

STREET ART: A FORM OF EXPRESSIVE ART FOR POLITICAL CHANGE

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ABSTRACT

Background: Street art, urban art, or graffiti has become a voice for social change. It has greatly been used to push boundaries and make statements in the country. Street artists are engaging in activism and community development in a unique way extending remits of art transformative ability. Street art is a powerful tool that has brought rise to resistance movements and publicized protests. **Problem:** Data murals have been used to visually display relevant localized information as an outlet to empower community members to engage in dialogues that make data-driven arguments with local authorities which has worked at times in place of media but not fully embraced. This paper digs deep into how much influence graffiti art has in the rise and fall of issues and movement not forgetting the voice it has given to the political and social sectors in Kenya. **Objective:** This paper seeks to establish how many issues have been raised via graffiti and the reactive change that has occurred in the socio-political world, also to demonstrate the power of communication anonymously without the fear of critics. **Design:** The paper has used qualitative and quantitative methods with a case study of a few graffiti artists and their works of art. **Setting:** The study was carried out in Nairobi. **Subject:** The paper studies street art touching on a few graffiti artists. **Results:** The research results revealed that graffiti has prompted people to question some of the issues affecting them and in turn demand change. it has also shade light on numerous injustices that the artists have been able to spray away without criticism but as a way to create awareness to the masses. **Conclusion:** This paper concluded that graffiti artists have a major role to play in society for they are at the center of the action. The organization PAWA 254 has proactively used street art in campaigns and protests raising critical awareness around issues of corruption, land grabbing, oppression, brutality, injustice, electoral violence, tribalism, and governance issues.

Keywords: graffiti, socio-political change

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Placing visual art in Nairobi's open spaces extends possibilities for social transformation. Street art has been used globally for publicizing protests and resistance movements, while creating public socio-political spaces of engagement. Public spaces are recognized 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. It is here where people meet, interact, form collective memories, identities, meanings and construct themselves, city life and space. These areas are important for improving community cohesion, and contributing to the overall quality of life and civic identity. However increased urbanization, population growth, land grabbing, insecurity, poor planning and lack of resources has put public space at risk in Nairobi. Therefore Street art has been a means of education, awareness raising, increasing knowledge and molding public attitudes; which encourage constructive behaviors that can lead to a peaceful co-existence, mutual respect, common goals and aspirations.

2.0 THEORY

The desire of people to leave their mark on walls has been around for thousands of years. Archaeologists have found graffiti scratched on walls in the city of Pompeii as old as 1908. The term "graffiti" comes from the Greek "graphein," meaning "to scratch, draw, or write," and thus a broad definition of the term includes all forms of inscriptions on walls. More specifically, however, the modern, or "hip-hop" graffiti, that has pervaded city spaces since the 1960s and 1970s involves the use of spray paint or paint markers. It is associated with a particular aesthetic, most often utilizing bold color choices, involving highly stylized and abstract lettering known as "wildstyle,"

Once considered a primitive art form aligned with the seemingly unrooted hip hop movement, graffiti art has evolved from a street style resigned to the walls of buildings and subways to fine art that graces the walls of the world's galleries and mirrors the contracted murals. It is more than the spray-painted arrowed words of teenagers; its artists now employ various styles and mediums. Graffiti art embodies illusionist realism, pop art, modernism, and three-dimensional statutes. English-born artist, Banksy (2003) noted the complexity of the art form, citing that "Graffiti is one of the few tools you have if you have almost nothing. And even if you don't come up with a picture to cure world poverty you can make someone smile while they're having a piss". Arguably present since ancient history but with a modern emergence in the late 1960s, graffiti has become the visual language of social equity, personal expression, and integral art.

3.0 STUDY METHODOLOGY

The researcher collects data from journals, articles, essays websites in order to qualitatively analyze the origin of street art and track the impact it has had on today's society, striking a balance in the

socio-political sectors and well as the embrace of street art as an effective mode of voicing challenges of the common wananchi where voice is needed.

4.0 FINDINGS

4.1 Graffiti as a form of art

Graffiti are symbols or writings that have been painted, scribbled or scratched onto walls or other surfaces and are often within public view (Gottlieb 2008). there several forms of street art however four are predominant.

i) Tags are the most basic ones and are most the artists signatures in one color.



Fig. 1. tag a form of graffiti.

ii) Throw ups come after tags and are more advanced, consisting of one-color outline and one-color fill.



Fig. 2. throw up a form of graffiti

iii) Pieces which are usually three dimensional and incorporate several colors as well as effects.



Fig. 3. pieces, a form of graffiti.

Finally, murals that cover a whole wall, made of several colors and effects.



Fig. 4. mural, a form of graffiti.

4.2 The Street as a Public Space (A canvas for Peace and Cohesion)

The organizations working in the poor settlements of Korogocho, Kariobangi, Kibera and Mathare have been using street art; while actively engaging their communities (particularly youth) as resources in urban transformation; in order to (re)claim the ‘street’ as public space, while strengthening community cohesion and fostering peace. Land allocated to streets in Nairobi is just 11.5%, however, this drops hugely for informal settlements; for example 3% in Kibera. 47% of people’s main form of transport in Nairobi is walking streets become the spine of all communities, connecting the city, playing a prominent role in shaping its culture and history.

‘*Sauti Ya Mtaa*’ (SYM) uses ‘data murals’ to visually display relevant and localized information enabling communities to become better informed on issues pertinent to their lives. In Mathare SYM discussed issues of insecurity, extrajudicial 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.

‘Hope Raisers Initiative’ (HRI) uses street art to aesthetically transform the streets of Korogocho through messages of hope and peace. Since 2014 over 1.5km of surfaces in public spaces have been painted. Both SYM and HRI projects inspire young artists in these neighborhoods. Kerosh, a Kenyan graffiti artist, who works with both SYM and HRI says:

“The community appreciate what we are doing. We involve them, consult them and they help us come up with ideas for the artworks, that way we see so much interaction, especially with the youth. The youth have been neglected in every part of planning or every part of making the community their own. When they have an avenue where they can be involved in creating the change they want, which also engages them with a form of self-expression, then it gives them a sense of responsibility and also 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.”

The use of street art as a means to foster peace and social cohesion has been used across Nairobi. The “Kibera Walls for Peace” project, implemented in 2013 by Kibera Hamlets (KH), local children,



Fig. 5. graffiti on a mabati house in korogocho.

American artist Joel Bergner and Kenyan graffiti artists, used street art to promote peace, understanding and cooperation between groups within Kibera; contributing towards a large peace narrative across all media platforms in the run up to Kenya's 2013 elections.

The murals used a mixture of imagery and text (coming from the youth and community consultations) covering 'tribalism', corruption, unity, peace and reconciliation. Some imagery and text was straight to the point; such as "*Kabila Langu ni m'Kenya*" (My tribe is Kenya), "*Amani ni Kusameheana*" (Peace is Forgiveness), "*Vijana Tuishi Kwa Amani*" (Youth we live for peace), and "*Tuwache Ukabila, Tuwache Ubaguzi, Tuishi Kwa Amani*" (Down with tribalism, down with prejudice, up with peace). The use of characters in other murals offered a less confrontational means of communicating sensitive or unspoken topics in society.



Fig. 6. a mural speaking against tribalism on a wall in Kibera

The use of street art has transformed once neglected sites into spaces of greater public use which feel valued, are enjoyed and provide a sense of ownership and pride. In Korogocho, a neighborhood where few people visited, people now come from all over Nairobi to see the graffiti, especially musicians who have gotten space for their creative music videos. The involvement of youth in planning and decision-making activities regarding the visual transformation of their community's spaces shines a positive light on their potential as agents of change; while also inspiring new generations into art, social transformation and ensuring their voices are heard.

4.3 Graffiti or protest and dissent

Street art, graffiti, has a history of being a means and medium to voice dissent and protest. The organization PAWA 254 has proactively used street art in its campaigns and protests – raising critical awareness around issues of corruption, land grabbing, oppression, brutality, injustice electoral violence, tribalism and governance issues. One popular campaign led by Boniface Mwangi and Kenya’s top graffiti artists was ‘MaVulture’ which drew attention to endemic issues of bad governance, corruption, and abuse of office perpetrated by the political class.

While graffiti might be debated as art or crime, it is much more than both an indicator of important groups and subcultures that operate amongst us on a daily basis. Graffiti itself demonstrates the strong differences that can occur amongst people who hold radically opposing views and beliefs. Graffiti is much more than just art, it is a voice for channeling opinions about the beliefs that we cherish namely our rights to private property, good governance and freedom of expression (Sechrest & Olson, 1971).

Art is very complex... but art is very simple at the same time as a tool for communication. The power of art makes you stop and think, makes you stop and feel emotional about it... Art goes beyond gender, age, social background, class, race, sexual orientation, because art drives life, without art there is no life. - Mwangi.

The media has often failed the common mwananchi in more way than one hence PAWA254 and a few graffiti artist felt the need and responsibility to voice the issues affecting the nation.

In March 2012 the people of Kenya’s capital city, Nairobi, woke up to discover a large mural painted on a city wall along Muindi Mbingu Street by creative activists with a political message. The mural showed a Kenyan member of parliament, depicted with a vulture’s head, wearing a black suit and sitting on an expensive chair. Around the vulture-headed lawmaker was a list of social and economic problems that plague Kenya, such as ethnic discrimination, corruption, land grabs and famine. Below the piece were the words; “MP’s screwing Kenyans since 1963”.



Fig. 7. a mural protesting political injustice.

A high number of Kenyans live in poverty and Nairobi is home to the second largest urban slum on the African continent, Kibera. Yet the members of the ruling elite, upper and middle-class live extravagant and lavish lifestyles. The murals reflect popular dissatisfaction with the ruling class and represent a hope for a future with reliable leaders.



Fig. 8. graffiti entitled 'mavulture', depicting leaders as vultures.

They call for an end to the egocentric ruling class. The murals caution Kenyan citizens against ethnic rivalry and tensions, selling their votes, or allowing themselves to be manipulated by the power-hungry corrupt elite. They are heaped with challenging content.

Graffiti artists are often very secretive about their identities. The art itself is usually practiced secretly or at times illegally. It is the nature of graffiti that makes society draw misconceptions about the art form. Getting a graffiti artist is also not an easy task. Their secretive nature forces anyone interested in contacting one to know someone within the subculture who will act as a gate-way to the artist (unknown, 2014).

So far, the artists behind the graffiti have largely remained anonymous. Perhaps the only identified person who works behind the scenes is Boniface Mwangi. Mwangi is an award-winning photo journalist who has interestingly been banned from Facebook for apparently being too politically outspoken. He has also won the CNN Photojournalist of the Year award.

When secondary school students feel like other avenues of voicing their concerns have been blocked by authority, they usually turn to graffiti to communicate. Communicative strategies such as irony, short forms, humor, symbolisms, abbreviations and acronyms are used by students when they write or paint their graffiti. School administrators have divided views on graffiti. Some view it as a nuisance while others feel it is a very important avenue for gaining insight into the student mind (Mwangi 2012). Mwangi also documented the violence that shook Kenya in 2008 after the highly disputed presidential election in December 2007. He witnessed neighbors of different ethnic groups who had previously lived peacefully side-by-side turn against each other. This experience may have been the turning point that drove Mwangi into political activism. Afterwards, he founded Picha Mtaani, an organization aimed at contributing to community reconciliation after the post-election violence. He has referred to the members of parliament as "scavengers".

With the help of various connections and friends, including German graffiti artist Markus Quintin, also known as Tona, Mwangi and the anonymous group of artists launched the street art project. The artist's work at night, completing works that usually take weeks to finish in only a couple of hours. They

draw caricatures and paint slogans targeting members of parliament at traffic lights on major streets.

In acceptance of the truth

In Kenya, like elsewhere, it is illegal to deface other people's property yet property owners will not have to worry about cheap landlord insurance with the government cracking down on the graffiti. Within 24 hours, the first mural was covered up with blue paint by officials from the City Council.

These projects tell the stories that the mainstream media ignores through using art to speak to and for the people. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the murals gained almost immediate attention and got people talking. The majority of the citizens agree with the message of the murals, regarding them as truths that have been kept silent for long enough. The general opinion is that when the common people speak, the parliament never listens. On the other hand, some members of parliament have called the murals unfair, overly emotional and lacking facts and critical analysis of the role Kenyan members of parliament play. With the parliament paying attention, perhaps the graffiti are speaking in place of the common mwananchi.

More murals have come up across Nairobi, drawn in locations where crowds are known to pass by or gather, and where politicians on their way to parliament will be sure to catch a glimpse of the latest work targeting them specifically. This unfortunately doesn't say that change is coming, perception of both the parliament and the people is what determines how the nation will handle that particular issue. Graffiti artists however pave way for conversations regardless of how it is accepted by both parties, all the hope to do is shade light to the horrors that eat up our nation slowly by slowly hoping to cut the head of the snake before doom strikes.

The artworks present a clear challenge to the hegemonic and their (mis)practices; with all political parties coming under attack no one is favored. The metaphor of vulture continues to be used. It was also appropriated in a number of popular music videos which advocated for peace and how everyday Kenyans hold the power to change the status quo.

According to Lannert 2015 there is a rebellious and artistic characteristic to graffiti art which evokes two opposite reactions from the society. Graffiti is perceived as destruction of property, a gang related activity or some sort of revolt. At the same time, graffiti art is present in art galleries and museums as valued art. It is much to dismiss a name that has been scribbled on a dustbin than take a closer look and wonder why it has been written there.

The effect that graffiti has on its audience is possibly the most note-worthy input to the graffiti culture. Graffiti has been referred to as a voice of the public that allows them to speak out in a witty and brief manner on social, economical and political issues. The issues portrayed are usually very significant and capable of inspiring surprise and amusement within a graffiti observer who may have bumped into graffiti art unexpectedly. The graffiti subculture has grown immensely in previous years, largely due to the simplicity of access through social media (Bates 2014).

4.4 Graffiti for social change

Mundane who is Brazilian street artist says "graffiti is a powerful tool to communicate social and environmental issues, because it's a cool language and it is art; art can touch people in a different way. "he uses graffiti to talk about recycling something which people consider boring hence graffiti is a cool

and fun way of conveying such messages. He says the best thing about graffiti is that it is public and everybody can see it. It is very different from museums and exhibitions that are not easily accessible and are often hidden away from a large percentage of the public. Graffiti is therefore democratic (D'Arcy 2018) According to Chinoy (2017) good art has the power to educate and create empathy. It is empathy that brings change. Freedom of expression thrives only where the art thrives. Art has the ability to empower the most vulnerable members of the society directly. Chinoy uses film to tell stories of vulnerable members of the society and he believes that stories of resilience and injustices are all over the world and waiting to be told.

The peace train project saw several graffiti artists work together with the Kibera walls for peace team to create a massive peace mural along an entire side of a commuter train which passes by Kibera. This project was important because Kibera slums saw rioters tear up and destroy the train tracks during the 2007 post-election violence. The artwork displayed messages of peace for the upcoming elections with the main phrase *"tuwache ukabila, tuwache ubaguzi, tuishi kwa amani"* ("Paintings on the wall", 2014).

Kenyan graffiti is not a permanent art. it is interesting how murals can take months to complete



Fig. 9. Image of the peace train.

only to stay up for a week as the wall is brought down. Street graffiti contains more message that is community based but can also be abstract and beautiful. Each graffiti speaks its own message and when it appears people listen.

5.0 CONCLUSION

Putting workmanship into networks uncovered sections of society to components of contemporary craftsmanship, which they in any case may not experience, and furthermore opens local area discourse into the job which human expressions can play in certain social change. This has been seen through



Fig. 10. an image depicting the freedom youths have to speak change.

unveiling spaces more, esteemed and blessing them with a positive character.

Road workmanship has been a method for schooling, mindfulness raising, expanding information and embellishment public mentalities; which energize useful practices that can prompt a serene conjunction, shared regard, shared objectives and desires. These have been utilized with the end goal of social attachment and harmony building. Likewise philosophical messages in road craftsmanship have tested the prevailing authority of the Kenyan political and administering class. These activities and practices expand the possibility of citizenship, which resort to the exceptionally essential popularity-based qualities and the opportunity of articulation.

The association of youngsters in these tasks (connected straightforwardly and informatively with the help of spray painting and studios) open prospects to people and gatherings who beforehand may have been uninformed about their capacity to make social change, however presently may decide to lead an existence of activism or the longing to work on one's local area. Besides a youthful age of Nairobians, especially those from ghetto networks, have figured out how to put themselves out there through workmanship rather than hostile to social demonstrations, viciousness or hazardous practices.

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