messages of peace. Taking this discussion quite literally Solomon Muyundo immediately launched a single-handed campaign to bring peace to a fragmented society. He started painting monochromatic message of 'Peace Wanted Alive' and its various iterations across Kibera - signing each work off with his pseudonym 'Solo 7' (figs. 2.17-2.19).[84]



Figures 2.17 - 2.19 Examples of Solo 7's peace slogans written around Kibera

[83] Interview with Otieno Gomba and Kevo Stero at Annex Pub Kibera (13/04/2017).

[84] Solomon Muyundo (whose names contain seven letters) came into this world on July 7, 1977, and was his parents' seventh born of nine children – hence his chosen tag name of 'Solo[mon] 7'.

Executing his decipherable messages at a frenetic pace Solo 7 utilised a method of overexposure in order to publicise his peace slogans, painting these hundreds of times on walls, bridges, roads, fences, shops, homes and businesses. This strategic approach draws parallels to the tactics of tagging as a form of political graffiti writing which has found vivacity across the globe. For the artist, the practice of tagging was an effective means of communicating with the masses because, he says, 'signs speak louder than our voices'. In the context of a fragmented society, however, any understanding of 'our' quickly becomes substituted with the concept of 'us' and 'them'. The tag 'Solo 7' was able to sidestep this form of categorisation because it rendered an effective ambiguity, owing to it being unidentifiable to any specific ethnic group or political affiliation – something which is not easily concealed in Kenya when the surname of someone is used.

Solo 7's campaign aimed to introduce a dialogue of peace into the public sphere. One commonly used definition of peace comes from Johan Galtung (1967), who espoused that it is not just the absence of overt violence but also the absence of structural violence – in which social, economic, and political structures systemically limit human potential, preventing them from meeting their basic needs. Given the temporary impracticality of addressing the structural violence which fuelled the chaos, Solo 7's messages of peace found pragmatic appeal in contributing to a reduction in explicit violence manifesting across Kibera. According to art historian Annie Coombes (2014: 172), the slogans had some success in that they functioned as gestures 'admonishing people to stop and think before acting'. In discussion with Solo 7 he claims: 'when I was painting I noticed that people saw my signs and realised that peace was also important, some dropped their weapons and the public encouraged me to continue.'[85] Interview responses from residents of Kibera also provide anecdotal evidence to claims that Solo 7's messages contributed to deepening the discourse of peace in Kibera. For example, I was told 'they encouraged people to live with others in peace, no fighting, to take somebody in like they are your brother'; and 'if someone was angry then the messages helped to bring the anger down'; as well as 'when you saw his messages you yourself started thinking about peace'.[86]

It is difficult to know the true impact of Solo 7's activism, but the above accounts suggest his peace slogans may have induced people to resist violence and the temptation to give in to 'political tribalism'.[87] This can be further argued because of the fact that during Kenya's PEV numerous individuals copied Solo 7's campaign and painted peace slogans across Kibera.

[85] Interview with Solo 7 at Annex Pub Kibera (06/04/2017).

[86] Interview with residents of Kibera (18/10/2017).

[87] See pg.42.

Additionally, Solo 7 received the popular support of residents (from verbal encouragement to the supply of paints) which itself speaks volumes to their rejection of violence – also apparent from cases where Kikuyus fleeing from Kibera were safeguarded by their Luo neighbours and vice versa (Smedt 2009: 591).

Whilst Solo 7 was embarking on his peace activism work across Kibera, Maasai Mbili's other artists had also been co-ordinating a response to the PEV. At the end of February 2008 they started the *Art4Peace Healing Project* - which was supported through a small grant from Kuona Trust (Gazemba 2008). The project's premise was to use painting and the process of creating as a form of healing and therapy for young people. This was particularly called for because, as Gomba says, 'some [children] had seen their family members or relatives killed or hacked. They were confused and traumatised. This was a chance for them to bring out the pain they felt. It was a chance to heal through art' (as quoted in Gazemba 2008:4). In her analysis of the *Art4Peace Healing Project* Annie Coombes suggests that the resulting artworks, which covered the ruins of vandalised buildings and other surfaces in Kibera, stood 'as memorials to those that died in the violence' (Coombes 2014: 172). This perspective has particular influence considering that a number of artworks were subsequently repainted by the artists in the months and years that followed the PEV. However, I suggest the impact of the *Art4Peace Healing Project* was most felt in the 'then and now' owing to its tangible efforts in re-humanising the neighbourhood. In interview with Gomba and fellow Maasai Mbili artist Kevo Stero (Kevin Irungu), they described how the project started a process of healing by enabling participants' emotions to be accessed.[88] The children's drawings, depicted their future hopes and with this, say Gomba and Stero, came a feeling of 'harmony' and a 'sense of value and worth' was given to sites that had been ravaged during the PEV.[89]

Artists from Maasai Mbili also painted in the ruins, however their work was predetermined and focussed on creating new aesthetic spaces or acted as commentaries to the socio-political environment. For example, a mural created by Kevo Stero read 'WAKENYA TARIFF'. This referenced the rising cost of basic items across Kibera as a result of the PEV, something the artist described as being a 'tariff' on slum residents who, in addition to bearing the brunt of the violence, were now suffering the economic impact of this (fig. 2.20).

[88] Interview with Otieno Gomba and Kevo Stero at Annex Pub Kibera (13/04/2017).

[89] Ibid.

Figure 2.20 Kevo Stero's *Wakenya Tariff* mural

Local and international media covered Solo 7's campaign and the *Art4Peace Healing Project*. This was particularly significant because in the campaigning period, print media's reporting was criticised for inciting divisions between groups in society, contributing to the violence (Gachigua 2014). Solo 7 suggests that coverage of his activism at the height of the PEV had the effect of amplifying his message:

> 'When the media wrote about me I saw it as a message of hope. The messages of peace I wrote were spread across the whole country. If they [the wider public] saw hope coming from places where violence had occurred, they could be hopeful that peace would return to Kenya… At times the media escalated violence in some way…so it was important for me to have messages of peace in the media not just negative stories.'[90]

Similarly, recounting Maasai Mbili's media coverage for their *Art4Peace Healing Project* Gomba says:

> 'Media and journalists were coming with the notion of it [Kibera] being a hot bed of violence, but then they find us painting and working with children. It was a diversion from the violence. People came with an image in mind and then left with a different story, one

[90] Interview with Solo 7 at Annex Pub Kibera (06/04/2017)

showing positive things happening. We were there in the community when it really mattered.'[91]

Returning to Coombes' analysis of the *Art4Peace Healing Project* and Solo 7's activism she writes that 'for a short time the artists and cooperating residents in Kibera were able to signal the value of an area that most Kenyan politicians ignore (until election time) and to bring it into sharp relief and visibility.' (Coombes 2014: 173-74). Expanding on this I suggest that the media's attention to Solo 7 and Maasai Mbili furthered their portrayal as individuals performing the role of 'good citizens' who prioritised unity, inter-ethnic cohesion and non-violence (Lynch 2018). This was significant to their peacebuilding efforts. These young male artists, of various ethnic identities (Kikuyu, Luo and Luhya), occupied the demographic of those recruited into violent gangs during Kenya's PEV – who at times were paid by political 'Big Men' to fight their opponents (RoK 2008). Thus, by publicly promoting a culture of non-violence within their community, which openly rejected 'political tribalism', these artists demonstrated that it was not ethnicity *per se* at the heart of this chaos but more its politicisation. Furthermore, Solo 7 and Maasai Mbili's members claim that their affirmative actions during Kenya's PEV led to the breaking down of negative stereotypes of artists held by the community, which in turn may have catalysed a shift in people's prejudicial views of 'others'.

The chaos of Kenya's PEV triggered a reaction from Solo 7 and Maasai Mbili's other artists in which they felt compelled to urgently, and indeed creatively, respond to the situation in the best of their capacities. The profound experience of the PEV, and their response to it, had a long lasting impression which affected their future engagement with activism and art practices. In the case of Solo 7 this will be briefly revisited below, whereas I return to Maasai Mbili's socially engaged art practices in Chapter 3. Focus now turns to what followed once the PEV ended. Specifically, I will discuss two travelling photography exhibitions which generated awareness to the atrocities committed and the need to openly confront Kenya's recent past in order for its people to move forward to a more peaceful future.

Healing the nation

Kenya's 2007/8 PEV came to an end on 28th February, 2008, when Raila Odinga and Mwai Kibaki signed a power sharing agreement. The newly constituted 'grand coalition' government

[91] Interview with Otieno Gomba at Annex Pub Kibera (13/04/2017).

established an independent review into the December 2007 election (Kriegler Commission) and an inquiry into the PEV (Waki Commission). Some commentators suggest that these commissions amounted to a 'quick fix solution' by the Government and that 'the political class was anxious to sweep the post-election violence under the carpet and sanitize Kenya as the haven of peace within the Horn of Africa.' (Muhoma & Nyairo 2011: 412). What was urgently required were continuous efforts to promote reconciliation and healing; and there seems to be a general consensus in peacebuilding and trauma studies that reflection on the past is necessary in order to build a shared future. Thus, any notion of sweeping things under the carpet seems an unsustainable approach for long-term peace and reconciliation efforts. Expanding on this, the academic David Bloomfield suggests:

> 'It is not possible to forget the past and start completely fresh as if nothing had happened. Indeed, the motivation for building a future is precisely to ensure that the past does not return - and so a clear understanding of, and a coming to terms with, that past is the very best way to guarantee it will not come back to haunt a society. The past must be addressed in order to reach the future.' (Bloomfield 2003: 15).

In this section I examine two separate, but distinctly similar, photography exhibitions which displayed emotive and provocative images from Kenya's 2007/8 PEV. I argue that these created much needed spaces both for collective and individual reconciliation and for remembering to take place. Both exhibitions, I suggest, revealed the political class' apathy to reconciliation efforts, but at times they also exposed the possibilities for such tactics to do more harm than good.

The first exhibition, named *Kenya Burning,* was organised by a team from the GoDown Arts Centre and it opened there on the 19th April 2008. With support from numerous donors, *Kenya Burning* brought together the work of nine amateur and professional photographers and displayed over 100 images.[92] The Director and General Manager of the GoDown Arts Centre (Joy Mboya and Judy Ogana, respectively) recognised the risky timing of the exhibition given the proximity of its opening with the very recent ending of the violence (Mboya & Ogana 2009: 3-4). However, like many other Kenyans, organisations, artists and cultural groups, they felt a need to respond

[92] Funding partners of *Kenya Burning* included the Ford Foundation, USAID, The Royal Netherlands Embassy Nairobi, DOEN Foundation and Scanad Kenya. The participating photographers in the exhibition were: Anne Holmes, Allan Gichigi, Thomas Mukoya, Georgina Goodwin, Tom Otieno, Charles Kimani, Arno Kopecky, Boniface Mwangi and Chiba Yasuyoshi - it should be noted that 80% of the work in the exhibition came from Boniface Mwangi and Chiba Yasuyoshi.

meaningfully to what had happened in their country and to play a part in the national healing process.[93]

The majority of photographs in *Kenya Burning* were taken by Kenyan photojournalist Boniface Mwangi. It was Mwangi who initiated the second exhibition, called *Picha Mtaani*. Speaking to Cable News Network (CNN) Mwangi claims: 'Covering that [post-election] violence changed my life. I said "No, I must do something to make sure this doesn't happen again. I must speak out for the horrors we saw" and hopefully we can learn from my pictures and my work' (as quoted in Duggan & Howell 2016). *Picha Mtaani,* was launched as an open air exhibition on 7th December 2009 in downtown Nairobi (figs. 2.21 & 2.22). After this, and with assistance from international donors, *Picha Mtaani* toured the country, targeting towns and cities affected by the PEV (Nairobi, Naivasha, Nakuru, Eldoret, Kericho, Kisumu, Mombasa, Nyahururu, Kuresoi, and Mai Mahiun). Evoking Bloomfield's suggestion above, *Picha Mtaani*'s project coordinator George Gachara (2011) stressed:

> 'Kenyans, ourselves, we had murdered each other. We had looted properties. We had torched houses. We had displaced one another. Now we are living in camps. And we are being asked to move on and to go back to business as usual. But first we need people to reflect. To reflect on what had happened.'

Figure 2.21. Crowds attending the *Picha Mtaani* exhibition held in Nairobi, 2009.

Figure 2.22. Members of the public contemplating the PEV during the *Picha Mtaani* exhibition held in Nairobi, 2009.

Kenya Burning and *Picha Mtaani* differed in approach from that of the public's perceived response of the Government moving on from the PEV, and moving on quickly. Instead these exhibitions sought to create a space in which collective or individual reconciliation and

[93] Interview with Judy Ogana, Lavington, Nairobi (24/11/2018).

remembering could take place; efforts that had otherwise been left to various civil society organisations (Lynch 2018: 30-49). In both exhibitions the photographs were curated chronologically and addressed themes which included: political rallies; voting; demonstrations; police clashing with citizens; looting and arson; women, men and children murdered and maimed; people displaced from their homes; and grieving communities and individuals. Images portraying an initial hope as candidates were championed by their supporters, quickly faded to themes of anger, violence, destruction, loss, displacement, death, mourning and grief. The sheer number of photographs in each exhibition and their subject matter were unrelenting, hard-hitting and emotive.

The majority of these images had never been seen before by the public because they were unpublished in Kenya's mainstream media. Furthermore, unlike Kenya's mainstream media, the exhibitions were curated in order to present non-partisan narratives. In other words, the images, however shocking they may have been, were not there to point blame to one faction or another but instead were 'about the people and what they were going through'.[94] In their analysis of *Kenya Burning*, and the stories behind the exhibition's photos, Catherine Muhoma and Joyce Nyairo suggest they 'lay bare a complex sphere of multiple narratives that speak to the issues of what ails Kenya.' (Muhoma & Nyairo 2011: 417).[95] The authors convincingly argue that *Kenya Burning* is a crucial addition to the archive of Kenya's collective memory. It was crucial, they suggest, because through engaging with these photographs they unveil what has otherwise been forgotten or ignored (Muhoma & Nyairo 2011: 417). Furthermore, they suggest the photographs illustrate pockets of hope amongst the fragility of Kenya's democratisation and the challenges and tensions that must be confronted if the country is to move forward (Muhoma & Nyairo 2011: 419, 423). The authors conclude by signalling that *Kenya Burning* 'speaks volumes to the place of the creative arts in confronting violence and building bridges between divergent communities in Eastern Africa.' (Muhoma & Nyairo 2011: 423).

Indeed, both *Kenya Burning* and *Picha Mtaani* can be placed in the field of artistic responses to trauma, violence and conflict across Africa - something which thus far has received limited scholarly attention. That said, a notable contribution to this field is Bisschoff and Van de Peer's book *Art and Trauma in Africa* (2013). In this book the authors suggest African artists challenge and reinterpret master narratives created by the powerful and, in so doing, fill in the gaps left by

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[94] Interview with Judy Ogana, Lavington, Nairobi (24/11/2018).

[95] Specifically the analysis is of the *Kenya Burning* exhibition book, published (under the same name) by Kwani Trust. The 154 page book featured images taken by Boniface Mwangi and Japanese photographer Yasuyoshi Chiba.

official histories in order to establish a more secure and peaceful future (Bisschoff & Van de Peer 2013: 3-8). Of relevance to the analysis of *Kenya Burning* and *Picha Mtaani* is Moller and Ubaldo's chapter on photographic representations of Rwanda's 1994 genocide (Moller & Ubaldo 2013). The authors bring to the forefront of their discussion the possibility that images of Rwanda's genocide and its aftermath represent a double-edged sword. This is because, on the one hand, in engaging with the images and the memories they conjure, the photographs can help the viewer emphasise with individual and collective suffering and from this develop new means for learning and understanding (Moller & Ubaldo 2013: 137). On the other hand, memories evoked from viewing the images can re-traumatise victims, trigger feelings of rage, or leave viewers feeling separated from the experience and unable to politically engage with its implications (Moller & Ubaldo 2013: 133-136). Engaging in these issues, and contributing to the analysis of *Kenya Burning* undertaken by Muhoma & Nyairo, attention now turns to the spaces created by both exhibitions.

Following its opening, and over the course of six weeks, approximately 1,500 people visited *Kenya Burning* (USAID 2009). Recalling this, Judy Ogana states: 'We've had many exhibitions, but never had so many people broken down in tears . . . the public reaction was incredibly physical' (as quoted in Kimani 2010: 258). An excerpt from the exhibition's visitor book gives a snapshot of the emotions, thoughts and reactions expressed by those who visited:[96]

- Let Kenyans learn from the past election
- The pictures really open our eyes to see what people really went through for peace and power
- Touching, sad
- Dante's Inferno!
- Never again!
- Remarkable snaps…but did we have to go through all this?
- Kenyans must wake up!
- A bitter lesson
- Please share with leaders. Never again!
- Pictures tell a thousand words
- God bless Kenya, Peace!
- Shocking and unbelievable!
- Not seen anything this horrific, satanic
- Very disturbing that we actually came to this
- Why? Why? Why Kenya?
- Succinct! Poignant!
- So touching, there's need for real peace
- Fantastic, but upsetting
- Forgive us God for we know not what we do
- I'll never vote again
- Fuck politicians!
- How selfish our leaders are, shame on them!
- Fellow Kenyans, we should change
- Needs to be seen. We should never forget

[96] These statements have come from the back page of the book *Kenya Burning* (Mboya & Ogana 2009).

- Truth and Justice for all Kenyans
- Keep it alive, lest we forget
- Our leaders should see this!
- A very powerful display of bad memories
- Our leaders should/must see these horrors!!
- Deeply, deeply disturbing
- Photography – good; story – like a bad dream
- A very powerful exhibit

Kenya Burning later travelled to other venues across the city (RaMoMA and The Nairobi Gallery) and country.[97] Speaking about the exhibition held at The Nairobi Gallery (for 6 months) David Mbuthia (Coordinator of Public Programmes at Nairobi National Museum) argues that the exhibition was able to create a 'space for collective memory' for organised visiting groups – particularly for students who make up the vast majority of visitors (Mbuthia 2009: 3).[98] A series of discussions reflecting on the post-election violence took place alongside the organised exhibition visits and Mbuthia suggests that together these 'significantly contributed to making the youth proponents of peace and…offered the much-needed space for mediation and healing.' (Mbuthia 2009: 3).

Holding *Kenya Burning* solely within the confines of gallery settings limited its potential to reach a broader public. Recognising this, and perhaps drawing on suggestions made by visitors, the *Kenya Burning* team proposed moving the exhibition to Parliament Building – an offer that was rejected (Kimani 2010: 258). The exhibition did, however, take place for a few days at the Kenyatta International Conference Centre (KICC) – which houses a number of Government offices. Upon coming across this the President's advisor, Raphael Tuju, promptly shut the exhibition down.[99] Furthermore, in interview with Judy Ogana I am told that despite invitations, no MP attended any of the *Kenya Burning* exhibitions and MPs were hostile to receiving copies of the *Kenya Burning* book. The silence demonstrated by an absence of political figures attending and recognising *Kenya Burning* confirmed the public's perception towards the political class' apathy in reconciliation efforts. It also demonstrates something else. According to Ogana, *Kenya Burning* received this response by those in positions of political power for obvious reasons – and that was guilt. In effect, the political class' antagonism towards *Kenya Burning* politicised the exhibition and this was also evident during the *Picha Mtaani* exhibitions.

[97] Subsequent exhibitions were held in Eldoret, Mombasa, Kisumu and it was also taken to Tanzania.

[98] The Nairobi Gallery is located in an old colonial building in central Nairobi. It houses part of the Murumbi African Heritage Collection and also has space for temporary art exhibits. It is part of the National Museums of Kenya.

[99] Raphael Tuju was serving as Advisor to the President of the Republic of Kenya on matters related to media and the management of diversity. Interview with Judy Ogana, Lavington, Nairobi (24/11/2018).

The *Picha Mtaani* exhibitions occurred in public spaces (such as parks and on the street), thus engaging a larger demographic than the *Kenya Burning* exhibitions which principally took place in gallery settings. At *Picha Mtaani's* launch Boniface Mwangi told those gathered: 'right now we are pretending everything is normal and everything is not normal. So when you see the pictures the pretence stops…the whole idea is to bring people together…and to try and make them talk.' (Picha Mtaani 2010). After a few exhibitions, however, it quickly became apparent that the public's unmediated engagement with the images and their unmoderated discussions did, at times, worsen reconciliation efforts. Speaking of this, Robert Munuku (*Picha Mtaani*'s project coordinator) says 'there were places where the exhibition was shown where it was very tense. People were feeling it was doing more harm than good.'[100] Writing about *Picha Mtaani*'s exhibitions, Tom Odhiambo (2011:66) states: 'By reminding ordinary citizens of the recent violence…these…exhibitions were seen as re-opening a hardly-healed wound.' In some instances local authorities removed certain images for unduly distressing the public (Picha Mtaani 2010a, Cherono 2010). Consequently, the original approach of *Picha Mtaani* was adapted and a psychosocial counselling aspect was introduced, in addition to inserting elements of drama, documentary screenings, moderated group discussions and the promotion of peace pledges for citizens to sign.[101]

This new approach was largely appreciated by the public. Having said that, instances in which the exhibition was disrupted or closed by the authorities did occasionally occur. In discussion with some team members of *Picha Mtaani* they suggest these occurrences happened because the exhibitions 'brought a lot of things that the government didn't really want to talk about'. For instance, in Naivasha it was claimed that rumours started circulating which suggested team members were collecting evidence for the ICC cases against politicians who had been implicated in organising violence during the 2007/8 PEV. Additionally, the exhibitions occasionally encountered hostile audiences, but according to team members I spoke with, this was less to do with the public's unease with the images but more a result of local politicians mobilising youth to disrupt the exhibition.

The fact that for three years *Picha Mtaani* held tens of exhibitions across the country attests that it found popular support amongst the public. For a population which had experienced violence

[100] Interview with Robert Munuku, at Heinrich Böll Foundation Nairobi (21/04/2017).

[101] Interview with Robert Munuku, at Heinrich Böll Foundation Nairobi, (21/04/2017). Over the period of 2009-2012 the *Picha Mtaani* exhibitions and film screenings across Kenya engaged with more than 700,000 Kenyans (with many participating in the project's dialogue and counselling sessions); 35,000 individuals completed surveys giving their views on community violence and national healing; and 61,000 signed a peace pledge. (PCA 2012: 6).

and trauma (directly or indirectly) the opportunity to have a space to discuss, listen, contemplate and reconcile appears to have been extremely valuable. In conversation with the logistical organiser of Picha Mtaani, who toured much of the country with the exhibition, he recalls one (out of many) moving moments, saying:

> 'There were a lot of people who thanked us for providing that opportunity for them to speak about these issues. In Nakuru one story really stood out for me, it is quite a cosmopolitan community but people spoke about how when they were growing up that they were taught this community or that community is bad. There were two old men, probably in their 50s. They sat together, one was Kikuyu and one was a Kalenjin, and they for the very first time were able to properly talk, two communities coming together and they became very good friends.'[102]

Rather than sweeping the PEV under the carpet, both *Kenya Burning* and *Picha Mtaani* created platforms in exhibition halls and public spaces for citizens to visually confront the awfulness that Kenyan had done unto Kenyan. Through this the public found opportunities for taking steps towards reconciliation between previously hostile groups, and possibilities for psychological relief through the open expression of strong emotions. However, as the 2013 General Election approached and tensions increased as to whether there would be a repeat of such violence, a nationwide consensus for peace at all costs emerged. This pre-election period saw numerous art-based peace projects take off in Nairobi, which is where focus now shifts.

Peace at what cost?

In this section I discuss the pervasive peace narrative that emerged in the run up to Kenya's 2013 General Election. Specifically, focus is placed on how a community art project taking place in Kibera contributed to this through the painting of a series of peace themed public murals. I suggest that the project conformed to a nation-wide peace consensus, which subsequently received criticisms for curtailing more dissenting and critical narratives. However, I argue that the project's focus on engaging young people contributed to their participation in activities addressing issues of public concern and democratic values, thus fostering alternative forms of civic engagement.

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[102] Interview with Martin Njuguna Mugo, Java, Nairobi CBD (10/01/2018).

Writing about the situation leading up to the 2013 election, the Kenyan social and political commentator and cartoonist, Patrick Gathara expresses: '…we were primed for a repeat of the fighting because… none of the historical grievances had been tackled. We thus saw our fellow Kenyans as potential machete-wielding savages just waiting for an excuse in the form of a disputed election. The fear, the terror, was palpable.' (Gathara 2015: 18). The acute uncertainty over the spectre of past violence reoccurring prompted the artist Solo 7 to revive his painting of peace slogans across Kibera. However, whereas Solo 7's previous peace campaign stood out as being one of only a few artist responses at the time, in 2013 this was different. Across Kenya a huge peace narrative emerged, driven by a breadth of actors including artists, musicians, celebrities, faith groups, politicians, business leaders, and civil society groups (Adebayo & Richards 2015). These actors disseminated peace messages through the medium of radio, television, music, art, community forums, SMS and social media (Benesch 2014; Bowman & Bowman 2016).

Large corporations with a vested interest in stability (as the uncertainty of violence threatened profits) undertook a mass of peace-themed initiatives (Austin & Wennmann 2017). *Coca-Cola* joined this bandwagon and co-opted the work of Solo 7 for their Kenya launch of the sugar-free soft drink *Coca-Cola Zero*. Using the tagline 'it's possible', *Coca-Cola Zero*'s marketing campaign suggested that just as peace is possible in Kenya so too is the taste of sugarless *Coca-Cola*. Images of Solo 7 and his peace slogans appeared in *Coca-Cola Zero*'s advertisements and he was remunerated $500 for this; a significant amount considering the unpredictable and low incomes that characterise most households in Kibera, yet a paltry amount for a multi-national corporation (fig. 2.23).

Figure 2.23. Coca-Cola Zero's marketing advert featuring Solo 7

Kenya's mainstream media was also caught up in the prevailing narrative, giving great emphasis to publishing amicable articles for the sake of preserving peace (Benequista 2015). Journalists eagerly sought out Solo 7 to cover his story (and include images of his work) because it suited the nationwide peace campaign of framing 'the good Kenyan citizen as one who protects and promotes stability, and who shies away from potentially divisive rhetoric and activities' (Lynch 2018: 49). Each meeting Solo 7 had with journalists resulted in him receiving 'something small' from them – or in other words monetary payment. These numerous encounters, over the months leading up to the 4th March 2013 General Election, provided the artist with a regular source of income. Paradoxically, then, the uncertainty created by the spectre of violence created an element of certainty for Solo 7; demand for the artist from *Coca-Cola* and journalists translated to a brief period of financial security, providing relief to the precariousness of hustling to make a living.

Solo 7's revived campaign contributed to a nation-wide peace drive that was recognised for producing powerful narratives which contributed to the absence of mass violence (Akpedonu, Lumsdaine & Sow 2013). A further art-based peace initiative was the public art project *Kibera Walls for Peace*, which is now considered.

Starting in January 2013, *Kibera Walls for Peace* was a joint initiative between American artist Joel Bergner and the NGO Kibera Hamlets.[103] The project aimed to promote peace between diverse ethnic groups and aspired to achieve this through collaborating with 30 young people to conceptualise and paint seven large murals in public spaces. According to Kibera Hamlets' director John Adoli, the value of public murals arise from their capacity to 'facilitate important message to the community, something not always achieved through conversations because of society's embedded power structures of age, gender and tribe.'[104]

Around half of the murals created were exclusively text based, with messages focussed on creating a future without necessarily confronting the past (fig. 2.24). Examples of text include: 'Kabila lango ni mKenya' (My tribe is Kenya); 'Vijana Tuishi kwa amai' (Youth we live for peace); and 'Amani ni Kusameheana' (Peace is Forgiveness). It has been suggested that using the national

[103] Bergner's leading role in Kibera Walls for Peace speaks to a growing record of international visual artists undertaking public art projects in Nairobi. Notable art projects initiated by foreign visual artists in Nairobi include: American photographer Lana Wong's project Shootback in Mathare slums (1997); French artist JR's Women are Heroes project in Kibera (2009); Colombian American artist Yazmany Arboleda's Colour in Faith (2015).

[104] Interview with John Adoli at Kibera Hamlets (13/02/2017).

language of Kiswahili 'meets the communication needs of a society hence [it being] an essential tool for propagating peace in Kenya.' (Achoka, Cheruto & Ochieng 2009: 115).

Figure 2.24. Mural created during *Kibera Walls for Peace*

Similarly, a ten carriage passenger train (which passes through Kibera daily) was covered in peace messages (fig. 2.25); these included 'Tuwache Ukabila, Tuwache Ubaguzi, Tuishi Kwa Amani' (down with tribalism, down with discrimination, we live for peace). The train was painted by local graffiti artists (Bankslave, Swift 9 and Uhuru B) alongside project participants. Speaking of their involvement Bankslave suggests graffiti is a powerful communicative tool amongst young people (Warner 2013), whilst Swift 9 states 'people have never seen anything like this so they'll definitely have to look at it and think about it during voting time.' (as quoted in Omar 2013: 33). The train's painting was particularly symbolic. Following the disputed 2007 election, rioters uprooted the railway line that runs through the slum. It has been suggested that this was a message from ODM supporters to associates of President Kibaki (who own a stake in Rift Valley Railways) but also a display of the opposition's capacity to destroy key economic assets (ICG 2008: 20-2). Thus, covering the train in messages of peace was a stark reminder to the violence of the past but also the collective will for a peaceful 2013 election.

Figure 2.25. Painted train carriages created during *Kibera Walls for Peace*

The other murals relied on imagery which put across narratives open to greater interpretation. For example, one presented the viewer with the tale of the tortoise and hare in which two paths could be chosen (fig. 2.26). However, while one path offered quick benefits it also revealed that this may lead to a person's early demise. One resident interviewed described this as representing:

> 'Youth being used by the political elite. It makes us understand that we the youth are part of the problem. We accept the money and are usually misled. We have to take responsibility and realise that just as we have the power to take money and fight we also have the same power to say no and choose to live in harmony with one another.'[105]

Figure 2.26. Mural created during *Kibera Walls for Peace*

Another mural depicted two mingling hyenas (fig. 2.27). In Kenya hyenas are frequently used in popular culture to denote 'a clever but opportunistic villain who… [has an] appetite for food, instant gratification and sheer greed to scavenge and turn friend and foe into a meal' (Wasike 2017). For this reason, they are often chosen to be used as a metaphor for Members of Parliament (Mungai 2007: 345). Thus, this mural reflects public opinion around politician's self-serving ambitions (NCRC 2016), as suggested by one resident:

> 'The politicians are the ones who cause us to fight. They never fight. The mural makes us think "why are we being so stupid to fight?" We live with our neighbours not our

[105] Feedback came during a focus group discussion with 15 residents from Kibera at Kibera Hamlets (08/02/2017). The discussion followed a film screening of the documentary 'My Tribe is Kenya' which was about *Kibera Walls for Peace.*

politicians, they do not live our reality but instead are sat in comfort with one another laughing at our expense. We will not be used anymore.’[106]

Figure 2.27. Mural created during *Kibera Walls for Peace*

The text based murals created during *Kibera Walls for Peace* unanimously called for unity, forgiveness, peace, and an end to ‘tribalism’. In other words the messages were fairly one-dimensional, as they did not address the root causes of the violence. I suggest the figurative murals’ provided a more nuanced narrative regarding those responsible but in a way that gave spectators knowledge not fully complete – thereby allowing viewers to form their own conclusions, as alluded to in the above quotes from residents of Kibera. That said, other factors such as accountability and justice (provided for in the 2010 Constitution) were less apparent in their understandings. These sentiments echo the pre-election nation-wide consensus of peace above anything else, created at the time through conditioning the public through repetitively exposing them to peace messages.

Evidently, *Kibera Walls for Peace* added to this pervasive narrative (in its own small and localised way), which can be commended for contributing to a largely peaceful election. However, it did so to the detriment of using art to create more agonistic spaces, such as those created from the *Kenya Burning* and *Picha Mtaani* exhibitions. In discussion with Adoli he suggests that the reason for this was because he and participants had experienced the 2007/8 PEV in Kibera and were concerned about destabilising what they saw as being an already fragile environment. This err on

[106] Ibid.

the side of caution speaks to the perceived need for art-based approaches to peacebuilding to be 'handled with care' in what is a balancing act, in which one continually negotiates the levels of appropriate conflict and optimal tension (Coleman & Deutsch 2014: 485).

The prevalence of peace messaging across the country did however draw criticisms because of its promotion over what otherwise might have been more diversified and robust conversations taking place in Kenya's public sphere (Cheeseman, et al. 2014). This led commentators to ask what cost this so called 'peaceocracy' had on democracy, particularly in the case of media compromising their role as national watchdogs over political failures for fear of being accused of inciting divisions within society (Cheeseman, et al. 2019). However the deepening of democracy occurs on many levels. Whilst *Kibera Walls for Peace* contributed to overwhelming peace narratives it also provided young people with opportunities for self-transformation and civic engagement.

In interview with Adoli he explains 'participants were chosen between the ages of 14-24 because many in this age group are out of school and idle which lends them to becoming vulnerable to exploitation.'[107] The approach of targeting disaffected and/or unemployed youths - for fear that they can be easily recruited into gangs and participate in violence in return for small sums of cash - was a common tactic by those managing peace initiatives in the run up to the 2013 election (Lynch 2018: 41-42). But young people's inclusion in *Kibera Walls for Peace* had a greater effect then simply keeping them away from trouble.

The project provided space for participants to influence community matters, a platform for their opinions and voices to be heard. In interview Bergner recalls 'the young people were excited by their mission of peace, and became more so as community residents would cheer them on and encourage them as they painted.'[108] Speaking with participants, a few years on from their involvement, they recall how the process of creating art for public dialogue around peace improved their confidence for self-expression, planning, community organising, and activism.[109] What stood out in these conversations was emphasis on how participation in the project developed their individual and collective capacity to identify and address issues of public concern. Furthermore, half of the correspondents reported that their experience from participating in *Kibera Walls for Peace* significantly contributed to their decision to become more involved in

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[107] Interview with John Adoli at Kibera Hamlets (13/02/2017).

[108] As told by Joel Bergner via online interview (19/10/2016).

[109] Feedback came during a focus group discussion, held at Kibera Hamlets (08/02/2017) with 9 male and female participants of *Kibera Walls for Peace*.

community and political matters.[110] In other words, *Kibera Walls for Peace* helped people become more civically engaged. For those who were previously unfamiliar with their ability to create social change, the experience of participating in *Kibera Walls for Peace* was empowering. The extent to which such projects bring citizens into democratic process where they feel they can influence decisions in their local area, or can serve as watchdogs and activists for truth, is explored further in Chapters 5 and 6.

Conclusion

This chapter has demonstrated that throughout Kenya's first fifty years of independence there have been examples in which artists have engaged in efforts to animate the public sphere. However, various epochs in Kenya and Nairobi since independence in 1963 have affected the life of visual artists and the issues they situate in their work. I discussed how without significant support from the State artists' principle patrons became commercial galleries, such as Gallery Watatu. This patronage enabled many to pursue art as a career but hindered the development of more experimental and critical works, and indeed the prospect of reaching a sizeable local audience. Another limiting factor was Moi's repressive regime which muffled the country's creativity but it did not completely stall. As argued, the 1980s *Sisi kwa Sisi* movement effectively revealed the limitations of Nairobi's weak art infrastructure, but also the possibilities to take visual art to the masses and use it to critique the postcolonial State.

The 1990s saw donor funding make an imprint in Nairobi's cultural landscape, which continued into the new millennium. On the one hand this drew attention to how dependency on fickle donor funds and priorities can have significant consequences, made apparent with the closure of RaMoMA in 2010 after the withdrawal of funding from the Ford Foundation. However, the influx of donor funds aided the establishment and development of alternative art spaces (such as Kuona Trust) which provided opportunities for intense interactions and exposure to new forms of artistic production not previously practised in Kenya. This was also fuelled through increased globalisation and human movements and exchanges, both physical and virtual.

As argued, I suggest this resulted in new approaches for art production and presentation in the 21st century, made apparent through an uptake of conceptual strategies. Whilst having never

[110] Ibid.

been totally absent in Kenya's colonial and postcolonial art history (giving emphasis to the concept of bricolage), the amount of artists committed to using their work to undermine and question the dominant hegemony increased following Kenya's 2007/8 PEV. A newly invigorated consciousness became apparent amongst visual artists who used their work to comment on and articulate political and social matters, such as Kamwathi's *Sitting Allowance* and Malinda's *Is Free Dumb*. Additionally, artists also engaged in work effecting social change and nurturing people's participation in action, demonstrated through Solo 7's peace activism, and the community outreach project *Kibera Walls for Peace*. Yet, as highlighted during the 'peaceocracy' of Kenya's 2013 election campaign, external factors such as the prevailing political climate continue to influence, and indeed shape, visual art practices. Still, what these divergent art forms and approaches also revealed is their creation of various sites of action. Often these sites not only functioned as exhibition spaces but rather demonstrated the potential to become a space for exchange and dialogue, and social spaces that invite participation for the contesting and re-negotiation of the public sphere – as exemplified through the strategies of the *Daily Billboard Project*, *Kenya Burning* and *Picha Mtaani*.

Thus, this chapter has concisely analysed art's relation to representing and affecting the postcolonial condition in Kenya and vice versa during the country's first fifty years of independence. More so, it has started to untangle the broad framework that artists in 21st century Nairobi are operating within and it has identified tensions, possibilities and limitations of a range of artistic strategies and spatial practices for the reinvigorating of democracy. As such, this paves the way for the four subsequent chapters that are both narrower in time frame (2013-2017) and focus. The task for the next chapter is to examine the potential for Nairobi's art institutions to become agonistic public spaces where the existing hegemony is openly contested.

Chapter Three

Democratic aspirations and Nairobi's art institutions

> 'Very early on in most discussions of the contemporary art world, the significance of institutions is granted…Institutions have a critical "gatekeeper" role in the contemporary art world but there are many kinds of institutions and some kinds – and some international networks of these – are far more important than others. Artists need institutions and institutions need artists: the relationship is symbiotic and mutually productive, yet often generates tensions.' (Jonathan Harris 2011: 19)

> 'Critical art is art that foments dissensus, that makes visible what the dominant consensus tends to obscure and obliterate. It is constituted by a manifold of artistic practices aiming at giving a voice to all those who are silenced within the framework of the existing hegemony.' (Chantal Mouffe 2008: 12)

In considering contemporary visual art in Nairobi the role that institutions play in governing art cannot be ignored. Chapter 3 of this thesis, then, aims to examine art institutions and, as the academic Jonathan Harris indicates, their critical role as 'gatekeepers'. Attention is given to Nairobi's art institutions whose principal function is to facilitate the distribution of contemporary visual art to a public – giving art a place in society. More specifically, I place emphasis on art exhibitions taking place within the walls of such institutions. I ask what their potential is to create not only sites for artistic expression but also arenas where opinions may be forged, freedom of expression experienced, awareness raised, and new meanings constructed and disseminated. This may particularly be the case if a critical art practice, such as that described by Chantal Mouffe, takes root. Yet these possibilities are in no way guaranteed.

There is debate about whether art encountered within the walls of institutions can indeed create meaningful sites for the performance of democracy. It has been suggested that when the role of art and its social value is determined by institutions' operations of power the status quo is

maintained rather than challenged (Jelinek 2013: 113). The implications of this are a reduction in the plurality or diversity of artistic practices, the suppression of innovation and particular narratives, and an erasure of individual agency and freedom. Thus, the argument goes, working within the confines of an institution can causes art to lose its critical element and instead art can come to represent an echo chamber of the prevailing consensus. Additionally, it is often argued that gallery type settings and museums are associated with an elitism incompatible with democratic aspirations. Consequently the parameters of galleries, museums and the like, are said to hinder the potential for art exhibitions to contribute to questioning the dominant hegemony. In her writing on agonistic politics and artistic practices, Chantal Mouffe counters these viewpoints and takes issue with those who claim that critical art practices can only have efficacy when taking place outside institutions (Mouffe 2013: 100). Mouffe goes on to argue 'such a perspective is, in my view, profoundly mistaken and clearly disempowering because it prevents us from recognising the multiplicity of avenues that are open for political engagement' (Mouffe 2013: 100). Thus, for Mouffe, art institutions (such as galleries and museums) can become agonistic public spaces where the existing hegemony is openly contested.

These limitations and possibilities raise a number of questions for this chapter. What exhibitions and art practices take place within Nairobi's art institutions, and how do these convey democratic aspirations? Who are the publics formed in such spaces? What are the topics permitted? And, how does the governing of these spaces effect this? In order to address these questions this chapter examines a number of art exhibitions possessing a critical efficacy which have occurred in Nairobi's art institutions between the years 2013-2017. Focus turns to four 'types' of art institutions (commercial art galleries, museums, art-centres, and foreign cultural centres) which characterise Nairobi's contemporary art landscape but are also regarded as part of the public sphere.

Comprising four sections and a conclusion this chapter begins with an examination of two installations which were exhibited at Kuona Trust art-centre. I assess the extent to which this art-centre's support for 'conceptual exhibitions' provides conditions for a critical art practice to emerge. The following section looks at how the Maasai Mbili art-centre turned its gallery into a local resource in order to engage with alternative forms of community living during two participatory art projects. Attention then shifts to the Circle Art Gallery, in which I question whether this commercial gallery has the possibility of promoting a critical art alongside its own commercial principles. Lastly, the chapter explores the liberal and progressive nature of some institutions in contrast to the conservative characteristics of others and uses exhibitions at the Goethe-Institut Nairobi and the Nairobi National Museum to illustrate this. The chapter indicates

that art exhibitions taking place within Nairobi's art institutions have the possibility to enrich Kenya's public sphere.

Conceptual exhibitions: Kuona Trust

To begin this enquiry I return to Kuona Trust, having discussed its inception in the previous chapter. Following the art-centre's move to the Nairobi suburb of Kilimani in 2008, Kuona Trust boasted of having: over 30 artists with studio spaces, an on-site art gallery, a library, and a programme consisting of international residencies, workshops and public art projects – making it arguably East Africa's largest visual art-centre.[111] A consistent model in the Trust's running has been its total dependence on donor funding, without which 'most of the more cutting edge, experimental exhibitions, regional and international workshops, residencies and public art projects would not have been possible' (Kuona Trust Annual Report 2014: 2). However, criticisms emerged over the art-centre's relation with funders (invested in using art to promote human rights and democracy) because of their apparent preference towards good intentions over actual creative qualities (Bounakoff 2017: 18). Whilst donor dependency has inevitably steered Kuona Trust's support for certain exhibitions, in this section I take a different tone. I suggest Kuona Trust's backing of 'conceptual exhibitions' enabled artists rarely afforded opportunities to acquire a budget to work outside market constraints and explore subjects close to their heart through new mediums and art forms. Through an analysis of two artist-led exhibitions I argue that Kuona Trust demonstrated its potential to foster critical art practices. However, the section also makes apparent the risk of donor dependency. Attention now turns to the exhibition *#YourNameBetraysYou* by Wambui Kamiru-Collymore.

On April 24th 2014, the opposition party to the Kenyan Government, the Coalition for Reforms and Democracy (CORD), held a press conference to deliver their verdict on the Jubilee Government's first year in office. What that conference is now remembered for is former Vice President Kalonzo Musyoka's actions towards the Nation media journalist Kennedy Murithi. At the conference Murithi commented: 'all you are saying is what is wrong with the Government,

[111] Rob Burnett left Kuona Trust in 2000 and was replaced by Judy Ogana who was director until 2004. The art-centre relocated from Nairobi National Museum to the GoDown Arts Centre, in Nairobi's industrial area. However, being housed within the premises of another institution meant that Kuona Trust's identity became lost, and in 2008 it moved to its own site in Kilimani. By this time Danda Jarolimek was Kuona Trust's director (2004-2012). In 2012 Sylvia Gichia became director until 2016.

you are not providing alternative leadership as CORD. You are not saying this is wrong, this is how it should be done.' Musyoka asked the journalist's name and upon hearing it declined to answer because Murithi is a Kikuyu name, an ethnic group typically associated with Jubilee. Instead Musyoka declared 'that name betrays it all, I have nothing else to say'.[112] Kenyans were quick to criticise Musyoka's actions, which were construed as divisive in that they perpetuated schisms in Kenyan politics and ethnic complexity.[113]

A year later the artist Wambui Kamiru-Collymore held the *#YourNameBetraysYou* exhibition at Kuona Trust, using the incident to stimulate discussion of ethnic stereotyping in Kenya. She explained her perspectives thus:

> 'we forget politicians are like puppeteers or magicians, they manipulate the facts, they tell you a different story and you come out of it and you're like "yeah, you know, that's precisely why I'm entitled to this because you know, I'm Kikuyu and we have always held this power mantle" and they're the most intelligent without realising where that idea of an intelligent Kikuyu came from, where that classification came from and how that politician is using it which matches how it was used before him and how before that it was used by a system, a structure, that needed to do that.'[114]

Kamiru-Collymore was based at Kuona Trust and it is there that her practice moved towards installation art.[115] The art historian Claire Bishop describes installation art as a 'type of art into which the viewer physically enters', going on to say that it differs from traditional media (such as painting, sculpture and photography) because it 'presupposes an embodied viewer whose sense

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[112] For a video clip of this press conference see 'Kalonzo snubs journalist in a cord news conference' video, uploaded to 'KTN News Kenya' YouTube channel on Apr 24, 2014, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BQnVJ9bOOd8 (accessed on 11/03/2019).

[113] Following Kalonzo's comments users on social media platforms, such as Twitter and Facebook, were quick to criticise his actions through creating and sharing a series tweets and memes using the hashtag #SomeoneTellKalonzoMusyoka.

[114] Interview with Kamiru-Collymore from her studio at Kuona Trust, (13/08/2015).

[115] In interview Kamiru-Collymore informs me that she found the medium of painting too restrictive in order to express her concepts and was encouraged to pursue installation art by Kuona Trust's then director, Sylvia Gichia. Kamiru-Collymore's first solo exhibition, the installation *#Harambee63*, looked at the role of ordinary people in revolutionary struggles prior to Kenyan independence. The exhibition was supported by Kuona Trust through an artist grant and was exhibited at the art-centre in 2013, marking Kenya's 50th year of independence. *#Harambee63*, Kamiru-Collymore explains, was 'an opportunity to make art out of history…[and] to make history accessible to people in a way that they appreciate and could experience' (Kariuki 2013). It is no coincidence African history is an ongoing subject in Kamiru-Collymore's work, given that in 2008 she completed an MSc in African Studies (with a focus on history) at the University of Oxford, UK. On returning to Kenya Kamiru-Collymore was unable to find work at Kenya's universities thus turning to her art practice as a means to publicly share her knowledge.

of touch, smell and sound are as heightened as their sense of vision.' (Bishop 2005: 6). In designing her exhibition Kamiru-Collymore sought to create a space in which people would 'ask themselves the difficult questions, what their stereotypes are, who fed them these stereotypes, and in what ways do they give life to those stereotypes'.[116] *#YourNameBetraysYou* filled Kuona Trust's gallery, including carefully selected books, film, sound, and text, paradoxically presenting the ways in which identity and tradition have been (re)constructed over different periods of Kenyan history (fig. 3.1-3).[117] Occupying the centre of the room stood an absurdly sized wooden chair which according to the artist signified 'the structure that has created what we believe to be tradition and culture and the stereotypes that we hold.'[118] The black and white colour scheme throughout the installation was explained by the artist, remarking: 'because we hold stereotypes to be true without realising there are some grey areas within them'.[119] But how does this installation fulfil the artist's intention of bettering understandings of ethnicity based stereotypes?

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[116] See the video 'Your Name Betrays you by Wambui Wamae Kamiru', uploaded to YouTube by Figure Studios, published on Mar 2, 2015, quote starts at 3 minutes and 25 seconds, available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b8R4NW3W2NM&t=219s (accessed 05/05/2019).

[117] An example of this is two books that occupied a side table - one being the *DK Eyewitness Travel Guide Kenya* the other *Kenya Burning* (a catalogue for an exhibition documenting Kenya's 2007/8 PEV, which was discussed in the previous chapter). Both books describe and portray Kenya and its people in very particular ways. Projected onto one of the walls was a recording of colonial film footage from Kenya. Both the books and film are archives which construct meaning around identity and tradition. Behind the projected film, stuck to the wall, were written stereotypes associated with particular ethnic groups in Kenya. These stereotypes were also 'catalogued' inside a museum-like cabinet which bears the name of an ethnic group on the front of each draw. It is no coincidence that some of these are out in the open, whereas others are found behind 'closed doors', or embedded in 'history' – referencing how stereotypes have come into being and when how or with whom they are used. Some of the sayings pasted on the wall of the installation include: 'The Luo believe they are smarter than everyone else. (1999)'; 'The Kikuyu are hardworking. (1967)'; 'The Luo are Middle Eastern Arabs who moved to Sudan in the 1400s, and emigrated from there to many African nations. (2011)'; 'The Kikuyu women know how to raise children. (2015); 'The Kisi are hardworking. (2015)'; 'The Kikuyu support Uhuru. (2013)'; 'The Kalenjin keep to themselves and don't leave home. (2014)'; 'The Luo support Raila. (2013)'. Source: https://wambuikamiru.wordpress.com/2015/07/27/yournamebetraysyou-the-installation/ (accessed 14/03/2019).

[118] See the video 'Your Name Betrays you by Wambui Wamae Kamiru', uploaded to YouTube by FIGURE STUDIOS, published on Mar 2, 2015, quote starts at 4 minutes and 17 seconds, available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b8R4NW3W2NM&t=219s (accessed 05/05/2019).

[119] Ibid.

Figures 3.1-3 (top to bottom) images from the installation *#YourNameBetraysYou* –
by Wambui Kamiru-Collymore

In his contribution to an influential edited book, *The Invention of Tradition*, the Africanist historian Terrence Ranger discusses the situation in colonial Africa – a text which Kamiru-Collymore says influenced *#YourNameBetraysYou.* At the end of his essay Ranger concludes by saying:

> 'As for historians, they have at least a double task. They have to free themselves from the illusion that the African custom recorded by officials or by many anthropologists is any sort of guide to the African past. But they also need to appreciate how much invented traditions of all kinds have to do with the history of Africa in the twentieth century and strive to produce better founded accounts of them than this preliminary sketch.' (Ranger 1983: 262)

Kamiru-Collymore takes on this double task with the exhibition *#YourNameBetraysYou*. Within the installation the embodied viewer is permitted an overview across time, confronted with the ways in which meaning around identity and tradition have been constructed at different periods throughout Kenyan history. This is what makes the installation effective. The viewer not only negotiates this process of invention but, because they are implicit in a society which perpetuates these stereotypes, they are prompted to come to terms with how these affect relations in society today and their position in this process.

Rather than creating an exhibition that simply critiqued stereotypes from Kenyan society - thus shutting down the discussion as Kalonzo Musyoka had done - Kamiru-Collymore instead created a possibility to better understand how the deployment of stereotypes maintains structures of power. The installation created an occasion whereby an audiences' own judgement of stereotypes came into question, thus starting a process to produce better founded understandings of how ethnic stereotypes emerged, evolved and were perpetuated.

Even though Kuona Trust was open to exhibiting diverse and contentious topics, it did not mean artists felt completely free from the consequences. In discussion with Kamiru-Collymore, she made known her apprehensions while preparing for *#YourNameBetraysYou*. The artist was concerned whether her work would be perceived as inciting ethnic divisions or discrimination by the National Commission on Integration and Cohesion - so much so that she consulted a lawyer before the exhibition opening. That Kuona Trust chose to support and exhibit *#YourNameBetraysYou* (and other exhibitions like it) is significant. This is not because such conversations were otherwise absent from the public domain, but because Kuona Trust became an additional space where critical thinking and freedom of expression could be advocated for and stimulated through art.

Kuona Trust has been pivotal in providing artists (particularly those who are young and up-and-coming) with a platform to develop a critical art practice. Since 2009 the institution's support for 'conceptual exhibitions' has seen artists create work that relates to local and global concerns including topics ranging from elections, women and politics, identity and the invention of tradition, to substance abuse, the NGO business and mental health issues. Attention to these themes was partly imposed by external donors. For instance, in 2015 the Swedish development organisation Forum Syd partnered with Kuona Trust and other cultural institutions in the multi-year programme *Wajibu Wetu* (Kiswahili for 'It's Our Responsibility'). Forum Syd were concerned with a shrinking of space for work on human rights and democracy following Jubilee's appointment to office in 2013 and saw cultural institutions as 'untapped pockets' of civil society

to increase and diversify social change. Thus, *Wajibu Wetu's* percieved Kuona Trust as a partner who could promote the use of art to advocate for a culture of democracy in Kenya. A second exhibition draws out the implications of Kuona Trust's engagement with such funders and the continued emphasis on 'conceptual exhibitions'.

Opening at Kuona Trust in April 2016, the exhibition *Democracy My Piss* used observations of political elections as a starting point to examine democracy in Africa.[120] This exhibition, like *#YourNameBetraysYou*, was an installation. It consisted of: two TV screens playing scenes of protest, violence and contestation; four hooded red figures representing a queue of voters; and a figure in black wearing a gas mask connected to a briefcase (fig. 3.4-6).

Figures 3.4-6 (top to bottom) images from the exhibition *Democracy My Piss* by Longinos Nagila.

[120] *Democracy My Piss* opened on Thursday 26th April 2016 and ran until Thursday 26th May 2016.

The artwork was created by Longinos Nagila who developed the exhibition with Nairobi-based curator Rose Jepkorir. Speaking about the process and intention of *Democracy My Piss* Jepkorir claimed 'the exhibition is questioning a very grand narrative, which is always a little bit tricky because we don't have the authority and we are not experts on what democracy is but we have observations, we have comments, we have seen things so the exhibition is basically bringing together all of these elements.'[121]

In discussion with the artist, Nagila described how inspiration for the exhibition came during a trip with scholars and artists from Nairobi to Rwanda's capital city, Kigali.[122] The journey took them through Uganda shortly after its 2016 General Election and Nagila was struck by the dominance of political campaign posters supporting President Yoweri Museveni (one of Africa's longest serving presidents) and his party, the National Resistance Movement, which has been in power since 1986. The artist further recollected an uncomfortable sense of calmness while in neighbouring Rwanda, saying 'you see nothing and everything is just quiet. You see this calmness that scares you…the worst kind of noise is silence.'[123] This reflection, Nagila told me, arose in relation to the restrictions of fundamental rights to freedom of expression under President Paul Kagame. Nagila described the whole experience as 'a political pilgrimage' - one which, he says, he 'used to interrogate what democracy is'.[124]

If Nagila's interrogation of democracy is to be read through *Democracy My Piss*, then on first account it is principally through the lens of elections – which the artist says is how democracy, in most places, is manifested.[125] In Kenya, he remarked, 'we are always in election mood'.[126] It is reasonable to question how, or indeed whether, such a reductive concept, limited to elections as presented throughout Nagila's installation, awakens in the spectator new understandings of democracy. Nagila conceives of himself as representing what he terms a 'ritual [in which] you have the queue, and the casting of the vote into the ballot…at the end of the day there is always

[121] See the video 'Democracy My Piss with Longinos Nagila', Published on Jun 21, 2016, YouTube https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ui0CjpXFciE (accessed 23/03/2019).

[122] Organised by the BIEA, the visit to Rwanda was to make preliminary plans for a workshop involving art organisations from across the region to investigate the role of art in society. The participants who travelled with Nagila were: Joost Fontein (BIEA Director), Neo Musangi (BIEA Humanities Research Fellow), Alex Dyzenhaus (BIEA Graduate attaché), Nicholas Gakuu (BIEA driver/mechanic), and Lemek Tompoika (visual artist).

[123] Interview with Longinos Nagila at Kuona Trust (10/10/2016).

[124] Ibid.

[125] Ibid.

[126] Ibid.

a dispute of the results.'[127] In his writing on political rituals, and speaking about standard criticisms of elections, the political scientist Lance Bennet argues:

> '[such assessments are] based on the assumption that elections are actually arenas in which issues can be specified and resolved. In light of the absence of any policy-making process, it might make more sense to regard presidential elections as rituals that function to promote the myth that elections are arenas for specifying and resolving issues. If elections serve to promote myths, then their melodramatic aspects are not inexplicable failings, but defining characteristics of a ritual.' (Bennet 1983: 49)

Bennet's critique draws attention to the structural limitations of elections. This too is precisely what *Democracy My Piss* does. The installation provokes the audience to re-examine what they perceive to be democracy's defining feature. For the artist 'democracy is something that should be celebrated, it's something that people should live in their daily lives';[128] but precisely what a more substantive definition, and indeed practice, of democracy denotes (beyond the ritual of elections) is not provided. This is not the artist's purpose, he does not look to promote answers, but instead presents what he thinks, and asks the questions he believes we should all be thinking about. Is democracy merely the regular ritual of elections? If not, what would we advocate for as a more substantive definition of democracy? Are we satisfied with the democracy we have? If not, then who is pissing on democracy – is democracy my piss?

Both installations - *#YourNameBetraysYou* and *Democracy My Piss* – are indicative of the 'conceptual exhibitions' Kuona Trust regularly supported (approximately 8 each year). It did not matter that these exhibitions were often unrefined because what they made possible was for artwork to be conceptualised and created away from the parameters of the commercial market, for experimentation to take root. The exhibitions were also fairly well attended, attracting audience numbers of approximately 100-200 per show – most of whom were Kenyans. Furthermore, as part of the curatorial practice in these exhibitions, artist talks were a regular feature. These talks provided an additional platform for public dialogue around themes of an artist's exhibition – rather than purely being about artistic merit and process. For instance, a public forum organised as part of the exhibition *Democracy My Piss* involved not only the artist and members of the public but also academics and scholars from the social sciences, thus broadening the scope and perspectives of dialogue around the subject of democracy. Another

[127] See the video 'Democracy My Piss with Longinos Nagila', Published on Jun 21, 2016, YouTube https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ui0CjpXFciE (accessed 23/03/2019).

[128] ibid

example is a public forum organised for the 2015 exhibition *Enjoy Responsibly*, in which artists interrogated the subject of substance abuse in Kenya.[129] Health and social workers (who were invited to the forum by exhibition curator Thom Ogonga) expanded the opportunities for a debate on issues of addiction and treatment. This took place in the 'safe' and known environment of Kuona Trust and away from the professional 'clinical' setting. Building on this last point, according to Kuona Trust's then-Director (Sylvia Gichia), the 'conceptual exhibitions' and associated forums created 'a safe space' through their ability to 'elicit serious conversations that are not easy to have, despite this whole idea of freedom of speech.'[130]

The concept of 'safe space' is an often contested and ambiguous term which is generally applied in educational settings or within the LGBT community. Referring to queer safe space the human geographer Gilly Hartal imagines it as 'a protected place, facilitating a sense of security and recreating discourses of inclusion and diversity. It is a metaphor for the ability to be honest, take risks, and share opinions' (Hartal 2018: 1056). Such elements are particularly apparent in the context of Kuona Trust, and other art spaces such as the Goethe-Institut Nairobi (discussed below); but as this chapter will go on to demonstrate this is not the case in all venues – revealing the more fractious nature of the term and prompting questions about 'safe from what?' or 'safe from whom?'.

In September 2016 Kuona Trust's Board of Trustees shut down the offices so Forum Syd could conduct a thorough audit. The audit was not made public although *The East African* (a regional newspaper) reported that the Swedish NGO demanded the return of over $50,000 that was unaccounted for (Whalley 2016). Such reporting increased existing accusations that Kuona Trust's management was corrupt. Unsurprisingly, following this scandal other donors also withdrew their support and Kuona Trust ceased operations and dissolved. The complete lack of public transparency as to what happened has meant those responsible for its collapse have not been held to account.

This crisis galvanised artists and previous beneficiaries of Kuona Trust to come together to keep the space functioning. Working collectively, artists created a committee and raised funds through open days and art exhibitions in order to meet the minimum requirements to pay for the bills and

[129] The exhibition *Enjoy Responsibly*, which was curated by Thom Ogonga, was an attempt to understand substance abuse, addiction, its symptoms, the problems and possible ways of rehabilitation through a body of conceptual work developed by 6 visual artists (Maral Bolouri, John Kamicha, Peterson Kamwathi, Ndeithi Kariuki, Thom Ogonga and Antony Okello). The exhibition opened on Thursday 9th July 2015 and ran until Sunday 19th July 2015.

[130] Interview with Sylvia Gichia (Director at Kuona Trust) from her office at Kuona Trust (06/08/2015).

rent. In December 2017, the Kuona Artists Collective was launched. The newly founded collective aims to continue the legacy of Kuona Trust but it currently lacks the resources to implement training workshops, artist grants, art residencies, and retain a gallery space and library. Thus, while borrowing its name and remaining at the same site, it is clearly something very different from Kuona Trust. As such, the collapse of Kuona Trust might be characterised as having arrested the development of a more challenging strain of contemporary visual art in Nairobi. The role of the art-centre, as a space for critical art, is nevertheless still apparent in Nairobi – but in recent years this is, for the most part, limited to the Maasai Mbili art-centre in Kibera.

Alternative art spaces: Maasai Mbili

In the last chapter I discussed the intervention-based activities of the Kibera based Maasai Mbili artists' collective (a registered cultural centre at the Ministry of Sports, Arts and Culture). In 2011 the collective successfully fundraised to purchase the building they had been renting for their art-centre (comprising a studio-cum-gallery) and in 2016 this was refurbished. This independence effectively means that Maasai Mbili is not dependent on fickle donor support. Rather, operation costs are generated through a commission on the sale of artworks by its members (which at the time of writing stands at approximately 15). Furthermore, Maasai Mbili represents an alternative art space in that it has a very different model of engagement with the public when compared with the other institutions discussed in this chapter. This is because the art-centre is not only situated within a community, but the collective has also become part of that community. In this section I return to Maasai Mbili's work to focus on two recent art projects which took place within the walls of Maasai Mbili's newly-renovated art-centre. Both projects gave emphasis to galvanising local participation and present an opportunity to examine the potential of such initiatives in leading to new forms of social interaction.

In October 2016 the artist known as Greenman (Muleh Mbillo) and others from Maasai Mbili launched *Tiba Clinic*. Rejecting the idea of using the recently renovated art-centre to exhibit conventional art objects, it was instead used as a stage on which social relations could be activated. The idea for *Tiba Clinic* was partly inspired by the experience of an earlier art performance called *Tibiwa na Tiba*, which took place at various sites in 2013.[131] *Tibiwa na Tiba*

[131] *Tibiwa na Tiba* was an art performance by Maasai Mbili, Chris King and Maia von Lekow, which took place at City Market and Kuona Trust. It was part of the GoDown Arts Centre's *Nai ni Who* festival in 2013.

(Kiswahili for be cured by the cure) involved the setting up of a clinic where the public would come to be treated by healers from the planet *Tiba* (fig. 3.7). The 'healers' performed consultations with willing members of the public and were given remedies, which included 'magic' coloured maize corn. The idea of the performance was to test whether people believe you more when you come from another planet (Goethe-Institut 2016: 92). It has been reported that at one point during the performance a member of the public accused the artists of engaging in 'witchery' and the artists had to be rescued by the local police from a potentially hostile crowd (Mboya & Oluoch-Olunya 2017: 64). As a follow up to this, *Tiba Clinic* was also about healing, but rather than being a performance, this art project was more concerned with the sphere of human interactions.

Figure 3.7. *Tibiwa na Tiba* (2013) – a performance by Maasai Mbili, Chris King and Maia von Lekow.

Running daily, over a period of three weeks, *Tiba Clinic* aimed to transform the Maasai Mbili art-centre into a 'space to love'. The art project set up situations where the public could come and play games (such as cards and Ludo), take part in group activities (like mask-making and music 'jamming' sessions), or simply have access to a space and environment to socialise with others (fig. 3.8-13). Boundaries between artist and public became blurred as everyone was in effect a 'curator' of the activities that took place. During the daytime the art-centre was largely occupied with young people and children and through the evening and into the night mainly adults occupied the space. Throughout the period *Tiba Clinic* ran, the art-centre became a more completely local resource as emphasis shifted from conventional art-making to creating situations in which a community could be brought together. According to Greenman, *Tiba Clinic*'s concept was to use participation as a tool for helping anyone to create, share and overcome day-to-day challenges.[132] In the context of the densely populated Kibera slum (where access to

[132] These aims were shared to me from artists at Maasai Mbili during multiple visits to the Maasai Mbili art-centre in 2016 when *Tiba Clinic* was taking place. In addition to this I was in attendance when Greenman presented the concept of *Tiba Clinic* to an audience at the BIEA in Nairobi on the 29th October 2016 for the BIEA's Third Annual Graduate Conference.

community and public space is limited) the value of a site where recreational, cultural, and social activities can be accommodated stands out.

Figures 3.8- 13. *Tiba Clinic* – Maasai Mbili, 2016.

Shortly after *Tiba Clinic*, Maasai Mbili artists exhibited *The Hotel of the Oppressed*. Taking place over one day *The Hotel of the Oppressed* saw the art-centre's gallery and studio modified as a result of a huge installation constructed inside which resembled a local restaurant (fig. 3.14 & 3.15). The 'restaurant' provided free food to the public which was prepared, cooked and served

by the artists (fig. 3.16). Outside there was a gaming area where people could play, or watch others play, the game Ludo (fig.3.17). *The Hotel of the Oppressed* became a space for encounters, sharing, and eating, but it was also a performance which played out the ways in which food, its associations, and the materiality of the places in which food is prepared and consumed, contribute to the (re)making of life in Kibera.

Figures 3.14 – 17 (clockwise from top left). *The Hotel of the Oppressed* – Maasai Mbili, 2016.

Like *Tiba Clinic*, *The Hotel of the Oppressed* relied on participation to activate the work. In this, both *Tiba Clinic* and *The Hotel of the Oppressed* share similarities with what curator and art critic Nicolas Bourriaud has termed 'relational aesthetics': they both emphasised 'the realm of human interactions and its social context' (Bourriaud 1998: 14). Rather than creating situations in which a one-to-one relationship is formed between the spectator and artwork, Claire Bishop argues that 'relational art sets up situations in which viewers are not just addressed as a collective, social entity, but are actually given the wherewithal to create a community, however temporary or utopian this may be.' (Bishop 2004: 54). Bishop, however, goes on to dismiss Bourriaud's presumption that because relational aesthetics sets up moments in which relations are formed and dialogue takes place it is intrinsically democratic. Instead, she suggests questions need to be

asked as to what type of relationships are created, for whom and why, in order to properly understand the democratic potential of this art form (Bishop 2004: 54). These are questions I now ask of *The Hotel of the Oppressed* and *Tiba Clinic.*

Both these exhibitions/events insisted on the Maasai Mbili art-centre becoming a space for community *use*, rather than a space in which *contemplation (*of, for example, artworks hanging on a wall) occurs. Furthermore, the projects sought to involve Kibera's public as, in effect, the artwork's joint authors. As such, distinctions between artist/audience and institution/social space were collapsed.

In the case of *The Hotel of the Oppressed*, however, the social relations created were highly authored. Participants were invited at a specific time to make art through the act of ordering and consuming food and engaging in conversations with one another. But these conversations were scripted to the extent that discussions were steered towards food's contribution to creating an identity specific to Kibera – which was partly in response to the artwork being filmed for the larger project *Sensing Nairobi*.[133] As such, the relations and participation were less *for* the community than *about* them.

In contrast, public participation in *Tiba Clinic* was open-ended: there was no rigid schedule, the public could come and go as they pleased and participants were largely free to use the space how they wished - thus instilling a democratic approach to the artwork's authorship. During the multiple trips I made to *Tiba Clinic*, the art-centre always had tens of people present. In that space, and at that time, a community had been produced. But this risks being idealistic if it simply echoes what Bourriaud terms 'Nokia Art' – which is an art 'connecting people' by creating interactions and communications for the sake of it but never addressing any political or other aspects (Simpson 2001: 3). However, I suggest that *Tiba Clinic* can be construed as inherently political. The project created active subjects with agency, not passive consumers; social interactions extended over periods of time providing an alternative to the alienating relations of capitalist ideology. *Tiba Clinic* created a place for conviviality and triggered conversations which addressed art's use in healing; or to put it another way, art played a role in addressing relationships that the community otherwise lack. The Maasai Mbili art-centre downplayed its institutional function – that is, using its recently renovated gallery to exhibit artworks on its walls – and instead turned it

[133] *The Hotel of the Oppressed* took place on 11th February 2017. It was commissioned by the British Institute in Eastern Africa (BIEA). *The Hotel of the Oppressed* was live streamed to a larger art project titled *Sensing Nairobi* which was organised and exhibited at the BIEA, before moving to the Nairobi National Museum in June 2017 (where a video of *The Hotel of the Oppressed* was played). *Sensing Nairobi* brought together a group of artists, critical thinkers and scholars in an endeavour to 'make sense' of Nairobi through the city's sensorial registers.

into an open space for the community. On the one hand, this made apparent how many social and public spaces across the city are characterised by exclusion; on the other hand, *Tiba Clinic* highlighted a collective communal will for ordinary citizens to provide for the services which the neighbourhood lacks, albeit on a temporary basis. The contrast between the approach of Maasai Mbili in this period and that of commercial galleries elsewhere in the city is stark. This chapter now considers a more market-oriented art institutions.

The paradoxes of commercial galleries

In *Inside the White Cube* the ideology of gallery space is discussed by art critic, artist, and academic Brian O'Doherty. He writes:

> ‘A gallery is constructed along laws as rigorous as those for building a medieval church. The outside world must not come in, so windows are usually sealed off. Walls are painted white. The ceiling becomes the source of light. The wooden floor is polished so that you click along clinically… The art is free, as the saying used to go, “to take on its own life”. The discreet desk may be the only piece of furniture…Unshadowed, white, clean, artificial – the space is devoted to the technology of esthetics.’ (O'Doherty 1976: 15).

Despite being written over forty years ago, O'Doherty’s words remain a precise portrayal of Circle Art Gallery - Nairobi’s only ‘white cube’ gallery space. Such an ideology chimes with both Circle Art Gallery’s commercial drive and its momentous efforts to expand the local and global market of contemporary art from East Africa through its annual art auction (the 6th having taken place in March 2019), representation at significant international art fairs, and its holding of local exhibitions.[134] In interview Danda Jaroljmek, who established Circle Art Agency in 2012 (the permanent Circle Art Gallery opened in 2015), explained:

> ‘the market has changed because we’ve made it change. We’ve gone out and dug people out and said you need to look at art. I think it is partly due to the way art is presented…having well-presented exhibitions has made a difference because there aren’t many people in the audience who can go into an artist’s studio and look at loads of work stacked up against the back wall and say “that’s good”. Whereas if you present

[134] At the time of writing Circle Art has participated in the following international art fairs: Art15 London (2015); Cape Town Art Fair (2015, 2016, 2017, 2018, 2019); Art Dubai (2016); Armory Show (2016); Also Known as Africa (2016, 2017); FNB Joburg Art Fair (2016, 2017); Africa 1:54 London (2016, 2017, 2018); ART X Lagos (2018); Africa 1:54 New York (2019).

> art on a shiny white wall, in a well-lit gallery, and you provide them with the affirmation that this artist needs collecting because they are exceptional, then they will take it seriously.'[135]

The institution and the platform Circle Art provides is clearly necessary. In his writing on contemporary art from Kenya, Pierre-Nicolas Bounakoff frames his discussion around Kenya's *avant-garde* artists for whom he claims the Circle Art Gallery is a 'path-breaking cultural platform…[which] aims to build East Africa's artworld through its…edgy themed exhibitions' (Bounakoff 2017: 12). Circle Art states its intention as 'to create a strong and sustainable art market for East African artists by supporting and promoting the most innovative and exciting artists currently practicing in the region.'[136] However, I question the paradox in this statement because at times it is clear the art market and the white cube ideology suppress innovation.[137] This is partly because, with the absence of a significant budget for curatorial and production fees, coupled with the pressure to deliver sales, the 'most innovative and exciting artists' chosen by Circle Art Gallery are unsurprisingly those often with commercial viability. The result of this is fairly standardised exhibitions (most notably group exhibitions) and artworks principally in the form of painting, print and sculpture. If this is the case, are there possibilities for Circle Art Gallery to be a site for a critical art practice? Furthermore, how does the ideology of the 'white cube' space influence one's engagement with the artwork? In order to answer these questions - and examine this perceived paradox - I turn to Shabu Mwangi's 2017 exhibition *The Stateless*, in which the hugely popular artist presented a series of paintings which were informed by his experiences during an art residency in Germany.[138]

[135] Interview with Danda Jaroljmek at Circle Art Gallery (26/05/2017).

[136] As stated on the Circle Art Gallery website - www.circleartagency.com/ (accessed 29/03/2019).

[137] For instance, it is unlikely that *Democracy My Piss* or *#YourNameBetraysYou* would find a place in Circle Art Gallery because they lack commercial viability, and clearly art projects such as *Tiba Clinic* or *The Hotel of the Oppressed* would lose their significance in the context of the white cube space of Circle Art Gallery.

[138] Shabu Mwangi's exhibition *The Stateless* opened at the Circle Art Gallery, Nairobi, on 26th September 2017 and ran until 20th October 2017.

In 2017, Mwangi spent five months in Berlin, interacting with asylum seekers.[139] Two years earlier Europe had been confronted with the largest refugee crisis it had seen in years.[140] Recollecting his time in Berlin, during an artist's Q&A session at Circle Art Gallery, Mwangi spoke of his daily exchanges with asylum seekers:

> '[the asylum seekers] saw me as one of themselves, maybe from East Africa, but they didn't know which country…they missed home and wanted to talk with someone who had that feeling of belonging somewhere, not someone in exile. They were used to stories of exile every day because they live amongst themselves so they liked to have that other person to talk to, someone from outside Germany. So because of this my work became the talks we were having.'[141]

Mwangi has previously used the theme of migration in his work to portray the human condition. However, what differed in this series of work compared with previous ones was Mwangi's approach to the subject. The artist says:

> 'I have worked before on migration but this was more to do with self-expression and how I feel about migration. The work I created was more about interaction, with real stories, real people and feelings. At one point I felt like I was one of them because we were talking about everything. So that is the difference. Before I worked through observing, but this time I was part of it.'[142]

Mwangi's re-counting of his time with asylum seekers, and the bonds they formed, point to his compassionate character and ability to empathise. Mwangi, who grew up and still lives in Mukuru slum, relates the day-to-day challenges faced by those residing in Nairobi's informal settlements to the situation of asylum seekers, reflecting:

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[139] While in Germany Mwangi worked with the institution *Schlesische27* – a Berlin-based art lab for young people who want to change the world. See the organisation's website http://www.schlesische27.de/ (accessed 29/03/2019). According to the main international instrument of refugee law – the *1951 Geneva Convention* - an asylum-seeker is a person who has fled their own country and whose request for sanctuary in another country has yet to be processed. A refugee is a person who has been forced to flee his or her country because of persecution, war, or violence and has been granted asylum status.

[140] This was largely as a consequence of the war in Syria and conflict, poverty, and humanitarian crises in parts of the Middle East and Africa. In contrast to the deeply conservative policies and xenophobic fears propagated by some EU governments, German Chancellor Angela Merkel's humanitarian response was to open its doors. Over the course of two years more than 1.2 million refugees entered Germany seeking asylum.

[141] Artist Q&A session with Shabu Mwangi discussing his exhibition *The Stateless* with an audience at the Circle Art Gallery (24/10/2017).

[142] Ibid.

> ‘The difference between a refugee and maybe someone living in a shanty here in Africa is maybe that one person is home and the other person is not home, but the conditions seem to be the same. So that was like a reflection because some of the challenges that each of us face were almost the same, so there was a connection… To me it is the same where we are just numbers, we only count as numbers.’[143]

The profound experience Mwangi had in Berlin is evident in the body of work he created for *The Stateless*. This consisted of 15 paintings on canvas, with descriptive titles such as *Waiting Room*, *Journey to Self-search*, *Marriage to Stay*, and *Denied Asylum*; and an installation in a small room which consisted of a bench, a soundscape created in collaboration with Johannes Helberger (a Berlin-based composer), and 12 small portrait paintings on canvas (fig. 3.18-19).

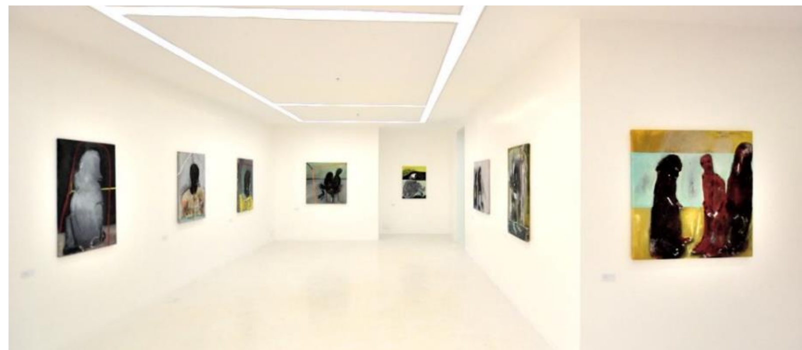

Figure 3.18. The ‘white cube’ space of Circle Art Gallery with Shabu Mwangi’s *The Stateless* exhibition.

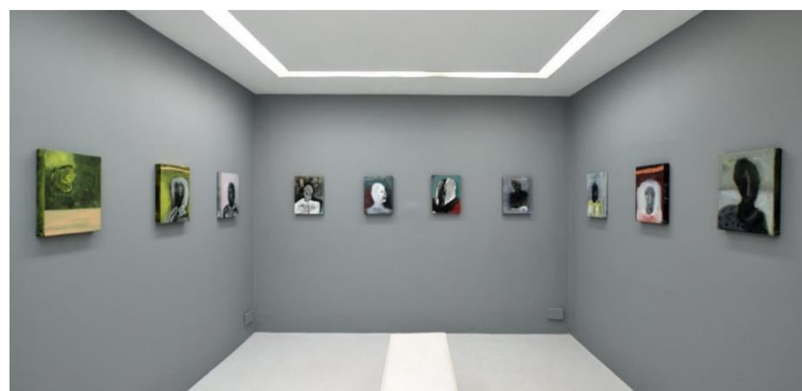

Figure 3.19. Room with installation, for Shabu Mwangi’s *The Stateless* exhibition, consisting of a soundscape, 12 canvas portrait paintings and a bench.

The soundscape comprised recordings of a sea-crossing by boat, commotion, panic and screams. It then switched to calmer, quieter sounds of movement and voices. Chaotic noise suddenly

[143] Ibid.

returned, while rhythmic drum-like sounds faded in and out of the recording. At times the soundscape suggested a linear sequence of events, but elements of interspersed order and disorder emulated movements across time and space, memory and loss. Mwangi continued these themes in his 15 canvas paintings which, he says, encompassed 'my experience and their stories', going on to state 'in this work, I am here merely as a narrator, telling the stories of people with whom, in our time together, we became a family'.[144] These stories are presented through the use of lines which Mwangi claims demarcate the margins in which asylum seekers exist. There is also something harrowing in Mwangi's paintings depicting the psyche of asylum seekers (figs. 3.20-22). For the artist, individuals are rendered this way in his paintings to show 'an outer perception of how people see them….Society tries to undress the refugee from their culture'. But, he says, 'you can't undress these things, they still have strong connections to where they were from.'[145]

Figure 3.20. *Bus Stop*, 2017
Oil on canvas
by Shabu Mwangi.

Figure 3.21. *Displacement*, 2017
Mixed media on canvas
by Shabu Mwangi.

Figure 3.22. *Homelessness*, 2017
Oil on canvas
by Shabu Mwangi.

In their writing on the artist's role in artistic representations of refugees, the social scientists Isobel Bloomfield and Caroline Lenette (2018: 322) raise the possibility of artists perpetuating existing tropes detrimental to the individual circumstances of those they represent. Mwangi's body of work in *The Stateless* portrays aspects of trauma and victimhood which could be seen as re-enforcing assumptions that every asylum seeker's story is the same. However, the stories Mwangi tells come across as deeply personal and promote a more nuanced trope which considers

[144] Ibid.

[145] Ibid.

his own experience arising from meaningful consultations with asylum seekers and their lived experiences, unique stories and individual perspectives. At the heart of Mwangi's work is a narrating of human stories in such a way as to elicit a basic instinct for empathy. Mwangi's work is about asylum seekers, but his paintings are not direct visual depictions of them. There is an ambiguity in their physical appearance, though a certainty in the emotions conjured up and encounters faced. In this respect, Mwangi does not present the viewer with a form of 'othering', but instead reveals shared traits and feelings common amongst all – gain/loss, grief/joy, and belonging/alienation. This is where a poignancy in Mwangi's work is made apparent, a poignancy with the potential to build bridges among people who are otherwise distant from each other, with divergent experiences; a poignancy that contributes to the cultivating of empathy.

It has been argued that empathy is a potential vector for social change. Writing about this in specific relation to the arts, the moral philosopher Martha Nussbaum argues that sympathetic and reasoned debate can be generated through art and the spaces and experiences art creates; which, the author says, can help overcome fear and suspicion, and challenge how we perceive ourselves, relate to others, and make sense of our place in the world (Nussbaum 2007: 40). Audience members I spoke with and heard from (during the exhibition and the artist's Q&A session), described an emphatic response triggered by Mwangi's artwork and his time in Berlin (which was narrated through an in-depth interview with Mwangi published in the exhibition catalogue). Exhibition goers viewing *The Stateless* in the 'white cube' environment of Circle Art Gallery spoke of a momentary detachment from the everyday in which, as spectators, they were immersed in another's world. The gallery became a platform in which Mwangi gave voice to asylum seekers without reproducing clichéd representations. Yet there are inherent disjunctions. Viewing *The Stateless* in the environment of Circle Art Gallery gave rise to unease - the challenging stories on the wall, of people's lived experience, were there to be exchanged for capital. Knowing this, shifts the question from 'who is telling the story in the name of whom', to 'who is profiteering from whose tragedies'? Mwangi's body of work is created as a result of real peoples' lives and misfortunes; it simply would not exist otherwise. For the gallery, critical questions and ethical considerations are left unanswered, or at least not publicly acknowledged: how is this exhibition different from others? Is *The Stateless* not simply profiteering from adversity?

It is uncommon for coherently impassioned and political exhibitions to feature at Circle Art Gallery. Most focus on: particular art forms and/or mediums; contemporary art from specific regions; large group exhibitions with a broadly defined theme; and bodies of work by individual artists. Yet, Shabu Mwangi's *Stateless* is one of a few exhibitions which tells otherwise; making

evident the possibilities for Circle Art Gallery to become an arena for an artist to express, and the public to engage with and consider, some of the most pressing issues of our time.[146]

This is noteworthy because the distribution of contemporary visual art in Nairobi is largely mediated by commercial galleries, or local and international cultural brokers; which, according to Jaroljmek, is problematic because 'events are being controlled or handled by non-practicing artists who dictate who gets seen, who gets picked up, and obviously there is a commercial aspect to that'.[147] A consequence of this is that artists engaged in an alternative type of art-making, which falls outside the parameters of what is accepted by commercial galleries, receive inadequate support because of an undeveloped art infrastructure.

In his writing on 'Art and Money' the art critic Boris Groys dwells on the commonplace that a lot of contemporary art functions simply as a commodity but he also asserts that 'it is contemporary art alone that is able to demonstrate the materiality of the things of this world beyond their exchange value' (Groys 2011). It is this paradox which is at the crux of whether a critical art practice can find a place within, or indeed is suited to, Nairobi's commercial art galleries (Velthuis 2013). Commercial galleries do have a role in creating and maintaining the local art scene. However, as has been discussed in this section, to see Nairobi's commercial galleries as simply a hegemonic force obscures recognition of their potential to become (albeit occasionally) a site where a critical art can be shown. With that in mind what is considered now are the opportunities for critical art practice to command a place in Nairobi's international cultural centres (specifically the Goethe-Institut Nairobi) and the Nairobi National Museum (NNM).

Foreign cultural centres and Nairobi National Museum

The Goethe-Institut Nairobi's work in the field of contemporary art since 2007 has primarily been through its exhibition series *Sasa Nairobi* and more recently its curatorial workshops (discussed in detail in Chapter 4). However, it should be noted that the institution's focus on visual art has a changeable profile which relates to who the director is at the time and the new programmatic direction they take. According to Franziska Lukas (Goethe-Institut's Cultural Programme Officer)

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[146] Other examples of include Kaloki Nyamai's 2019 exhibition *Mwaki Nginya Evinda Enge* (The Fire Next Time), or Rehema Chachage's 2017 solo exhibition *Mlango wa Navushiku*, and also the 2017 curated exhibition *Proximity to Power* (discussed further on in this chapter).

[147] Ibid.

Sasa Nairobi came about due to the diversity of art practices happening in the city which lacked adequate support. [148] This is principally because such work was not exhibited in Nairobi's commercial galleries, or because it portrayed issues other institutions shied away from (such as human rights for LGBT+ people). To counter this the Goethe-Institut Nairobi has regular open calls in which visual artists and curators are invited to submit exhibition concepts and those successful receive an ample production budget. Consequently, *Sasa Nairobi*'s exhibitions are reflective of a non-commercial ethos and frequently incorporate conceptual art, photography, video, installation and performance art.[149] Furthermore, if an artist's integrity relates to whether they have freedom to create and exhibit work in their chosen medium and form, and to address topics without fear of censorship, the Goethe-Institut Nairobi comes across as offering these possibilities and promoting the production and distribution of a critical art practice. In this section I argue that a project celebrating queer love through a series of *Kangas* (a cloth printed with coloured designs and text which are worn primarily by women in East Africa) provides a striking example. After this I discuss whether similar possibilities exist at the Nairobi National Museum.

The 'International Day Against Homophobia, Transphobia and Biphobia' is held each year on May the 17th. In 2017 the Goethe-Institut Nairobi marked this day with the exhibition opening of *To Revolutionary Type Love* - a project created by visual artist Kawira Mwirichia.[150] The exhibition showcased numerous *Kangas,* and while these followed a standardised graphic format (size, various colour combinations, central motifs, Swahili phrases/proverbs, and border designs) their content reflected the artist's intention to use art to 'champion a human cause'.[151]

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[148] Interview with Franziska Lukas at the Goethe-Institut Nairobi (16/02/2017). In 2018 Franziska Lukas left this position.

[149] Artists who have held exhibitions in the context of *Sasa Nairobi* from 2007-2016 include: Jimmy Ogonga (Catastrophe: Images of the Transition, Selected Photographs); Syowia Kyambi (Gender, Power and the Past); Ato Malinda (Looking at Art, looking at Africa); Peterson Kamwathi (Sitting Allowance); Sam Hopkins (Sketches); James Muriuki (Rear View); Mbuthia Maina (In Memoriam); Mimi Cherono Ng'ok (Re: accumulating signs); Michael Soi (The Face of Nairobi); Jackie Karuti (In the Case of Books / Where Books Go To Die / There Are Worlds Out There They Never Told You About); Paul Onditi (Pipes that Bind, Faces in Places); Maasai Mbili (Chokora Wear – MA-LOOKS); Jim Chuchu (The Bones Remember). Group exhibitions and projects exhibited in the context of Sasa Nairobi from 2007-2016 include: Nairobi24: An Exploration of a City by Photographers and Writers; It's a pity we only exist in the future – curated by African Maximalism; A Black Man´s View, A White Man´s Taboo – curated by Ato Malinda; Afropolis: City, Media, Art – in collaboration with the Rautenstrauch-Joest-Museum, Cologne.

[150] The exhibition (which ran from the 17th of May to the 2nd of June, 2017) also included six photographers who shared their interpretation of love in the lives of LGBT+ people. The project received support from Astraea Lesbian Foundation for Justice Global Arts Fund, the Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung and the Goethe-Institut Nairobi.

[151] See the Standard Media's online article *The artpreneur out to spark a revolution using the kanga*, by Mona Ombogo, published on 27th March 2019, available at

As an act of celebrating queer love, each individually designed *kanga* incorporated quotes submitted from the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT+) community and were fashioned accordingly (figs. 3.23-25).[152] The resulting *Kangas*, therefore, became a product of, and indeed for, the Kenyan (and global) LGBT+ community, giving visibility to their stories and voices, something which Kenyan society habitually silences.

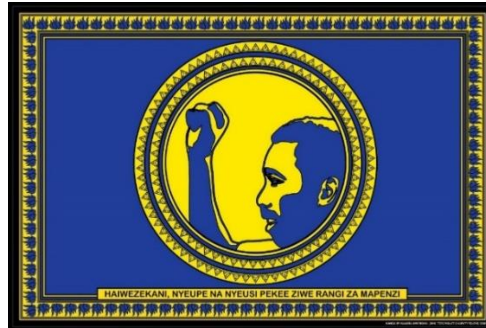

Figure 3.23. *Khanga* quote translation: 'Black and white are not the colours of love. They never were'. The image on the *Khanga* is Simon Nkoli – a South African activist who fought against apartheid and discrimination based on one's sexual preferences.

Figure 3.24. *Khanga* quote translation: 'My love is valid'. This *Khanga* honours Kenya's queer history.

Figure 3.25. *Khanga* quote translation: 'They say love is blind, but I can see mine'. This *Khanga* honours Benin's queer history.

https://www.standardmedia.co.ke/business/article/2001318319/the-artpreneur-out-to-spark-a-revolution-using-the-kanga (accessed 07/05/2019).

[152] The "plus" in LGBT is inclusive of other groups, such as asexual, intersex, queer and questioning.

As a distinct East African garment imbued with extensive meanings, *kanga* have a special role in society. Mwirichia's use of *Kangas* is not coincidental given that they are said to provide a way of suggesting thoughts and feeling that cannot be said out loud (Spring 2012: 105). In the past governments and organisations have used *kangas* as a channel for communication and education, recognising their propaganda value (Hilger 1995: 45). Additionally, the choice of a *kanga* is related to its quality, its design, and the pertinence of the written text or proverb (Hilger 1995: 45): every women wearing a *kanga*, the collector/dealer John Gillow claims, 'has a message to impart' (Gillow 2003: 175).

However, in the case of *To Revolutionary Type Love*, *kangas* were not worn, but were instead exhibited on the floor (fig. 3.26). As such, is there not an ambivalence about their means of display? Mwirichia has another context in mind: the giving of *kangas* by a groom's parents to their new daughter-in-law. At weddings *kanga*s are laid on the ground with celebratory singing, signalling the positive affirmation of this tradition. The artist goes on to say 'this is a gesture that queer individuals and lovers miss out on', because Kenyan society forbids any recognition of queer love.[153] The laying of *kangas* on the floor in *To Revolutionary Type Love* can therefore be interpreted as a way for the queer community to celebrate themselves by creating an inclusive space where diversity is accepted and celebrated.

Figure 3.26. Photo from the exhibition *To Revolutionary Type Love*, by Kawira Mwirichia who designed the *Kangas* which create a path on the floor of Goethe-Institut Nairobi. The exhibition featured photography from Neo Musangi, Mal Muga, Awuor Onyango, Faith Wanjala, Wawira Njeru and Maganga Mwagogo – who shared their interpretation of love in the lives of LGBT+ Kenyans.

[153] See the artist's website at https://torevolutionarytypelove.com/about (accessed 07/05/2019).

In his writing on *Kangas* the former curator of African Galleries at The British Museum Chris Spring suggests they 'reflect changing times, fashions and tastes, providing a detailed chronology of the social, political, religious, emotional and sexual concerns of those who wear them.' (2012: 105). Likewise, Kawira Mwirichia hopes the *Kangas* she has designed and exhibited will also contribute to the societal shifts that are required to rescind the inequalities faced by LGBT+ people, saying:

> 'I dream of the day when *To Revolutionary Type Love* might become an icon, might be considered this different and powerful thing that came out of Kenya and spoke on behalf of many marginalised people, people who should be accepted as part of the fabric of society…In a sense, my kangas stand for that; being a fabric of society. I think society will catch up one day and when it does, I want to be one of the people who stood in the gap to get it there'[154]

In contrast to the Goethe-Institut Nairobi's focussed support and liberal approach to the development of a critical art practice in Nairobi, the Nairobi National Museum (NNM) has had a volatile relationship with contemporary art. As a venue, it is available to hire with the advantages of large galleries which can accommodate artworks and exhibitions that need significant space (something other of Nairobi's gallery spaces are unable to offer). As a consequence, it displays work of varying standards by a range of amateur and professional artists. Despite this, over the past few years the NNM has hosted a number of significant art exhibitions that have been noteworthy for their curatorial practice, critical rigour, and the quality of the artworks.[155] Notable examples of this include the British Institute in Eastern Africa's exhibition series held from 2015-2018, under the banner 'Remains Waste and Metonymy' (Fontein 2018), and the exhibition 'FAVT: Future Africa Visions in Time' (held at NNM in 2017) led by the Bayreuth Academy of Advanced African Studies.

What sets art exhibitions at NNM apart from those at other venues is their engagement with much larger audiences. Visitor numbers are impressive having risen from approximately 150,000 at the start of the millennium to over 300,000 in 2012 (Lagat 2017: 15). In particular the NNM receives hordes of school children from across Kenya each Friday during term-time. In contrast,

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[154] See the Standard Media's online article *The artpreneur out to spark a revolution using the kanga*, by Mona Ombogo, published on 27th March 2019, available at https://www.standardmedia.co.ke/business/article/2001318319/the-artpreneur-out-to-spark-a-revolution-using-the-kanga (accessed 07/05/2019).

[155] Notable examples include the British Institute in Eastern Africa's exhibition series held from 2015-2018, under the banner 'Remains Waste and Metonymy' (Fontein 2018), and the exhibition 'FAVT: Future Africa Visions in Time' (held at NNM in 2017) led by the Bayreuth Academy of Advanced African Studies.

art exhibitions held at Nairobi's commercial galleries, art-centres, and cultural institutes tend to, but not always, attract a similar crowd. Expanding exposure to contemporary art not only helps promote an appreciation of art itself (particularly in the Kenyan context where art education is lacking) but, given its potential to foster new ways of understanding, art also has a role in knowledge production and dissemination – a primary function of a national museum. This is well acknowledged at NNM. A decade ago, Idle Farah (the then-Director General of the National Museums of Kenya) discussed the need for Kenya's museums to reposition themselves to contribute to new understandings of today's society, to promote dialogue-building, and to contribute to better tolerance between individuals, communities and nations (Farah 2006). Following the same line of thought, in 2017 Kiprop Lagat (National Director of Culture for Kenya) discussed NNM's role in using culture to celebrate nationhood. Exhibitions at NNM, Lagat argues, are important springboards in the construction of memories and national identity (Lagat 2017). However, in reality these aspirations have not always materialised for artists exhibiting at the NNM because of the limiting policies in place regarding what can and cannot be exhibited. It is these institutional limits which have placed the NNM in conflict with a number of contemporary artists in Nairobi today. I now turn attention to an exhibition planned by the NNM which demonstrates this hostility.

> 'I have just been censored by the National Museums of Kenya! These are conversations I refuse to have when it comes to my work. The exhibition dubbed speaking the unspeakable was meant to address issues that society refuses to openly discuss and I invested 4 weeks of my time creating this body of work only to be told that at the end of it all, the National Museums of Kenya itself cannot handle the unspeakable! The most commonly used line..... you know there are school kids'. (Michael Soi Facebook post, 17/05/2017).

The above quotation was posted by artist Michael Soi on what should have been the opening day of an exhibition in which he was participating, along with fellow artists Patrick Mukabi and Joseph Bertiers. [156] However, the exhibition which had been months in planning never happened. This

[156] In interview with Soi and Mukabi both artists stated that they expressed to the museum's curator their initial reluctance to participate in the exhibition organised by Nairobi National Museum because of previous instances in which the museum has censored artwork. However, Soi says the museum's curator 'managed to convince me', adding, 'I was very excited that the museum was slowly opening up.' Similarly Mukabi claims 'when Nairobi National Museum invited me for this [exhibition] I asked if they were sure, three or four times, I emailed and asked are you sure and they said yes we are celebrating the unspeakable. So I thought okay I will take my usual paintings.' Mukabi's reluctance is understandable because nearly two decades ago, in 2001, he was involved in an exhibition at NNM which was censored by management. At that time, Mukabi was working with Thom Ogonga (among other artists) at Kuona Trust - which was based in the grounds of NNM. Mukabi, Ogonga and Dutch artist Peter Klashorst collaborated

was because officials from NNM deemed each artists' work unsuitable for their audience – in effect censoring their work. [157]

The occasion for the exhibition was to celebrate International Museum Day (IMD).[158] Taking place each year on the 18th May, museums around the world mark this day by responding to a theme set by the International Council of Museums. In 2017 the theme was 'Museums and Contested Histories: saying the unspeakable in museums'. Shortly before its intended opening the event was advertised widely as 'an exhibition by artists who do not flinch from controversial issues'. The event's promotional material even incorporated one of Michael Soi's paintings intended for the exhibition, giving the impression the museum's curators had an understanding of the artworks to be shown (fig. 3.27). So, what was it about the artworks created by these three artists that caused their censoring?

Figure 3.27. Promotional material from Nairobi National Museum advertising their events for International Museum Day.

with the international curator Gert Meijerink (of the Amsterdam Institute of Painting) on the exhibition *Nairobi Day & Night Club* which interrogated topics such as sex work in the city. A number of the images created for *Nairobi Day & Night Club* were removed by management for being culturally offensive.

[157] One of NNM's more progressive curators explained to me that the reason for censorship was because 70% of visitors to NNM are children; as such, the museum adheres to a strict set of policies of what can be shown to those under the age of 18. When questioned why the NNM cannot create a separate section where viewing by adults is only permitted the response was that the museum layout did not cater for such scenarios. Grappling with the issue of minors being a potential audience is something that even the more liberal institutions in Nairobi have to adhere to (see footnote 209).

[158] The objective of International Museum Day is to raise awareness of the fact that, 'museums are an important means of cultural exchange, enrichment of cultures and development of mutual understanding, cooperation and peace among peoples.' See the organisation's website - https://icom.museum/en/activities/events/international-museum-day/ (accessed 29/06/2019).

Large paintings of voluptuous female figures, some nude, were Patrick Mukabi's contribution - something the artist is well known for, but imagery that has caused controversy in the past.[159] Michael Soi's paintings came from his *Contemporary Religion* series. These depict the absurd actions of some pastors from Kenya who reportedly order female members to remove their bras and underwear. The nudity in both Mukabi and Soi's work proved to be a topic the museum was unwilling to entertain. But Soi's other paintings, which depicted male clergymen and politicians kissing, as a metaphor for the relationship between the State and Church, were also disapproved of. This is, according to Soi, because the paintings' imagery promoted homosexuality, which he says 'cannot be openly discussed in society'.[160] Joseph Bertiers (whose art has also previously faced censorship) submitted paintings and sculptures narrating domestic violence by women against men. However, despite his artworks registering with the theme of IMD, they were rejected – 'in African society, a man being beaten by a women, no way!' was the reported response from one of NNM's administrators.[161]

The censorship of artists' work by NNM is not limited to *Saying the Unspeakable*. There have been previous instances at the NNM in which artists have been requested by the institution to edit or remove certain artworks, in addition to times when exhibition proposals have been rejected due to their content and/or theme.[162] However, previous instances relate to exhibitions that have

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[159] In 2005 Mukabi exhibited his nude paintings in a group exhibition titled *Nudes* at the upmarket restaurant *Le Rustique*. However, during the exhibition some diners, displeased with the display of nudity, reported the open display of these paintings to the Administrative Police. The apparent indecency and pornographic nature of Mukabi's intimate and unapologetic studies of the unclothed human body was enough for the artworks to be removed by the police and 'detained' at the local police station.

[160] Interview with Michael Soi from his studio at the GoDown Arts Centre (17/10/2017).

[161] Interview with Patrick Mukabi at the Dust Depot, Nairobi (26/01/2018).

[162] There have been previous instances at the NNM in which artists have been requested by management/curators to edit or remove certain artworks, in addition to times when exhibition proposals have been rejected due to their content and/or theme. On occasion this has been because their content was deemed inappropriate on grounds of being sexually provocative. For instance, in 2016, and as part of the exhibition *Sensing Nairobi*, Neo Musangi was given a conditionality that their (the artist's chosen pronoun) artwork could only be included if the word 'penis' was removed from their installation. Musangi's work was an installation which referenced the visual narratives of 'Doctor' posters pasted across the city - which offer all kinds of healing, fixing of problems, changing of fortunes, and in some cases penis enlargements. The installation commented on these posters and their associations to rituals, the real and abstract, ambiguity and authenticity. The artist obliged with the museum's request to censor the words 'penis' in order for the installation to be included in the exhibition. Further examples where artworks have been removed from the NNM include photographs from Boniface Mwangi's series *Nairobi at Night*. The images removed were of sex workers on the streets of Nairobi, whose outfits were claimed to be 'too revealing', thus giving cause for their removal on moral grounds. Mwangi agreed to the removal of these works as he wanted the exhibition to go ahead. At other times artworks have been censored because their documentation of historical practices which are today regarded as unethical. An example of this is a recent exhibition by Gallen-Kallela which included paintings depicting trophy hunting from the colonial period. These paintings were removed by NNM staff because staff deemed the

been brought to NNM from outside rather than curated by a team from the museum. A consequence of NNM cancelling *Saying the Unspeakable* was that it prompted conversations around freedom of expression. Artists and proponents of freedom of speech criticised the museum's move and the discussion sparked national and international media coverage, paradoxically encouraging to its own detriment the very discussions it sought to suppress (fig. 3.28).

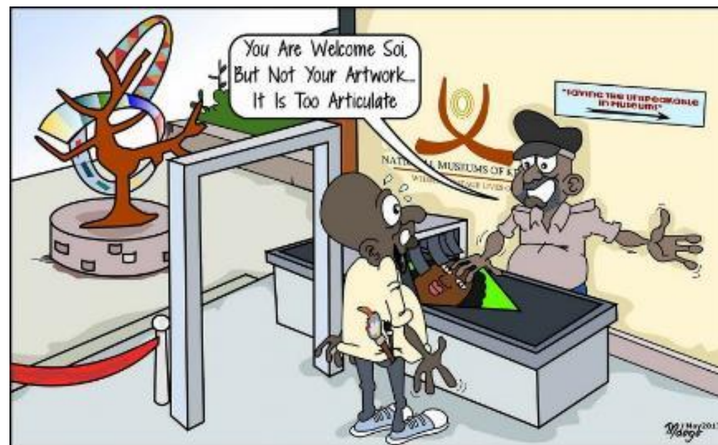

Figure 3.28. Cartoon created by Baba Mdogo' in response to the censoring of Michel Soi's artwork at the Nairobi National Museum for the exhibition *Saying the Unspeakable*, in celebration of International Museum Day.

Other art and cultural venues have occasionally censored artists' work.[163] However, I suggest NNM's repeated practice of censorship which restrict its ability to promote non-conformist narratives and views has particular consequences. Firstly, the museum's policies seemingly steer

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content to be controversial in society today. Other exhibitions that have been proposed have been rejected without hesitation because of their focus on LGBT issues, or reference to alcohol.

[163] For example, since 2014 the Alliance Française in Nairobi has been the venue for the exhibitions *Sex in the City* (2014, 2015, and 2017) which contain artworks that portray topics and imagery which would be censored from the NNM. However, according to Harsita Waters (Head of Alliance Française's Cultural Affairs), the timing of the *Sex in the City* exhibitions are purposefully choreographed to take place during the school holidays in order to limit potential controversies of young people being exposed to what is regarded as adult content. While Alliance Française upholds that art and freedom of expression are vital elements in a democratic society, the institute's multi-purpose function, and audiences, requires consideration as to when certain exhibitions can be held. But that does not always mean that exhibitions held there are without their controversies. In 2014, the first edition of *Sex and the City* saw a group of religious fundamentalists demand an artwork by John Kamicha be removed before the exhibition opened. For the exhibition Kamicha produced a series of collage works using posters he bought from street vendors in Nairobi. The artist created works which touch on prostitution, homosexuality, religion and capitalism – themes which he recognises are often taboo, but are at the heart of contradictions in modern Kenyan life. It was one work in particular, titled *Sex Retreat* – depicting Christ surrounded by scantily dressed women - which was considered blasphemous by a group of Christians who demanded the work be removed. Kamicha complied with their demands. The work was censored.

it towards appealing to conservative public sensibilities, which often seem to go at odds with the more progressive nature of the Constitution; in particular, the Bill of Rights (discussed in Chapter 1). Secondly, the NNM's rigid institutional policies have left a particularly bitter taste in the mouths of many contemporary artists. And, as a publicly funded institution, fiascos such as the organising of *Saying the Unspeakable* and its subsequent cancellation continue a feeling of despair amongst artists in regards to the Government treating visual artists with contempt. A consequence to this is that some artists have taken an exodus approach which avoids the NNM as an institution for their critical art practice.

Conclusion

This chapter has argued that Nairobi's principal art institutions have the potential to become agonistic public spaces where the existing hegemony is openly contested. Installation exhibitions at Kuona Trust, by Kamiru-Collymore and Nagila, demanded the audience break down commonly held perceptions of stereotypes based on ethnicity and understandings of democracy. Artists at Maasai Mbili used their art-centre to create new social spaces based on shared values. Mwangi disclosed his experience with asylum seekers and gave them a voice through his paintings that triggered an emphatic response, at Circle Art Gallery. And, Mwirichia challenged the status quo through celebrating queer love with a series of *Kangas* at the Goethe-Institut Nairobi.

A commonality between these exhibitions, which gives them their critical efficacy, is that they 'play a part in the process of disarticulation/rearticulation which characterizes a counter-hegemonic politics.' (Mouffe 2013b). The exhibitions discussed in this chapter were purposefully selected to demonstrate this, and their characteristics are not always evident in other exhibitions held across the same institutions examined. Having said that, what this selection made apparent is the need to discard the notion that some of Nairobi's art institutions are destined to fulfil one fixed function. Such a viewpoint chimes with Mouffe's suggestion that by engaging with the institutional terrain critical artistic practices can create 'a multiplicity of agonistic spaces where the dominant consensus is challenged and where new modes of identification are made available.' (Mouffe 2013b). This is particularly pertinent in the context of Nairobi's artworld where

its institutions (such as commercial galleries and art-centres) often have transient qualities.[164] As such, artists who want to make public their critical art within an institutional setting have to navigate a competitive and fairly delineated field of possibilities, limitations and restrictions. This was made evident with the recent closure of Kuona Trust, but also the case of NNM cancelling the exhibition *Saying the Unspeakable*.

As also demonstrated in this chapter, exhibitions are the apparatus for artists to disseminate their artwork and provide a means to circulate their ideas and beliefs. Time and again artists reaffirm in a social context their passion for inquiry, their aptitude to travel in the world of ideas, and their capacity to convey to a public injustices that permeate their society and world. In this sense, artists appear to function as 'public intellectuals' (discussed in the Introduction) who, in the space of the institution, chose the exhibition as a public platform to reach an audience. Furthermore, whilst exhibitions in Nairobi's art institutions are social events they also offer a place for public thinking and acting, which at times is conceptualised as a 'safe space'. Examples throughout this chapter indicated the types of participation that art institutions promote and the publics they include or exclude, which bare significance to the positioning of art exhibitions in the public sphere.

On a last point, given that the exhibition can be understood as a mechanism through which institutions publicly define and validate contemporary art, it is rather damning that the Government supported NNM is continually embroiled in stifling freedom of expression and lags behind the more forward thinking principles evident in the internationally managed Circle Art Gallery and Goethe-Institut Nairobi, or the expanding notions of exhibition that Maasai Mbili demonstrates in its encouragement of participatory social engagement. However, the governing principles of Nairobi's art institutions under which contemporary artists are obliged to operate are also intertwined with the market and capital, relationships with donors, NGOs, and the struggle for curatorial agency. These are the subject of Chapter 4.

[164] For example, between the years 2013-2017 a number of new commercial art galleries and art-centres opened in Nairobi, but after a short while several folded or closed their gallery spaces (such as the Fundi Art Centre, and The Art Space Kenya gallery). Additionally, a number of previously prominent spaces for the visual arts, such as GoDown Arts Centre, have failed to fulfil their potential in recent years.

Chapter Four

Implications of the market, NGO patronage, and curatorial practices

This chapter explores the influence that the market, NGO patronage and curatorial strategies have on the production and distribution of critical art practices in Nairobi. When the role and social value of art is determined by these various authorities they present possibilities for freedom, co-option and compromise, so an understanding of their impact should not be dismissed. For instance, it has been argued that the agency of artists has become lost in current times because of the artworlds' fixation with profit and commerce (Jelinek 2013: 59; Mouffe 2013: 105). Likewise, claims have been made that today art and culture are largely controlled by the capitalist culture industry which 'sells commodified cultural products into society, rather than allowing art to emanate from society' (Krause 2011: 12). In a similar, but different, vein, the influx of NGOs (without a specific arts focus) which provide various forms of support and opportunities for contemporary artists in Nairobi draws attention to the implications this has on agency. More specifically, questions are often raised in regards to whether NGO support for art production equates to artists having to strictly adhere to their specific ideologies, and if so the extent to which this suppresses intellectual expression whilst realigning the means in which aesthetics is judged (Ndaliko & Anderson 2020). Curatorial practice, in contrast, often aspires to distance itself from a commercial focus to one which wrestles with ideas, reflects on circumstances, and sparks insight. Foregrounding these influences as the frame of analysis for this chapter provides insight into the ways in which they impact and shape aesthetic choices, artistic rationale, and issues of artistic agency. Yet the market, NGO patronage and curatorial practices do not occur in strict isolation from one another - raising questions as to whether, at times, a symbiotic relation between them emerges. These are the issues which are taken into consideration throughout this chapter.

The chapter is divided into four sections and a conclusion. The first section examines how artists play to the market through the commodification of their work in order to generate capital which can give them a freedom and independence to concentrate on a more critical art practice. I consider the commercial and socio/political work of artist Michael Soi and assess the extent to which his commercial and more critical work remain independent from one another. Following this I analyse the encroachment of development organisations in the field of art. I focus on the multi-year project Arts to End Slavery and examine the extent to which artists involved in this project fall into the trap of perpetuating an 'NGO aesthetic'. As a consequence of many curatorial opportunities opening up in Nairobi a section then asks whether Nairobi is experiencing a curatorial turn. This leads to an analysis of two curatorial projects, where I evaluate their potential to take art and situate it in relation to specific contexts – those being Kenya's 2017 General Election and discrimination faced by the LGBT+ community - in order to challenge the status quo and give voice to those who have been historically silenced. The chapter demonstrates how certain artists, art practices, and themes, become privileged over others because they suit specific agendas - which in itself draws attention to where and with whom agency lies in this complex set of inter-relationships.

Playing to the market

Corporations and businesses operating in Kenya have eagerly co-opted artists to advertise their activities and products with images made for the purpose of generating their business profit. The creative spirit of visual artists, and indeed their personality and persona, have been used to advertise big brands (and to promote hotels, shopping centres and restaurants.[165] In addition to this, corporations in Kenya have supported the arts through sponsoring exhibitions and competitions to enhance their own profile and brand awareness (with recent examples involving

[165] In 2014 Guinness launched a campaign across Africa to promote its black stout drink. The campaign ran with the tagline 'Made of Black' and declared that black is a mind-set and attitude. The adverts featured artists, musicians, and trend setters from across the continent who were 'fuelling a new, progressive spirit of Africa. For Guinness' campaign in Kenya the visual artist Cyrus Kabiru was used in their online advertising in addition to appearing on television adverts in the country. More recently artists have been commissioned to create art for Nairobi's shopping malls. For example, in 2016 Peter Ngugi created an installation at The Hub Karen, titled 'Under the Kahawa Tree', which aims to highlight how the coffee plant has shaped communities and livelihoods in Kenya. In 2017 the artist Maryann Muthoni created a huge mosaic mural of a delighted women with her hands clutching numerous shopping bags. The mural was created for the recently opened Two Rivers Mall – purported to be the largest in East and Central Africa.

the telecommunications giant Safaricom and Absolut Vodka). However, as art becomes assimilated into capitalist activities within Nairobi and is commodified and appreciated for its commercial value, the question arises as to what impact this might have on critical art practice in Kenya? To answer this question this section considers the range of the work created by the artist Michael Soi.

On July 2nd 2015 the global superstar Kenyan actress Lupita Nyong'o uploaded an image to her Instagram account showing her with a hand painted tote bag. The bag had been designed by Kenyan artist Michael Soi and Lupita's post was liked by over 40,000 people from across the globe (fig. 4.1). Soi started his venture of painting imagery (principally female faces) on canvas bags - what he terms as 'fine art merchandise' - a year prior to Nyong'o's endorsement. However, the publicity Nyong'o's Instagram post generated and Soi's own strategic marketing of his tote bags on social media have made them a must-have accessory and a commercial success. The use of female faces echoes an earlier series of paintings by Soi exhibited in his 2013 solo show 'Face of Nairobi' at the Goethe-Institut Nairobi. What was striking about his simple depictions of female portraits was their commentary on society's standards of beauty, particularly the politics of black women's hair (Prince 20009) and the ways in which, Emma Dabiri (2019) argues, this topic can be viewed as a blueprint for decolonisation. Yet these readings appear to be less apparent from the public and media when very similar imagery is used on Soi's tote bags, where appraisals are more concerned with business acumen; perhaps unsurprising given the sheer number that have been churned out. In 2016 Soi launched the 'Nairobi Bag Factory' - a store set up specifically to sell bags painted with his designs. Over the course of 2015, 2016 and 2017 more than 1,500 of these fairly uniform tote bags have been produced. Soi's commercial venture flirts with consumer culture. The tote bags' visual marketing across social networking sites urges consumers to stand out from the crowd, to creatively express themselves and to be different – the language and marketing tactics employed by corporate mass culture.

Figure 4.1. lupita Nyong'o Instagram post 2nd July 2015.

In contrast to the ideology of Soi's tote bags are the artist's canvas paintings which he has been creating for over a decade. The topics and themes of these paintings tend to critique injustices, rebuke abuses of power, and document society's vices and virtues. Soi describes his paintings as a visual diary of contemporary Kenya, narrated through satire and humour to decode complex stories.[166] However, while on the surface these appear to be two distinct art practices, one in which art is a commodity, and the other which offers a critical outlook through art, I suggest they do intertwine. To illustrate this, I first begin with a discussion on Soi's critically enthused paintings.

In Soi's earlier work his decoding of complex stories was quite literal as a consequence of including newspaper headlines on his canvases and his employment of editorial cartoonist tactics. For example, like the anthropomorphic representations of the political elite by the cartoonist Gado (Godfrey Mwampembwa), Soi has used animals – principally pigs and cats – as a metaphor for certain characteristics of Members of Parliament (MPs). The reason for this, he says, is because:

> 'I was looking at the similarities that exist between animals and politicians. A cat is basically a very selfish animal. It is this thing that comes and starts going round your legs

[166] Interview with Michael Soi from his studio at the GoDown Arts Centre (17/10/2017).

wanting to be fed, you feed it and then it just goes and passes out and sleeps until it wants to be fed again. A pig is gluttonous, it will eat anything. So you look at it from that perspective. I got interested in these similarities. People come into positions of power basically so that they can line their pockets. It is as simple as that.' [167]

The behaviour of cats and pigs and the parallel made by Soi to politicians is easily understood by Kenya's electorate. In giving MPs animal attributes Soi at once satirises and denounces the excesses of those in power (Eko 2007; Wells 2009; Harun et al. 2015).

Speaking in 2010 about his overtly political paintings, Soi remarked 'I think this is also a very effective way to protest. My work can actually be seen as a silent pictorial protest of some sort.'[168] However, if Soi is thereby demonstrating his disapproval of those who, he believes, wrong society, his 'pictorial protest' is anything but silent. His work is, in fact, widely shared on social media attracting a sizeable online audience and it is regularly exhibited across Nairobi.[169] Soi continues to depict 'conversations that people find uncomfortable and issues which Kenyans tend to bury their heads in the sand over'.[170]

One strand in Soi's repertoire of paintings is his series on Nairobi nightlife in which the artist depicts what he terms 'the economics of love' – a reference to a world of transactional sex and relationships which take place across the city.[171] Other of his paintings document the questionable relation he sees between church and State, issues of corruption and government scandals, State violence against citizens, and Kenya's elections (figs. 4.2-4.4). Another large body of work, entitled *China Loves Africa*, critiques China's approach to Africa, in which he sees there being no moral compass (figs. 4.5 & 4.6). It is, Soi says, an affiliation built on the exploitation of natural resources by the elite, and the Kenyan Government's colossal borrowing deficit with

[167] Interview with Michael Soi from his studio at the GoDown Arts Centre (17/10/2017).

[168] See the video 'Michael Soi at Kuweni Serious', on YouTube, Published on Feb 17, 2010, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yjDaGKg4A3k&t=81s (accessed 28/05/2019).

[169] In July 2019 Michael Soi's Facebook page - Michael Soi studio – has over 5,000 followers, his Instagram account – michaelsoistudio – has 13,800 followers.

[170] Interview with Michael Soi from his studio at the GoDown Arts Centre (17/10/2017).

[171] In 2018 Michael Soi's paintings were used to illustrate a BBC News online article titled *Sex and the Sugar Daddy*, which provided different perspectives as to how an increasing amount of young women in Nairobi are using sugar daddies (also known as 'sponsors') to fund seemingly lavish lifestyles in the age of social media. See https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/resources/idt-sh/sex_and_the_sugar_daddy (accessed 21/07/2019).

China.[172] Soi portrays China's dealings with Africa as deceitful, opportunistic and self-seeking[173] - tactics which have allegedly upset Chinese officials.[174]

Figure 4.2. *The Shepherds and the politician* (2016)
Acrylics mixed media on canvas, 170x140 cm.

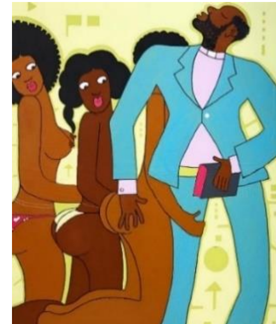

Figure 4.3. *Contemporary religion* (2016)
Acrylics mixed media on canvas, 159x130 cm.

Figure 4.4. *Luo lives matter* (2017)
Acrylics mixed media on canvas 250x150 cm.

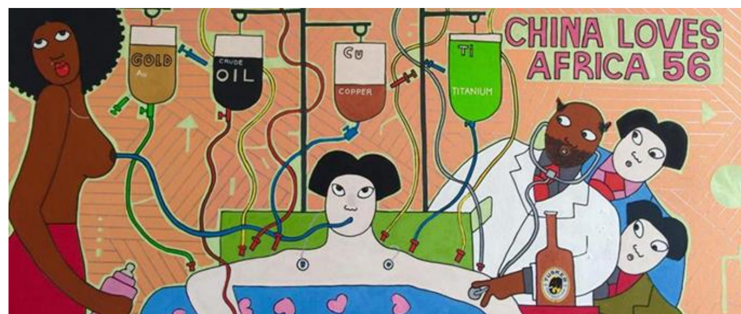

Figure 4.5. *Patient zero* (2016)
Acrylics on canvas, 240 x 100 cm.

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172 Interview with Michael Soi from his studio at the GoDown Arts Centre (17/10/2017)

173 There has been a number of deeply and historically informed works written about the role of China in Africa, which include: Ian Taylor's (2006) *China and Africa: Engagement and Compromise*; Chris Alden's (2007) *China in Africa;* Chris Alden, Daniel Large and Richardo Soares De Oliveira's (2008) *China Returns to Africa: A Rising Power and a Continent* Embrace; Deborah Brautigam's (2009) *The Dragon's Gift: The Real Story of China in Africa*; Stephen Chan's (2013) *The Morality of China in Africa : The Middle Kingdom and the Dark Continent.*

174 In discussion with Soi he recounted a time when a group of Chinese officials visited his studio at the GoDown Arts Centre and harassed him for his portrayal of Chinese influence in Kenya and Africa.

Figure 4.6. *China loves Africa* (2018)
Acrylics mixed media on canvas 200x140 cm.

Humour clearly plays a significant role in Soi's work, the reason being, Soi says, that 'some of the things that I talk about are very dark. I put across very direct stories or issues so I put humour around it to make it more palatable.'[175] In this manner his satirical work seeks to present political messages in an engaging, interesting and accessible way which, as commentators on satire suggest, can incite people to action (Heller 1992, Katz 2004). Indeed Soi seeks to create dialogue and encourage viewers to criticise, reflect on, and question the politics of the day. Additionally, Soi's paintings encourage the public to revel in the contradictions which characterise Kenyan society. It is for these reasons that Soi's artwork has been described in both international and local media as: holding up a mirror to society;[176] taking on the status quo;[177] contributing to a new wave of politically engaged art;[178] inspiring civic engagement and education in Kenyan society;[179] and creating a poignant platform for public debate.[180]

Despite the acclaim, disapproval over Soi's pictorial approach has also been voiced. This is principally in regard to his portrayal of women, whose lack of agency is said to perpetuate

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[175] Interview with Michael Soi from his studio at the GoDown Arts Centre (17/10/2017).

[176] See the online article *Michael Soi: live from Kuona Trust*, by Zihan Kassam, published on 6th February 2017 at https://africanah.org/michael-soi-live-from-kuona-trust/ (accessed 28/05/2019).

[177] See the online article *Politics pervades everything: Kenyan artists take on status quo*, by Jason Burke, published on 4th July 2016 at https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/jul/04/politics-kenya-artists-status-quo-elections-protest-violence (accessed 28/05/2019).

[178] Ibid.

[179] See the online article *Africa's New Satirists Draw Political Fire*, by Ayodeji Rotinwa, published on 26th June 2018 at https://www.ozy.com/fast-forward/africas-new-satirists-draw-political-fire/86119 (accessed 28/05/2019).

[180] See the online article *Eclipsing the moral boundary: An artist's quest for boldness*, by Wilson Manyuira, published on 28th December 2013 at https://www.nation.co.ke/lifestyle/lifestyle/An-artist-s-quest-for-boldness/1214-2127552-f9hjll/index.html (accessed 28/05/2019).

patriarchal ideals found across Kenyan society. These views were shared with me privately on a regular basis in Nairobi in discussion of Soi's work. The Kenyan academic and humanitarian advocate Nanjala Nyabola recently raised these issues publicly. Writing in 2018 for the online platform *African Arguments*, Nyabola questions why in Soi's *China Loves Africa* series Africa is always presented as the passive partner in the relationship. But Nyabola goes further and argues that in using women's bodies as an allegory for Africa - which China and Western countries (depicted as men) grope, ogle and lust over - it has the effect of presenting women as a commodity to be consumed: a representation which, Nyabola says, is deeply disturbing.[181] As the writer and art critic John Berger wrote in a similar critique of Western art tropes 'men act and women appear' (Berger 1972: 47).

In that sense, then, Soi's use of satire and humour in his paintings can be seen as serving to reinforce the excesses he critiques rather than inciting opposition.[182] In *On the Postcolony*, Achille Mbembe (2001) suggests that satirical cartoons which highlight the vulgar excesses of the ruling elites do not necessarily represent a form of resistance and speaking back to authority, but rather bolster the towering power of the elite (Fontein 2009: 388). Rather than seeing Soi's work as a form of protest or resistance, an alternative reading would suggest it does little to disrupt power relations but instead works to reify the power of men over women, foreign powers over Kenya, and the elite (Church/State/Police) over the everyday citizen.

Soi's repertoire of work from 'fine art merchandise' tote bags to satirical paintings is a striking example of the different turns an artist might take. The first format (tote bags) was used to produce what is principally a market commodity, offering its consumers a distinctive domestic product to display in public settings. The second uses painting as a medium to speak out and mock the elite's excesses, documenting thereby power relations in contemporary Kenyan society. To put it another way, one is clearly a commercial art – which, while offering its consumers something created by a contemporary artist from Kenya, requires little effort from the viewer to

[181] See the online article *Why is Africa Always Portrayed as a Passive woman?*, by Nanjala Nyabola, published on 18th September 2018 at https://africanarguments.org/2018/09/18/why-africa-always-portrayed-passive-woman/ (accessed 28/05/2019).

[182] This idea is in contrast to what Soi claims on his website, whereby the artist states: 'I want to create work that highlights women's issues in Africa, particularly issues that relate to how men view women here and how they treat them.' Soi goes on to say '[my] work highlights the role that has been assigned to women as implements of joy, pleasure and a means to an end to be enjoyed by men. This is a subject that I have had an interest in for a while now and the aim is to influence how men view and relate to women.' See http://michaelsoistudio.com/personal/ (accessed 21/07/2019).

understand and offers little social critique. By contrast, to appreciate Soi's satirical paintings require greater critical thought and an engagement with socio-political events.

This combination of commercial art and more critical art practice is not unique to Soi. For example, Chapter 6 below discusses the work of numerous graffiti artists working in Nairobi whose voluntary participation in community outreach projects is made possible as a result of their commercial activities of painting advertising murals for businesses and corporations. Similarly Soi has suggested that the income he receives from his commercial practice provides him with a level of institutional independence whereby he can continue with his satirical paintings to his own pleasing.[183] Soi is aware his position is at once a privileged and an ambiguous one: on the one hand, he says 'galleries are becoming, this whole commercial thing, it just becomes about moving art'; on the other he remarks that 'donor funding will always try and make you look at things from a different perspective and mostly that is the perspective of the one giving you money. And when it gets to a point where you are not working for yourself then you have a problem.'[184] The independence that Soi speaks of gives him a degree of autonomy from commercial galleries and donor funding.

Soi's commercial ventures and his critical art practice clearly intersect in various ways. Further examples of this are notable in the artist's 2015 and 2016 solo exhibitions (titled *Faces* and *The Women in My Life*, respectively) held at Circle Art Gallery – which, as discussed in Chapter 3, aims to exhibit challenging and thought-provoking contemporary art (fig. 4.7). As such, it might have been expected for both exhibitions to centre on Soi's more provocative work seen in his satirical paintings.[185] Instead, the two exhibitions comprised a series of female portraits painted on canvas, resembling those seen on his commercially successful tote bags. As the art reporter for *The EastAfrican*, Frank Whalley, remarked of the paintings in the *Faces* exhibition, 'they make a nice easy look with no hidden agenda' (Whalley 2015). Despite relating to Soi's portrait series of 2013 (mentioned above) I suggest that the artist's depiction of female faces has become synonymous with the totalising aesthetic of imagery from Soi's 'fine art merchandise'. As such, and despite the context of display having changed, the association of female portraits with commercial merchandise remained strong, thus the potential for the images to conjure

[183] Interview with Michael Soi from his studio at the GoDown Arts Centre (17/10/2017).

[184] Ibid.

[185] Examples of recent exhibitions to do so include Soi's 2015 'I Love Nairobi' exhibition at the GoDown Arts Centre, and the artist's inclusion in the 2014, 2015 and 2017 exhibition series 'Sex in the City' at Alliance Française – whereby Soi's paintings depicted elements of Nairobi's night life.

alternative narratives failed. This was conveyed to me from attendees at both exhibitions. In interview with Soi, the artist also remarked a number of people being disappointed with the *Faces* exhibition because they expected to see his 'political' work but were instead presented with work reflective of Soi's flirtation with consumer culture which occupied a space where one would expect to see a more challenging art practice. In effect, it can be argued that the Circle Art Gallery forfeited opportunities of encouraging more thought-provoking exhibitions. Given the gallery's standing in Nairobi as an authority for contemporary art and its proclamation to exhibit challenging and thought-provoking work, the implications of this are all too apparent. According to one experienced cultural worker I spoke with 'younger artists are being influenced in the wrong direction. Today it's all about selling and they are getting away with making weak work.' Two potential alternatives to alleviate the dominance of a commercially oriented art market in Nairobi is for an augmented curatorial practice to emerge and increased support from the not-for-profit sector – to which this chapter now turns.

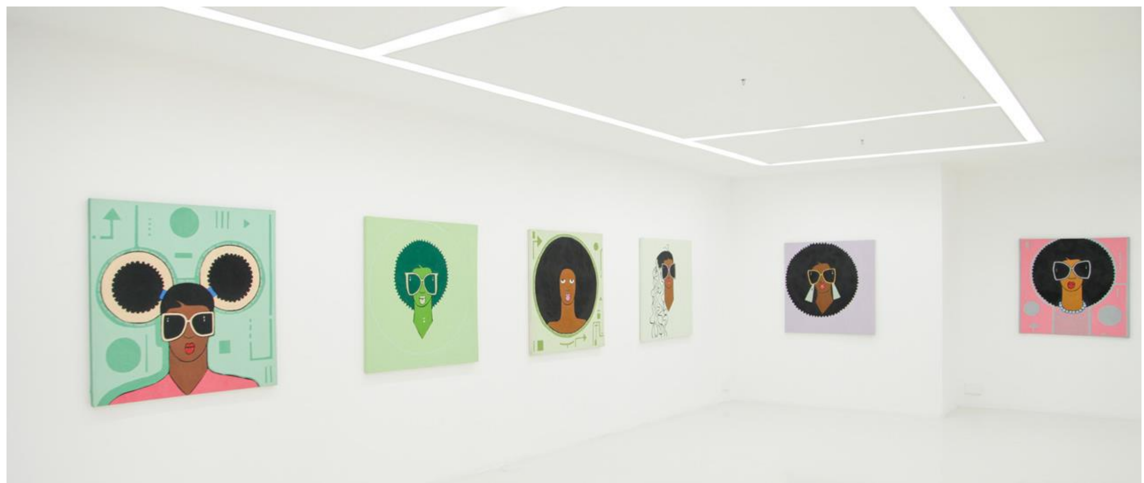

Figure 4.7. Faces exhibition by Michael Soi, 2015 (Source: Circle Art Gallery)

Development organisations and the arts

Following the movement towards multi-party politics in the 1990s, Kenya has witnessed an astonishing increase in the number and influence of NGOs (Amutabi 2006; Hershey 2013). For example, in her doctoral thesis on NGOs and the State in Kenya, Jennifer Brass notes NGO numbers increased from 400 in 1991, to over 6000 in 2008 (Brass 2010: 1). Given the power that many NGOs wield it is unsurprising that over the years questions have been raised as to whether

or not they are the most suitable actors for improving people's lives. More recently, questions have been asked about development NGOs who co-opt artists for projects to further their cause. This is because NGOs provide alternative forms of arts patronage which can realign the 'authority and aesthetics of local creativity' (Ndaliko & Anderson 2020: 7). Artists I spoke with in Nairobi expressed similar concerns (like that of Michael Soi discussed above) which centred on the influence of NGOs in shaping art practices in Nairobi. In this section I explore the extent to which this is the case. I begin by demonstrating how artists have responded to the growing presence, ideology and aesthetics of NGOs in Kenya.

In 2011 Maasai Mbili member Kevo Stero started *Jobless Corner Campus* (JCC) - a satirical art project which questions critically the business of NGOs operating in his community of Kibera. Sceptical to the work of many NGOs, Stero refers to the acronym NGO as 'Nothing Going On'.[186] Stero's concept for JCC comes from his engagement with actual 'Jobless Corners' in Kibera - spaces in which the unemployed gather and engage in conversation and other bonding activities. While some view these 'corners' as sites where 'people just loaf around', Stero recognises the forms of social engagement which transpire in these urban spaces as being important for emotional wellbeing. Thus, Stero's JCC project aims to promote 'emotional sustainability' through using 'idling as an alternative development approach' (see fig.4.9 for the JCC manifesto). As with Maasai Mbili's *The Hotel of the Oppressed* and *Tiba Clinic*, Stero's JCC manifests through participation and this has been performed at various sites within Kibera (fig. 4.9-10), but has also been extended to Nairobi's gallery spaces (fig. 4.11-12). [187]

Visual artist Sam Hopkins has also expressed his interest in 'development' and 'aid' organisations working in Kenya, and in particular the ways in they use images, logos and film to communicate their chosen ideologies of a place and its people.[188] For Hopkins the discourse NGOs narrate is centred on suffering, poverty, and the need for charity; something which the artist, along with his colleague Alexander Nikolic, terms the 'NGO aesthetic'. This aesthetic is made apparent in Hopkins' installation artwork titled *Logos of Non Profit Organisations working in Kenya (some of*

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[186] In 2014 a Kenyan mockumentary, called *The Samaritans*, asked similar questions but in the format of a TV series which was based around the absurdities of a fictitious and dysfunctional NGO called 'Aid for Aid'.

[187] See Pgs.128-133.

[188] This perspective has been partly shaped by the project Slum TV, which the artist co-founded in 2007. Slum TV is a grassroots media collective which started in the informal settlement of Mathare. Its broad aim was for residents to author their own narratives and in so doing counter the dominant representation of Mathare and its people generated by the media and the NGOs operating there.

which are imaginary) (fig. 4.13). According to Hopkins, not knowing which is genuine and which is fictitious, you re-examine all of them and in doing so come to question the motives of each NGO and what it claims to represent (Hopkins 2014). [189]

Jobless Corner Campus a non-profit local organisation whose concern is to fight for the rights of idleness and idlers in Kibera.

Vision: A community that understands, appreciates and tolerates each other from deep within.

Mission: To promote community social understanding through facilitating processes and activities that empower, transform and develop people's souls.

Goal: To promote idling as an alternative development approach that promotes genuine peoples participation for inner peace.

Figure 4.8. *Jobless Corner Campus* Manifesto

Figures 4.9 -10. *Jobless Corner Campus*, Kibera, 2016.

Figures 4.11-12. *Jobless Corner Campus*, Kuona Trust, 2015.

[189] It is worth noting that both Sam Hopkins and Kevo Stero have benefitted from NGO funding for their own art practice and projects; something perhaps inevitable given the Kenyan Government's neoliberal policies and deficiency in supporting the visual arts.

Figure 4.13. A section of Sam Hopkins' *Logos of Non Profit Organisations working in Kenya (some of which are imaginary).*

Stero and Hopkins' critique of NGOs draws similarities to that of Cameroonian philosopher and political theorist Achille Mbembe, who has remarked that donor institutions tend to have a simplistic notion of what 'Africa' and 'development' are and thereby promote a 'vicious ideology' of Africa as a 'doomed and hopeless Continent waiting to be rescued and saved' (Mbembe 2009). Mbembe goes on to state:

> 'Under these circumstances, it seems to me, the function of art in Africa is precisely to free us from the shackles of development both as an ideology and as a practice…
>
> I hate the idea that African life is simple bare life – the life of an empty stomach and a naked body waiting to be fed, clothed, healed or housed. It is a conception that is embedded in "development" ideology and practice…This kind of metaphysical and ontological violence has long been a fundamental aspect of the fiction of development the West seeks to impose on those it has colonized. We must oppose it and resist such surreptitious forms of dehumanization.' (Mbembe 2009)

Mbembe's critique of development ideology and practice has close parallels with Stero's 'nothing-going-on' representation of NGOs in Kibera and Hopkins' 'NGO aesthetic'. But, given the prevalence of development funding in the arts, what is the pressure on artists who are supported by NGOs to present certain defined messages? Through their work do artists perpetuate the

discourse, fiction and violence that Mbembe speaks of? Or can development funding paradoxically enable the arts to create an alternative imaginative space in which development goals may be pursued? To examine these questions discussion turns to a consideration of a multi-year NGO project in which the visual arts have been employed as a tool for communication and raising awareness.

In 2015 the Kenyan NGO Awareness Against Human Trafficking (HAART) launched the *Arts to End Slavery* (A2ES) project. [190] The project's purpose has been to 'create awareness on the issue of human trafficking' through holding substantial annual art exhibitions across Kenya.[191]

The A2ES website explains how this NGO understands art's agency in this area. It advocates art's ability to 'create' and 'spread' awareness 'in an exciting way that will engage public participation…by using all forms of art as a tool for communication'.[192] The exhibitions' catalogues develop this line but additionally they emphasise 'the art is for sale!' and that all proceeds will go towards the vital work of HAART.[193] There is, perhaps, a contradiction here. If, on the one hand, art's agency lies in its ability to raise sums of money for charity, is the artist not better off creating work that will fetch the highest sum rather than creating work to communicate awareness about modern day slavery which some may find not appealing enough to buy and hang on their walls. Additionally, who is the 'public' that A2ES hopes to engage?

According to HAART's Programme Consultant, Sophie Otiende, the target audience for A2ES is Kenya's middle class because, Otiende says, this is a section of society 'who would not necessarily think that trafficking is something that is close to them…who do not think they are involved with supporting trafficking, but they are.'[194] In interview Otiende also remarked that the A2ES exhibitions engage an audience who are less inclined to attend more formalised awareness raising

[190] HAART was founded 2010 in response to the increasing crisis of human trafficking in Kenya. The organisation works in the areas of prevention of trafficking, prosecution of trafficking offenders and protection of victims, and works with partners in advocacy and policy.

[191] In Nairobi the A2ES exhibitions have been taken to the Shifteye Gallery, the British Institute in Eastern Africa, The GoDown Arts Centre, Sarakasi Dome, and Kobo Trust. Outside of the nation's capital city the exhibition has been shown in the cities of Mombasa and Kisumu. For information about the project see the Art to End Slavery website - https://a2es.org/about-a2es/ (accessed on 26/02/2019).

[192] See the Art to End Slavery website - https://a2es.org/about-a2es/ (accessed on 26/02/2019).

[193] According to Sophie Otiendo, the Programme Consultant at HAART, when the artworks are sold the artist receives 50% and the remaining 50% is goes towards the HAART. Interview with Sophie Otiende at the HAART office in Nairobi (24/10/2016).

[194] Interview with Sophie Otiende at the HAART office in Nairobi (24/10/2016).

events.[195] Despite the high prevalence of human trafficking taking place in Nairobi's lower income neighbourhoods, Otiende says the reasoning why A2ES did not enter these communities is because:

> 'I don't think it would have the same impact… they would not be able to understand the idea… when it comes to being able to sit down and look at a painting and be able to appreciate it for its worth, and probably you're selling it, in most cases it would not have the same effect. These are people who every single day see those images…These are images that they have around them. Every single day…you don't need to show them, they already know.'[196]

This inherently contradictory response presents an arguably patronising view towards art appreciation amongst lower income groups; but these comments also hint at there being a very specific type of imagery A2ES seeks to promote. So, what is this, and does it fall into the category of Hopkins' 'NGO Aesthetic' or perpetuate what Mbembe sees as the doom-and-gloom narrative of development organisations? Furthermore does art's use in A2ES provide a new perspective and viewpoint to understand human trafficking in Kenya today?

Throughout the three A2ES exhibitions the artworks have dealt with the multifaceted nature of human trafficking.[197] However, despite their differences in medium, the artworks more often than not portrayed trafficked persons through stereotypical representations. Prevailing tropes included the powerless victim, the use of symbols associated with slavery (padlocks, chains, price tags and barcodes), and the sex worker (figs. 4.14-19). These portrayals strip trafficked persons of their dignity and agency – often literally, with victims' hands tied, being kept in dungeon-like rooms, or cowering to a clenched fist of a male figure. The bodies of female prostitutes are eroticised – something which criminologist Elena Krsmanovic (2016) writes is not new in the representation of human trafficking victims but has the effect of replacing indications of suffering, coercion and exploitation with notions of seduction and arousal.

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[195] Ibid.

[196] Ibid.

[197] This has included imagery representing: the act of trafficking with humans sold and transported like a commodity; power relations showing the act of trafficking through false promises, coercion and violence, or the upkeep of traditions; and the intent of trafficking with reference to themes of sexual exploitation, ritual purposes, domestic work and child soldiers.

Figure 4.14. *Barcode child*
Photography on canvas
By Murage Gichuki.

Figure 4.15. *Deflowered*
Photography on foam
By Nicholas Thuita.

Figure 4.16. *Not My Own*
Acrylic on canvas, 100 x 63 cm
By Gloria Muthoka.

Figure 4.17. *Beneath the veil*
Photography on canvas
By Robert Dinda.

Figure 4.18. *Lamenting*
Digital print on canvas, 59.4 x 42 cm
By Brian Omolo.

Figure 4.19. *Target*
Acrylic on canvas, 150 x 250 cm
By Magdi Adam Suliman.

A consequence of these representations is the creation of binaries - good and evil, victim and perpetrator, free and slaved, people and goods. Making use of images in this way greatly oversimplifies complex issues. In HAART's own estimation the majority of people in Kenya already have a basic understanding of what human trafficking is.[198] Rather than encouraging more nuanced understandings, or a deeper analysis, of the complexities of human trafficking, the majority of works included in the A2ES exhibitions offered arguably shallow depictions which focussed on recurring stories of peril. As a consequence, the project, and indeed many of the artists involved, fell short in recognising the role that art can play in providing an alternative to the 'NGO aesthetic' while at the same time remaining sympathetic to the work of HAART.

The encroachment of NGOs into the field of art in Nairobi is not limited to HAART and their project A2ES.[199] What this specific example highlights is the influential role NGOs have on contemporary art production and distribution. The number of artists involved in such projects is significant as are the multiple venues in which the artworks are exhibited. Additionally, the permeation of the field of art by NGOs signals a new aesthetic in which art criticism is replaced with a development lens, with artworks selected on the basis of their ability to translate complex messages into undemanding images. Such an approach, as discussed above, can have the consequence of unintentionally simplifying the voices of those they wish to represent, and in doing so play into the dehumanising ideology which Mbembe warns against.

This is, however, not always the case. Some NGOs and development organisations have supported the arts to create an alternative imaginative space to development where narratives are not about suffering and tragedies. Mwirichia's project *To Revolutionary Type Love* discussed in Chapter 3 is but one example; it received support from the US charitable organisation 'Astraea Lesbian Foundation for Justice'. Furthermore, whilst it is often (unsurprisingly) the case that donor funding is supportive of art initiatives which align closely with their cause it does not necessarily result in work conforming to a strictly scripted messages and practices of denunciation. For instance, the Heinrich Böll Foundation – a German political foundation which

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[198] A recent survey conducted by HAART states 'In Kenya 83 percent of survey respondents agreed that people in their area know what human trafficking is'. See the report – 'Human Trafficking in Eastern Africa: Research Assessment and Baseline Information in Tanzania, Kenya, Uganda, and Burundi', International Organization for Migration, Geneva, Switzerland, 2008. Available online at - http://kenya.iom.int/sites/default/files/Human_Trafficking_in_Eastern_Africa.pdf (accessed on 13/05/2019).

[199] In 2016 Amnesty International worked with 11 artists in Kenya for the exhibition *Behind the Brush Stroke*. The exhibition was held in Nairobi at Shifteye Studios and it aimed to raise awareness about extrajudicial killings in Kenya. A documentary showing how the behaviour and attitude of the artists evolved during this process was created and is available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xl798wKfPQ8 (accessed 27/07/2019).

works towards fostering democracy and safeguarding human rights globally - sees art as 'an instrument of civic education' and values art and culture 'as independent spheres of thought and action' (Böll 2017: 25-29). Alongside other donors, the Heinrich Böll Foundation supported the art project *Who I Am, Who We Are*, initiated by artists Wambui Kamiru-Collymore and Xavier Verhoest. Whilst the project aligned itself closely to donor objectives – in that it used art to create opportunities and spaces to examine ideas around Kenyan nationhood and identity (Kamiru & Verhoest 2016) – the project was equally provided with a freedom for nuance and experimentation. Thus not all donor and NGO interventions in the arts demand, or indeed foster, a conceptualisation of art practices and aesthetics which relate to a simplistic notions of what donors want to hear.

As discussed in Chapter 2, foreign donor funding has been critical in supporting the establishment and activities of major art-centres but with this came consequent risks of encouraging a culture of dependency. The matters raised above, however, relate to support lent to specific art projects and more so the intervention of development NGOs which have unmistakeably started to imprint the field of art and culture in 21st century Nairobi. What is evident is a clear link between what is funded and the ideology of donors and NGOs. On the one hand, there are opportunities for artists to work away from the parameters set by the market. This apparent freedom is, however, at times conflicted because donors and NGOs influence artists to work in certain ways, or choose to make public artworks that suits their agenda. Artists can in the process be encouraged to perpetuate a discourse of 'othering' in contrast to producing powerful counter-narratives of negative tropes (Bloomfield & Lenette 2018). At the nub of the relation between the encroachment of NGOs and donor funding into the field of art, and the prospect for a critical art practice to emerge, are matters relating to agency – who speaks on behalf of whom, what stories are told or left unspoken. Indeed, these concerns have come out in many of the sections discussed thus far. Thus attention now turns to the role of curatorial practices within Nairobi.

A curatorial turn?

In 2016 the Goethe-Institut Nairobi initiated a five-week curatorial workshop for eight emerging curators from Kenya.[200] The workshop's aims were to provide a grounding in contemporary

[200] The participants for this workshop were: Thom Ogonga, Zihan Kassam, Rose Jepkorir, Mbuthia Maina, William Ndwiga, Nyambura Waruingi, Don Handa and Wambui Kamiru. Following this workshop there have been two additional workshops on curatorial practice by the Goethe-Institut Nairobi. These are: 'Art Education: Curatorial

curatorial thought and practice and they were led by two established curators from the continent, Azu Nwagbogu and Raphael Chikukwa - the latter having taken issue with Western curators speaking on behalf of African practitioners because of their tendencies to look at 'other cultures' in unequal terms (Chikukwa 2010). In the article *Curating Contemporary African Art*, Chikukwa (2010: 229) questions why the West should narrate African contemporary art, and he concludes by referencing Olu Oguibe's critique of Susan Vogel's 1991 *Africa Explores* exhibition which states: 'Africans must narrate themselves and must not be mere stagehands in a ventriloquist's show' (Oguibe 1993: 22).

In the same year as Goethe-Institut's curatorial workshop, a three-day 'Critical Writing Workshop' for young up-and-coming art critics based in Nairobi took place. The workshop was organised by Contemporary And (C&) - a platform for critical engagement with the arts from Africa. The result of this was a special printed edition of C&, comprising articles by participants from the workshop.

Around the time of both these events, meetings in Nairobi were taking place to discuss *The Gathering* – a major forum that included 52 artists and practitioners from 12 countries, which took place in February 2017 in Naivasha (a town approximately 50 miles from Nairobi). According to one of its organisers[201] (the London-based, Kenyan-born painter Michael Armitage) *The Gathering* was a space for artists from different parts of the continent and at different stages in their careers to get to know each other away from commercial and institutional frameworks.[202] Over the course of three days *The Gathering* - through talks, discussions, performance and informal interactions – provided a setting in Africa, for Africans, to inspire intellectual rigour and critical discourse. But above all else *The Gathering* generated a space and time for artists to convene and interrogate their positioning, and that of their art practice, in relation to the continent and each other.

Comparable events on the continent are becoming increasingly common and represent a continuous curatorial rewiring of contemporary art from Africa at a global level, which started taking root at the end of the 20th century (Belting et al. 2013). One recent and significant example

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Strategies in a Digital Age', with Chantal Eschenfelder, in 2018; and 'Regarding the Curatorial: Strategies in Self-Organization', with Gabi Ngcobo, in 2019.

[201] The other organisers of *The Gathering* were Nicola Armitage and Mukami Kuria.

[202] Feedback from this event came from conversations I had with Michael Armitage on the last day of *The Gathering*, on February 19th 2017. A short film, 'The Gathering 2017', which documents parts of the weekend is available at https://vimeo.com/236818699?ref=fb-share&1&fbclid=IwAR0664bRIP3fMxRzrkmhQuaDHEILjBmOyymA2BR4wt0pr9Zq1KyLySd_VxE (accessed on 05/02/2019).

of this is the *Àsìkò* programme that was initiated by Bisi Silva in 2010 and ran until 2016, providing trans-African experimentation in arts education (CCA 2017). But the proximity of the three events mentioned above, both in time and the fact they occurred in Kenya, pose questions as to whether Nairobi is experiencing a 'curatorial turn'? This is where attention now turns.

In examining this it is not to imply that curating as an activity, or practice, by Kenyans in Nairobi's art domains is new - chapters 2 and 3 have provided examples of artists curating their own exhibitions and indeed those of other artists. Additionally, in 2010 Kenyan writer, artist and curator Jimmy Ogonga was described as one of the continent's 'breed of new curators' (Chikukwa 2010: 226).[203] So what is meant when speaking of a curatorial turn in relation to what is happening in Nairobi today?

In *Thinking Contemporary Curating* the art historian and critic Terry Smith argues that curating today is no longer just an activity concerned with caring for collections and the staging of exhibitions. He says:

> 'When it comes to the core purpose of curating - to exhibit art's work - curators now express intuitions, define nuances, articulate ideas, state hypotheses, all the while comparing and contrasting them with the relevant others that are out there…every exhibition demonstrates that curators reflect on circumstance, wrestle with ideas, develop research programs, and spark insights. This is the substance of curatorial thought as a discourse.' (Smith 2012: 254).

In a similar manner to Smith, the curator, Maria Lind broadens the simplified understanding of curating as exhibition making. Lind says:

> '…"Curating" is "business as usual" in terms of putting together an exhibition, organizing a commission, programming a screening series, et cetera. "The curatorial" goes further, implying a methodology that takes art as its starting point but then situates it in relation to specific contexts, times, and questions in order to challenge the status quo. And it does so from various positions, such as that of a curator, an editor, an educator, a communications person, and so on. This means that the curatorial can be employed, or performed, by people in a number of different capacities within the ecosystem of art. For me there is a qualitative difference between curating and the curatorial. The latter, like

[203] It would be ironic to forget mentioning Jimmy Ogonga's significant project *Amnesia* - a series of discussions, workshops and exhibitions developed between 2007 and 2009 which looked at the consequences of the collective cultural memory loss that has affected the African continent and how these translate in contemporary culture and visual arts.

Chantal Mouffe's notion of the political in relation to politics, carries a potential for change.' (Lind 2011).

If 'curating', then, has an extended meaning in contemporary contexts, it justifies characterisation as a 'turn' to borrow from Mary Nooter Robert's analysis in *African Arts and the Curatorial Turn* (Nooter Roberts 2012: 1). Irit Rogoff's essay *Turning* is also instructive (Rogoff 2010). She suggests that a turn occurs when a discipline needs shaking up: 'In a turn', she writes, 'we turn *away* from something or *towards* or *around* something, and it is *we* who are in movement, rather than *it*…Something in us is activated, perhaps even actualized, as we *turn*' (Rogoff 2010: 33, 42). To assess the possibilities of Nairobi's curatorial turn two exhibitions developed by participants from the Goethe-Institut's workshop are illustrative. The first exhibition to be discussed is *Proximity to Power*, and the second, which is examined in the following section, is *27*.

During the Goethe-Institut Nairobi's curatorial workshop each participant was asked to develop and pitch an exhibition concept. Thom Ogonga proposed *Proximity to Power*, an exhibition probing the ambiguities of Kenya's democracy, ethnic voting and the often violent and divisive politics of belonging. According to Ogonga, this concept was 'something I wanted to speak about for long. But maybe ten years ago we were not ready to have such conversations, or we didn't have the ability to articulate it in a certain way.'[204] Ogonga received support from Goethe-Institut Nairobi to develop his curatorial vision and *Proximity to Power* opened at the curator's chosen venue of Circle Art Gallery in July 2017 – barely one month before Kenya's 8th August election. Four artists (Peterson Kamwathi, Longinos Nagila, Nicholas Nikomambo, Onyis Martin) were selected by Ogonga and each given a budget and total creative independence to produce work relating to the curator's brief. This process, says Ogonga, gives power to the artist to articulate their ideas in their chosen way without being overly influenced by the principles of the market.[205]

The resulting artworks weaved together fragments of Kenya's history which impact today's politics and challenges for democracy. Longinos Nagila's work, titled *Descent of Monuments into the Mountains of National(ism) Garbage*, enacted a form of 'metaphorical iconoclasm' on Nairobi's public monuments – Nyayo Monument, Parliament Building, KICC and a statue of Jomo Kenyatta (fig. 4.20). Nagila attacked them as historical symbols of regimes which politicised ethnicity by imaginatively re-contextualising reproductions of national monuments in rubbish

[204] Interview with Thom Ogonga from his studio in Lower Kabete (24/11/2017).

[205] Ibid.

tips.[206] The artist explains 'this body of work is an interpretation of Kenya's social and political descent into tribalism and nepotism'.[207] Nagila's approach shares similarities with South African artist Wayne Barker's overpainting of landscape scenes by Hendrik Pierneef in order to symbolically destroy the censored image of apartheid (Peffer 2009: 223-228). Additionally, the act of iconoclasm relates to the recent Rhodes Must Fall student protest movement which started in South Africa, 2015, and involved student activist Chumani Maxwele throwing a bucket of shit on the statue of the imperialist Cecil John Rhodes (1853–1902) which stood at the campus of the University of Cape Town (Knudsen & Andersen 2019). Following student demonstrations and events, and significant national and international media attention, a month after Maxwele's action the statue of Rhodes was removed - inspiring allied student movements both within South Africa and elsewhere (Gebrial 2018).

Figure 4.20. Detail from Longinos Nagila's *Descent of Monuments into the Mountains of National(ism) Garbage*, depicting the the Kenyatta International Convention Centre tower (left) and a statue of Jomo Kenyatta (right).

Martin Onyis' installation, titled *The Society of Spectacles* (fig. 4.21), questioned the notion that Kenyans should 'forget the past so we can build the nation' (Sahau yaliyopita tujenge taifa). Doing so, however, requires an element of amnesia which the artist is uncomfortable with because it effectively erases significant moments of Kenyan history. Through text and visual metaphor the artist's installation forcefully re-presents historical atrocities associated with the political elite

[206] During research I came across one case of iconoclasm in postcolonial Nairobi. On 12th October 1988, the Nyayo Monument was unveiled. Situated in Nairobi's Central Park, it marked a decade of Moi's rule. On 10th October 2004, a group of human rights activists painted slogans – such as 'Moi-error' - all over the monument, drawing attention to the violation of human rights, economic crimes, and other injustices committed during Moi's 24-year presidency. The activists involved were members of the Release Political Prisoners pressure group and this mischievous act aimed to raise public attention to the Government's unfulfilled promise to set up a Truth, Justice and Reconciliation Commission.

[207] *Proximity to Power* exhibition catalogue, curated by Thom Ogonga. Catalogue designed by Mwini Mutuku. pg.8.

capitalising on ethnicity for political gain. This includes Kenya's 2007/8 PEV and the Kiambaa massacre whereby the Kenya Assemblies of God church, in Eldoret, was burned to the ground by a group of youths thought to be Kalenjin militia members – killing dozens of Kikuyu for whom the church had become a place of refuge during the violence (Branch 2011: 274). Speaking about the incident, William Ruto (the current Deputy President of Kenya) and Peris Simam (the then MP for Eldoret South constituency), both of whom belong to the Kalenjin group, tried to re-write history by suggesting the cause of the fire was accidental – absolving 'their people' from the blame, so to speak (Branch 2011: 274; Muhoma & Nyairo 2011: 420). Other historical incidents signalled to in Onyis' installation include the 1984 Wagalla massacre of ethnic Somalis by Kenyan security forces and the 1969 Kisumu massacre. The artist's inclusion of two doors in the installation act as a metaphor for where one has come from but also to where one is going. In essence, the work of both Onyis and Nagila cause the audience to reflect on Kenya's recent past and future possibilities.

Figure 4.21. *The Society of Spectacles*, an installation by Martin Onyis for the exhibition *Proximity to Power.*

The installation by Peterson Kamwathi, on the other hand, speaks to the here and now (fig. 4.22). The work, titled *Six Piece*, features six hefty ballot boxes constructed from steel whose polished tops reflect faces drawn in charcoal that are fixed to an adjacent wall and which symbolise the electorate. The work comments on the practice of political parties asking voters to choose candidates from one party for all six positions on the ballot – those being: President, Member of

Parliament, Senator, Women's Representative, County Governor, and County Assembly Representative. By implication, this call for exclusionary politics is at odds with Kenya’s 2010 Constitution which states every political party shall have a national character (Article 91(1) (a)). Thus Kamwathi’s *Six Piece* comments on the continuing framing of Kenyan elections principally around candidates’ ethnic identity rather than policies.

Figure 4.22. *Six Piece*, an installation by Peterson Kamwathi for the exhibition *Proximity to Power.*

For Ogonga *Proximity to Power* was a curatorial project which passed agency to artists. In interview, Ogonga remarked that such curatorial practices are critical because ‘artists are quick to respond to global concerns but these things do not always affect us in the space we operate in every day.’[208] Thus, as an exhibition devised for and produced by Kenyans, *Proximity to Power* confronted everyday realities, occurring at a meaningful time given the 2017 General Election was imminent, and acted as an extension to the discourse around the state of democracy in Kenya. According to Ogonga:

> ‘We have to find ways of presenting avant-garde museum quality shows locally… we need to have the ability to tell our stories in ways only us can so that we stop complaining when

[208] Interview with Thom Ogonga from his studio in Lower Kabete (24/11/2017).

they're mistold. That is probably the one thing we have that no one else will ever have over us. And we have to tell them in memorable ways'[209]

Ogonga's curatorial direction exemplifies what Enwezor and Okeke-Agulu describe as 'a kind of *continentalism*' - in which 'curators who live and work in Africa seek to reverse forms of cultural capital accruing to the perceived privileges of "diasporic" and transnational Africans working in the West' (2009: 25). Furthermore, Ogonga's efforts reject ideas that high quality exhibitions of contemporary art from Africa are 'a sort of privileged export, to be enjoyed only in the West' (Enwezor and Okeke-Agulu 2009: 25) but instead works towards making these happen in Nairobi and for an audience in Africa. An instance that his curatorial practice be rooted in the everyday experiences of Kenyans is directly relevant to the growing local population who now attend exhibitions in Nairobi and indeed far exceed the ex-patriate attendees who previously dominated displays at formal art institutions.[210] Furthermore, in 2018 Ogonga initiated and launched *Nairobi Contemporary* – a magazine which is aimed at a local audience and which provides a platform for local voices to write about art in Eastern Africa. The magazine, which aspires to advance the study of modern and contemporary art from the region, is contributing to a revival in locally produced critical writing and discourse, which, given the number of practising artists in Kenya, has been in surprisingly short supply (Labi 2013).

Curatorial activism

In discussions on curatorial practices questions of inclusions and exclusions arise. In the case of Ogonga's *Proximity to Power*, the over-representation of men is glaring. The curator, assistant curator and project manager, four artists, and two writers who contributed text to the exhibition catalogue, are all male. Given that the exhibition deals with power, identity, and hierarchies, there was surprisingly very little discussion of this 'all male cast' by the public and in exhibition

[209] Blog post by Thom Ogonga, '*Proximity to Power: Again, This Is Not An Exhibition Review*, posted on July 21st 2017, on the artist's personal blog site 'the alternative writer'. Available at https://thealternativewriter.blogspot.com/2017/07/proximity-to-power-again-this-is-not.html (accessed 23/07/2019).

[210] Observations, and interviews with those working at Nairobi's formal art institutions, made apparent the vast majority of exhibition-goers in Nairobi are Kenyans and it has reportedly been this way for the past decade. This is in contrast to previous decades where it was suggested that half or more of those who attended exhibitions were non-Kenyans. That said the number of people reached through exhibitions remains fairly insignificant – with galleries reaching a few hundred, whilst cultural centres and the NNM engage a wider public due to reaching non-art-going audiences.

reviews. I suggest this is surprising because only a few months earlier a lively Facebook debate about gender inclusion and exclusion within the arts in Nairobi took place. That online debate was initiated by the artist Jackie Karuti who criticised what she felt was the 'praising of men' and the 'all male cast' of two exhibitions happening at that time in Nairobi.

One of the exhibitions that faced criticism was *Young Guns*, which opened at Circle Art Gallery on the 7th of June 2017. In the exhibition's promotional material, *Young Guns* was described as featuring '26 emerging artists in Nairobi…[who] are the new guard: politicized; pushing boundaries; exploring their identity; local and global concerns; war and peace; law and disorder; issues of masculinity and the artist's role in society.' All the artists for this exhibition are male. Perhaps in recognition of the criticisms raised regarding the total lack of female representation in *Young Guns*, the gallery went on the defensive. In the *Young Guns* exhibition catalogue it stated: 'during a series of studio visits to [six art-centres]… and other private spaces in Nairobi…all the artists I met were men, the collectives were established by men and the art that I saw in each space was by men.'[211] Text in the exhibition catalogue asked 'why there has been this vigorous surge in young male artists', but failed to critically reflect on the role commercial galleries, and indeed other art institutions, play in perpetuating the low representation of female artists. This raises the question of whether the Circle Art Gallery's *Young Guns* exhibition should be seen as a one-off ill-judged instance? Or is female under-representation in the visual arts systematically endorsed by Nairobi's formal art institutions?

An analysis of female representation in exhibitions from 2015-2018 at two prominent commercial galleries in Nairobi is revealing.[212] The inclusion of women in exhibitions held at Circle Art Gallery, Nairobi, in 2015 was 50%, but women's representation dropped to just 13% in 2016, fell to 10% in 2017, while in 2018 it rose to 38%.[213] Women's representation at One Off Contemporary Art Gallery (Nairobi's other premier commercial gallery) in the years 2015, 2016, 2017 and 2018 equated to 22%, 26%, 30% and 39% respectively.[214] The combined average of women's

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[211] The art-centres that were visited are: Wajukuu, Brush Tu, Kuona Trust, the GoDown Arts Centre, Dust Depo and Maasai Mbili.

[212] These two commercial galleries were chosen to be analysed because data from their exhibitions was available. Further analyses into other art institutions such as the Goethe-Institut Nairobi and NNM will provide additional, and much needed, evidence into the extent of women's representation in art exhibitions in Nairobi.

[213] Data for this was collated from Circle Art Gallery's listed exhibitions which took place at their Nairobi gallery from 2015-18. See https://www.circleartagency.com/exhibitions/ (accessed 24/05/209).

[214] Data for this was collated from One Off Contemporary Art Gallery's listed exhibitions which took place at their Nairobi gallery on Rosslyn Lone Tree Estate from 2015-18. See https://www.oneoffafrica.com/exhibition-archive.html (accessed 24/05/209).

representation for both galleries over this 4 year period is 28.5%. What this makes plain is the extent to which male artists are more visible than their female counterparts. This may be symptomatic of there being more male than female practising visual artists, but if that is the case it is only so because of institutional and socio-cultural structures at play. If galleries are one significant arena where the visibility of artists are made apparent to the general public, then the implications are all too apparent. If art and the spaces created through art's distribution and reception act as an extension of Kenya's public sphere, then the current situation perpetuates the circumstances in which male voices and narratives dominate.

Given this, curators can clearly play a role in ensuring the visibility of those who are frequently under-represented. Such actions can be seen as a form of 'Curatorial Activism' – a term which curator and arts writer Maura Reilly uses to designate:

> 'the practice of organizing art exhibitions with the principle aim of ensuring that certain constituencies of artists are no longer ghettoized or excluded from the master narratives of art. It is a practice that commits itself to counter-hegemonic initiatives that give voice to those who have been historically silenced or omitted altogether—and, as such, focuses almost exclusively on work produced by women, artists of color, non-Euro-Americans, and/or queer artists.' (Reilly 2017).

Reilly's concept of curatorial activism argues for the inclusion of those who face discrimination, in the artworld and beyond. And it is evident that such activism has taken root amongst some who attended the Goethe-Institut's curatorial workshops. The exhibition *27*, which was curated by Nyambura Waruingi and named after the progressive Article 27 of Kenya's 2010 Constitution, is one such example.

Taking place at Shifteye Studios in November 2017, *27* featured four female artists and was created in collaboration with the National Gay & Lesbian Human Rights Commission (NGLHRC). The exhibition included juxtaposing excerpts from the Kenyan Constitution with The Penal Code of Kenya. Placed together on the gallery's walls and within the exhibition catalogue, these legal texts made apparent the stark disconnection between the enshrined rights of everyone in the Constitution on the one hand, and the criminalisation of LGBT+ people's bodies and their consensual sexual acts on the other.[215]

[215] Two significant excerpts are Article 27 from the Kenyan Constitution which enshrines citizens' rights and fundamental freedoms, meaning that every person is equal before the law; and section 162-167 of The Penal Code of Kenya which essentially criminalises homosexuality.

The NGLHRC state the goal of *27* was to 'create a space where people can come in and engage with the ideas that drive this organization, and the work that we do to bring these ideas closer to reality, and art seems like a good place to start; we think of the [art]work as a point to launch into conversations around the work that we do.'[216] As such, the exhibition was not simply about creating visibility for Kenya's queer community and artists but it was also inherently about fashioning a space, perhaps a safe space, for queer bodies and stories about queer lives in Kenya whilst challenging heterocentrism (fig. 4.23).[217] According to the artist Awuor Onyango, who participated in the exhibition, 'the creation of safe spaces becomes such an important thing, because there are very few spaces where you can just be, and not have to present a certain version of yourself, but be whatever, whoever, you want to be in that moment.'[218] *27* enabled the concept of a safe space to momentarily transpire, as recounted by its curator Nyambura Waruingi in saying the exhibition and programme of events 'serves to bring together voices from different spaces, art and litigation, ordinarily rarely communicating directly or with each other, to create conversations that allow us to step out of our seemingly immutable identities…We wanted to invoke in the audience the lived realities of the law on our bodies and minds and souls…and re-claim the spirit of the Article [27].'[219]

In Kenya, those who identify as LGBT+ are marginalised, criminalised, frequently humiliated, and defamed. Thus the exhibition *27* can be seen as a challenge to the dehumanisation of LGBT+ people and as a means of activism in that it celebrates and sanctions queer lives and queer love through art but also through the creation of temporal spaces for this to be recognised.

[216] Exhibition catalogue for *27* which was Curated by Nyambura M. Waruingi. Exhibition catalogue designed by Asteria Malinzi. pg.5.

[217] For discussion on 'safe spaces' see pg.127.

[218] Exhibition catalogue for *27* which was Curated by Nyambura M. Waruingi. Exhibition catalogue designed by Asteria Malinzi. pg.18.

[219] Exhibition catalogue for *27* which was Curated by Nyambura M. Waruingi. Exhibition catalogue designed by Asteria Malinzi. pg.8. In addition to the exhibition the following activities took place: screenings from the digital media organisation None on Record, who work with LGBT+ communities across Africa; a public forum discussion on private lives becoming public; an artist talk; and a substantial exhibition catalogue was produced and distributed which included artist interviews, and a discussions with NGLHRC about their work.

Figure 4.23. Exhibition opening of *27* at the Shifteye Studios, on 9th November 2017.

Shortly after the Goethe-Institut Nairobi's curatorial workshop the Kenyan artist and art writer Zihan Kassam published an online article titled *A curator is born: a look at Kenya's first curator's workshop* (Kassam 2016). What is noticeable in Kassam's article is the impression that following certification from a course a curator is equipped with all the necessary elements required for him or her to perform their curatorial functions: it is as if 'a curator is born'. The curator Maria Lind (2011) has cautioned against giving out certificates 'that claim to show that people have actually become curators when they are merely beginning to acquire their own methodologies', going on to say 'curating is an applied activity that cannot exist without substantial hands-on experience.' Lind's remarks are strikingly relevant for what is taking place in Nairobi today, especially as curating has become more and more professionalised. During research in Nairobi, it became evident that curators were eagerly being brought on board various art initiatives because the idea of needing a 'qualified' curator has become popular. However, many of these projects, exhibitions and other initiatives, lacked any real curatorial budget thus limiting the curatorial role to one of simply presenting artworks in exhibitions. As such, a rich curatorial practice remains fairly elusive in Nairobi, and the inclusion of a curator in art projects, or in exhibitions, appears to have more to do with the perceived credibility they bring, rather than a meaningful opportunity for curatorial practice to take root. Nevertheless, the examples of *Proximity to Power* and *27* demonstrate the fact that there is an appetite for 'shaking up' curatorial practice and using it to enrich Kenya's public sphere with stories which reflect on circumstance, develop arenas for participation, spark research, and catalyse new understanding.

Conclusion

This chapter has discussed the implications of the market, NGO patronage, and curatorial practices in enabling a critical art to develop and find a platform within Nairobi's art institutions. I started by using examples of Michael Soi's commercialised work of selling tote bags in addition to his canvas paintings which provide a critical reflection on socio-political issues. It was argued that Soi's fine art merchandise provided the artist with an alternative stream of income and autonomy from the influence of Nairobi's galleries and donor funding. Nairobi is a tough and highly competitive environment for artists – particularly those less established than Soi – and alternative avenues for generating income through the commodification of art are increasingly being explored and undertaken. In doing so, a symbiotic relationship can emerge in which an artist's commercial venture can support a more experimental and critical art practice. Yet, whilst the imagery of female portraits found on Soi's tote bags has been commercially successful, when similar imagery appeared in Circle Art Gallery's white cube space its association with the totalising aesthetic of Soi's commodified art remained. In other words, the imagery of consumer culture filled the space of where one might expect art to provide a more subversive experience.

Discussion then moved to examine the influx of NGOs in the field of art and the influence their patronage has on critical art practices. Attention was given to the multi-year project A2ES. I suggested that A2ES, and indeed similar initiatives, offer significant exposure and funding opportunities for NGOs by creating novel platforms (in the format of art exhibitions) where a public can coalesce. However, in examining the work created by artists who are engaged in projects led by development organisations it has become apparent that many succumb to perpetuating an 'NGO aesthetic'. Rather than art becoming a medium to create an alternative imaginative space in which development goals may be pursued, work selected for inclusion in NGO projects appear to be judged on their moral messaging. In the case of the A2ES exhibitions this was evident in many works that simply denounced slavery and human trafficking. I am not suggesting that this is bad, however (as argued above) presenting topics this way does not necessarily change the way people see things. In other words, the art is not subversive or agonistic, in the Mouffean sense, because it merely tells the audience what to think, for instance 'sex trafficking is exploitative' or provides simplistic notions such as 'slaves are commodities'. As Mouffe argues, 'to create an agonistic public sphere is to create other forms of consciousness, not simply lift false consciousness by denunciation.' (Mouffe 2012: 4). I signposted instances where this has occurred in order to demonstrate that NGO/donor patronage can support the development of critical art practices in Nairobi. Having said that, what this section made apparent

is that the influx of development NGOs and foreign donors is imprinting the field of arts in Kenya in fundamental ways and looks set to continue in the foreseeable future.

Lastly, the chapter explored the notion that Nairobi is experiencing a curatorial turn. Evidently there are aspects of a ‘turn’ occurring; there is a push for the practice to use exhibition-making as a mode of research to intellectually interrogate a chosen theme and as a vehicle for the production and dissemination of knowledge. This was argued through examining the exhibitions *Proximity to Power* and *27* which both demonstrated the potential for critical curatorial practices to challenge the status quo. Yet, whilst increased demand to involve curators in various projects and exhibitions is noticeable, limited opportunities exist for curators to pursue a practice which moves beyond simplistic concepts of putting on an exhibition around a loose theme.

A central feature throughout this chapter has been the notion of who has agency, and who is setting the agenda, which in turn effects the possibilities for a critical art to manifest, and the potentials for art to invigorate the public sphere. As in many other parts of the world, one significant limitation confronting artists in Nairobi working within the confines of gallery spaces, and the like, is their limitation for reaching a mass audience - given that most of the art institutions discussed above and in Chapter 3 remain privileged sites for the dissemination of contemporary art. Therefore, the two subsequent chapters move attention to those art practices which take place outside the walls of art institutions and the possibilities, but also challenges, that this presents to expand experiences of democracy.

Chapter Five

Art and activism on the streets

'The fall of one regime does not bring utopia. Rather, it opens the way for hard work and long efforts to build more just social, economic, and political relationships and the eradication of other forms of injustices and oppression.' (Gene Sharp 1993: xxii).

Half a century ago Guy Debord coined the term 'spectacle' to refer to the alienating and divisive effects of capitalism (DeBord 1967). In shorthand the spectacle is a world condition wherein images are made for the purpose of sales which shape everyday life experiences and become a means for producing passive subjects distracted and alienated from reality. Like other major cities in the world today, Nairobi is enveloped in a barrage of spectacle. These conditions relate to sociologist and philosopher Zygmunt Bauman's observation at the turn of the 21st century that public space in global cities is increasingly void of public issues (Bauman 2001: 107). This provokes questions as to the role art can play in bringing public issues back into public spaces, and art's potential in empowering active urban-dwellers. These are perhaps substantial asks, but in Kenya's recent history there have been significant moments when and movements in which artists stepped outside the confines of their studios and the walls of art institutions in order to produce work and create situations in a multiplicity of Nairobi's public spaces.

Chapter 5 approaches this by exploring the possibilities and limitations on deploying art in areas of activism, specifically through protest graffiti and carnivalesque street demonstrations, that took place shortly before Kenya's 2013 election and the period immediately following – during which the Jubilee Party of Kenya, led by President Uhuru Kenyatta, has been in power. Kenyans are well aware of the challenge of the political scientist Gene Sharp (quoted above) and this chapter demonstrates how its message remains relevant. Specifically, the fight for justice made by those associated with the organisation PAWA 254 through its use of 'artivism' (a bringing

together of art and activism) is considered. The chapter begins by summarising what artivism is. It does so by drawing on a range of writing on the subject and highlights artivism's contribution to social and political change. This sets the scene for an analysis of the work carried out by PAWA 254 in the following six sections of the chapter.

Firstly, I discuss PAWA 254's initial foray into artivism in which graffiti was used as a statement of protest and rebellion. The focus then shifts to artivism's involvement in organised street protests and demonstrations. In this I recount my own participant observations of protests in Nairobi, concentrating on one protest in particular which exemplified artivism's tactics and its theoretical context, carnival. A third section concentrates on protests which deployed mock coffins and funereal references to generate a media-worthy spectacle. In section four I discuss the use of live and model pigs to ridicule Members of Parliament in order to examine the confines of laughter and mockery as a tactic in artivsm. The State's response to these 'carnivalesque' protests is considered through my concept of the post-colonial State's moment of 'violent carnival'. After this the chapter then moves to explore the potential to participate in these protests online and how acts of artivism are (re)interpreted away from the initial event. The chapter concludes by reflecting on artivism's implications in areas of activism more broadly and suggests that artivism's values lies in its ability to transform political imaginations and create new arenas for political engagement in Nairobi.

Art + activism = artivism

In 2011 the photographer-turned-activist Boniface Mwangi founded the organisation PAWA 254.[220] Based in Nairobi, PAWA 254's aims included building the capacity of activists, creatives, journalists, and citizens to use art and activism (what Mwangi called 'artivism') to bring about social change (Mwangi 2016: 285). As examined in previous chapters, organisations and art collectives have been known to use art as a tool in this way. The concept of bringing together art and activism has also been termed 'activist art' (Danto 1991; Duncombe & Lambert 2013; Duncombe 2016), 'artistic activism' (Mouffe, 2007, 2013; Groys 2014), 'community art' (Cohen-Cruz 2002), 'performative democracy' (Weibel 2015), 'cultural resistance' (Duncombe 2002) and

[220] The name 'PAWA254' is a combination of Kiswahili slang for power (PAWA) and Kenya's international dialling code (+254).

‘cultural activism’ (Verson 2007; Buser et al 2013).[221] By using the term artivism to describe their method of working PAWA 254 seeks to make apparent their intentions, which calls for reflection on what artivism is.

Artivism connects art and activism. It focusses on the ways in which art provides new understandings of common concerns, and how political action can become creative in its fight against perceived injustice (Harold 2007; Buser et al 2013; Weibel 2015). As a result of this, artivism often creates new or alternative ways of political intervention and civil disobedience, which moves beyond conventional forms of activism (Jordan 2016: 2). Also representing a shift from convention is art’s detachment from its orthodox home of the gallery and museum and associated accolades. Instead, artivism is concerned with the domain of daily life, and innovatively using public space (Purakayastha 2014: 57; Mesquita 2015: 495). Artivism demands that art is not compelled to simply represent change, but instead becomes part of an action which engages with society’s transformation. Scholars of artivism suggest this is achieved by drawing on a range of potentiality: to unite people, to question the status quo, to disrupt everyday life, to instruct or persuade, to improve public understanding of civic issues, and to create new or different cognitive, emotional and physiological experiences (Cohen-Cruz 2002: 6; Stern & Seifert 2009; Bala & Zangl 2015; Duncombe 2016: 116). Consequently, it has been argued, artivism with its counter-hegemonic tendencies represents an important dimension of radical politics (Mouffe 2007, 2013).

Interpretations of artivism are, however, not without criticism. For instance, Boris Groys (2014) notes that the artworld critiques it as a lowering of aesthetic quality, whereas political scientists criticise it as a distraction from the practical goals of political protest. In response, it can be argued that artivism’s interdisciplinary nature and methodology should not be understood within the purview of one subject but rather be seen as an ‘indiscipline’ in its refusal to be restricted by the discipline of art or political science, or be hemmed in by conventional understandings of either ‘artist’ or ‘activist’ (Jordan 2016: 2). This matters because in today’s world, as the political theorist Chantal Mouffe reminds us, political questions are those which affect our everyday lives now and in the future and, as such, are not issues to be left exclusively in the hands of experts (Mouffe 2007: 2).

As this chapter will demonstrate, artivism is often theatrical. It can be funny and creative at the same time as it can ridicule and mock; artivism can bring people together in new, creative and

[221] For instance in two papers from 2005 Aldo Milohnić discusses the term ‘artivism’ as a hybrid approach combining art and political activism (Milohnić 2005, 2005a).

often powerful ways, but it can also divide and antagonise. As may be expected of an indiscipline, artivism is at times messy and disordered; but it does, nevertheless, offer opportunities to expand on the ways of engaging with politics and help to both understand and practice social change.

Graffiti as an act of protest and rebellion

In early 2012, Boniface Mwangi co-ordinated PAWA 254's first venture into artivism, a graffiti campaign named *MaVulture* (meaning 'many vultures' in Kiswahili). Driven by the ability and willingness of four graffiti artists (Swift 9, Bankslave, Uhuru B and Smokillah) the campaign saw a series of illegal murals painted across Nairobi's Central Business District (CBD).[222] Through metaphor, imagery and text, the murals publicly chastised Members of Parliament (MPs), called upon the electorate for a 'ballot revolution', and reminded 'amnesia suffering Kenyans' of past scandals[223].

The murals depicted MPs as vultures – an animal whose unpleasant character is manifest in a life of scavenging, opportunism, and preying on the frail. Emphasising this point, graffiti artist Swift 9 says 'those in power weaken us and then they attack us, just like the vulture'.[224] Using the image of a vulture in this campaign built upon an iconographic and emotive take on this bird.[225] Likewise, the attribution of human traits (or those the artists feel are portrayed by certain MPs) to non-human entities (that of the vulture) ties this work to that of other artists in Kenya who employ anthropomorphism and satire to criticise those in office. In juxtaposition to the political elite's representation, the electorate were depicted as vociferous, demanding, and collectively powerful

[222] In addition to murals, artists also pasted paper artworks on walls and stencilled messages on roads and pavements. Speaking to Swift 9 at Dust Depot in Nairobi (interview on 26/01/2018) he describes that this approach was used because they didn't have the luxury of time and they wanted to cover the city with as many messages as possible in a short period. The artist claims that their group executed over 100 stencils and paste ups across Nairobi.

[223] Newspapers in Kenya often feature articles in which the author, tired of recurring outrages, will declare 'a case of selective/collective amnesia' amongst the populace. One lady, discussing a mural from the *MaVulture* campaign, emphasises such a viewpoint by stating 'If you look at some of the scandals they are from back in the day. They haven't been resolved but they have been forgotten.' Interview accessible online at https://soundcloud.com/theworld/nairobis-smart-graffiti-and (accessed 20/06/2018).

[224] Interview with Swift 9 at the Dust Depot, Nairobi (26/01/2018).

[225] Examples of this include: Kevin Carter's harrowing photograph of a famine-stricken Sudanese child shadowed by a vulture, visually capturing political failings which contributed to the 1993 famine in areas of southern Sudan; the Nigerian author Emeka Nwabueze's portrayal of Parliamentarians (in his play *A Parliament of Vultures*) as voracious and consumed by self-interest rather than being driven by delivering good governance; and the editorial cartoonist Gado's use of animals (including vultures) to represent politicians (Gado 2012: 131).

(fig. 5.1 & 5.2). That said, in one mural (fig. 5.3) the common Kenyan (depicted through the image of *Wanjiku*[226]) was shown bearing the burden of a 'tribal leader' plundering the country at the expense of the 'idiot' electorate which continually votes them into power.

Figure 5.1. Detail of *MaVulture* mural situated close to City Market.

Figure 5.2. *MaVulture* mural situated in Nairobi's CBD along Kenyatta Avenue.

[226] Often depicted as a female character, *Wanjiku* was a term popularised by Moi who used it to describe the common person's ignorance of politics and national issues. The idea of Wanjiku has changed over time, most notably in the editorial cartoons by the artist Gado, who today depicts *Wanjiku* as someone aware of their rights and who eloquently articulates the issues that affect them (Shitemi & Kamaara 2014).

Figure 5.3. Detail of *MaVulture* mural situated close to City Market.

There are no hints of nuance in this campaign. The viewer is told precisely what to think, who is to blame and how they should react. Boniface Mwangi says of this approach that it is intentional because he aims to 'shade off the complexity in art… we don't want you to start trying to get a meaning, we want to give you the meaning'.[227] A result of this is that the artworks are direct and the spectator is not lost for interpretation - a characteristic attributed to artivism (Cohen-Cruz 2002: 2; Groys 2014: 1; Jordan 2016: 1). People are generally not ignorant to the themes *MaVulture* presents (endemic issues of bad governance, corruption, and abuse of office). However, the method by which these murals have entered the public domain is central to their understanding as an act of artivism. Therefore, what follows is a 'reading' of the rebellious nature of these murals as an act of public protest which goes beyond the analysis of their pictorial narrative.

The act of claiming a highly visible space usually controlled by capitalist and political interests - illegally, within the centre of Kenya's capital city, under the nose of the authorities – can itself be

[227] Interview with Boniface Mwangi, at PAWA 254 (14/08/2015).

understood as a rebellious act towards the establishment. According to the artists, the murals' locations were selected because they were sites where a considerable number of people pass-by daily. Speaking of one site, Swift 9 says 'there was a huge wall next to City Market... A building which stood there had been demolished but this wall remained. It had become a meeting place for people in the city. We had to hit it up.'[228] The choice of painting murals and pasting posters at other sites, such as the city council-run public toilets which bore the demanding phrase 'no posters here' across its walls, was also a rebellious act due to its refusal to comply with authority and its hegemony over public space in the city (fig. 5.4). The artists also sprayed stencils of vultures and anti-establishment slogans stating 'fukuza mavulture bungeni na kuru yako' (Kiswahili for 'remove the vultures in Parliament with your vote') and 'sauti yangu, kura yangu, maisha yetu' (Kiswahili for 'my voice, my vote, our lives') on the city's pavements and roads.

Figure 5.4. Boniface Mwangi pictured with graffiti artists next to a *MaVulture* mural painted on public toilets in Nairobi's CBD.

Through claiming sites of high visibility in significant public locations, the artists sent out an indisputable message: 'our voices [read as "the common citizens"] will be heard'. The artists could have opted to create murals at less prominent sites to conceal their illegal doings from the authorities. However, such a manoeuvre would have broadcast a timid message: 'we are rebelling and you should too, but let's not shout too loud'.

Carrying out *MaVulture* required careful strategies. Going out during the quiet hours of night, Swift 9 recalls how the tactics used by the artists borrowed from the social power of uniforms, saying 'at times we wore high vis jackets, which were quite new in the city and became a regular

[228] Interview with Swift 9 at the Dust Depot, Nairobi (26/01/2018).

uniform for construction workers. So wearing these made us blend in, like we were meant to be there…A lot of people get scared when they see a uniform, they assume that you must be authorised, so you can get away with things.'[229] Yet such audacious doings are clearly not without risk, which begs the question of what spurred on the artists.

The media enthusiastically reported *MaVulture* in the news; articles in Kenya's *Daily Nation* newspaper called it 'a new form of revolution' (Obuya 2012) and described the approach as 'heralding a new dawn in political activism' (Wesangula 2012). Internationally, *The Guardian* and *Reuters* described *MaVulture* as a 'graffiti revolution' (Chonghaile 2012), and an 'outlet for citizens angry' with MPs' greed (Miriri 2012). Such language, connoting the transformative possibilities of art, appealed to the artists' own desire to be change-makers, as suggested by Swift 9: 'we as artists have a responsibility to show society that if we keep electing these type of leaders then we will all perish'.[230] The artists' motivation was also influenced by global and national events.[231] The Arab uprisings, which started in 2011, made known to the world the role a young generation can play in driving and leading change across North Africa and elsewhere. The explosion of creative production by poets, photographers, playwrights and graffiti artists during the Arab uprisings were inspirational, as Swift 9 recalls:

> 'During the Arab Spring a lot of young people were revolutionary... In Kenya young people are always told "you are the leaders of tomorrow", but tomorrow always remains in the future…you think to yourself, "when are we going to get our chance to lead?"…if you really want to do something you have to stand up and do it. There is no point complaining and waiting for things to be handed to you, you have to work towards it and fight for it... If the whole world is doing the same then why should we kick back and just keep complaining.'[232]

Despite the cliché that the city and its surfaces are the graffiti artists' studio and canvas, the benefits of a physical space where graffiti artists and other like-minded creatives gather provides many benefits. Speaking of this Swift 9 describes PAWA 254 as: 'a place where we met other

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[229] Ibid.

[230] Interview with Swift 9 at the Dust Depot, Nairobi (26/01/2018).

[231] For example the post-election violence of 2007/8 affected all the artists and an anxiety amongst the populace was growing in regards to how the upcoming 2013 election would unfold. Though while some artists, such as Bankslave, had previously created murals in Nairobi's informal settlements (which 'spoke' of the need for peace) other artists had yet to venture into overtly political content in their work.

[232] Interview with Swift 9 at the Dust Depot, Nairobi (26/01/2018).

creatives such as video makers, photographers, play writers, script writers, spoken word artists and cartoonists. Being a graffiti artist you rarely had the chance to meet these kind of artists, but PAWA 254 offered a platform where we could engage with artists and activists, share ideas and create together.'[233]

To begin with, PAWA 254 emphasised a commitment to collective, not strictly individual, action. This approach (rooted in the coming together of art and activism) created a socialising force and bond across diverse actors, which contributed to nurturing alliances required for social movements. After all, it is very unusual for concerted social change to occur through the actions of one individual. However, that said, individuals need to somehow become stirred in order to be inspired to act or to continue acting. It is clear from speaking with artists from the *MaVulture* campaign that Boniface Mwangi was this driving force. From the outset it also became clear that Boniface Mwangi would soon become the 'face' of PAWA 254.

The *MaVulture* campaign initially remained anonymous, which Swift 9 says was because 'we [artists] didn't want to own it, this is something for Kenyans, so let it belong to the Kenyans. What mattered to us was the message not who is portraying this message.'[234] However, for reasons which are not entirely clear (depending on who you speak with stories differ) Mwangi, who helped choreograph the campaign but who was not responsible for executing the artwork, came forward and claimed responsibility. In doing so, Mwangi also took the credit for *MaVulture*. The public imagination around those behind these acts of artivism waned as Mwangi was now wrongfully narrated as the 'Kenyan photojournalist turned graffiti artist' (Aarhus 2012).

Today, only one of the murals from the *MaVulture* campaign remains (fig. 5.3), the others having been promptly painted over by Nairobi City Council. As a tool for communicating with young people, whilst also drawing on its links with dissent and rebellion, graffiti has been used in other areas of artivism undertaken by PAWA 254.[235] However, in recognition of the fact that change

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[233] Ibid.

[234] Ibid.

[235] For instance in 2015 PAWA 254 (in collaboration with Goethe-Institut Nairobi, Afrika ARTS Kollective, Kuona Trust art-centre, Sauti Ya Mtaa and Action for Transparency) launched the project *#ArtCrossingBorders Urban Art and Data Visualisation*. The project involved Kenyan and international artists transforming a run down and disused open space in Kariobangi, Nairobi, through graffiti and art installations. For a short video on this project see https://www.facebook.com/PAWA254/videos/949145815145612/?v=949145815145612 (accessed 07/06/2019). Also of note is PAWA 254's support for the organisation 'Sauti Ya Mtaa', which enabled them to run their 'data murals' project. This project involved the creation of graffiti murals in the neighbourhood of Mathare. The murals discussed issues of insecurity, extra judicial killings, mob justice, poor policing and lack of accountability; thus creating a space which can be used as a resource and outlet to empower community members to engage in dialogue to make data-driven arguments with local authorities.

often involves the collective 'power of the people', PAWA 254 began organising street protests and demonstrations. These protests have become a fairly regular occurrence. It is, however, the creative methods of artivism that PAWA 254 employs in these protests which is where focus now turns.

Reflections on street protests in Nairobi

Shortly after arriving in Nairobi (July 2016), the national news reported the apparent extrajudicial killing by police of human rights lawyer Willie Kimani, his client Josephat Mwenda, and taxi driver Joseph Muiruri. There have been hundreds of killings in Kenya for which the police have been blamed (van Stapele 2016; Jones et al. 2017), however the murder of this lawyer caused particular outrage. A protest dubbed *Stop Extrajudicial Killings* followed, which received significant media coverage – perhaps in part due to the performative and symbolic aspects entailed (such as the splashing of fake blood on police spokesman Charles Owino and carrying of mock coffins). Speaking with human rights activists they describe these performative and artistic considerations in protests as being common features in 21st century activism in Nairobi which contribute to a rejuvenated spirit in protest movements.[236] Being interested in experiencing what these creative dynamics bring to protest, I attended a number of street demonstrations in Nairobi – one of which was in part shaped by artistic considerations. I turn to this now.[237]

On the morning of Thursday 3rd November 2016, I made my way to Freedom Corner (a section of Uhuru Park) for a demonstration against corruption. Freedom Corner is the default meeting point for many protests in Nairobi's CBD; it is a site associated with peoples' fight for justice, the earth

[236] In discussion with the artist, activist, and human rights defender Tony Mboyo, he expressed that the spirit of activism and protest diminished in Nairobi following the defeat of KANU's long-standing dominance in 2002. This was in contrast to the decade of the 1990s which was seen as being a golden age of popular political activism in Kenya's capital city (Maupeu 2010: 373-376). It is only over the past 10 years, following on from Kenya's 2007/8 post-election violence, that Mboyo says the 'spirit' of protesting and demonstrating in Nairobi has re-emerged. Mboyo's suggestion relates with Adam Branch and Zachariah Mamphilly's research on popular protests in Africa, who claim a new wave of popular protests swept across Africa from the late 2000s. Branch and Mampilly term this 'the third wave of African protests', the first wave having occurred during decolonisation, the second through democratic transitions to multi-party politics in the 1990s. (Branch and Mampilly 2015: 68–69).

[237] The four street demonstrations I attended were: *Ni Yetu Walk* - A walk from Kisumu to Nairobi (350 km) to commemorate the 6th anniversary of the promulgation of the Constitution. I joined the last day of the walk (17km) from Kinoo to Nairobi (21/08/2016); *#ActOnCorruptionOrResign* – A protest against corruption (03/11/2016), *Stop Killing us* – A protest against police killing protesters (19/10/2017); *#NotInMyCountryKE* -A protest over the country's state of affairs, including a recent media shutdown (05/02/2018).

bearing the imprint of the historic footprints of those reminding governments to whom they are accountable. [238]

Speaking about corruption the previous month during a State House summit on governance and accountability, President Uhuru Kenyatta asked: 'ladies and gentlemen, what do you want me to do?'[239] Aptly named *President Uhuru Act on Corruption Now or Resign*, the protest was a retort to the President's question.

At Freedom Corner, I witnessed a bundle of branded t-shirts, and professionally printed placards with witty slogans, handed to a throng of enthusiastic participants ready to start demonstrating.[240] Donning these 'uniforms' visually emphasised the unity and solidarity conjured by this gathering. But this also revealed an aspect of protest branding, often reliant on donor funding, which some openly criticised as a form of incentivisation and a waste of resources.

A crowd of approximately 225 had congregated at Freedom Corner. My initial impression was how trivial the turnout for this protest was. I wondered where were the Kenyans that I had communicated with who expressed deep resentment of Kenya's corruption problem. Where were the thousands who voiced their online support for this demonstration? Striking a conversation with those gathered, I sensed an atmosphere imbued with enthusiasm that, optimistically, those assembled believed change could come. Through asserting their right to the

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[238] Today this site is marked by a monument (designed and executed by artist Kevin Oduor) dedicated to the thousands killed, tortured and jailed in the Mau Mau fight for independence. However, it was the subversive use of the body by female bodies that has given this site its prominence. In the late 1980s Wangari Mathai led hundreds of protesters, mainly women, against plans to erect a huge building (for the ruling party) in the park. Their efforts stopped this from happening and in so doing inspired a generation of other Kenyan civic activists. Mathai recognised the importance of accessible public space that was becoming ever encroached by urbanisation and privatisation; the park became a space where people had the freedom to gather, and where people gathered to be free. In 1992, a group of women did just that, occupying Freedom Corner demanding the release of their imprisoned sons and husbands for alleged political crimes. When the police started brutally evicting the women they used the strongest form of political protest they had at disposal. The women threw off their clothes and exposed their bare bodies to the police – cursing them with their nakedness (Brownhill & Turner 2002). These actions reached the global stage, prompting huge support for the women's cause.

[239] See the online news article *Frustrated Uhuru scolds state officials on rampant corruption*, available at https://www.the-star.co.ke/news/2016/10/18/video-frustrated-uhuru-scolds-state-officials-on-rampant-corruption_c1440108 accessed on (16/08/2018).

[240] I would later learn that police officers infiltrated this demonstration, under the guise of protesters to feed colleagues with intelligence. They were able to dress in the branded T-Shirts handed out to those who had gathered to protest. See the exclusive footage of this taken by *Africa Uncensored* at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WibLmPaD4qc&t=0s&list=PL7XuhVR9yNJgtWridK4UqN9iNZFR9kESD&index=26 accessed on (16/08/2018).

city's public space, making their voice heard, and practising their constitutional right to freedom of assembly, the protesters were already claiming a democratic victory.[241]

Revolutionary protest songs and chants, as well as the national anthem, boomed from a PA system. The words to these tunes were echoed by protesters and invigorated through dance. These songs – often corruptions of 'traditional' or Christian compositions infused with new lyrics – brought vivacity when needed. These elements, and the ebullient crowd, created a mood akin to a festival, boosted by artistic theatricality, large effigies and performance (fig. 5.5). This included a model boxing glove (paraded through the crowd) created to a scale big enough to symbolically 'Knock out Corruption' (fig. 5.6).[242] Also larger than life, and towering over the heads of those gathered in the park, were papier-mâché figures of Anne Waiguru (Cabinet Secretary in the Ministry of Devolution and Planning - who was embroiled in a major corruption scandal) and President Uhuru Kenyatta (who, despite calls for her sacking, stood by her, claiming the allegations were propaganda by the opposition). Waiguru and Kenyatta were in chains, signifying a Kenya where it doesn't matter who you are, but if you are involved in corruption then you should be brought to justice. Demonstrators flocked round the effigies and humourlessly and relentlessly mocked them (fig. 5.7). The impact of grand scale corruption on ordinary Kenyans was dramatised by a group chained behind bars donning prison robes. Asking one protest-goer's interpretation of this, he said 'they are showing how we have become prisoners of systems that do not work, the leaders steal in order to create their wealth while imprisoning us to a life of inequality' (fig. 5.8).

[241] In the 2010 Kenya Constitution, article '37. Assembly, demonstration, picketing and petition' states 'Every person has the right, peaceably and unarmed, to assemble, to demonstrate, to picket, and to present petitions to public authorities.'

[242] The effigy of a boxing glove had been created for, and used at, an earlier demonstration held on Tuesday 1st December 2015. The demonstration, called *#KnockOutCorruption March to State House*, was in support of President Uhuru Kenyatta's statement on corruption being declared as 'a national security threat' and the President announcing a raft of measures to bolster the fight against corruption.

Figure 5.5. Speeches made at Freedom Corner during the protest *President Uhuru Act on Corruption Now or Resign.*

Figure 5.6. Model of boxing glove at the protest President *Uhuru Act on Corruption Now or Resign.*

Figure 5.7. Effigy of Anne Waiguru at the protest *President Uhuru Act on Corruption Now or Resign.*

Figure 5.8. Performers at the protest *President Uhuru Act on Corruption Now or Resign*.

As impassioned speeches were made, and frustrations vented to a zealous crowd, it was easy to assume that there in the moment, this group of like-minded people's battle against corruption was on. But, as the demonstration began to leave Freedom Corner, the police's response told otherwise. Suddenly, startling explosions reverberated around the park. For a second there was hesitation, an uncertainty as to what had happened. For some, the sound and actions were familiar. The ground started hissing, spewing a toxic cloud of chemicals, blanketing those slow to escape. The body of protesters fractured. Individuals frantically ran in different directions, trying to evade the suffocating tear gas. Those affected choked and retched as the chemicals attached to the mucus of the throat and lung walls. Eyes began streaming. The pain and panic was disorientating, yet the assault continued. The police violently coerced the protesters out of the park and made arbitrary arrests. Spirits waned. Attempts to reconvene were thwarted.

The protests I attended in Nairobi often happen under anxious conditions. Unfortunately, the police have not respected the right of assembly enshrined in the 2010 Kenya Constitution. Repressive and brutal policing has become normalised. What is evident, nevertheless, is the passion of those who take to the streets, the feeling of connectedness between demonstrators, and the festive atmosphere created through song, dance, performance and art. At times, people I spoke with criticised these protests, claiming they didn't have a clear agenda or were disconnected from the grassroots. When I put these criticisms to the ardent supporters of, and participants at, these street demonstrations they openly acknowledged areas needing improvement. However, they also stressed how street demonstrations function as an outlet for expressing frustrations within society, and while change coming as a direct result of protest is desirable, it must never be lost that the act of protesting itself is a fundamental right in a healthy democracy. These democratic rights have been hard won, and as the younger generation involved in these social movements expressed to me, as soon as one element of dissent against those in power becomes eroded, it sets a dangerous precedent for further infringements of human freedoms.

Carnivalesque protests and their mediation

The element of dramatisation apparent in many of today's protests was likened by one activist to giving protests a 'face-lift'. This activist went on to illustrate the atmosphere and aesthetics of these protests through an analogy to carnival, saying

> 'There is a notion that demonstrations are violent but when you include symbolism and performance they become like a carnival. People at the protest start having fun…the use of art and performance puts them on a different level. This carnival aspect changes the mood. People are still angry and frustrated – that is why they are there - but the art and performance provides a different way of looking at the problem, it provides a moment when people can also have fun, it kind of ridicules the issues but without losing sight of what we are there for.'[243]

Academic research into global contemporary protests that are shaped by artistic and performative considerations have gained prominence linking them to theories of carnival. Mikhail Bakhtin's theory on medieval carnival in Europe is frequently cited as a framework in both the global north and south to think about and understand contemporary activist initiatives. In Bakhtin's classic work, *Rabelais and His World*, his concept of carnival is characterised by the creation of an alternative space, one characterised by freedom, by moments where anything goes, and where lines between performer and spectator are erased. As Bakhtin argues: 'In carnival everyone is an active participant, everyone communes in the carnival act…The laws, prohibitions, and restrictions that determine the structure and order of ordinary…life are suspended during carnival' (Bakhtin 1984: 122). Widening this reading, the art historian Frances Connelly's (2003: 9) interpretation of Bakhtin's carnival sees 'the carnivalesque as the voice of the people, as the vehicle of self-expression for the usually suppressed and regulated proletariat.' For political theorist and activist Andrew Robinson (2011) it is precisely these features which suggest how carnival 'occurs on the border between art and life'. It is at this fringe that Bakhtin's concept of carnival blends the fictive and the real, combines parodic mockery, debasement, humour, displays of excess, and an anarchic aesthetic that draws on the grotesque and vulgar (Kershaw 1997:263; Göttke 2015: 130; O'Leary 2015: 294). Considering the temporality of carnival, other authors write of how for this brief period life escapes the mundane, the world may be turned upside down, and the everyday can be replaced with visons of utopia (Kershaw 1997: 264; O'Leary 2015: 294; Bruner 2005:141). When these qualities of carnival are experienced in the real world and used in contemporary activist initiatives (such as street protests), they have been credited with the ability to oppose repressive forms of government and become a resource for political action (Bruner 2005:151; Ngoshi 2016: 54). Thus, in this section I ask what are the

[243] Interview with Kimani Nyoike at Java, Junction Mall, Nairobi (29/12/2017). It is also worth noting that in Mokua Ombati's study of one protest associated with PAWA 254 (Occupy Parliament) the author states how the protest evoked an atmosphere of carnival and also references a protest goer as saying 'the carnivalesque atmosphere is part of the reason people do go out and participate [in the protest]' (Ombati 2017: 206).

different aspects of carnival that emerge in protests which employ artivism, and how do 'carnivalesque protests' provide opportunities for expanding people's experience and practice of democracy? To answer this, I now discuss two protests whose methods of artivism embody aspects of carnival.

On June the 29th, 2012, PAWA 254 and the social movement #TeamCourage coordinated *Love Protest*, a demonstration voicing disproval to a culture of impunity ingrained in Kenyan politics. For this protest 49 mock coffins were created, representing each year of independence (1963-2012). These were delivered to an unwitting crowd of demonstrators at Freedom Corner. The use of coffins elicited the emotive aspects of funerals while also arousing the communal and bonding essence apparent in funerals in the 'African' context (Jindra & Noret 2011:2; Mack 2019). One activist recalled this moment, remarking: 'when the coffins came out, the whole thing just turned emotional, people started weeping uncontrollably and spontaneously started singing funeral songs'.[244] However, what followed was more scripted. Imitating a funeral procession, the coffins were carried to Parliament Building (fig. 5.9). Like Bakhtin's carnival, this performative act provided 'a place for working out, in a concretely sensuous, half-real and half-play-acted form, a new mode of interrelationship between individuals' (Bakhtin 1984a: 123). This is because each coffin had to be collectively carried due to its size and weight, which demanded associations to be made. The bulk of each coffin physically burdened its carriers. Painted with images of a vulture and inscribed with the names of those linked to major political scandals, the coffins also represented a symbolic burden that ordinary Kenyans are portrayed as enduring – that of corruption and plunder by those in power. At Parliament Building, the burden (physical and symbolic) was offloaded to the elation of the demonstrators (fig. 5.10). Just as in carnival, for a brief time, the rules of everyday life had been suspended; it could be seen to create what Bakhtin (1984: 9) describes as a 'second life of the people, who for a moment entered the utopian realm of community, freedom, equality, and abundance'. Through performance and the symbolic use of coffins, the protesters metaphorically bid farewell to a culture of impunity, scandals and corrupt politicians – together they 'buried the vulture'. In so doing, the ordinary Kenyan, often seen as powerless became powerful, all that breathed life into what was wrong with Kenyan politics became lifeless. This act visually projected to those in office (the MPs) that they (the electorate) hold the power to remove them - a timely message given that Kenya's election, to be held on 4th March 2013, was imminent. The *Love Protest*, therefore, provided a moment of carnival for the demonstrators and created an image for spectators that gave a glimpse of an

[244] Interview with Erick Matsanza at Nairobi memorial park (19/10/2017).

ideal future, a hint of utopia, in which the alternative political reality for many Kenyans might be realised.

Figure 5.9. Demonstrators making their way through the Nairobi's CBD during *Love Protest.*

Figure 5.10. Mock coffins bearing the phrase 'Bury the vulture with your vote' piled against the gates of Parliament Building during *Love Protest*.

Six months later (16/01/2013) PAWA 254 organised another related protest, called *State Burial*. The protesters demonstrated against the conduct of 221 outgoing MPs who tried to drastically increase their bonuses – which included the right to a State funeral. The use of mock coffins and their associations were once again used. According to one activist who I interviewed: 'the plan was to give them the funeral they wanted, that was the idea of using the coffins, you want a State burial so we will give you one.'[245] The use of coffins mocked the audacious request of MPs through

[245] Interview with Martin Njuguna Mugo, Java, Nairobi CBD (10/01/2018).

an overt parody of their demand for a State burial. The protest started with a satirical funeral service held at Freedom Corner and continued with the procession of coffins to Kenya's Parliament Building (fig. 5.11). As with *Love Protest*, the carrying of coffins and their associations to funerary rites aimed to create cohesion and develop group identity.[246] However, while the participants of this demonstration were aware that mock coffins were to be used, there were nevertheless unscripted surprises. Outside Parliament Building the coffins were piled together, doused with petrol and set ablaze (fig. 5.12).[247] Mwangi says the reason for this act was because 'when you want to clear the field you burn it and then you plant, so this is what we are doing, we are burning it to start afresh with new leaders.'[248] The huge inferno, created by the burning of 221 coffins can be interpreted as a celebration denoting the recurring democratic process of Parliament shutting before an election is held, with the prospect and desire for non-performing MPs to be replaced.

Figure 5.11. Protesters gather at Freedom Corner where pretend coffins are delivered and a mock funeral service is held as part of the protest *State Burial.*

[246] The use of coffins and performative associations to funerals in *Love Protest* and *State Burial* also evoke occasions for protesting Apartheid in South Africa. During the period of Apartheid political expression was stifled and demonstrations frequently banned. Instead, funeral marches and orations – which were one of the few lawful forms of assembly for the black majority in South Africa - became occasions for dissenting Apartheid.

[247] Protests globally, and in Kenya too, have created infernos through the burning of effigies in order to express dissent. This act, which has been described in terms of destruction, violence and humour, has become an element in playful and performative political protest. Recent examples of burning effigies in Kenya include: An effigy of President Kibaki being burnt in some oppositional strongholds in Nairobi following the result of the 2007 presidential election; the Mungiki burning an effigy of Uhuru Kenyatta outside his father's mausoleum in Nairobi, in 2000; in 2012, an effigy of Miguna Miguna was burnt by supporters of Raila Odinga from Ahero town, in retaliation to a book Miguna published which was critical of Odinga. In Kenya the act of protesting through torching property is also a frequent occurrence in schools as a result of students torching their dormitories (Cooper 2014). During my period of research, for example, it was reported that in 2016 students at more than 120 schools across Kenya had set fire to their dormitories.

[248] See the news clip by Kenya Citizen TV, titled 'Protesters Bury Members of Parliament', available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DD5pHcRaW5g accessed (17/08/2018).

Figure 5.12. 221 mock coffins are burnt in a huge inferno outside Kenya's Parliament Building as part of the protest *State Burial.*

Through performance and moments of carnival both *Love Protest* and *State Burial* staged other possibilities in which Kenya was free from 'vulture MPs' and endemic corruption scandals. The protesters made their alternative reality visible and imaginable (albeit only temporarily). The powerless became powerful, authority was mocked, and the living laid to rest. At times there were scripted events (the bringing of coffins by protesters, and the setting of them alight), though other moments were filled with spontaneity and improvisation (such as the singing of funeral songs). The carnivalesque nature of these protests (and others discussed below) also draw on the unexpected and the surprising, creating moments when anything goes. Through this artivism, the protesters emphatically stirred up ways to voice dissent, and – in ways similar to characteristics attributed by Bakhtin's to carnival - momentarily turned the world upside down.

First-hand accounts from people who attended *Love Protest* and *State Burial* often talked of the protests' mobilising affect. What this term describes is how artistic and performative additions to protests lure the public into paying attention to the issues, while occasionally also emboldening the public to participate. As a consequence, the protest becomes amplified, which not only helps engage the public who are present during the event, but also facilitates communication with audiences through conventional media channels and online platforms. In his research on increasingly theatricalised forms of protest the academic of theatre and performance Baz Kershaw states 'in its desire to capture the high points of the "news" the media may well play into the hands of the people creating the events. The media tend to pick out the performative

precisely because the performative stages the dramas that the media consider to be the "news"' (Kershaw 1997: 260).

Similarly, as has been discussed with other forms of socially engaged art, media stunts have increasingly become an important part of politics (Thompson 2012: 24). Having worked for media houses as a photographer, Boniface Mwangi understood this dynamic which he alludes to in his book *UnBounded*:

> 'As a photographer, I covered many protests and found them uninspiring. I thought the messages could be presented differently so that the protest gets attention from the media and citizens. I felt that protests ought to be designed to convey the message to as many people as possible with whatever means available. This should include means that shock them if possible, in order to dominate conversations of the day or season with the action and message of the protest.' (Mwangi 2016: 294)

Over time the protests organised and associated with PAWA 254 and Boniface Mwangi received increased media exposure both nationally and internationally. This included coverage through the airwaves of the radio, in the pages of newspapers, and on the screens of televisions. Additionally, carnivalesque protests were seen on smart phones, tablets and computers via online platforms (such as YouTube, Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp and Instagram). As a result, public engagement with these protests can be expanded to include what Kevin Michael DeLuca and Jennifer Peeples (2002) term the 'public screen' which is, they state, an essential supplement to the 'public sphere'. The authors note that static ideas of the public sphere (such as embodied conversations and consensus) fail to consider the technological changes of the 20th century (DeLuca & Peeples 2002: 131). The public screen, the authors say, 'highlights dissemination, images, hypermediacy, spectacular publicity, cacophony, distraction, and dissent' (DeLuca & Peeples 2002: 145). Given how many forms of activism in Nairobi today are adapted to a wired and online society, the concept of the public screen is fitting for the 21st century and offers a means to expand the ways in which artivism animates the public sphere whilst potentially reaching new and wider audiences. This is significant given the relatively low turnout of participants 'on the ground' at most carnivalesque protests, generally numbering a few hundred. Although media stunts attract attention whether through 'traditional' forms, or the public screen, there are still factors that both constrain and enable this action. These include who has ownership of media platforms, what their interests and agendas are, and the levels of media freedom at that time. There are also questions of how well the performative aspect of protest is executed and what imagery or spectacles are created. Reflecting on this last point, recurring themes of artivism

that have been seen in *MaVulture*, *Love Protest*, and *State Burial*, are those of provocation, surprise and shock. In interview, Boniface Mwangi has discussed these as intentional tactics, saying 'we're not here to soothe your emotions or soothe your ego, or make you feel comfortable. We want our work to make you feel uncomfortable, to do something.'[249] In the next section the question of whether at times media stunts work against these ambitions will be discussed.

The confines of laughter and mockery

In 2013 a coalition of civil society organisations (including PAWA 254) held two protests under the banner *Occupy*,[250] which objected to the move made by newly sworn-in MPs to increase their salaries.[251] Characterised as vultures in previous acts of artivism, Boniface Mwangi was intent on continuing MPs' anthropomorphic representation, this time typecasting them as pigs. For Mwangi, the unconstitutional proposal to disband the Salaries and Remuneration Commission, in an effort to enable the salaries of MPs to be increased equated to unfathomable greed and callous disregard for the everyday Kenyan. A character, and vocabulary to describe it, was popularised – the *MPigs*.[252] The tactic of using art and symbolism to communicate unequivocally was continued, as emphasised by Mwangi: 'We don't want you to start trying to get a meaning, we want to give you the meaning… pigs are greedy, these guys [MPs] are pigs, that's why we give you pigs'.[253] Provocation and shock were once again Mwangi's chosen method. Describing this approach, one artist (who at that time was based at PAWA 254) asserted: 'the best way to go out there hard is to come up with the most disgusting, the most horrible, shocking, and radical kind

[249] Interview with Boniface Mwangi, at PAWA 254, Nairobi (14/08/2015).

[250] Protesters in parts of North Africa and the Middle East inspired thousands globally when in 2011 they made history and toppled seemingly unshakeable dictators. With a deteriorating economy in many parts of the world, and growing discontent towards austerity, capitalism and inequality, 2011 also witnessed hundreds of *Occupy* protests in over 80 countries. In a similar manner, the *Occupy* protests in Kenya were also built around fighting injustices regarding social and economic inequalities. Furthermore, it is likely that the name *Occupy* was chosen to show solidarity and engage with this global movement.

[251] Kenya's MPs were among the best paid in the world before a national commission in early 2013 ordered their annual salaries to be cut to £51,000 from £82,000. Before starting office (following the 4th March 2013 election) Kenya's new MPs were calling for a pay rise, protesting £51,000 is too low to live on in a country where the average income is less than £100 a month.

[252] The term MPigs is a derogatory name for Members of Parliament, chosen because many believe MPs share the same characteristics often attributed to pigs, such as greed, gluttony, and living in filth. While Kenya's *Occupy* movement certainly popularised this term its use can be traced back to at least 2009 when it was used as a hashtag on Twitter by Peter Chiira Maina, who expressed his resentment toward politicians' greed (Tully & Ekdale 2014: 74).

[253] Interview with Boniface Mwangi, at PAWA 254, Nairobi (14/08/2015).

of stuff'.[254] This begs the question of how such 'radical', 'shocking' and 'provocative' approaches in artivism are regarded not only by those involved in the movement, but also the wider public.

The first of the two protests was *Occupy Parliament*, which was held on 14th May 2013. Protesters marched from Freedom Corner to Parliament Building, singing and chanting with their banners and placards embracing their resounding message for MPs to 'stop your greed' (Ombati 2017). Posters and political cartoons critical of the Government were also carried aloft by protesters. One of these cartoons was by Gado (fig. 5.13) and speaking of its inclusion in *Occupy Parliament*, he says:

> 'it is interesting people have used my cartoons in demonstrations as placards and I support it even though they have never asked me. In the protest a cartoon of mine depicting an MP behind a cow was used. That specific cartoon was never published by the *Daily Nation*, "you must be out of your mind, you must be really sick to think that we will publish this" the editor said to me.'[255]

Figure 5.13. During Occupy Parliament a protester holds a printout of an editorial cartoon (by the cartoonist Gado) critical of MPs' behaviour.

When the march culminated at Parliament Building, demonstrators sat in protest 'occupying' the space outside (fig. 5.14). Unbeknown to the vast majority, the demonstration would next enter a new phase, incorporating grotesque and vulgar aesthetics. Tens of live piglets, a bulky male pig, a severed pig's head and canisters of animal blood were delivered to a small group in the know.[256]

[254] Interview with Swift 9 at the Dust Depot, Nairobi (26/01/2018).

[255] Interview with Godfrey Mwampembwa at the Buni Media offices, Nairobi, (07/01/2018).

[256] The pigs used in *Occupy Parliament* came from Nairobi's Dandora dumpsite. This is because, as one activist tells me, it is a place where 'you see pigs feeding the whole day, so they were the right pigs to use because they never raises their heads when they start eating, they eat forever.' One of the artists tasked with 'preparing' these pigs, told

The piglets were brought to the Parliament Building gates and litres and litres of rancid, rich, red blood, were emptied onto the street (fig. 5.15). For the organisers (and for many of the protesters too), the piglets outside Parliament Building (dressed in neck ties and painted with the slogan MPigs) represented those inside. This attack on MPs also became personal, as painted across the hog's fat belly were the names of three MPs perceived as being the most vocal supporters of increasing MPs salaries.[257] This included Aden Duale (the Majority Leader of the National Assembly) who on his grounds as a Muslim was totally enraged, saying 'This is an insult and an affront to my religious liberty by associating me with an animal that my religion prohibits.'[258] The objection to the pigs, on religious grounds, may also concern other members of the Islam religion who make up approximately 10% of the population in Kenya.

Figure 5.14. Protests 'occupy' the space outside Parliament Buildings during *Occupy Parliament.*

Figure 5.15. A protester squats by piglets at the gates of Parliament during *Occupy Parliament.*

me how 'it was one of the filthiest and disgusting places I have ever worked from' and the idea of painting on pigs was too much for some of his crew mates, 'who had to call it quits'.

[257] These names included Aden Duale, Mithika Linturi and Jakoyo Midiwo. The three were seen as the biggest and most vocal supporters of the proposal to disband the Salaries and Remuneration Commission, in an effort to enable the salaries of MPs to be increased.

[258] See the online news article from the *Standard*, titled *Duale angered by "Occupy Parliament" protesters who branded one of the pigs with his name*, available at: https://www.standardmedia.co.ke/article/2000083679/mp-to-sue-for-being-likened-to-a-pig-during-protest (accessed 08/06/2019).

The use of live pigs and their associations to MPs reveal strategies of debasement and reversal. In his writing on playful political protests, academic Florian Göttke describes such tactics as a means to 'establish a temporal alternative order, bestow[ing] carnival with inherently power-contesting traits' (Göttke 2015: 136). This is evident in *Occupy Parliament* through MPs being exposed for what protesters see them as - pigs who wallow self-absorbed in their own blood, piss and shit which they do in total disregard of the common citizen. Drawing on Bakhtin's grotesque aspect of carnival, *Occupy Parliament* too created vulgar moments undermining authority, giving marginal subjects some kind of temporary power, through a suspension of ordinary rules and norms regarding what behaviour is acceptable (Ngoshi 2016: 54). The grotesque use of pigs and blood recalls suggestions in Bakhtin's theory of Carnivalesque that when a kind of symbolic degradation is performed it brings the elevated back down to earth and all that is high, low (Robinson 2011; O'Leary 2015: 294). One of the activists told of how these tactics are used as a means to challenge the powerful and to unite the populace:

> 'Our leaders understand the language of shame. So our artistic impressions have a connotation of shame and anger. Kenyans understand the language of anger and politicians the language of shame. So we try to come up with things that will make the society angry and will make our leaders shameful. Only then will politicians come to their sense and start realising it is wrong'.[259]

Unlike the previous protests discussed, *Occupy Parliament* was particularly violent 'when the police came in their numbers. It was very brutal and not like before.'[260] The protesters were dispersed with teargas and water cannon (fig. 5.16); they were intimidated with police dogs and police horse units; a number of protesters were beaten and arrested. Perhaps the 'language of shame', this time around, was too much for those in power; or, as will be discussed in the following section, perhaps the State lost its sense of humour.

[259] Interview with Erick Matsanza at Nairobi Memorial Park (19/10/2017).

[260] Ibid.

Figure 5.16. Protesters at *Occupy Parliament* met with water canon outside Parliament Buildings.

It is worth noting how the use of humour in *Occupy Parliament*, and other acts of artivism, has been the chosen method in order to shame the vulture politician and Mpig: to respond to the State's demands with sarcasm, ridiculing the State; to create a festive air through the mocking of authority and breaching codes of expected behaviour; to demonstrate protester's own sense of humour, that vital human quality, which the State seemingly lacks.

In his social critique of humour, the social scientist Michael Billig writes of how outwardly mocking the rules and the rulers is a form of 'rebellious humour' that conveys an image of momentary freedom from the restraints of social convention, which can delight in taking the powerful as its target (Billig 2005: 208). Bakhtin also suggested that laughter was positive, claiming 'seriousness burdens us with hopeless situations, but laughter lifts us above them and delivers us from them. Laughter does not encumber man, it liberates him…. laughter only unites; it cannot divide' (Bakhtin 1986: 134-5). Although just as laughter, ridicule and humour can bring people together, it can also in the end divide (Berger 1997: 57; Leftcourt 2001: 72). It may even, as Billig asserts, 'help maintain the order that it appears to mock' (Billig 2005: 200). Returning to the case study of *Occupy Parliament*, the representation of MPs as greedy pigs was in some instances laughed at by the powerless at the expense of the powerful. However, when laughter is at the expense of the powerless - even if the powerless is a non-human entity, in this case a live pig and piglets - then it is unsurprising that some people found it distasteful.

Occupy Parliament was reported on live across news stations in Kenya and received a great deal of coverage from national and international media. The protest was also enthusiastically spread and magnified by Kenyans on social networking sites. However, much of this coverage gravitated towards the (ab)use of live animals. Activists I talked with bemoaned the media sensationalising the bloody scene of frenzied pigs. For example, a young man working for a social justice

organisation, for whom *Occupy Parliament* was his first experience of partaking in street protests, recalled:

> 'I heard the protest spoken about on capital FM radio. It really broke my heart. The media personality was de-riding the protest, saying it was the dumbest thing, saying why did we slaughter animals at Parliament, it was an abuse of animal rights. There wasn't any slaughtering there. They totally missed the point of the protest…she did not identify with what we were doing but she just felt like "you know what you guys are just crazy protesters, crazy civil society people who are just caught up in your own clouds and wanting to bring chaos, for the sake of it".'[261]

Online news reports in Kenya's *The Star* and *Standard*, falsely claimed 'at Parliament buildings, the protesters slaughtered a pig and three piglets' (*Star* 2018), and 'Bonnie Mwangi & Co slaughtered pigs outside Parliament on Tuesday morning as an analogy of MPs' greed' (Mochama 2013), respectively. No pigs were slaughtered outside Parliament Building that day. As one activist explained to me, the severed adult's pig head brought to Parliament was meant to symbolise how MPs will 'feed off anything, even their own kind if it means they can fill their bellies.'[262] However, such reports meant activists felt that the TV and radio coverage of *Occupy Parliament* was biased. My own analysis of 29 online national and international news reports concerning Occupy Parliament divulges the extent to which this stunt garnered the media's attention. 72% of headlines mentioning 'pigs' or 'piglets' and of the articles which used imagery 83% exhibited pictures of the bloody pigs. In the main body of text 96% of articles mentioned the use of pigs and why the protest was taking place. Of notice, however, was that 65% of articles discussed in detail the protesters' concerns and reason for demonstrating. That said, approximately 25% of articles criticised (directly or indirectly) the protesters approach and those that did raised issue with the welfare of animals used in the protest.

The metaphor of a pig as an MP was easily understood by the public, however this was distorted through the use of live pigs. In a sense, the authors of this stunt lost control over the relationships between the symbolic and the real because they assumed a transparency that could not be sustained in the face of the contradictions produced by events. Unintended narratives regarding animal rights entered conversations that were planned to be about the greed of MPs. As a result, voices that were critical of the Government were at times deflected by shouts of animal abuse

[261] Interview with activist who chose to remain anonymous, Art Café, Westlands Nairobi (12/12/2017).

[262] Interview with Erick Matsanza at Nairobi Memorial Park (19/10/2017).

and as a consequence the protesters inadvertently came to be protested against. *Occupy Parliament* therefore raises a number of methodological considerations when undertaking carnivalesque protests. As highlighted by Kershaw in his study of 'dramatized popular protests', the performative always promotes an instability of meaning and as a result 'the significance of the event may thus more easily be turned against the authors' (Kershaw 1997: 259).

These lessons were taken on board a month later at the second *Occupy* protest, dubbed *Occupy Parliament Reloaded* in which demonstrators once again rallied to reject the greed and excess of MPs. [263] No live animals were used but instead a huge effigy of a pig was paraded to Parliament Building and when it arrived a group of protesters jointly participated in the effigy's theatrical destruction (fig. 5.17 & 5.18). In addition to this, blood was poured on the streets in a symbolic performance, resonating the demonstrators' torment of MPs 'bleeding Kenya dry' (fig. 5.19). Adding to this was the hurling of fake Kenyan banks notes (illustrated with pigs) in the air (fig. 5.20). This was part of a sarcastic performance which also involved protesters tossing coins through the gates of Parliament Building as a means of mocking how Kenyans are happy to give the greedy MPigs everything they have. Time and again carnivalesque protests have been deployed as a form of artivism to counteract what is seen as the State's absurdity. The State has not always responded to protest in the same way, however, as will be discussed next.

Figure 5.17. Protesters carry an effigy of a pig during *Occupy Parliament Reloaded.*

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[263] I mention that this lesson was taken on board but it was not the last time Boniface Mwangi worked with a group of artists using live animals. In December 2014 activists released donkeys in the centre of Nairobi which had the phrase *Tumechoka* (we are tired) spray painted onto their side. Furthermore, in March 2015, activists chained donkeys along a busy street in Nairobi's CBD. The donkeys were painted and carried slogans such as 'corruption bleeding Kenya dry', 'poachers killing our wildlife as the government watches', 'MPigs raping our women prosecute them'. Speaking to one of the artists involved, he told me 'everyone in Kenya has seen a donkey carrying a heavy burden, so it is a very easy thing for people to be able to connect with.' The use of the donkeys, therefore, acted as a metaphor the nation's fatigue with politics and politicians.

Figure 5.18. A protester at *Occupy Parliament Reloaded.*

Figure 5.19. Blood emptied outside Parliament by a protester at *Occupy Parliament Reloaded.*

Figure 5.20. Protesters hold a fake bill imitation of Kenyan currency during *Occupy Parliament Reloaded.*

The humourless State

One regular and ugly element of protest is police violence and intimidation. It should be noted that this form of State suppression is intermittent; there are times when voicing dissent *is* tolerated, given not all street protests are quashed. There are also times when certain opinions and issues *are* granted space on the street, and people's right to assemble and demonstrate respected. Writing about such periods of State tolerance of carnivalesque protest, the academic Michael Lane Bruner (2005) describes there being windows of opportunity which can quickly close when a State loses its humour. According to Bruner 'sick and humourless States are populated by strict "conservatives" who crave certainty and discourage dissensus, have anaemic and passive public spheres, have bland and diverting forms of public entertainments, and are led by individuals who repress critical citizenship.' (Bruner 2005: 137).

Why then at times might the State choose to suppress carnivalesque protests? Has the Sate, as Bruner might suggest, lost its sense humour? As has been critiqued in carnival theory, after occasions of expressive dissent 'normal social order resumes – therefore reinforcing the dominant order by momentary act of juxtaposition' (Robinson 2011). In other words, in letting citizens have a brief, uninhibited, moment to publicly vent frustrations, the State can come across as upholding certain democratic values, while at the same time curtailing others. Given Kenya's reported decline in democracy (which follows a global retreat) this option is surprisingly rebuffed time and again (Freedom House 2019). Even on their own account, numerous activists interviewed remark how antagonistic police behaviour spurs them into a frenzy as they staunchly defend their constitutional rights. Without such police hostility, it is said by those activists I interviewed, many protests would have likely faded following the protesters' successful demonstration.

As a result of restricting civil liberties, the Jubilee Government, led by Uhuru Kenyatta, has been accused of taking Kenya back to the dark days of former President Moi.[264] At one protest, Boniface Mwangi was apparently deliberately shot in the chest at close range with a tear gas canister by a policeman (fig. 5.21-24). The irony that the protest was against 'police killing protesters' (and at the time Mwangi was carrying an oversized model bullet with the words 'STOP KILLING US') seems to have been lost on the police. Such tactics, which aim to instil fear amongst those wishing to

[264] For instance, in 2014 the Kenyan law scholar Prof Yash Pal Ghai, who played a key role in Kenya's 2010 Constitution, wrote about the various ways in which the Jubilee Government has flouted the Constitution, concluding that, 'we are rapidly slipping into the Kenyatta-Moi era' (Ghai 2014b).

express dissent against the Government (an imposed form of State censorship), can, I argue, also be viewed as the post-colonial State's moment of 'violent carnival'. In this moment of violent carnival anything goes, police impunity reigns, and vicious displays of the State's power over the citizen is asserted. However, activists also use and at times provoke the State's 'violent carnival' in order to reveal not only the State's apparent anxiety over opposition and dissent, but also to expose the State's tendency to use violence as a means of exerting authority. A protest which took place on February 13th 2014 illustrates these points.

Figures 5.21-24. (from top to bottom) Boniface Mwangi being shot with a teargas canister during the protests *Stop Killing Us: A protest against police killing protesters.*

Planned months in advance, the *#FEB13Protest* in 2014 was a call to citizens to hold the Government accountable. One of the organisers remarked: 'we felt many issues which led to the 2007/8 post-election violence had not been resolved; we still had impunity, corruption, tribalism, and poverty, so the protest was to remind Kenyans that we hadn't really moved forward'.[265] The *#FEB13Protest* was part of a larger campaign called *Diaper Mentality*, which criticised what it claimed was fifty years of stunted growth as a nation, and how Kenyans needed to 'stop acting like babies and grow up'. Speaking of this, one activist recalls how Uhuru Kenyatta caused controversy signing into law a draconian media bill and remarked that now newspapers were 'only good for wrapping up meat'.[266] This activist went on to say: 'leaders had become reckless in their addresses, so we were like, "ok that's what you think as a leader, that's a kid's way of thinking." It is time we don't have kids leading our nation.'[267] However, just hours before the protest was due to start the Government banned it, accusing the organisers of trying to overthrow them through street protests, with the alleged financial support of USAID (the United States international development agency). Undeterred, the organisers persisted with their plan and were joined by hundreds of demonstrators. Carried by the protesters were huge baby effigies made of polystyrene and papier mâché, symbolising Kenyans' immaturity (fig. 5.25). Also brought along, in a humorous and mocking fashion, were rolls of toilet paper because, as one activist says, 'we wanted to tell our leaders to stop using diapers and start using toilet paper because when you become an adult this is what you do.'[268] One of the artists given the mammoth task of creating these baby effigies, recollects this time, saying:

> 'During the diaper mentality campaign we were celebrating fifty years of independence. We were asking if we had grown as a country, but no, fifty years after and we are behaving like children and have this mentality. So we thought let's make a baby, and Boni[face Mwangi] said 'no – let's make fifty of them, fifty giant babies', I said 'are you serious?' It was one baby for every year since independence. That took about one and a

[265] Interview with Kimani Nyoike at Java, Junction Mall, Nairobi (29/12/2017).

[266] Interview with Erick Matsanza at Nairobi Memorial Park (19/10/2017). The passed law created a Government-controlled body with power to punish journalists and media houses for their work. For remark made by Uhuru Kenyatta about newspapers see the online *Daily Nation* article *Draconian law to gag media now in force*, available at https://www.nation.co.ke/news/Draconian-law-to-gag-media-now-in-force/-/1056/2114510/-/9gubkj/-/index.html (accessed on 23/08/2018).

[267] Interview with Erick Matsanza at Nairobi Memorial Park (19/10/2017).

[268] Interview with Erick Matsanza at Nairobi Memorial Park (19/10/2017).

half months with a team of about nine to twelve people. It took a lot of work and energy.'[269]

Figure 5.25. Demonstrators carry giant baby effigies during *#Feb13Protest.*

The demonstrators never made it to Freedom Corner, the planned meeting point. The police and anti-riot units blocked all access routes. Before long, the protesters were met with violence and arrest (fig. 5.26).[270] Speaking to Voice of Africa (VOA) news, Reverend Timothy Njoya said 'we came here to make a statement on the state of the nation. To assess how much we've been able to accomplish, but it seems that the police have made the statement for us, and they've made it very loudly and clearly' (quoted in Joselow 2014).

Figure 5.26. Police fire tear gas at demonstartors during #*Feb13Protests.*

[269] Interview with Tony Mboyo, at a bar in Satellite neighbourhood, Nairobi (20/01/2018).

[270] Protesters were instantly met by police and anti-riot units who launched a cascade of tear gas forcing the crowd to be dispersed. On that day four human rights activists (Gacheke Gachiki, Wilfred Olal, John Koome and Nelson Mandela) were arrested.

As the demonstrators expected their continuation with the banned protest was met with brutish behaviour by the authorities - which, perhaps calculatedly on the part of the protesters, played into the *Diaper Mentality* narrative. After all, images of the police violently dispersing protesters and then kicking huge baby effigies across the street and rounding them up in the back of their vans doesn't reflect kindly on the State, but it does create imagery for the media which works to the favour of the protesters (fig. 5.27 & 5.28). Additionally, rather than causing activists to lose morale or become consumed with fear, one protester claimed the actions by the State and police 're-energised people because suddenly the highest security organ in the country got to a point where they felt a mere protest could topple a government. So, we must have been doing something right.'[271] However, such optimism risks obscuring the State's own violent carnival. Having rebelled and laughed at authority through carnivalesque protest, the demonstrators became all the more aware of the State's power. Thus, revealing complexities regarding relations of power at play between the State/police and areas of civil society/protests as they both use each other to make, breakdown and then remake narratives of domination, legitimacy and resistance.

Figure 5.27. Policeman kicks baby effigy across street during *#Feb13Protest.*

Figure 5.28. Baby effigies used during the *#Feb13Protest* are rounded up and put in the back of a police van.

[271] Interview with Kimani Nyoike at Java, Junction Mall, Nairobi (29/12/2017).

"Whose Tweets? Our Tweets" carnivalesque protests in cyberspace

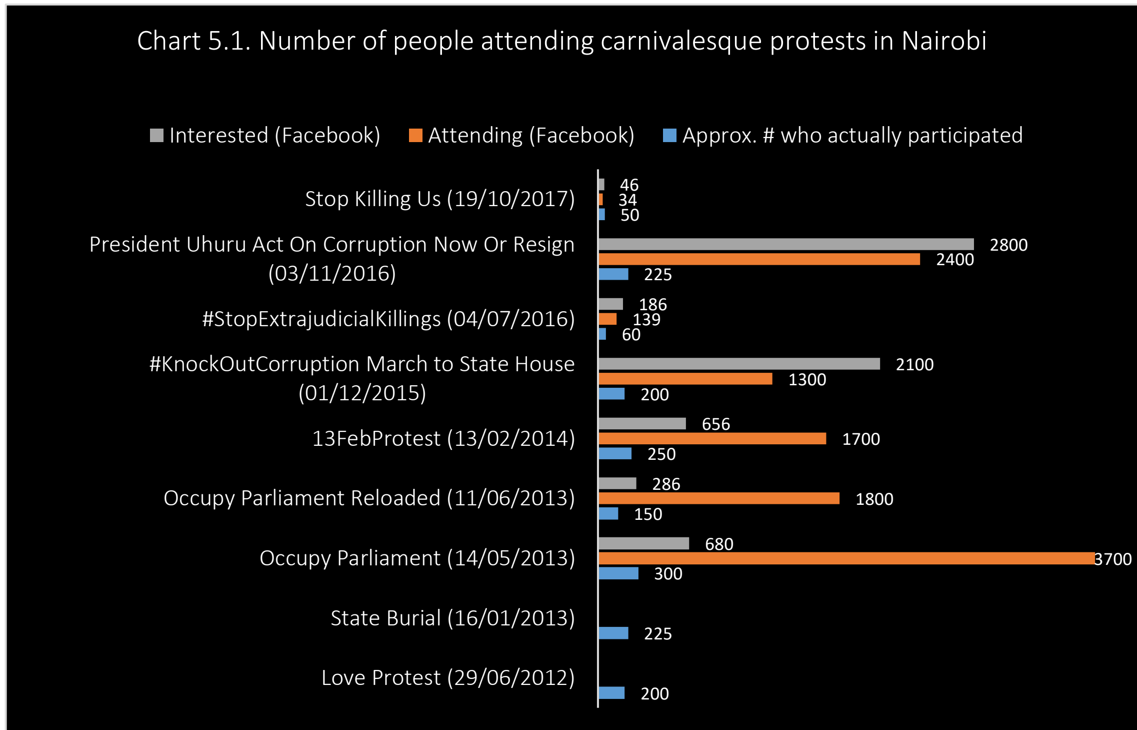
Across Africa, with the advent of digital technologies and social media came prospects of reinvigorating democracy thanks to increased online opportunities for citizens' engagement in democratic debate, politics and activism (Mutsvairo 2016). Kenya has been described as having one of the most active online communities on the continent (Ogola 2015: 74). It is not surprising, therefore, that a growing number of scholarly works reflect on the effectiveness of social media in bringing about social change in Kenya (Bing 2015; Koross and Kosgei 2016; Nyabola 2018).[272] Indeed, it was through Facebook and WhatsApp I came to know of, and later attend, a number of street protests in Nairobi. It is not just 'on the ground' where Kenyans expressed their opinions, but also on social networking sites. Studies show that Kenya is one of the top countries in Africa active on Twitter, the social networking site which allows users to post and receive 140 character messages known as 'Tweets' (Portland 2014, 2016, 2018). The vigorous commentary and critique of social and political issues by 'Kenyans on Twitter' (as they are commonly referred to) are infamous. This raises the question of how social networking sites are appropriated as tools in areas of artivism. In what ways, then, do forms of protest move between online spaces and the street? How do social networking sites extend public participation and broaden spaces where artistic forms of activism take place?

Social networking sites have become conventional platforms for mobilisation, raising awareness and provoking people to take action. As one activist put it, 'social media is a very good platform for showcasing what you are doing …and it remains a very big avenue for mobilisation'.[273] Past 'Facebook Events' for protests mentioned in this chapter, provide evidence of this platform's success in attracting hundreds, and often thousands, of people to the cause. However, despite

[272] Online networking sites like Twitter and Facebook, as well as instant messaging platforms like WhatsApp, are becoming an everyday aspect of life for young people in Kenya. A number of authors suggest the availability of social media expands the public sphere by enabling new forms of social interaction and political discourses to occur (Otieno and Mukhongo 2013, Mukhongo 2014: 338; Nyabola 2018). However, the democratising effects that might result from this 'digital public sphere' have been met with caution. At times, social media sites in Kenya have become platforms for ethnic hate speech (Umati 2013, Kimotho & Nyaga 2016). However, as is evident from other research, social media offers new forms for citizen journalism to take place; providing the public with real-time reporting which can side-step news agendas set by, and disseminated through, mainstream hegemonic news agencies. Examples of this include how social media operated as an alternative medium for 'citizen communication' throughout a media blackout during Kenya's post' election violence (Makinen & Kuira 2008), or the real time coverage of the Westgate Mall siege in which Twitter became a crucial channel of communication between the government, emergency responders and the public (Simon et al. 2014).

[273] Interview with Kimani Nyoike at Java, Junction Mall, Nairobi (29/12/2017).

many making the online pledge that they will 'attend' the event, in reality only a fraction of those people actually turn up (Chart 5.1).[274] So what is going on?



Discussing this issue with one activist, two main reasons were provided. The first is termed 'fake activism', which is where people want to be seen (online) supporting the cause and to come across as 'progressive'. However when it comes to fighting for social and political change those engaged in activism generally refer to Kenyans, especially the middle and upper class, as 'apathetic' because, one activist remarked, they 'like to make a lot of noise, but don't really want to do anything about it because they [the middle class] are comfortable.'[275] Nevertheless, many middle class Kenyans are not apathetic, which leads to the second reason given why some stay away from public demonstrations, which is insecurity and the threat of violence. Online platforms, therefore, offer an alternative and safer form of participation. As one activist

[274] In addition to mobilising support through social networking sites such as Facebook, it should also be noted that the protests I discuss in this chapter also rely on a number of community mobilisers. These community mobilisers tend to be associated with human rights, justice, and development organisations working in various neighbourhoods of Nairobi – in particular Nairobi's lower income neighbourhoods such as Kibera, Mathare, Kariobangi, Pumwani and Umoja. Each community mobiliser is tasked with informing residents from their area of the upcoming protest, what it is about, and why they should be concerned with attending. Those resident who do choose to attend are often supplied with a small stipend, which a number of mobilisers have told me is to cover refreshment and transport costs.

[275] Interview with Martin Njuguna Mugo, Java, Nairobi CBD (10/01/2018).

remarked: 'those who are anxious or frightened to come and join you on the streets can express themselves and raise awareness through social media, where they join the conversation.'[276]

Many activists I conversed with were not convinced 'online activism' can replace street protests to bring about change. Furthermore, they are aware of the existing inequalities of accessing the internet and social networking sites (Kamau 2017; Kivikuru 2017). There is, nevertheless, something important happening between the conjunction of bodies on the street (making the event) and bodies elsewhere (engaging with the event through official news channels or social media). It is this combination of online and offline events and bodies in physical and virtual space, which gender theorist Judith Butler (2011) describes as constituting 'a very contemporary version of the public sphere'.

Social movements in Kenya, especially those in urban areas, have become increasingly media- and tech-savvy. One way of bringing online and offline bodies together and enabling them to all experience and take part in the protest, or as one activist put it 'getting people who are not there, there',[277] is through the use of a hashtag. A hashtag is a word, or phrase, placed after the symbol '#', which allows users of social networking sites (such as Twitter, Facebook and Instagram) to quickly and easily search for, and join conversations, around certain topics. Data collected from Twitter (after a search of each protest's official hashtag) show the protests discussed in this chapter, in addition to a number of other protests associated with PAWA 254, were 'tweeted' about hundreds, and often thousands, of times (Chart 5.2).[278] Though, while these statistics reveal a level of online engagement with real life events (those of protest), they are unable to explain how meaningful this online engagement was. For instance, it is unclear how the symbolic and artistic performances are interpreted in a different space, away from the event, or whether forms of protest continue through online platforms. These are the queries that are now addressed.

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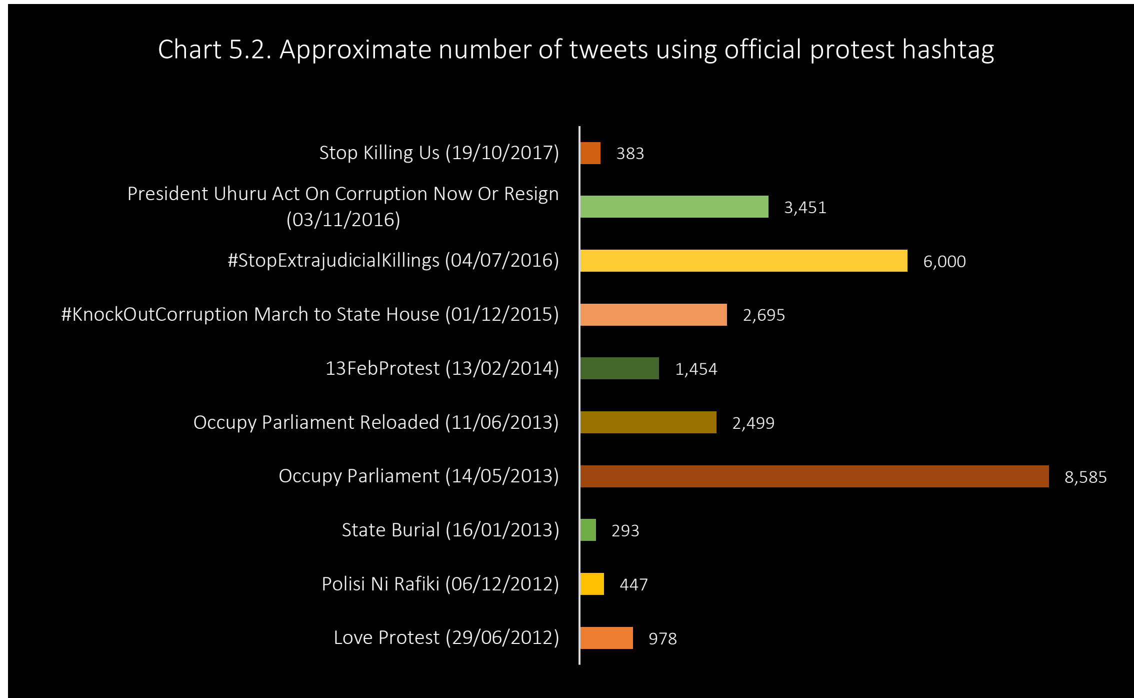
[276] Interview with Erick Matsanza at Nairobi Memorial Park (19/10/2017).

[277] Interview with Kimani Nyoike at Java, Junction Mall, Nairobi (29/12/2017).

[278] For each protest data was collected from Twitter using the search tool, where an 'advance search' was conducted for all Tweets containing the protests' official hashtag. For each protest the search collected Tweets from a fixed period of 15 days – 7 days before the protest, the day of the protest, and 7 days after the protest.



In an analysis of popular hashtags originating in Kenya, Melissa Tully and Brian Ekdale (2014), describe how online spaces become 'sites of playful engagement'. In their study they briefly look at *Occupy Parliament* and the protest's official hashtag (#OccupyParliament) which gave the protest an online space. They go on to write of how Tweets using this hashtag provided a running account of what was happening on the ground during the demonstration. In another study on social media, Mukhongo (2014) also refers to *Occupy Parliament*. In particular, the author draws attention to the sharing of images which, he says, presents political narratives in new ways – for instance, how today on social media 'a pig symbolises a member of Parliament' (Mukhongo 2014: 338). However, the author also notes how 'diverse virtual communities tend to interpret the same images differently' (Mukhongo 2014: 332) and goes on to use the example of pigs outside Parliament being interpreted as: 1. An affront to Muslim beliefs and their religion; 2. An act of animal cruelty; and 3. Symbolising the greed of MPs.

The analysis undertaken here focuses on Tweets made on the 14th May 2013, which use the hashtag #OccupyParliament. This is based on reading thousands of Tweets in order to generate nodes and themes from them. What follows is a select sample and discussion of these which takes forward the work of Tully and Ekdale (2014) and Mukhongo (2014).

As Mukhongo (2014) discussed in his study, various interpretations of the use of pigs in Parliament were evident.

Naph, King (naphtaleeN). "**Just wondering...was using live pigs in the #occupyparliament reinforcing George Orwells animal farm... Some animals are more equal...?**". 14 May 2013, 16:41 UTC. Tweet
Amolloh (okweroh). "**The Blood...Just shows how Mpigs are sucking us DRY.. #OccupyParliament**". 14 May 2013, 11:33 UTC. Tweet

Unsurprisingly, there were mixed reactions to the use of live pigs and real blood. Tweets which supported this method praised the protest for its 'amazing symbolism' and 'ingenuity', gave it an 'A for creativity' and admired it for 'shocking us out of our comfort zone'. In contrast to critics who complained that using pigs was an unnecessary course of action, other Tweets questioned the protest's tactics through referencing other acts of protest which at the time may have appeared extreme but in hindsight contributed to achieving change.

Irungu, Lorna (KuisanMacharia). "**Was it necessary for a man to set himself on fire in Tunisia? Was it necessary for women to strip at Uhuru Park in 92? #occupyparliament**". 14 May 2013, 10:23 UTC. Tweet

In addition to the concerns raised surrounding the treatment of the pigs, other Tweets disapproved the use of pigs as they felt this 'overshadowed the protesters' message' or didn't reflect 'values of tolerance' and as a result of this 'antagonised those it should be seeking support from'. For some at least, the apparent media stunt of using pigs in Parliament backfired.

Bring me Thanos. (marcusolang). "**Noble as #OccupyParliament may have started out as, it has degenerated into a spectacle that has lost the main script completely**.". 14 May 2013, 09:57 UTC. Tweet

In spite of this other users on Twitter were quick to call out people's abrupt concern for animal rights while at the same time appearing blasé to the actual message of the protest.[279]

[279] A few weeks before *Occupy Parliament* two bizarre stories were reported in Kenyan media; one which initially reported police catching a foreign male and 11 women making pornographic movies with a dog; the second about a cat whose head had been trapped in a jerry can for 4 days with residents refusing to save it due to its connection with 'witchcraft or demons'. Though despite these instances of apparent 'animal abuse', Kenyans on Twitter were quiet in regards to voicing concerns over the welfare of animals.

Njiru, Wawira (wawiranjiru). "The day Kenyans became animal rights activists. Seems we'll be outraged about everything BUT the real issues. #occupyparliament". 14 May 2013, 12:27 UTC. Tweet
gathara (gathara). "GoK and Mpigs suddenly concerned about animal welfare. As usual, that of citizens is not a priority. #OccupyParliament". 14 May 2013, 16:52 UTC. Tweet
Robert ALAI, HSC (RobertAlai). "You find people complaining about animal rights but they never complain about police brutality. Pathetic sellouts. #OccupyParliament". 14 May 2013, 11:05 UTC. Tweet

The violence shown to demonstrators by police was strongly condemned and images of this aggression were tweeted over and over again. The heavy-handed response by the police was also met with Tweets that expressed its absurdity.

Kenya Ni Kwetu (KenyaNiKwetu). "Perhaps the one photo to take away from today's #occupyparliament --> http://t.co/8OfslsNhLb @bonifacemwangi". 14 May 2013, 20:24 UTC. Tweet
Nkosinathi-Buthelezi (kenyanzulu). "one teargas cannister costs 2500/= and two those can pay the rent of the person throwing it!! #OccupyParliament". 14 May 2013, 11:33 UTC. Tweet
Ndungu (AlgebraKE). "Its only in kenya where after the police throwing Teargas at you they provide you with water #occupyparliament". 14 May 2013, 10:46 UTC. Tweet
Neville KE KE ✊ (nevzKe). "We have enough water in fire engines to disperse protesters but none for fire disasters #occupyparliament #KOT ". 14 May 2013, 10:42 UTC. Tweet

This violence, and resources spent on policing *Occupy Parliament*, also brought to the fore other national issues - for instance, the gang attacks at the time on villages in Busia and Bungoma counties, which the Human Rights Watch claim ‘the police did not effectively investigate…and ignored the possibility that criminal gangs have been employed for political reasons’ (HRW 2014: 1).

Dr.Oduwo, Noah Akala (OduwoNoahAkala). "**There's something ridiculous about the security for #OccupyParliament yet they were nowhere to be seen in 2 weeks of Bungoma violence!**". 14 May 2013, 13:13 UTC. Tweet
Kiania (kianiadee). "**Response of Police to peaceful protesters is amazing, but to bandits and killers even of their own in Baragoi is woeful #occupyparliament**". 14 May 2013, 10:37 UTC. Tweet

Also coming under rebuke by Kenyans on Twitter was the national media's initial failure to report on *Occupy Parliament*. The international media, specifically the news station CNN, was likewise targeted. In 2012 and 2013 CNN published news stories which many felt stereotyped Kenya as a violent country.[280] This dubious reporting enraged Kenyans on Twitter who were quick to voice their critique through satirical messages using the hashtag #SomeoneTellCNN. Rekindling this saga Tweets made fun of how CNN might misinterpret the use of pigs in *Occupy Parliament*.

♂ (sickolia_). "**#occupyparliament Bring pigs to Parliament. CNN:"Kenyans Protest the high cost of bacon**"". 14 May 2013, 10:47 UTC. Tweet
Kuley, Ken (kenkuley). "**#OccupyParliament: Pigs and piglets outside parliament. CNN: State making organ in Kenya invents a pigsty**.". 14 May 2013, 11:05 UTC. Tweet
Nkosinathi-Buthelezi (kenyanzulu). "**meanwhile @CNN is reporting outbreak of swine flu in Kenya. #OccupyParliament**". 14 May 2013, 11:28 UTC. Tweet
Avandrous (Avandros1). "**#OccupyParliament SKY NEWS 'CRIMINAL PIGS INVADE PARLIAMENT' CNN: Pigs armed with pangas planing post election violence**". 14 May 2013, 13:43 UTC. Tweet

Just as carnivalesque protests on the ground employed humour, debasement and ridicule, Kenyans on Twitter employed similar tactics. Twitter users created and shared jokes and memes relating to *Occupy Parliament*. In *Can Jokes Bring Down Governments?* Metahaven writes of the distinct role memes play in protests today, representing 'the embodiment of shared ideas in a

[280] The #SomeoneTellCNN hashtag emerged in 2012 following CNN's reporting of an Al-Shabaab grenade attack on a Nairobi bus terminal. The news network framed this event as 'Violence in Kenya', wording that triggered outrage from Kenyans because they felt it stereotyped their country as a violent place, and chose to ignore Kenyans being victims of a terrorist attack. A year later the hashtag emerged again when, in the run up to the 2013 election, CNN posted a news report entitled 'Armed as Kenyan vote nears'. Kenyans poked holes in the reliability of the report, claiming it was stage managed and criticised CNN for its sensationalist reporting and decision to ignore the major peace narrative at the time. More recently, in 2015, just days before President Obama arrived in Kenya, CNN ran with the headline 'Security Fears as Obama Heads to Terror Hotbed'. Such was the outrage by Kenyans of this report that a senior CNN executive flew to Nairobi to apologise.

community' (Metahaven 2014: 30) and going on to say 'jokes are an active, living and mobile form of disobedience' (Metahaven 2014: 53). What I find interesting is how the tactics of artivism employed in *Occupy Parliament* on the ground have given rise to alternative forms of disobedience, ridicule and laughter in cyberspace. However, the success and impact of these jokes and memes remained fairly insignificant, at least on Twitter, as a result of only being shared, liked and imitated a small number of times.[281] This may have been due to these Tweets going largely unnoticed as a result of the high number generated at the time and thorough the day, or simply because people didn't find them catchy enough to spread.

Anwar (anwareptimal). "**Q: How do #mpigs write top secret messages? A: With invisible oink! #OccupyParliament**". 14 May 2013, 15:13 UTC. Tweet
Kagwa, Gaetano (gaetanokagwa). "**Parliament session transcript - MP1: Oink. MP2: Oink? MP3: OINK! MP4: O...O...Oink. MP5: Oiiiink! #MPigs #OccupyParliament #Kenya**". 14 May 2013, 11:55 UTC. Tweet
BEEF, MOIST (MwasFatFinger). "**PIG1: Why are people crying? PIG2: I think they'll happy to see us. PIG3: nop! They got gased. #OccupyParliament**". 14 May 2013, 11:00 UTC. Tweet
Dusty Foot Filosofa (itssoulo). "**BREAKING: Cops refusing to leave the site of the #OccupyParliament demonstration in the event someone comes with a BBQ grill.**". 14 May 2013, 11:57 UTC. Tweet
Revolution™, Wanjikũ (WanjikuRevolt). "**Labeling a pig "Alan Nduale" is an insult to that pig me thinks! #OccupyParliament @BonifaceMwangi @Robertalai**". 14 May 2013, 09:39 UTC. Tweet
Mutwiri, Gilbert (sirgke). "**#occupyparliament #MithikaLinturi spotted near parliament building drunk and dishonest as usual. http://t.co/4IFVFTkQ92**". 14 May 2013, 20:15 UTC. Tweet

[281] The idea of the meme was introduced by evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins in the late 1970s as a unit of culture and behaviour which spreads through adaption and imitation (Dawkins 1976: 192). According to Metahaven (2014: 30) there are three qualities that define a meme's success. These are: 1. How long a meme can last (longevity) 2. How catchy a meme thus how likely it is to spread (fecundity) 3. How a meme can withstand copying and imitation (copying-fidelity).

Tell It Like It Is (Tillike). "#LINTURI #KOT #OccupyParliament #MPIGS pigs in parliament >> http://t.co/pq46x3pSlt". 14 May 2013, 12:07 UTC. Tweet
Karanja, Moses (Mosehshuba). "Tame the greed #OccupyParliament http://t.co/5hxIPTrF2o". 14 May 2013, 13:07 UTC. Tweet

This analysis of Tweets made on the day of *Occupy Parliament* may not be exhaustive or definitive, but it does endorse the work undertaken on the role of social networking sites in activism in Kenya. Specifically, what this inquiry has aimed to show is the interrelationship that occurs from the streets to the Tweets, and vice versa. Those on the ground used Twitter to coordinate with one another and with those online through their sharing of real time accounts and images of the protest. Despite only a few hundred people being physically present at *Occupy Parliament*, hundreds of others joined online. This mass of online and offline contributors praised, criticised, and at times discussed not only issues allied to *Occupy Parliament* (MPs' pay rise, police brutality, the use of live pig) but other national matters too (such as the violence in Bungoma, or the continuation of countering CNN's history of misreporting). What is also interesting to observe is how Twitter became an alternative space for people to freely and openly engage in their own online versions of carnivalesque protest. A number of Tweets and edited imagery exhibited characteristics of Bakhtin's carnivalesque which included humour and parody, playfulness and the ridiculing of those in power. As such, Twitter can be seen as an extension to the public screen discussed above because it 'provides an alternative venue for participatory politics and public opinion formation' (DeLuca & Peeples 2001: 145).

Conclusion

In this chapter I have looked into the various methods of using art as a form of activism and how activism can be re-energised through creative forms of civil disobedience. One question regularly posed when analysing artivism is whether such actions provide more than the appearance of civil resistance and political engagement without any of its desired results (Duncombe & Lambert 2013:2). In relation to the cases discussed above is it, for example, enough to judge artivism's impact from the number of news articles published reporting the event or from the level of online engagement with people through social networking sites? There is also the fact that following the two *Occupy* protests, the Government's Salaries and Remuneration Commission agreed with Parliament that its members would get a pay cut. Again, it is, perhaps, another indication of effectiveness that the methods of bringing pigs to Parliament has been mimicked several times by the activist group *Jobless Brotherhood* in Uganda. These outcomes, to which artivism has contributed, are indeed significant. Their understanding is advanced in the work of Duncombe (2016), who approaches the analysis of artivism through its affect and effect – a combination he describes in the term 'Æffect'. According to Duncombe, activism's goal is action to generate some form of change, to move the material world and to have an effect; whereas art generates affect, it moves a person's heart, body, and soul (Duncombe 2016: 118). So what are these in the context of the case studies discussed in this chapter? (Table 5.1).

Table 5.1. Æffects of 21st century artivism in Nairobi

- Provide an alternative avenue for the population to participate in politics and acts of dissent
- Catalyse unusual cognitive, emotional and physiological experiences to engage in activism
- Engender cohesion and group identity in social movements
- Enable marginal subjects opportunities to gain temporary power
- Deliver a complementary rhythm to street protests
- Alter the status quo of urban experiences and city space
- Generate an instability of interpretations by the public

The summary list above indicates that - whether through using graffiti as protest, turning the world upside down during mock funerals, bringing laughter and vulgarity with pigs in Parliament, or exposing the State's violence with the help of baby effigies - 21st century artivism in Nairobi revitalises not only what art and activism can be, but also what they can achieve. It is, perhaps, unsurprising to learn that many of the methods of artivism discussed in this chapter (23 to be precise) are listed in the political scientist Gene Sharp's guide to nonviolent struggle, *From*

Dictatorship to Democracy (Sharp 1993). Kenya is no longer in a dictatorship but, as Sharp emphasises, political defiance provides a means of public resistance which can be used to defend citizens' liberties and personal freedoms (Sharp 2012: 57). For many of the activists I engaged with, artivism represents an alternative avenue to engage one's self and others in politics and the experience and practice of democracy. That, in itself, comes across as a powerful notion – made even more so in the context of the Jubilee Government coming to power in 2013, and what many activists claim is the Government's subsequent clawing back of democratic gains (Smidt 2018). And, as Sharp acknowledges, employing numerous methods of nonviolent protest and persuasion – at the right time, in the right context and through appropriate tactics - will 'cause any illegitimate regime severe problems' (Sharp 2012: 47).

However, for some activists, artivism has at times used inappropriate tactics in the wrong context, which they feel has hampered their cause. The secrecy around elements of artivism at PAWA 254 has encouraged such misgivings by some. The reasons for this secrecy are often framed around avoiding infiltration by Government agents and are a necessary tactic in order to retain the possibilities of shock, surprise and the unexpected to street protests. At the same time, however, this secrecy fosters mistrust, and highlights individuality over collective unity. Furthermore, the authorship of PAWA 254's acts of artivism (whether its carnivalesque protests or the *MaVulture* campaign) are often attributed to Boniface Mwangi and indeed claimed by him. This is despite undertakings of artivism being the product of, and only made possible through, many artists and activists. The result of this, according to one of the activists I spoke with, is 'nowadays PAWA 254 is a shell of its original days because everyone realised that we do everything together but at the end of the day it is one person who gets all of the credit and that has been the thing that has been keeping people away. We had brought a movement of many grassroots leaders and organisers, but everything is focussed on Boniface.'[282] One of the claims for artivism is that it (re)energises people and revitalises the institution it works within and because of this 'artistic activism is a form of organizational self-care' (Duncombe & Lambert 2018: 10). While initially this was evident with PAWA 254 it would appear that over the years, and for the reasons mentioned, it is less the case today.

Additionally, a striking feature of protests animated through artivism is their professionalisation, which relates to recent debates regarding the 'NGO-isation' of social movements (Choudry & Kapoor 2013). The protests discussed above, and indeed other protests associated with PAWA 254, make apparent this professionalisation as they draw support from international donors,

[282] Interview with Mzalendo Mulingwa Garang at the Kenya National Theatre, Nairobi (08/01/2018).

elaborately brand their movement through printed T-shirts, banners and placards, are savvy in their use of social media, and pull off ostentatious stunts, which often require considerable resources to stage. The Æffects of this have been made apparent. That said, and despite efforts at mobilising the masses on the ground, protests employing artivism in Nairobi cannot point to large numbers of participants or, as of yet, a significant social movement being built. In explaining this, the 'NGO-isation' of social movements employing artivism was one reason frequently cited by previous, and would be, participants of protests in Nairobi. The often vague and/or broad goals of protests, such as demonstrating against corruption and impunity, come across as abstract to the masses because they reflect the language of donors. When more narrowly defined goals and objectives are at the core of protests (such as those made during Occupy Parliament) a broader coalition of support across society is evident.

However, the dynamics of protest cannot be gained by counting numbers alone. It is evident protests organised by PAWA 254 are geared towards being media events that use aspects of artivism in order to gain maximum publicity. It was suggested by activists that using the media this way amplifies the protest, and indeed acts as a megaphone for those unable to participate. In doing so, and as a result of entering the public sphere through various domains, the protests are able to include a wider public in their generation of narratives and discourse about the matters that shape their society.

While artivism alone seldom brings significant social or political change it does, nevertheless, play a valuable part in different levels of the struggle for a more radical politics and better world (Mouffe 2013: 99). This viewpoint aligns with political scientists Adam Branch and Zachariah Mampilly's assessment of Claude Ake's suggestion that protests create new terrains for political engagement and as such need not be assessed on their immediate impact but rather on their revelations of what is possible and their ability to transform political imaginations (Branch & Mampilly 2015: 5-8). Applying this understanding to the broader field of artivism, the practices discussed in this chapter can be seen as enabling people to actively practice and experience democracy in the here and now, while also planting the seeds required for change that may not fruit until sometime in the future. Interestingly, some evidence of this is provided in the final chapter in which graffiti artists who were once working at, and with, PAWA 254, have now moved on to initiate their own neighbourhood graffiti projects which promote a form of 'street democracy'.

Chapter Six

Do-it-yourself urban politics

> 'Besides their morphological form, their built environment, and their physical infrastructure, cities also consist of an imaginary dimension through which urban residents define themselves and give meaning to their daily lives.' (Murray & Myers 2006: 27).

Over the past few years a group of graffiti artist have been initiating several significant public art projects across Nairobi. Led by artists once involved with the organisation PAWA 254 these projects are clearly inspired by their earlier foray into areas of activism, but also their previous engagement in community outreach projects.[283] The work created (which is principally through the medium of spray paint) is not overtly political in content but it is, nevertheless, implicitly political in its approach. The reason is because these projects represent a youth subculture working with communities to appropriate public space through a participatory form of direct action, which visibly changes people's urban environment and experience. However, unlike the negative characteristics usually associated with graffiti, or its function as a means of political protest, its use in these projects seeks authorisation for the painting of city walls and is non-egotistical in motivation. Furthermore, importance is placed on creating public artworks that are not only created *for,* but also informed *by,* inhabitants of neighbourhoods where these projects occur.

These 'neighbourhood graffiti projects' and their focus on civic engagement correlate with the aims of educational and socially engaged mural art in Kenya. A clear distinction between the two,

[283] For example, see the *MaVulture* project discussed in Chapter 5, and the *Kibera Walls for Peace* project discussed in Chapter 2.

however, is the grandeur of neighbourhood graffiti projects and their endeavour to give agency to artists and urban dwellers in the control, use and consumption of public space.[284] The opening quotation to this chapter speaks of the creative possibilities that abound in urban spaces, which catalyse new ways to reflect upon and shape the experience of urban living. This chapter investigates these possibilities through neighbourhood graffiti projects and the various forms of participation and appropriation enacted by artists and urban dwellers to (re)make their city. In doing so, the chapter explores the extent to which these projects constitute a new form of street democracy and urban politics through the concept of 'right to the city' and do-it-yourself (DIY) urban practices.

Divided into five sections and a conclusion this chapter starts by discussing the concept of right to the city and notions around do-it-yourself urban practices. An overview of the two neighbourhood graffiti projects to be examined in detail is then provided. The analysis begins by assessing the extent to which neighbourhood graffiti projects enhance urban space through beautification and ideological messages. Focus then turns to individual and collective motives of those participating in these projects, and how the projects provide artists and urban dwellers with alternative means to appropriate city space. Questions are then asked as to whether these projects enable a new, albeit temporary, commons to emerge. The chapter concludes that neighbourhood graffiti projects provide a means for those disenfranchised to claim the right to their city.

The right to the city and DIY urban practices

Over the past few decades the catchphrase 'right to the city' has accompanied global social struggles to reclaim public space in order to build what is presented as more just, socially encompassing, and democratic cities (Mitchell 2003; Miladi 2015). In this section I discuss the concept of the right to the city and its relation to do-it-yourself (DIY) urban practices. There is a rich amount of work on the right to the city (Dikeç, 2002; Purcell 2002; Harvey 2003; 2008; Marcuse 2009; Mayer 2009; Zeiger 2011). It was, however, French sociologist and philosopher Henri Lefebvre, in *Le Droit à la ville* (The Right to the city), who was among the first to promote

[284] For the purpose of this chapter I apply a broad definition of public space as 'all places publicly owned or of public use, accessible and enjoyable by all, for free and without profit motive; which consist of streets, open spaces and public facilities'. This definition of public space comes from the 'Charter of Public Space', adopted during the II Biennial of Public Space in Rome (2013). The definition has been concretised by UN-HABITAT resolutions.

this idea (Lefebvre 1968). Lefebvre argued for citizens' empowerment through their participation in the use and production of urban space (Purcell 2002). Considering the city not merely as commodified space, Joe Painter states Lefebvre is concerned with 'the use-value of the city over its exchange-value, emphasizing that citizens have a right to make use of the city, and that it is not solely a collection of resources to enable economic activity' (Painter 2005: 9, see also Kofman and Lebas 1996: 19). In a similar manner, the urban planner Peter Marcuse (2009) has argued that cities should be for people and not profit whilst David Harvey (2008) - a leading theorist in the field of urban studies - has criticised the ways in which capital shapes the city, arguing that:

> 'The right to the city is far more than the individual liberty to access urban resources: it is a right to change ourselves by changing the city. It is, moreover, a common rather than an individual right since this transformation inevitably depends upon the exercise of a collective power to reshape the processes of urbanization. The freedom to make and remake our cities and ourselves is, I want to argue, one of the most precious yet most neglected of our human rights.' (Harvey 2008: 23).

It is, however, Lefebvre who spoke most forcefully of the city's 'use value' through a set of needs which stood for a more capacious, expansive understanding of the city:

> 'the human being has the need to accumulate energies and to spend them... [A] need for creative activity, for the *oeuvre* (not only of products and consumable material goods), of the need for information, symbolism, the imaginary and play. Through these specific needs lives and survives a fundamental desire of which play, sexuality, physical activities such as sport, creative activity, art and knowledge are particular expressions and moments.' (Lefebvre 1996: 147)

The inclusion of 'symbolism, the imaginary and play' as well as 'creative activity, art and knowledge' are emphasised by Benjamin Fraser who states: 'for Lefebvre these are some of the privileged tools through which the city may be taken back by those who have been alienated from it.' (Fraser 2018: 109). This taking back is conceived by Lefebvre through active citizenship which confers two central rights—the right to participation and to appropriation (Kofman & Lebas 1996: 174) – and are of significance for the work discussed in this chapter. Participation enables city inhabitants to access and influence decisions that produce urban space, whereas appropriation suggests the right to access, occupy and make use of existing, or create new, space that meets people's needs (Stickells 2011: 53).

The concept of right to the city is often linked to DIY urban practices taking place in global cities (Donovan 2014: 386). DIY approaches vary widely; however, they tend to involve small-scale citizen-led interventions which experiment with appropriation and alternative uses of urban public space (Iveson 2013: 942; Donovan 2014; Douglas 2014: 6). According to the multidisciplinary urbanist Gordon Douglas, DIY interventions 'can be seen as both a reaction to and product of the structures and processes that define the contemporary city—trends such as state disinvestment, commodification, gentrification, and a general intensification of uneven development' (Douglas 2014: 10). These trends, which are often born out of neo-liberalism, become the beacons calling for Lefebvre's 'use value' of the city to take centre stage in DIY urban interventions. For instance, the architect and curator Mirko Zardini writes that DIY practices provide bottom-up approaches and opportunities to push against accepted norms of behaviour in cities which enables one to 'reinvent our daily lives, and reoccupy urban space with new uses' (Zardini 2008: 16). For the curator and urban researcher Joni Taylor, DIY activities encourage participation and explorations into 'what can be done with the city from the perspective of its users' (Taylor 2011: 47). Perhaps drawing on Lefebvre's (1996: 151) notion of 'experimental utopias', Taylor goes on to suggest DIY initiatives can be used to reimagine the idea of the urban utopia as a better place to live and play (Taylor 2011: 47-49).

Those engaged in DIY practices act in the here and now, rejecting the ineffectiveness of local government bureaucracy, often circumventing official processes and permits. A consequence of this is that DIY interventions tend to be low-cost and temporary forms of direct action – perhaps reflecting the provisional dynamics of how the city is inhabited and used. For a number of authors this is where the political and social implications of DIY urban practices lie. 'Do-it-yourselfers' see themselves as aiding the city and benefiting the general public through improving urban space by injecting it with new functions and meanings (Hou 2010: 2; Zeiger 2011; Douglas 2014: 13; Mattern 2016: 91). It has also been suggested that DIY interventions provide increased agency for citizens as a result of empowering citizens to contribute to the design of their surroundings, leading to a more engaged citizenry (Donovan 2014: 395).

Neighbourhood graffiti projects

Having discussed the concept of right to the city and its links to urban DIY practices, the chapter relates these ideas to two recent neighbourhood graffiti projects. However, before doing so I briefly summarise each of these projects. Although taking place in different areas of Nairobi and

occurring a year apart from one another, both projects share similar approaches and intentions. They both principally involved the same artists whom worked voluntarily; the projects represent a bottom-up approach led by citizens; they took place in lower income neighbourhoods/informal settlements; they both received limited sponsorship and were low cost; and each was partnered with local key stakeholders.

The first of the two projects to be discussed is *Talking Walls*. The project was a component of a 'street democracy festival' which aimed to create a more vibrant, safe and democratic street life in Korogocho – one of the largest and most impoverished slums in Nairobi (Höök et al. 2016: 24).[285] *Talking Walls* occurred in August 2015 and involved twenty artists who spent two weeks visually transforming informal structures along two prominent streets.[286] Public art in Korogocho is not uncommon, although the sheer scale of *Talking Walls* was unprecedented.[287] The artworks created consisted of imagery concerned principally with enhancing the area's aesthetics, stylised writing offering positive directives, and murals aimed at changing people's behaviour and attitude. Local organisation Hope Raisers Youth Group implemented the project. Its director (Daniel Onyango) described *Talking Walls* as being about beautifying the streets of Korogocho and encouraging creative expressions to manifest, which he emphasised as being 'a democratic right'.[288]

In July 2016 the second project discussed in this chapter took place. It was part of the bi-annual cultural event *SAMOSA Festival*.[289] The project, which worked with local partners and involved

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[285] Residents of Korogocho live in an area approximately 1.5 square kilometres. Recent estimates put the population in the region of 100,000 - 200,000.   Government neglect, high levels of poverty and an extreme density of people living in Korogocho create challenging circumstances for residents, placing pressure on the few available resources. This contributes to poor infrastructure (Oketch & Mutisya 2012: 5, MacAuslan & Schofield 2011:13), low levels of education and high levels of unemployment (Oketch & Mutisya 2012: 11, African Population and Health Research Center), illegal activities and crime (Gathuthi et al, 2010), inadequate water and sanitation facilities, and challenges of food security (Emergency Nutrition Network 2013).

[286] The two adjacent streets where *Talking Walls* took place contain the local police station, chieftaincy, and community hall. A consequence to this is that on a daily basis hundreds of people use these streets, thus come into contact with the public artworks created there.

[287] The local Catholic Church (St John's) and the Korogocho Community Hall have over the years been sites for murals painted by national and international artists. Furthermore in 2014   graffiti artists Swift, Kerosh, Bhupi, Chege and Uhuru painted a series of murals on the wall of Daniel Comboni primary school, Korogocho.

[288] See the video news report *Murals in Korogocho* by African Slum Journal, posted on March 13th 2015. Available at http://www.africanslumjournal.com/murals-in-korogocho-slums/ (accessed 11/06/2019).

[289] SAMOSA stands for 'South Asian Mosaic of Society and the Arts'. Initially the festival focussed on Kenya's Asian population and their contribution to Kenyan civil society. However, today the festival is inclusive and represents Kenya's diverse ethnicities and nationalities. SAMOSA is the 'cultural arm' of AwaaZ magazine –which provides a

approximately fifteen artists, took place across three sites in the Nairobi neighbourhoods of California, Eastleigh and Pumwani. Discussing *SAMOSA Festival* the Deputy Festival Director Ubax Abdi wrote of there being 'little room for public space and certainly none for green space' at the project sites, going on to say 'one of the intended outcomes of this project was to reclaim public space back to the inhabitants.' (Abdi 2016).[290]

In California (which was established in 1967 as the first public housing project following Kenyan independence) the project worked with the organisation Berlin Self Help Group (BSHG). BSHG manage the only open space in California, which is the dusty playing-field 'Berlin Desert Ground' (locally referred to as Desa Ground) - a lively site used by residents for socialising, football matches, talent shows, film screenings, music events and festivals.[291] Reflecting Desa Ground's prominence for local activities eleven artworks on ten buildings surrounding the playing field were created.

In Eastleigh the project partnered with St Teresa Boys Primary School. Established in the 1940s, St Teresa's serves hundreds of children from the area. The headmaster hoped the project would uplift the spirits of students and staff, raise the profile of the school, and visually communicate the value of education to the community. Approximately 100 meters of the school's perimeter wall which faces a busy side street was painted. In addition to this the owner of an adjacent apartment building requested for his wall to be included, which it was.

In Pumwani another perimeter wall, spanning 140 meters, was covered with artworks. Permission for this came from its owners and principal users: the chairman of the Ministry of Housing and Works, and members of the Pumwani Youth Group carwash. The wall ran alongside the busy Meru Road which is used by hundreds of pedestrians and vehicles daily.

In the remainder of this chapter I assess the impact of these two neighbourhood graffiti projects in cultivating the concept of right to the city.

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broad platform for debate on issue of contemporary and historical interest. The 2016 festival included drama, music, yoga, poetry, film screenings, public forums, storytelling, an art exhibition, and a walking tour of Eastleigh.

[290] Ubax Abdi has close associations to the project sites as a consequence of her mother living in Eastleigh and her father, Yusuf Hassan Abdi, being MP for Kamukunji Constituency. According Ubax Abdi, a further objective for graffiti's use in the SAMOSA Festival was 'to bring colour and beauty, to challenge and inspire and most importantly…to change the perceptions of an overly misrepresented community' (Abdi 2016: 21).

[291] One large public mural already existed prior to the project, which promotes peace and tolerance, and was organised by BSHG and funded by USAID through its *Kenya Transitional Initiative* programme.

Enhancing urban space through beautification and ideological messages

In this section I examine the pictorial and text-based artworks (or a combination of the two) created in both projects and the interpretation of these by the public. Some artworks were created with the primary purpose of enhancing urban space, which entails the beautification of cityscapes. The graffiti artists Bantu, who participated in the SAMOSA project, suggests that the method of enhancing public space 'creates a visual transformation of someone's hood, helping people overcome visually boring and uninspiring urban environments.'[292] Other artworks aimed to pass on an affirmative public message. 'We use graffiti not just for beauty but for communicating messages', states Kerosh, who participated in both projects. Discussing graffiti's communicative role with urban residents, Kerosh says 'when the public look at the works time and again we don't just want them to see something beautiful but also something that plays with their brains to stimulate new ways of thinking and believing.'[293]

These positions, one of enhancing urban space and the other of filling it with ideological messages, are aspects found in graffiti globally. In their study on street art Luca Visconti et al. (2010) frame these two positions by drawing on Elizabeth Hirschman's work on producers as either 'artists' or 'ideologists' (Hirschman 1983). According to Hirschman, '[artists are] those who create primarily to express their subjective conceptions of beauty, emotion or some other aesthetic ideal', while an 'ideologist may be defined as one who puts forward an integrated set of positive and normative statements that describe what the world is and what it should be' (Hirschman 1983: 46). Visconti's adoption of these two positions of artist and ideologist as separable is questionable: graffiti artists straddle both positions. Graffiti artists in Nairobi unite the roles of artist and ideologist. To assess how this is achieved attention now turns to the public artworks created during both projects.

I begin by discussing a selection of artworks intentionally created to instruct residents about neighbourhood issues. A mural in Korogocho depicts residents walking hand-in-hand with the accompanying text 'children too have right of way' (fig. 6.1). This artwork references recently tarmacked roads used by both young people for recreational activities and *boda boda* (a motorbike taxi service) drivers, who have in the past caused accidents with pedestrians. With its

[292] Interview with Bantu, at the Railway Museum, Nairobi (03/08/2016).

[293] Interview with Kerosh from his studio at the Dust Depot Nairobi (08/08/2016).

direct and unambiguous meaning the mural performs as a visual indicator asserting residents' claims to the use of the street. The image is a reprimand to reckless motorists - as one inhabitant remarked: 'we point at the mural and shout "uona!" [you see] and they get the message'.[294] *Boda boda* riders also acknowledge that the wall painting affects their driving behaviour: '[the mural] cautions us guys, who have a tendency to speed, to slow down...so we must stay aware of other road users', stated one motorist.[295]

Figure 6.1. Mural created during *Talking Walls* depicting residents' right to the streets.

Another mural with a didactic purpose in Korogocho portrays animals roasting meat over a fire, accompanied by text 'anaye nyanyasa wenzake bila kukatzwa, pia atanyanyaswa bila kukatazwa' (Kiswahili for 'who oppresses others without you stopping him/her will oppress you the next day without being stopped') (fig. 6.2). The mural's message taps into the wisdom and moral codes offered in various proverbs (Mieder 1985: 119; Winick 2003: 595). In the book *Wit & Wisdom of Africa*, Patrick Ibekwe argues that proverbs are an expression of how people perceive themselves, social values and attitudes (Ibekwe 1998: x). The proverb which the mural references for Korogocho's low income and marginalised residents works on multiple levels through its application to numerous situations. What is clear from those interviewed is their understanding of this mural as a pedagogical tool to guide behaviours and encourage people to speak out against injustices.

[294] Field notes, Korogocho, (29/07/2016).

[295] Field notes, Korogocho, (29/07/2016).

Figure 6.2. Mural created during *Talking Walls* narrating a proverb advising residents to stand up against injustices.

Mural designs incorporating proverbs and affirmative words or phrases were also noticeable in the SAMOSA project. In California, the image of a young boy assisting a pregnant lady with the proverb ‘Heshima si Utumwa’ (Kiswahili for ‘respect is not slavery’) was painted on the side of a recently constructed community centre (fig. 6.3). Similarly, at St Teresa’s school artworks consisted of moral commands and work which gave emphasis to the value of education (fig. 6.4 & 6.5). In both projects artists painted text in highly stylised font, which tended to call for peace, unity and love – expressions which have become synonymous with many public graffiti projects following the immense peace narrative developed during the run up to Kenya’s 2013 election (fig. 6.6 & 6.7).[296] On the one hand, the use of proverbs and short phrases fit into a context of informal education (Plissart 1983: 9; Mieder 2004: 146), but they also make visible the values that these artists believe are expected in society. If, however, this is the case, might the omnipresence of the messages in such artworks come across as sermonising, or perhaps patronising?

[296] For an example of graffiti’s employment to create a peace narrative during Kenya’s 2013 election campaign see Chapter 2.

Figure 6.3. Mural created in California narrating a proverb that says respect is not slavery.

Figure 6.4. Mural promoting education, created on the perimeter wall of St Teresa Boys Primary School, Eastleigh.

Figure 6.5. Mural created on the perimeter wall of St Teresa Boys Primary School, Eastleigh.

Figure 6.6. Mural created on the perimeter wall of St Teresa Boys Primary School, Eastleigh.

Figure 6.7. Mural created on a wall facing onto a busy pavement and road, Pumwani, Nairobi.

I was informed by one resident that the recurrent visibility of the murals' messages are conducive to changing attitudes because 'it is good for moral messages to be told over and over again.'[297] In similar vein the South African activist, writer and feminist Ellen Kuzwayo argues that constant exposure to proverbs and short messages can be an instrument to help improve various forms of social break-up (Kuzwayo 1998: 16). In the case of neighbourhood graffiti projects, artworks with a didactic intention resonated with the community for whom they were created. It was not only through words, however, that artists put forward positive statements.

In California and Pumwani, murals depicting local and national figures were created to celebrate aspects of life and culture specific to those neighbourhoods. On a block of flats overlooking Desa Ground, the artist Swift 9 painted a portrait of Kenya's national football team captain Victor Wanyama - who at the time of writing also plays for English Premier League club Tottenham

[297] Field notes, Korogocho, (29/07/2016).

Hotspur (fig. 6.8). Wanyama grew up in a neighbourhood bordering California and is an icon for many across the country. Speaking about his early life and the struggles of growing up in the area, Wanyama says: 'I come from a place called Muthurwa, in Eastlands…You have to be a lion coming from that humble background. If you work hard then dreams, they do come true' (as quoted in Collings 2016). Thus, the mural of Wanyama acts for some residents as an everyday stimulus to believe in their potential, as expressed by one resident, saying 'Wanyama's success makes us feel that anything is possible and the mural reminds us of this.'[298]

Figure 6.8. Portrait of Kenyan footballer Victor Wanyama on the side of a housing estate which faces onto the Berlin Desert Ground, California.

Wanyama was not the only icon painted in California. The estate is widely known for its association to Genge, a genre of Kenyan hip hop music whose roots are in California. In recognition to this the artist Vandal (Kevin Githinji) painted a mural of Genge star E-Sir, who tragically died in 2003. The mural, which included other Genge artists from California, was painted on the building where E-Sir grew up (fig. 6.9). [299]

[298] Field notes, California, (27/07/2016).

[299] The mural also contained a portrait of Nonini, who is often referred to as the 'the Godfather of Genge', and the artist Jua Cali, who co-founded *Calif Records*.

Figure 6.9. Mural of local Genge artists on the side of a housing estate which faces onto the Berlin Desert Ground, California.

In Pumwani, images of locals and street users were painted on the walls as an act commemorating ordinary people's lives. By portraying their daily activities Swift 9 celebrated the *Mkokoteni* labourer, a manual worker who pulls a handcart often laden with heavy goods (fig. 6.10). The *Mkokoteni* is ubiquitous on this street, and in the words of John Githongo (former Kenyan journalist and corruption whistle-blower) 'represent the real spirit of Kenya: striving and entrepreneurial' (Githongo 2015). The Pumwani national league football team, in particular its goal keeper Selanko, was also celebrated (fig. 6.11). 'When the kids see him [Selanko] on the wall they know who he is, they aspire to be like him' says Bantu, the artist who painted the image. Bantu also painted what he described as 'faces of beautiful girls. The idea was to challenge ladies to aspire them to do more. There are a lot of sex workers, the cheapest sex workers in Nairobi here. So, my idea was to show them that they can be anything.' (fig. 6.12).[300]

[300] Interview with Bantu, at the Railway Museum, Nairobi (03/08/2016).

Figure 6.10. *Mkokoteni* labourer in front of a mural which recognises their contribution to society, Pumwani, Nairobi.

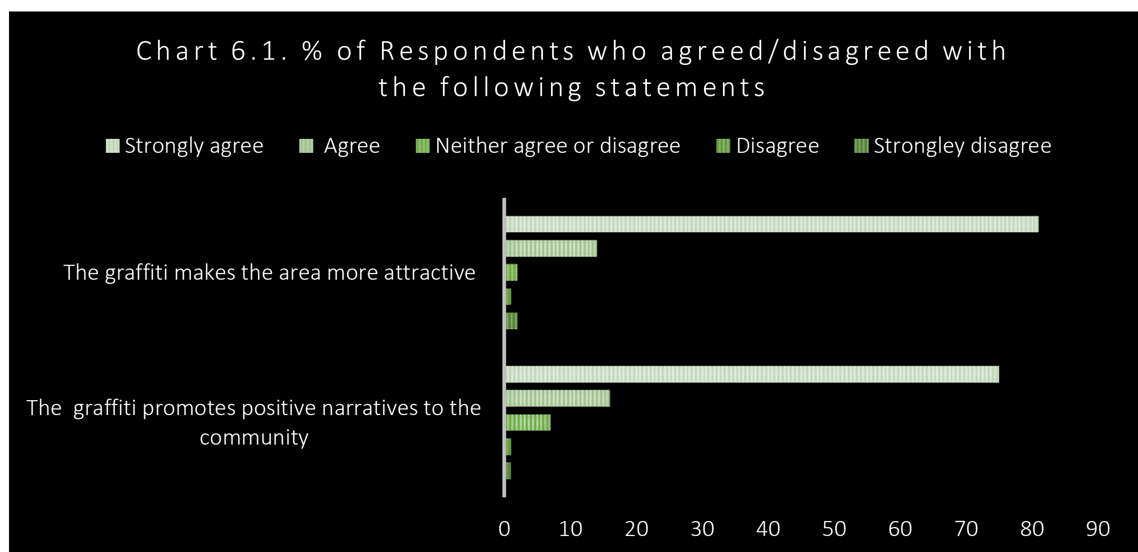
Figure 6.11. Mural of, and quote from, Pumwani national league football team goalkeeper, Pumwani, Nairobi.

Figure 6.12. Girl Power mural in Pumwani, Nairobi.

In a survey conducted with 150 members of the public in the neighbourhoods of California, Eastleigh, and Pumwani the vast majority (91%) of respondents agreed the graffiti depicted positive messages (Chart 6.1).[301] Focus group discussions with residents in each of these neighbourhoods expanded insight into these opinions. In California, residents admired the

[301] For further information about the survey see pg.36 and Appendix II.

inclusion of national icons associated with their neighbourhood which, they say, highlighted the area's rich heritage in Genge music and sport, underscoring what many (though in particular male youth) described as the neighbourhood's positive identity. At St Teresa's school in Eastleigh, amongst other sites, graffiti was described in terms of its pedagogical role, whereas in Pumwani artworks representing the lives of ordinary people legitimised the valuable contribution that everyone can make in society. However, on different occasions I was informed that the representation of men, and indeed their portrayal, in artworks was disproportionate to that of women. For example, in California and Pumwani men were celebrated for who they are and what they have achieved – seen through the portraits of actual people, such as Victor Wanyama, E-Sir, the hard working everyday *Mkokoteni* worker, or the goalkeeper Selanko. In contrast, no icons of recognisable females were created. Instead women were represented as needing assistance, as passive and 'beautiful', and who they could be (university graduates, models, or strong voices in the family unit), rather than who they are now. In his study of street art, Mark Matten writes 'the images we see repeatedly in an urban landscape become part of our individual and collective psyche' (Mattern 2016: 98). If this is the case, then the omission of imagery portraying women role models and their contribution to society does little to visually affirm their right to the city.



While the artworks discussed above were viewed for the principles they communicated, other artworks functioned to aesthetically transform neighbourhoods. Such artworks comprised abstract compositions, coloured patterns and geometric shapes, or non-specific imagery (figs. 6.13-15). Residents talked of how the graffiti completely changed their streets' aesthetics, providing a novel visual identity for their neighbourhood, with many suggesting it beautified the area. A resident from Korogocho remarked that 'before, when there were no pictures, the area

looked like a real slum', going on to say, 'although we are still in the slum, at least the area now looks nice, it conceals the ghetto.'[302] Not wanting to be solely defined by the familiar appearance of Korogocho's infrastructure which conveys dwellers' marginal conditions, the graffiti altered resident's everyday reality and expressed their vitality. Similar views were expressed in California, Eastleigh, and Pumwani, where 95% of survey respondents felt their neighbourhood was now more attractive, affirming graffiti's aesthetic contribution to improving the urban environment (Chart 6.1). These sentiments reveal the assertion by artists and urban dwellers to exercise and make visible their habitation of the city. Asserting one's place of dwelling is a particularly strong gesture in Korogocho because in this informal settlement residents often live in a precarious situation in which there is the lack of legal security of tenure.

Figure 6.13. Painted home in Korogocho, Nairobi.

Figure 6.14. Painted home in Korogocho, Nairobi.

[302] Field notes, Korogocho, (29/07/2016).

Figure 6.15. Painted home in Korogocho, Nairobi.

In other parts of the world, specifically poorer suburbs in Western cities, it has been argued that large scale graffiti projects sanitise the realities of urban dwellers' lives and their environment. Such criticisms are frequently raised in the context of public art being used to transform neighbourhoods for the purpose of neoliberal urban development benefiting private interests and leading to what the urban geographer Leslie Kern terms the 'slow violence' of gentrification (Kern 2016: 442). While this is perhaps the case in other contexts, this argument holds less sway for neighbourhood graffiti projects discussed in this chapter. Rather than sanitising urban conditions artists purport to give expression to peoples' (re)conceptualisation of their neighbourhoods through enhancing urban space via gift-giving and vitalising. Artists carry out the act of gift-giving through creating free and accessible public artworks in urban space for the users of that space, while vitalizing refers to residents becoming connected to an aesthetically transformed environment which offers excitement, vivacity and surprise (Visconti et al. 2010: 520). In Nairobi, graffiti artists have remade the city in a very literal sense, transforming the aesthetics and experience of urban space through ideological and visually appealing artworks. However the city is also produced and reproduced through other acts of participation and appropriation, to which attention now turns.

Individual and collective motives

In neighbourhood graffiti projects, artists and residents perform individually and/or collectively, influencing decisions that produce urban space. But how might these actions promote a more democratic urban space, one which is made for the benefit of those who occupy it? In order to

explore this, I draw on the concept of Street Democracy expressed by Visconti et al. (2010), who state:

> 'The ideology of street democracy demands active and collective participation in the design and use of cityscapes. It refuses both the excesses of the appropriation of public space by single individuals and the lack of conscious consumption. This is the idea of street democracy, since it relates to the set of rights and duties that citizens have in democratic political settings. These artists acknowledge the right of collectively consuming public space as a collective good, while calling for participation, responsibility, and planning from its entitled owners' (Visconti et al. 2010: 520).

To develop discussion, I turn to a public forum held in 2015 at PAWA 254, Nairobi, in which panellists debated the possibilities for creative projects to promote equity in neighbourhoods and improve urban life. At this forum the artist Kerosh spoke about his ventures into using graffiti for community outreach projects and his participation in *Talking Walls*. Kerosh placed emphasis on how artists taking part in *Talking Walls* created public art which was not only *for* but also informed *by* the community. Describing this process in more detail, Kerosh told the audience:

> 'We involve and consult the community and they provide their input for the artworks. There is much interaction, especially with the youth who are usually neglected in planning and making the community their own. When youth are given an avenue to be involved in creating the change they want it gives them a sense of responsibility and a sense of adding value to their community. It has become their way of saying that they also belong in this space, because generally they are left out of these decisions and activities.'[303]

Kerosh's words evoke a sense of giving agency to urban dwellers and artists through their participation and through the public's appropriation of artworks and public space. However, this raises questions as to how participation is granted and to whom, what participation involves,

[303] Kerosh was speaking at a forum held at PAWA 254 in August 2015 which was organised by Architects without Borders (a Swedish organisation that brings together a growing group of architects, planners, designers, engineers, artists and others who all want to use their knowledge and dedication to contribute to a more sustainable and fair world) and Hope Raisers Youth Initiative (a Kenyan community based organisation, established in 2005 in Korogocho). Panellists discussed the possibilities for creative projects to promote equity in neighbourhoods and improve urban life. The panel consisted of; Cecilia Andersson (Public Space programme coordinator, UN-Habitat), Naomi Hoogervorst (architect), Irungu Houghton (Kilimani Project Foundation, chairperson), Maria Höök (landscape architect, Architects without Borders), Robert Kariuki (landscape architect, Director) Lariak (Landscapes Ltd, Lecturer at JKUAT), Kerosh (graffiti artist), Ibrahim Nyaburi (KDI Kenya Project Manager), Swift9 (graffiti artist).

what the conflicts or contestations are that emerge in neighbourhood graffiti projects and how these affect others' experience and consumption of public space.

The practice of graffiti often conjures up assumptions about the creation of unauthorised work on the walls of a city, vandalism, crime, violations of law and order, and the narcissistic actions of urban youth. Artists interviewed reject such generalised associations and resist the charges of an egocentric display of the self. 'It is a community project, you can't just come and tag your name. You have to consider something that the community will understand, appreciate, and something that they will be proud of, something that they want to own and defend', says Kerosh.[304] Public participation in neighbourhood graffiti projects as a viewer is open to anyone. This is because artists sought permission from property owners to paint on privately owned structures facing public space, thus involving the responsible participation of entitled owners.[305] This two-way voluntary transaction, by property owners/dwellers and artists, can be interpreted as a form of public gift-giving in which both stakeholders endorse the public appropriation of city walls.[306] In claiming the surfaces of a neighbourhood, graffiti artists and dwellers subvert the usual rules of private property and individual ownership. In doing so, artists and property owners/dwellers insist on the right for inhabitants to appropriate visual public space. In addition to this, neighbourhood residents participated in the projects through the act of painting (which essentially involved residents priming surfaces for artists to paint) and at times through inspiring, choosing and influencing certain topics, issues and imagery to be painted by the graffiti artists.

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[304] Interview with Kerosh, at California (27/07/2016).

[305] Perhaps unsurprisingly there were occasional instances of scepticism but also refusal from property owners, or dwellers, of buildings that artists requested to paint. This principally revolved around residents wanting to be remunerated for their participation. The artists and local organisations, which the projects partnered with, linked this to a culture created by international NGOs who habitually provide financial handouts to participants of community development interventions – something which both projects refused. A further reason given for the community's initial reluctance to participate came from the director of BSHG who says 'many organisation come with promise of development projects for the community which either never materialise or take forever to start.' However, owing to residents visibly witnessing the tangible change which neighbourhood graffiti projects offer residents' initial apprehensions and suspicions of the projects, and indeed artists, subsided. Furthermore the residents I spoke with state that they quickly acknowledge the publics' benefit of enhancing public space. In some cases this resulted in residents coming forward and asking for their premises to be painted and included in the neighbourhood graffiti project.

[306] This is in contrast to the few cases which surfaced in each project whereby owners refused their walls to be publicly appropriated and in so doing invoked individual sentiments of private property which cannot be used for the benefit of others.

When asked what they paint and why, the artist Bantu responded by saying 'I paint what is around me or what the community wants. Forcing our own ideas on the community doesn't work';[307] whilst Swift 9 added 'it is much better to paint something that the community will relate to, or something they see every day, because we have found ourselves in trouble if we paint something that the community feels is disturbing or insulting.'[308] In California, Kerosh presented a number of drawings to local children and he painted the one most liked, saying 'that's how we want to operate. We want to be guided by the community.'[309] In the same neighbourhood, the artist Vandal's mural of Genge star E-Sir morphed into something far bigger than initially imagined following the request of residents to include other local Genge artists (Nonini and Jua Cali) - these proposals were included and the artwork manifested as a truly collective celebration of the estate's heritage through its positive roots in Genge music. A commonality between these artists' responses is their rather ambiguous application of the term community. Who exactly is the community which graffiti artists speak about? Furthermore, the act of gift-giving still leaves the question of whether it is an imposition on those who view the resulting imagery.

On one level, the concept of community in these projects refers broadly to the public who reside or regularly spend time in the neighbourhoods where the graffiti is sited. A narrower concept of community comprises those directly involved in the artworks' creation. This latter concept asserts people's right to the city through involving them in channels of decision-making, i.e. where artworks will be located and at times their subject matter. These ambitions relate to what the commentator on graffiti and street art, Anna Waclawek, describes as a new genre of public art in the 21st century which focusses on social accountability rather than aesthetics or design per se (Waclawek 2011: 79). However, in this pursuit of social accountability the channels used by artists entail fairly ad-hoc processes which mostly engage those there at that moment, rather than adhering to a more formal democratic process which would involve representation and inclusion from a cross section of each neighbourhood. Most graffiti artists considered their work as being a reflection of and response to the engagement they had with locals. However, on a few occasions informants suggested this as being rather shallow. A consequence of this was that some imagery was censured by the public because it was said to antagonise certain beliefs or its meaning was incomprehensible to the wider public.[310] While these instances were rare, they do nevertheless

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[307] Interview with Bantu, at the Railway Museum, Nairobi (03/08/2016).

[308] Interview with Swift 9, at the Railway Museum, Nairobi (08/08/2016).

[309] Interview with Kerosh, at California (27-07-2016).

[310] During focus group discussion held in Korogocho residents expressed disapproval towards some artworks. These criticisms were principally founded on painted words being indecipherable. For instance, one resident described how

raise considerations regarding individual and collective motives for neighbourhood graffiti projects. As noted by culture and heritage academic Sabine Marschall in her study on mural art in South Africa, public art projects often fall short of their intended inclusive approach when artists create work without consulting with those who will 'consume' it, which can result in art that is created *in* public but not necessarily *for*, or endorsed *by*, the public (Marschall 2008: 21).

I suggest that an additional reading of the term 'community' is that of the group of graffiti artists themselves – practitioners who are brought together through a common goal of using graffiti as a mechanism by which to appropriate the city. This group of predominantly young men use their art form to render themselves visible in a city in which they often feel otherwise disenfranchised. Such actions draw similarities to visual anthropologist Ricardo Campos' study of youth and graffiti in which he relates youths' utilisation of graffiti as a means to insert minority-related or counter-hegemonic opinions, representations, or stances in the public sphere (Campos 2015: 21). These practices, according to Campos, may be considered an act of citizenship as a consequence of graffiti artists exercising their rights to participation and to appropriation (Campos 2015: 21). It has been discussed above how artists and residents have expressed these rights through making decisions as to what artworks would be created and where in the city they should be situated, thus having agency over the production of visual urban space. However, attention now turns more specifically to artists' experience in these projects and how their participation was perceived by local residents.

Artists involved in neighbourhood graffiti projects were at times seen as role models by residents, in that they were committed to working for the benefit of people's neighbourhoods across the city. For instance, in Pumwani a group of women I spoke with hoped the visibility of young people

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in several wall paintings 'you get some texts bending, others lying down, some letters are closely packed together, and it proves difficult in reading…unless you are really sharp you cannot really capture what it means.' Similar sentiments were voiced by the public in Eastleigh and Pumwani. During *Talking Walls* one of the artworks had to be painted over by the artists because of strong disapproval by residents. Additionally, for some residents in Korogocho certain imagery which remained reportedly antagonised their Christian beliefs because the artworks were perceived to be associated with 'satanic' or 'demonic' features. Interpretations of imagery this way is not uncommon. For instance, in early 2017 several media outlets reported that a student from Bahati Boys High School was expelled for drawing 'demonic art'. These criticisms, which tended to be uttered by older residents illuminate how the agency offered to artists to create public artworks in a neighbourhood affect others' experience of that space. This speaks about the contested nature of creating public artworks and the individualistic and collective appropriation of urban space. On the one hand these instances of censure might be attributed to an individualistic approach by artists concerned principally with creating artwork related to their own liking rather than considering the wider publics' 'consumption' and appreciation of them. Lessons from these instances appear to have been carried over to the SAMOSA festival graffiti project. For example, in California I observed one artist being requested by Kerosh to re-do an entire artwork he had spent the best part of a day working on. This was, according to Kerosh, because the work simply depicted the artist's name and as such provided nothing for, or said nothing about, the community. As Kerosh went on to explain, 'doing this work is not about supplying our ego'. The artist complied and created a new artwork.

making a positive change to the city - rather than idling - would inspire more youth to become active citizens.[311] For the artists too this experience was transformative.

The artists on both projects came from across the city but were brought together through a common goal of using art to transform the city's neighbourhoods. For many of the artists, however, working in these neighbourhoods was something new - something which caused artists to confront prejudices and stereotypes the media creates about these parts of the city and those who dwell there. During this process, Kerosh says, 'you forget all your perceptions and inclinations you may have had. You break down barriers. We work with each other, engage with each other, paint together, eat together, we create bridges between different groups of people.' [312] The experience of working in different neighbourhoods and collaborating with residents provided a means for artists to become part of the wider society through a collective acknowledging of common interests and the shared appropriation of public space. According to Kerosh, 'that by itself is priceless and by the time we were leaving the project sites I know perceptions had been changed…everything was at the level of just being human.' [313]

Although male-dominated both Talking Walls and the SAMOSA projects had limited participation of female artists, however those who contributed stressed the importance of their visibility in a male dominated scene, and indeed within Kenya's patriarchal society. Commenting on this the female artist Blaine 29 says:

> 'I have been challenging people because not many people think that girls can do graffiti, so when they see me there they are like "ahh, we can also do graffiti", so I have been seeing so much curiosity in girls, they look at my work and say "I would love to learn this". So, I think through me I have been able to challenge others…[the graffiti scene] is quite male dominated and that is what made me get into it because I don't like a society where we think that only males can do this. I would like people to see that even females can get into graffiti and do positive things through art, it is not only for males and we can help break that chain.'[314]

By physically declaring their authority in the city these artists are performing their equality as urban inhabitants. Their actions are based on the appropriation of urban space through the

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[311] Field notes, Pumwani, (30/07/2016).

[312] Interview with Kerosh Kiruri, Dust Depot Nairobi (08/08/2016).

[313] Interview with Kerosh Kiruri, Dust Depot Nairobi (08/08/2016).

[314] Interview with Blaine29, at the Railway Museum, Nairobi (03/08/2016).

promotion of street democracy. The artists challenged what they perceived to be their own marginalisation from city life, whether this is confronting male control over public space or their side-lining from formal decision-making arenas about their city's development. Such actions, says urban geographer Kurt Iveson, which 'assert new forms of authority in the city based on the equality of urban inhabitants' may generate a wider politics of the city (Iveson 2013: 16). The extent to which this occurred in the months following these projects is now considered.

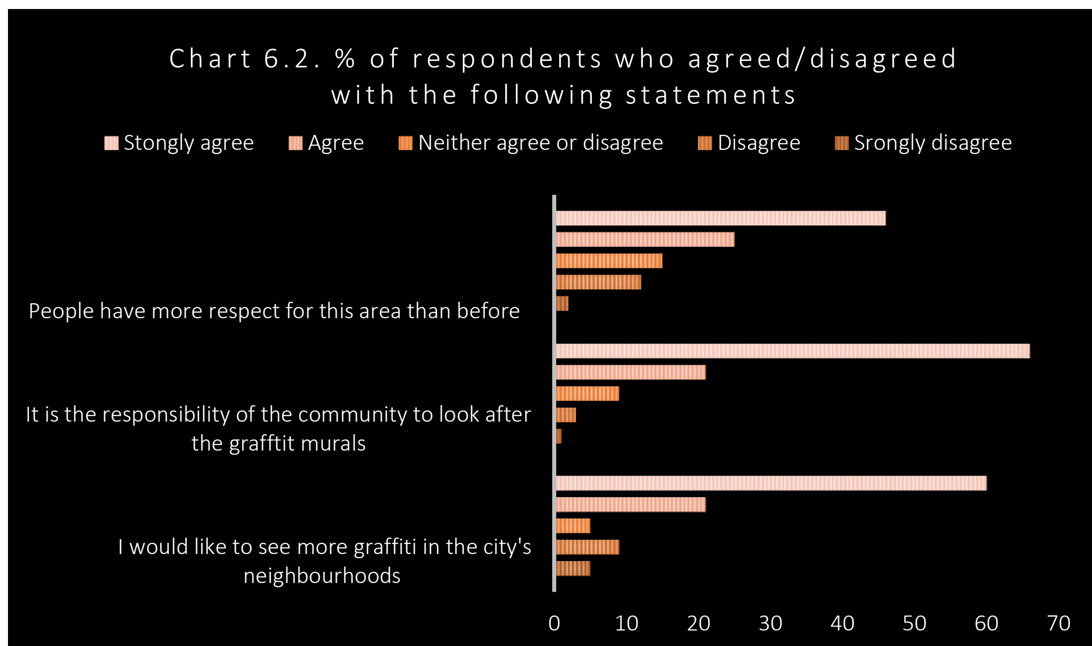
Striving for a common place and community ownership

The process of revitalising urban space in the city's neighbourhoods disrupted the everyday and kindled public curiosity. As a result of the activities occurring at the time, new forms of social interaction at the project sites were stimulated. Artists, together with residents, momentarily allowed themselves to enjoy the pleasure induced by transformations occurring in their city. The streets, some locals suggested, became sporadic conversational commons; or, as one resident from Korogocho stated, 'the project provided activities for people to understand the meaning of community. The streets became the setting for us to unite and to make our own change for our own neighbourhood.'[315] However, while it became quite evident during research that neighbourhood graffiti projects produced a livelier public space during the actual project, what this chapter now addresses directly is whether urban space was consumed differently following on from the projects.

It came across during discussions with residents that the appreciation of the murals correlated with the sites becoming more valued. In a survey with 150 members of the public 71% of respondents stated they had greater respect for the project sites than before, which residents associated with there being fewer cases of people openly defecating and littering where there were graffiti murals (Chart 6.2.).[316]

[315] Field notes, Korogocho, (29/07/2016).

[316] For further information about the survey see pg.36 and Appendix II.



The majority of survey respondents (87%) agreed that it was the communities' responsibility to look after the murals, having developed a sense of ownership and pride in them, and it was reported that these visually vibrant streets had acquired additional uses and functions, which are discussed below. In Korogocho, informal vendors along both streets of the project reported an increase in foot traffic which they attributed to the interest created by the painted structures and suggested that economic activity along these streets had improved. According to one informal vendor, '[the graffiti] brings people here because they want to see the art. We even get people coming who are not from the area and it makes people excited. It brings more business to these streets.'[317] However, in California estate there had been a number of instances in which buildings were vandalised through egotistical graffiti tagging; perhaps inspired by the SAMOSA community graffiti project, which it somewhat ironically opposed. In contrast, in 2018 the BSHG sponsored a new mural to be created in California by one of the youths from the area. The mural promoted the role of young people leading the way in their community, affirming on the one hand continued use of this art form to speak about and for local residents - but also making apparent the public's interest in visual art and the desire of residents to enhance their neighbourhood. This was further made clear by respondents of the survey above, 81% of whom stated they would like to see more graffiti in the city's neighbourhoods.

[317] Field notes, Korogocho, (29/07/2016).

Anna Waclawek states that graffiti as a public art form 'aids in the creation of city spaces by occupying a physical location in the cityscape and by engaging people in the experience of art' (Waclawek 2011: 70). Similarly, informants at sites across both neighbourhood graffiti projects underline this public art form as one of their foremost experiences of visual art in Nairobi.[318] Residents in the project's neighbourhoods were largely unaware of Nairobi's commercial galleries and, while they acknowledge the Nairobi National Museum and some foreign cultural centres, they talked of feeling marginalised from these cultural spaces. This was principally because of associated costs (such as the entrance fee charged at the NNM), accessibility, and implications of these venues catering for foreigners, the upper classes, or strictly for art connoisseurs. In contrast, informants discussed neighbourhood graffiti projects as appearing, on the whole, more democratic in that they are produced *by* and *fo*r urban dwellers, and are accessible to everyone. 'These streets provide a space for people to appreciate art', one resident affirmed, going on to say: 'we have a lot of artistic people in the slum, but many are idle because they don't realise what they could achieve. Having this work here sends them a message to do something creative for themselves, to follow their dreams.'[319] The implication of bringing art into public space is its contribution to fulfilling the cultural needs of citizens – and perhaps has further significance because, as Professor of International Peacebuilding John Paul Lederach suggests, a society which embraces art is one which is able to create solutions to complex problems (Lederach 2005). This is a view shared by artists who use the platform of the street to publicly promote the role that visual art, and indeed artists, can play in society – as Victor Mwangi (Viktart), who participated in the SAMOSA project, remarked:

> 'creativity is a form of courage. There is not a strong culture of art in Nairobi, most people view it as a leisure activity…Without creativity people stop imagining things for themselves and just look for the textbook answer. I hope this project will inspire others to see art as something to be taken seriously and ignite young people's creativity in the area.'[320]

Informants also discussed how their neighbourhood came to be appreciated by urban dwellers from other spheres of the city. People who would otherwise not visit these neighbourhoods did so in order to see the artworks, but also because the public spaces provided a unique visual

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[318] The other significant form of visual culture which residents discussed were the highly stylised Matatu minibuses, which are prolific across the city.

[319] Field notes, Korogocho, (29/07/2016).

[320] Interview with Victor Mwangi, Pumwani, Nairobi (30/07/2016).

setting to be utilised for various activities. For instance, in California, Korogocho and Pumwani urban youth appropriated the spaces created through neighbourhood graffiti projects by filming music videos, doing fashion shoots, and using them as in-vogue locations for generating hip social-media posts. The news media also, at times, used the graffiti as a backdrop when reporting on young people's entrepreneurial and creative capacities from the area. California provided perhaps the most high profile example of the appropriation of such sites. It is to this neighbourhood that Genge star Jua Cali came in 2016 to film the entirety of his music video for the song *safsana*. The track's message thanks those who have appreciated his contribution to Genge throughout his 15-year career – something epitomised in one of the murals. In each scene of the music video the graffiti murals are clearly depicted and according to the director of BSHG it is because of the graffiti that the artist chose this site for his video.[321]

The nature of public space in Nairobi is continually being negotiated and contested. This shaping and reshaping of urban space, which is described by Henri Lefebvre (1991) as the 'production of space', is the product of different actors seeking to govern who and what the city is for. By participating in the neighbourhood graffiti projects artists and residents became involved in the appropriation of new visual urban spaces. What this section now turns attention to is the contestation of the graffiti projects' sites – whether it be for visibility or economic and political capital - in the months following the projects.

In California, the Desa Ground is a popular location for national and international filmmaking companies.[322] According to the director of BSHG, an international filmmaking company wanted to use this venue approximately 4 months after the SAMOSA project but found the graffiti murals didn't fit with their desired aesthetic. As a result the filmmaking company asked BSHG if the graffiti could be painted over. This presented a rather awkward situation for BSHG because these filming occasions provide job opportunities for many residents, but at the same time locals had become fond of the artworks and their celebration of the neighbourhood's identity. A compromise was made and some of the murals were covered by canvas which was then painted to a colour matching the surrounding buildings. However, paint seeped through the canvas onto the murals which inadvertently destroyed them. At St Teresa's the artwork lasted approximately

[321] Interview with Kelly, the director of BSHG, California (09/11/2018).

[322] For example in the Netflix series *Sense 8*, there is a scene from the first series which is filmed at the Desert Ground in California, Nairobi. The scene depicts Capheus Onyango (a young man living in Nairobi who is a matatu owner and driver) fighting with the help of Sun against a gang of men.

8 months until the school's perimeter wall was covered with campaign posters for Kenya's 2017 election. Following the removal of the posters the wall was left in a shabby state. Thus, the school's headmaster gave permission for the wall to be painted as advertising space for the corporation *GoTV Kenya* – rendering it like so many of the city's other surfaces which have been visually colonised by big business advertising. The artwork at Korogocho and Pumwani has remained, and surprisingly has survived appropriation by others. However, given the ephemeral nature of graffiti these murals were only ever meant to be temporary fixes of popular expressions created for the benefit of urban dwellers. Nevertheless, what they make apparent is their indifference to the capitalist and political appropriation of the same city space whose purpose is self-seeking: that is to increase profitability (in the case of *GoTV*) or to improve the likelihood of being elected into office (in the case of the political posters).

Returning to the concept of the right to the city - specifically Lefebvre's remark that the right to the city intends to advance the interests 'of the whole society and firstly of all those who inhabit' the city (Lefebvre, 1996: 158) - it can also be argued that neighbourhood graffiti projects enable a form of direct action against capitalist, political and private control of urban visual space. They create situations in which the interests of a city's inhabitants come to the fore, whereby they are enfranchised to claim the right to the city, even though this may only be temporarily.

Conclusion

The African Union declared the years 2009 to 2018 as the 'Decade on Youth'. A focus on this demographic was evidently necessary. In spite of representing a significant size of the continent's total population, African youth (aged 18-35) generally report lower rates of political and civic engagement than their elders and without such opportunities it is argued African youth become increasingly disempowered (Lekalake & Gyimah-Boadi 2016). As discussed above, similar perspectives are evident in Nairobi whereby young people feel disenfranchised from official decision-making arenas regarding their city. The chapter examined how do-it-yourself urban practices, specifically neighbourhood graffiti projects in Nairobi, provided an avenue for citizens to participate in civic activities and processes of change.

Through enacting various forms of participation and appropriation, artists and indeed urban residents, performed the notion of street democracy. The process of enhancing urban sites transformed neighbourhoods into visual representations of those who inhabit that space. Painted

murals celebrated the achievements of locals, their heritage, and challenged urban dwellers to 'dream big', and to 'reach for your goals'. The artworks also brought beauty, pride and in some cases increased a sense of belonging to the area. In places like the informal settlement of Korogocho, where slum dwellers are frequently touted as illegal occupants, the exploits of changing and individualising their neighbourhood became an affirmative undertaking which visually declared 'we belong here, this is our home'.

Additionally, the chapter has brought into focus how public space in Nairobi is continually contested and examples discussed revealed this to be the case with economic and commercial interests, those seeking political power, and patriarchal dominance. Such structures relate to Chantal Mouffe's definition of public space as 'a battleground on which different hegemonic projects are confronted' (2007: 3). In part, the neighbourhood graffiti projects played a role in subverting these dominant structures through the concept of 'right to the city', and their focus on use-value of the city. However, despite both projects encouraging female participation which (as explained by the artist Baline 29) defied gender roles in society, questions arose to the absence of imagery depicting local female figures, especially given that local male figures were visually represented. In effect the murals fell short in challenging the male-dominated Kenyan public sphere in favour of more equitable gender relations in urban space.

Having said that, neighbourhood graffiti projects provided opportunities for the everyday person to engage in a direct form of action, in that artists and residents visibly (re)claimed a space and stake in their city, claiming the right to help determine the character of their streets. These low cost initiatives - which are instigated, designed and created by and for urban inhabitants - are not a panacea for the challenges and struggles faced in Nairobi's neighbourhoods. Nevertheless, they clearly offer an avenue to empower citizens in the participation and appropriation of their neighbourhoods which can result in a more engaged citizenry who practice that precious right – the right to the city.

Conclusion

This thesis has not only demonstrated the challenges but also reflected on the opportunities for contemporary visual art to reinvigorate democracy in the 21st century in Nairobi. I argued that artistic interventions in Nairobi actively contribute to the flow of information, ideas, and voices in a multiplicity of spaces, and thereby (re)animate the public sphere.

I positioned this study within the broader historical context of the development of modern and contemporary art in postcolonial Kenya. In particular, Chapter 2 examined visual art practices which artists have adopted in efforts to document the postcolonial condition when notions of democracy itself were being (re)formulated. I argued that artists adapted and responded to significant epochs during Kenya's first fifty years of independence and showed commitment to enthusiastically engender social change through their work. Several examples discussed in this study built upon past scholarly investigations and I contributed to them through original research. In doing so I provided additional, and indeed significant, voices that had otherwise been left out of historical accounts (as in the case of *Sisi kwa Sisi* and the *Daily Billboard Project*) and offered alternative, albeit complementary, angles of analysis (for instance, in the discussions of Solo 7 and Maasai Mbili's peace campaigns, and the *Kenya Burning* exhibition). Furthermore, entirely new research was undertaken on case studies that had otherwise not received scholarly attention (notably, *Kibera Walls for Peace*). Consequently, this study historicised socially engaged visual art practices during Kenya's first fifty years of independence, making apparent how contemporary art in the present shows continuities with, but also changes from, the past.

As such, this thesis furthers existing (albeit limited) academic work on visual art in postcolonial Kenya (explored in the Introduction). Furthermore, it contributes to the broader study of art histories in the region, of which notable recent publications include: the book *Modernist Art in Ethiopia*, by Elizabeth W. Giorgis (2019); Donald Kuira Maingi's (2018) PhD study titled *Constructing and deconstructing a nation: the emergence of contemporary Kenyan art* (1963-1993); and Dominicus Zimanimoto Makukula's (2019) PhD study titled *The Development of Visual Arts in Tanzania from 1961 to 2015*.

Following Chapter 2, the argument that there was an uptake of critical art practices ensuing Kenya's 2007/8 PEV was explored in the subsequent four chapters, where the temporal time frame narrowed to the period 2013 to 2017. These chapters considered the range of art practices, happening in an array of settings across the city, and their effectiveness in expanding spaces for democratic ideals to be articulated and forged.

In short, chapters 3 and 4 concentrated on critical art practices happening within Nairobi's art institutions. Here, I analysed art exhibitions' potential to be avenues where ideas and meanings could be (de)constructed and disseminated, in the context of limitations posed by the market and NGO patronage. I argued that exhibitions became agonistic public spaces, in the Mouffean sense, and suggested this was performed through the disarticulation and re-articulation of current discourses through which the current hegemony is produced. In view of that, this research proves significant because it challenges viewpoints explored in the literature which suggest that, when art's social role is determined by institutions' operations of power, individual agency and freedom is erased. Consequently, the findings in this thesis point to the need to recognise the potential for exhibitions to act as extensions of Kenya's public sphere where democracy can be reinvigorated.

The subsequent two chapters shifted analysis to events taking place in public spaces, including streets, parks and neighbourhoods, where critical art practices took the form of temporal interventions in the cityscape. Chapter 5 discussed the possibilities and limitation of using art in areas of activism (artivism), specifically graffiti and carnivalesque protests, and suggested that its value in animating democracy lies in its ability to create new arenas for political engagement in Nairobi. Chapter 6 argued that neighbourhood graffiti projects provided opportunities for disenfranchised urban youth to enact forms of participation and appropriation to (re)make their city, and by doing so involve themselves in civic activities and processes of change. The case studies discussed in each chapter demonstrated the ways in which artistic practices and interventions arrested the domination of public space in Nairobi by capitalist and political forces, whilst effectively bringing public issues back into public space. In essence, these findings expand research on African cities, visited in the Introduction, by providing new research into the ways in which Nairobi's urban spaces generate new expressions in art and culture, which at time fashion sites where authority and power are creatively challenged.

In studying contemporary art practices happening within the institutions of Nairobi's galleries, museums, cultural institutes, and art-centres, alongside those practices occurring outside of them in alternative urban public spaces, this thesis has not argued for the privileging of one over the

other. Rather, I have aimed to recognise the multiplicity of avenues open for political engagement through the arts in Nairobi whilst understanding the potentiality of various art forms to reinvigorate democracy. Despite this diversity, a linking factor which this research demonstrated was that artists have shown unease at remaining silent during blatant attacks and infringements on the principles of Kenya's 2010 Constitution. Examples of instances in which artists have vociferously responded include: the persistence of grand corruption and impunity under the administration of Uhuru Kenyatta, in spite of his eloquent anti-corruption speeches; how the progressive rights of equality, dignity and freedom enshrined in the Kenyan Constitution are violated by Kenya's Penal Code which criminalises same-sex activity; the unconstitutional proposal to disband the Salaries and Remuneration Commission, in an effort to enable the salaries of MPs to be increased; and the continuing practice of exclusionary ethnic politics. Furthermore, this thesis established that artists routinely evoke Kenya's Constitution through their practice – embracing ideals enshrined in the Bill of Rights including those that protect the freedom to seek, receive or impart information or ideas, the right to assembly and demonstration, freedom from discrimination on any ground, and the freedom of artistic creativity.

Yet, in this study, the examination of art's potential to reinvigorate democracy is not limited to its articulation of issues raised by the implementation of the Constitution. In fact, I suggest that if it followed this route it would reduce the criteria for assessing art's capacity to animate democracy to moral judgements; whereby art which simply adheres to the constitution – whether through engaging with its themes, topics or actions - is deemed inherently good, and other interventions would be considered inferior. Rather, this thesis argued democracy's reinvigoration through visual art comes from its reiterating, reaffirming, reinstating and keeping alive the public sphere. The conceptual framework referenced in the Introduction laid out the key factors which I suggested were critical to understanding art's potential to assist in making this happen, and I now return to these through summary remarks to the study's four sub-questions.

1. *To what extent can it be suggested that contemporary visual artists are agents of change?*

This thesis asserted how time and again artists working in Nairobi in the 21st century reaffirm their passion for inquiry, their aptitude to travel in the world of ideas, and their capacity to convey the importance and complexity of those ideas through art. I have provided evidence of times when artists have acted for the marginalised and have amplified the voices of underrepresented and disadvantaged groups whose opinions or narratives are frequently suppressed (including artists speaking on behalf of victims of human trafficking, refugees and asylum seekers, the LGBT+ community, disenfranchised urban youth, and victims of electoral violence). Artists have spoken

out against injustices and social problems and have taken on those abusing their authority (such as: rebuking the language of ethnic chauvinism by Kenya MPs; protesting the numerous scandals since Uhuru Kenyatta took office; and laying bare the corrupt relationship between Beijing and African elites). Artists have shown courage, initiative and leadership in times of public trauma, and have displayed an unwillingness to remain on the side-lines when crises arise. They have used their work to introduce a dialogue of peace and promote inter-ethnic harmony; induce people to resist violence and reject 'political tribalism', and create space for reconciliation and healing amongst communities.

These actions have not been undertaken silently in the background. Rather artists have felt the responsibility and willingness to do so in public because they believe that their work will contribute to (re)framing debates, generate ideas for society, and can convince a larger public of the injustices that permeate their society. At times artists have taken risks to do so - working illegally in the dead of night to paint graffiti murals chastising the political elite's malpractices; putting their bodies on the front line during protests and demonstrations in the face of police brutality; or producing work and creating spaces for the celebration of queer love despite Kenya being no safe haven for LGBT+ people. Whilst occasionally (most notably during Kenya's PEV and the 2013 'peaceocracy') artists have acted as consensus-builders, more often than not they have used their work to raise questions (often uncomfortable ones), confront orthodoxy and dogma, and challenge the status quo. As such, this study makes the strong claim that contemporary visual artists share the type of traits of public intellectuals discussed in the Introduction, through the work of Maurice Amutabi and Edward Said. Despite the artists to whom this may apply being far fewer in number than otherwise, this is still significant. As considered in the Introduction, the literature on intellectual activity in Kenya has yet to seriously consider visual artists in the 21st century in this mode, or indeed recognise their role as change-makers who enter the struggle and fight for an improved social world. This thesis suggests otherwise and presents concrete evidence that artists too are activists and public intellectuals.

The case studies also explored how artists in Nairobi do not have a fixed identity and at times they work in different fields of activity, circumventing reliance on art institutions, donor funding and grants, while also taking selective advantage of commercial opportunities. In doing so, artists straddle multiple worlds which at times provide them with opportunities to continue their largely unprofitable critical art practice yet make a living. However, as examined in this thesis, these multiple worlds influenced art production. It is necessary here to briefly flag that numerous scholars writing on politically engaged art practices have suggested that the agency of artists in the 21st century has become eroded because of the artworld's fixation on profit. Sceptics in Kenya

were also vocal about the actions of artists not being altruistic or reflective of their desire to bring about change but instead suggest their practice signals their co-option by the market, foreign funders and/or donor agencies. This study found little evidence to support such claims for artists engaged in critical art practices and has provided confirmation that artist are willing to work, and indeed become politically and socially engaged, for reasons other than financial gain.

Furthermore, the concept of who an artist is became complicated during the more participatory and collaborative projects, including: Maasai Mbili's *Tiba Clinic* and *Art4Peace Healing Project*; Kevo Stero's *Jobless Corner Campus*; the community outreach project *Kibera Walls for Peace*; PAWA 254's carnivalesque protests; and neighbourhood graffiti projects. In these instances, the barriers of artist and audience were reduced or blurred as the authorship of ideas, artworks, and even the curation of activates was shared. A consequence of this, I argued, is that it created opportunities for new forms of civic engagement to be played out, where confidence, skills and aptitudes were developed which individuals could (and often did) carry into future projects, or other aspects of life, where they furthered possibilities of being agents of change.

Case studies demonstrated that both male and female contemporary visual artists perform as agents of change. However, this research also made apparent women artists have been few in number in Kenya. This is, in part, symptomatic of there being more male artists than others actively working within the arts scene in Nairobi. The cause of this, beyond societal expectations of gender roles in Nairobi, requires further study. Having said that, what this research brought into question was the extent to which the underrepresentation of women artists is perpetuated by Nairobi's art institutions, and the affect that the portrayal of women in contemporary art shapes their own creative outlook and position in society. Critically, given that at least half of Kenya's population is female, the consequence of the overrepresentation of male artists and their work has significant implications. Can any true notion of the public sphere and democracy's reinvigoration be spoken about when the ones speaking are disproportionately men?

2. *In what ways does contemporary visual art represent democratic aspirations?*

From painting, graffiti, photography and installation, to artivism, participatory art and community outreach projects, the art discussed in this thesis attests Nairobi's dynamic art scene in the 21st century and the diverse art forms, approaches and practices deployed in efforts to reinvigorate democracy. The use of humour and satire was one apparent tactic, and its application tended to be framed around making topics more palpable and engaging. The method of shock and awe was frequently evident in artivism, whereby the aim was to generate media-worthy spectacles.

Artworks typically exhibited in gallery type settings lent nuance to narratives which provided a strangeness or indifference to how certain issues or topics are usually considered. Conversely more participatory practices developed situations which brought people together, and at times forged new, or strengthened existing, relations. The broader framework of analysis in this study focused on understandings of the extent to which theses various art forms, practices and methods lent themselves to the manifestation of critical art - which I discussed in the Introduction with reference to the work of Chantal Mouffe. It is worth recalling here that Mouffe suggests that critical art aims to make visible what the dominant consensus obscures and aspires to give a voice to those silenced within the framework of the existing hegemony. To summarise the various ways in which artists in Nairobi have made critical art I follow Mouffe who turns to categories of making critical art put forward by Richard Noble (Mouffe 2008: 12-13).

First, there is the kind of art that engages in a critical way with political reality, whereby artists use art as political criticism by taking 'certain political or social processes as its subject matter [… in order to…] critically analyse and expose these' (Noble 2004: 53). Within this category I place the work of: Wambui Kamiru-Collymore and her rebuke of Kalonzo Musyoka's divisive rhetoric and interrogation into ethnic stereotyping in the exhibition *Your Name Betrays You*; Longinos Nagila's exhibition *Democracy My Piss* and its probing into the ambiguities of democracy; Michael Soi's *China Loves Africa* series which examined the symbiotic and often corrupt relationship between Beijing and African elites; Thom Ogonga's curatorial practice - notably the exhibition *Proximity to Power,* in which artists Onyis Martin, Longinos Nagila and Peterson Kamwathi dissected issues of political power in Kenya; and the forms of artistic activism (artivism) attributed to artists from PAWA 254 and their notion of challenging the existing consensus through graffiti and carnivalesque protests.

Second, there are artworks which explore subject positions or identities defined by otherness, marginality, oppression or victimisation (Noble 2004: 54). In this category I place the work of: Shabu Mwangi and the artist's *The Stateless* series created in response to his experience interacting with asylum seekers in Germany; Kawira Mwirichia's project *To Revolutionary Type Love* which gave visibility to the LGBT+ community; and similarly, the curatorial activism of Nyambura Waruingi in the project *27* which used art to create a space in which the work of the National Gay & Lesbian Human Rights Commission could be explored and discussed.

The other category I draw upon is 'utopian experimentation' (Noble 2004: 54). Noble suggests that for artworks to be utopian they need to offer 'a vision or intimation of a better place than the here and now we inhabit', alongside an insight into 'the contradictions and limitations that

drive our will to escape the here and now in the first place (Noble 2009:14). In this category I situate the work of: Maasai Mbili's participatory art project *Tiba Clinic* and its providing of an alternative to the alienating relations of capitalist ideology; neighbourhood graffiti projects and their reimagining of the urban as a better place to live and play; and elements of carnivalesque protests in which for a brief period life escaped the mundane, the world turned upside down, and the everyday was replaced with visons of utopia.

The case studies examined attest to the ways in which diverse forms of critical art practice represent democratic aspirations in 21st century Nairobi. This is not to argue that contemporary art is the only medium which has highlighted and challenged what the dominant consensus tends to obscure. Rather, what the case studies in this research demonstrate is art's capacity to generate and harness affect that different registers of communication can rarely match. Given that recently considerable attention has been placed on contemporary African art's extraordinary growth in the global art market, this research is timely. This is because it shifts attention to the social and political roles of contemporary art and its capacity to engender change for the local populace.

Having said that, this thesis also raised the possibilities for art to deaden democracy, rather than reinvigorate it. This was evident in relation to the kinds of exploitative voyeurism arguably employed in the A2ES exhibition campaigns against human trafficking; the perpetuation of negative stereotypical tropes of women found in some of Michael Soi's paintings; the act of animal cruelty during tactics of artivism; and other work which plays a role in maintaining the given order. Furthermore, I argued there is a need to remain attentive to the influence that donor funders and development organisations have on realigning concepts of socially and politically engaged art. It should be noted, however, that this was particularly the case for those donors and organisations whose specialisation is not related to the arts. This is because - whilst they provide significant patronage to artists and support art's dissemination to a public – in some instances it became evident that rather than exploring the possibilities of supporting critical art practices they limit art's role to that of articulating NGO aesthetics.

3. *How do the sites in which art is made public in Nairobi assist in animating the public sphere?*

In their work on the intersection of democracy and art, discussed in the Introduction, Love and Mattern (2013) suggested that the arts expand current, or fashion entirely new, sites where the public can be drawn into civic and political engagement. I have provided examples of such sites

manifesting in Nairobi since Kenya's independence. In the period of 2013-2017, I argued, Nairobi's art institutions have demonstrated a capacity to perform as sites where exhibitions have facilitated interactions additional to their more familiar function of introducing contemporary art to a public. They also became sites for casual and formal exchange and dialogue, fashioned safe spaces facilitating discourses of inclusion and diversity where risks could be taken and opinions shared; and in that context they have provided platforms for challenging ideas and beliefs. This study also made evident how at other times entirely new sites in which art was made public assisted in animating the public sphere. In these instances, temporary and ephemeral places were created that invited participation for the contesting and re-negotiation of urban space, and where forms of agency and citizenship were played out. I suggest that this is significant because together these sites represent agonistic spaces where alternative passions, conflict and the airing of opposite views were not suppressed but instead became inhabited by pluralism.

As explored in the literature on the public sphere, if only certain truths are permitted and alternative opinions silenced the public sphere no longer works in the public's interest. While the public sphere in Kenya has expanded exponentially through the 21st century, trends during Kenyatta's first term in office pointed to its erosion. Reference was made to how since 2013 there have been several attempts by the Kenyan State to constrain civic and democratic space - including efforts to amend the regulation of civil society organisations and frustrate the operations and work of journalists, bloggers, activists, human rights defenders, members of the opposition, and ordinary citizens. Premised on this, art's expansion and fashioning of sites that animate the public sphere carries weight in reinvigorating democracy. Having said that, what became evident in this research is that - like other arenas of the public sphere - the sites in which art is made public in Nairobi are also, at times, co-opted, manipulated and censored by different powers in society. Examples discussed include the State Corporation of the Nairobi National Museum (NNM) which - despite being governed by the Constitution of Kenya - frequently removed or prohibited more explicit work that was critically oriented (and even withdrew an entire exhibition) because they disturbed the institution's - and, to an extent, society's - conservative sensibilities. Additionally, carnivalesque protests often felt the repressive response of the authorities who disregarded the right of assembly enshrined in Kenya's Constitution - revealing, what I described as, the postcolonial State's moment of violent carnival. Furthermore, whilst it was argued that commercial galleries occasionally acted as sites for the distribution of critical art, more often than not (perhaps unsurprisingly) this was not the case as commercial imperatives remained the principal determining factors for exhibitions.

There are many Nairobis, it was suggested in the Introduction, and each one has its own registers of inclusion and exclusion. This research made apparent that the sites in which art is made public in Nairobi also speak to this spatiality – rendered through economic factors (including entrance charges and transport costs), issues of security (notably the threat of violence from authorities at organised protests), and geographic location. Expanding on this last point, there are noticeable demarcations to what and where certain art practices tend to be made public in the city. There is Nairobi's CBD where its cultural centres and museums are located, and where carnivalesque protests generally take place. Nairobi's commercial galleries are positioned in middle-class and wealthy neighbourhoods. Following the collapse of Kuona Trust, art-centres are more often than not situated in lower income neighbourhoods and informal settlements. And, it is also here where the majority of community outreach and public art projects take place. In effect this creates a form of cultural segregation because the various sites which operate within these diverse spaces project their own ideas of what constitutes contemporary art to whatever audience inhabits them.

A consequence of this, I suggest, is that a false dichotomy is created in which art made for gallery settings (such as canvas paintings, sculptures, prints, and installation art) is perceived to be for the purview of the middle classes, whereas art sited in Nairobi's poorer neighbourhoods resonates with the populace only when it is community based or through the medium of murals. However, I contend this separation is primarily based on economics more than anything else, where the drive to create a market for contemporary art trumps the potential for its social role. Evidence has shown this contradiction to be false, given that there have been noticeable times when art commonly found in the city's galleries was distributed to, and appreciated by, a public in the city's informal settlements - often at open air exhibitions, repurposed social halls, or art-centres such as Maasai Mbili. Yet this separation exits - and, for the most part, continues today - which has clear implications for the ways in which public art effects animating the public sphere.

A further site for art's distribution is through the internet and social media platforms, and this requires acknowledgement of its role in linking critical art practices to a wider public. Of mention in this study was how various online sites, especially national and international news platforms as well as Twitter, prolonged the impact of carnivalesque protests whose performance in public spaces is otherwise ephemeral. Consequently, the internet and online sites can give a longevity to temporary practices and help make art available to anyone with the access to appropriate technology.

The many sites discussed above are not to be considered as substitutes for other influential arenas that animate the public sphere. Rather, what this study argues is that the volatility and fragmentation of Kenya's public sphere (which goes through episodes of expansion and contraction) can at times be opened up through the arts, where new sites for the populace to exercise the freedom to engage in divergent ideas and actions emerge.

4. *How does public engagement with contemporary visual art enrich democracy?*

This thesis argued that democracy became enriched owing to the public's critical consciousness being awakened through engagement with contemporary visual art. The case studies examined demonstrated how these engagements varied considerably. On the one hand, this consisted of forms of spectatorship which offered individuals and groups moments for reflection, contemplation, or triggered responses which produced new perceptions of the world. On the other, public engagement with art involved an activation of the audience through means of participation, generating opportunities for individuals and groups to realise their capacity in direct action and creating change. It is also necessary to raise the point that engagement with art often went hand in hand with the creation of spaces for a public to gather, where affinities of solidarity were built and people became empowered by making themselves seen or heard.

Rather than simply assuming such outcomes arose from the public's engagement with art, this research sought to provide evidence to support the proposition. This was gathered through observing and speaking with members of the public who attended art exhibitions and with those who experienced graffiti murals or were participant in carnivalesque protests. This was often supplemented through deeper insights gleaned through focus group discussions and interviews with members of the public or participants of art projects, in addition to survey data from the general public (in the case of the neighbourhood graffiti projects). Furthermore, evidence of art's impact on the public was collected through anecdotes, provided by artists, project participants, and members of the public. It would be naïve to suggest that critical consciousness is raised for everyone who engages with critical art, or that it moves people in the same way. Research in this thesis demonstrated how at times the public's engagement with the same artwork resulted in profoundly different reactions – such as imagery exhibited during the *Picha Mtaani* exhibitions, or the use of live animals in areas of artivism. However, there is convincing evidence to support the argument that engagement with art can enrich democracy, whilst arguably such public engagement with art has instilled a fuller sense of equality as cultural and human needs are better met.

This research principally examined public engagement with art through observations of those who experienced it first-hand. The extent to which democracy is enriched by critical art experienced through mediated sources - such as social media sites, news platforms and printed media – requires future research. Additionally, a factor which constrains art's potential to enrich democracy further is the small proportion of the population engaged. Art exhibitions in the city's various institutions tended to attract only a few hundred of people. Of note, however, is that the majority of audience members today are local, whereas a decade ago this this was not the case. Thousands of urban dwellers in Nairobi come across the city's public art forms such as graffiti murals, but these are thrust upon them and engagement is varied. The brief interventions of carnivalesque protests may attract hundreds of people and be witnessed by those who are in the city at that given moment, but wider public engagement often revolves around the extent to which the protests garner media coverage. There is, however, a scalability to many of these project that has yet to be fully exploited in order to engage a larger public, which could extend beyond the confines of Nairobi.

Whilst the public's engagement with the art practices discussed throughout this thesis lend themselves to awakening a critical consciousness amongst segments of the population, its continual production and distribution in Nairobi will only ever reinvigorate democracy to a certain degree. Consequently, I follow the perspective of Claire Bishop and Chantal Mouffe who suggest that at some point art must build synergies with other political projects, interventions, and institutions, if wider social change is to be achieved (Mouffe 2013: 126-7; Bishop 2012: 283-284). In this regard, of note is Boniface Mwangi's launch of the Ukweli Party in 2017 which he used as a means to campaign for election as MP for Nairobi's Starehe constituency. His campaign came on the back of spending years agitating for change and critiquing the corrupt political elite through artivism initiatives associated with the organisation PAWA 254, which he founded in 2011. Despite not winning the Starehe seat – being beaten by musician-turned-politician Jaguar, who had the backing of the ruling party and significantly more resources to influence the outcome – Mwangi's campaign proved radical in many ways. It mobilised at the grassroots level and fundraised by launching a crowd-funding campaign (seen to be a first in Kenya). The Ukweli Party also prioritised policy and avoided the rhetoric of 'tribal' party politics. In effect the campaign offered a glimpse to the possibility of a generational shift in the ways politics is done - something also seen in neighbouring Uganda with the election to MP of popular singer and activist Bobi Wine – who is a staunch critic of President Yoweri Museveni.

As a concluding remark, in the 21st century democracy continues to be questioned and challenged globally. In Kenya, the second term of Uhuru Kenyatta's presidency (following his re-election in 2017) shows no evidence of change in direction as previously made democratic gains continue to rollback. For example, in January 2018 several of Kenya's most popular TV stations were pulled off the air for their planned coverage of the mock presidential inauguration of opposition leader Raila Odinga. Two months later, in March 2018, eight leading newspaper columnists resigned from Kenya's largest media group (the Nation), citing a growing infringement on media freedom and a loss in editorial independence. Also in 2018, the Kenya Film Classification Board (KFCB) banned the film *Rafiki* (Friend), by award winning film maker Wanuri Kahiu, from being exhibited anywhere in Kenya due to its gay theme – seen by many as an act of reintroducing censorship in a country with an expansive Bill of Rights and guarantees (Njogu 2018). Seemingly, these examples point towards lingering antagonistic relations in Kenya between an 'us' and 'them', where one sees the other as an enemy to be silenced and destroyed. This thesis has demonstrated the extent to which artists counter such dichotomies and their incompatibility with democracy through the form of 'agonism' - where the 'us' and 'them' becomes a struggle, in the Mouffean sense, between adversaries whose ideas are to be challenged. Yet, if democracy is to survive as the preferred method of popular participation in politics - through which the populace can push for change and have the opportunity to address the problems facing society - then opportunity for agency and spaces for this to transpire must be made available to all citizens. As this thesis has argued, contemporary visual art can offer possibilities for this to happen and be participant in the struggle for democracy. Art can be a means to perform democracy and to interrogate, question and offer ideas as to whether the current form of democracy being practiced is suited for contemporary times. And, in so doing, it can help transform the areas that are - inevitably at times - in need of reinvigorating.

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Appendices

Appendix I

Example list of interview questions for artists, activists, and cultural workers

- Do you feel there are any barriers for your development in Kenya's art scene?
- If anything, what would you like your artwork to achieve, why, and to what extent do you think this can be achieved within the environment you operate?
- In your opinion what are the most prominent art institutions in Nairobi and why?
- What is it about art, as a medium or tool, which enables it to be used so well in community outreach projects/awareness raising?
- As well as identifying yourself as an artists do you also see yourself as an activist or a driver of social change?
- Who is your target audience for your work, and what do you feel the factors are which enable, or prohibit, them from being reached?
- What is the interest of contemporary visual art in your local community?
- In what ways do Nairobi's art institutions/market/donor funding support or create obstacles for the creation of a critical art practice?
- What do you feel democracy is in the Kenya context?
- Where do you think that Kenyans learn about the issues that you address in your work, does art create alternative spaces for these issues to be brought to the publics' attention?
- In what ways, if any, do you feel the Kenyan art scene has changed since you have been a part of it?
- What impact, if any, do you feel the [PEV/new Constitution/Jubilee Government] has had on [society/Kenyan arts and culture/artists/democracy]?

- Do you feel the level of freedom of expression that exists in Kenya has changed for better or worse over the past 1/3/5/10/15 years, and if so how, and are you able to provide examples?
- Do you think the publics' perception of, and attitude towards, being an artist, has changed over the past decade or so?
- Who are the main visitors/audience to the art exhibitions in this space, why do you feel that this space attracts that audience and to what extent does this represent a spectrum of Kenyan society?
- What support is the Kenyan government providing the visual arts?
- Have you noticed a change in who the audience is at art exhibitions over the past 1/3/5/10/15 years?
- What impact, if any, do you feel foreign donors and NGOs have had on the field of art in Nairobi during the 21st century?
- What does activism mean for you and in what ways can art be an ally in activist initiatives?
- What do you think it is about graffiti or street art that resonates so well with citizens with such a good medium to use to be able to get the message across that you want?

The in-depth interviews conducted by Craig Halliday with artists, activists and cultural workers, which were used to inform this study, are as follows:

Name of interviewee	Location interview took place	Date of interview
Aggrey Agwata	Java, Junction	19/11/2018
Allan Githuka	Studio, Ngecha	22/10/2017
Anitah Kavochy	Maasai Mbili Art Centre, Kibera	13/08/2016
Baba Mdogo	Satellite	20/01/2018
Bantu	Railway Museum	03/08/2016
Blaine 29	Railway Museum	03/08/2016
Boniface Maina	Brush Tu, Buru Buru	12/10/2016
Boniface Mwangi	PAWA 254	14/08/2015
Carol Lees	One Off Gallery, Rosslyn	02/08/2015
Celeste	Online	14/03/2018
Chela	PAWA 254	09/11/2018
Cyrus Kabiru	Studio, Ruiru	10/02/2017
Danda Jaroljmek	Circle Art Gallery, Lavington	26/05/2017
Eddie Picasso	Industrial Area	21/01/2018
Elizabeth Mazuri	Pizza Inn, Limuru Road	03/10/2017
Erick Matsanza	August 7th Memorial Park	19/10/2017

Etale Sukuro	Java, Junction	16/01/2018
Evanson Njuguna	Tafuta Art Centre, Ngecha	11/01/2018
Franziska Lukas	Goethe-Institut Nairobi, CBD	16/02/2017
Godfrey Mwampembwa (Gado)	Buni Media offices, CBD	07/01/2018
Gikonyo Maina	Java, Junction	11/10/2017
Hellmuth Rossler-Musch	Red Hill Art Gallery	04/08/2015
Ibra	Dust Depot	08/08/2016
Igah	Daily Nation, CBD	14/12/2017
Joel Bergner	Online	19/10/2016
John Adoli	Kibera Hamlets	30/07/2015 13/02/2017
John Kamicha	Kuona Trust, Hurlingham	06/08/2015
Joseph Bertiers	Studio, Karen	16/11/2018
Judy Ogana	Java, Lavington	24/11/2018
Kahare Miano	Kileleshwa	04/03/2018
Kelly	Berlin self Help Group, California	09/11/2018
Kennedy Chindi	Mathare Social Justice Centre	17/01/2018
Kerosh Kiruri	California Dust Depot	27/07/2016 08/08/2018
Kevo Stero	Annex Pub, Kibera	13/04/2017
Kibacia Gatu	Paa ya Paa, Ridgeways	30/01/2018
Kimani Nyoike	Java, Junction	29/12/2017
King Dodge	Ngecha Art Centre	13/01/2018
Leonida Odongo	Java, CBD	20/12/2017
Longinos Nagila	Kuona Trust, Hurlingham	10/10/2016
Lydia Galavu	Nairobi National Museum	22/02/2017
Maddo	Buni Media offices, CBD	05/03/2018
Margaretta Gacheru	Nairobi National Museum	08/12/2017
Martin Njuguna Mugo	Java, CBD	10/01/2018
Mbuthia Maina	Maasai Mbili Art Centre, Kibera	26/01/2018
Michael Musyoka	Brush Tu, Buru Buru	12/10/2016
Michael Soi	GoDown Arts Centre, South B	17/10/2017
Michael Wills	Dust Depot	08/08/2018
Morris Foit	Home, Ngecha	11/01/2018
Mwini Mutuku	Studio, Kitisuru	28/ 03/2017
Mzalendo Mulingwa Garang	Kenya National Theatre	08/01/2018
Onyis Martin	The Kobo Trust, Dagoretti	05/02/2017
Otieno Gomba	Maasai Mbili Art Centre, Kibera Annex Pub, Kibera	30/07/2015 13/04/2017
Otieno Kota	Maasai Mbili Art Centre, Kibera	26/01/2018
Otieno Rabala	Maasai Mbili Art Centre, Kibera	24/07/2015
Patrick Gathara	Java, Gigiri	23/11/2018
Patrick Mukabi	Dust Depot	26/01/2018
Peterson Kamwathi	Studio, Kiambu	31/10/2017
Rob Burnet	Well Told Story office, Karen	27/11/2018
Robert Munuku	Heinich Boell Foundation, Parklands	21/04/2017

Shabu Mwangi	Wajukuu art center, Lunga Lunga, Mukuru	04/08/2015 11/03/2017
Shine Tani	Banana Hill Gallery	28/04/2015
Slyvia Gichia	Kuona Trust, Hurlingham	06/08/2015
Solomon Muyundo (Solo 7)	Annex Pub, Kibera	06/04/2017
Sophie Otiendo	Awareness Against Human Trafficking offices, South B	24/10/2016
Steve Kyenze	Nyota Arts, Kibera	09/09/2016
Suzanne Mieko Thomson	Java, Valley Arcade	20/12/2017
Swift 9	Railway Museum	08/08/2018 26/01/2018
Tabitha wa Thuku	Groganville Estate	08/11/2018
Thom Ogonga	Kuona Trust, Hurlingham Studio, Lower Kabete	10/08/2015 24/11/2017
Tola	Maasai Mbili Art Centre, Kibera	16/11/2018
Tony Mboya	Satellite	20/01/2018
Ubax Abdi	Community Centre, California	26/08/2016
Vic Ndula	Lion Place, Westlands	14/12/2017
Victor Mwangi	Pumwani	30/07/2016
Wambui Kamiru-Collymore	Kuona Trust, Hurlingham	13/08/2015
Wanyu Brush	Home, Ngecha	11/01/2018
Wiki Opondo	Kuona Trust, Hurlingham	06/12/2016 22/11/2018
Zarina Patel	Home, Embakasi	02/02/2018

Appendix II

Graffiti in public spaces (public survey)														
I identify my gender as - ✓	Male		Female											
Age - ✓	Under 18		18-25		26-30		31-35		36-40		41-64		65 +	

From your own experiences to what extent do you agree or disagree with these statements	Completely disagree	Disagree	Neither Agree or disagree	Somewhat agree	Completely agree
1. The murals (painting / graffiti) makes the area more attractive					
2. The words and pictures in the murals (painting / graffiti) send out positive messages to people in this community					
3. The murals (painting / graffiti) make this area feel safer					
4. People look after/respect the area where the murals (painting / graffiti) are compared to before					
5. I have spent time looking at the murals (painting / graffiti) and speaking about it with friends or family					
6. The murals (painting / graffiti) help make the neighbourhood fell more like a community					
7. It is the responsibility of the community to look after the murals (painting / graffiti)					
8. The images or writing in the murals (painting / graffiti) are immoral or against our beliefs					
9. Before the murals (painting / graffiti) the walls and/or buildings looked uninspiring					
10. I would like to see more murals (painting / graffiti) in this area					

The above survey was conducted in three areas of Nairobi (California, Eastleigh and Pumwani) where the neighbourhood graffiti project (which was part of the 2016 SAMOSA Festival) took place. In California the survey was conducted around Desa Ground and its adjoining streets (including Marimbi Street). In Pumwani the survey was conducted along Meru Road. In Eastleigh the survey was conducted outside St Teresa Boys Primary School and its adjoining streets (including Eastleigh First Avenue and Captain Mungai Street).

In each area a questionnaire was completed by 50 members of the public (150 members of the public in total) who identified as residents of the neighbourhood. The demographic of those who answered the questionnaire was a 50/50 male/female split. The age breakdown of those who completed the survey in each area is as follows:

Location	Age and gender of respondents (m=male f=female)						
	<18	18-25	26-30	31-35	36-40	41-64	65>
California	0	15 m8 / f7	17 m8 / f9	08 m4 / f4	05 m3 / f2	03 m1 / f2	02 f2
Eastleigh	0	14 m8 / f6	14 m7 / f7	10 m6 / f4	06 m3 / f3	04 m2 / f2	02 m1 / f1
Pumwani	0	12 m6 / f6	14 m6 / f8	12 m6 / f6	06 m4 / f2	05 m2 / f3	01 f1

The survey was conducted over two days in December 2016 - exactly four months after the neighbourhood graffiti project took place, and during a time when all of the public artworks created during the project were still present.