

Public Art in Kampala: Unveiling political confusion

Dominic Muwanguzi

There is a critical lack of engagement and interaction between the public, artists and the government in Kampala. While cultural institutions in the city, such as Goethe Zentrum and 32° East | Ugandan Arts Trust, work to streamline relationships between artists, urbanites and public art, initiating partnerships with Kampala Capital City Authority (KCCA), political priorities present serious challenges to developing public art interventions and community engagement. A prime electoral constituency, the city is a site of tension between the central government and political opponents. Government security agencies have beaten and arrested people during political rallies, instilling fear and isolating the public from the capital. Kampala's public art further reinforces this spatial order, in some cases, overtly preventing public access and disregarding relevance to residents. However, the bi-annual contemporary visual art festival, KLA'ART has ignited a spark for (re)imagining creative possibilities in the city.

In a bid to strengthen its grip on Kampala, the Parliament of Uganda, passed the Local Government Act in 2010. The legislation gives the central government absolute powers to run the city. In addition, in order to oversee activities and implement government interests within the city, a new post — Executive Director of KCCA — has been created and a Minister of Kampala appointed by the president. This new change in the city's management implies that the Lord Mayor, elected to office through a democratic process, retains only ceremonial relevance and cannot create any policies in the capital city. The State's authority in the city is further reinforced in sculptures that take on the form of monuments — built from concrete, perhaps a symbol of the state's autocratic rule.

The government's political intentions were made all the more evident in October 2012, when the 50th Independence Anniversary monument was launched to commemorate the Golden Jubilee Independence celebrations. Occupying Kololo Airstrip, a venue for government celebrations, it purposefully evokes the qualities of a political statue. Moreover, the Uganda Police Force presently guard the site, and though it is not barred from public access, the relationship between the police and the public in the city is not cordial. Indeed, the police have been accused of harassing and torturing people on many occasions. The *Stride* monument bears striking similarities. A composition of three human figures — Man, Woman and Child — moving forward, the statue symbolises a cliched nationalist teleology. Modeled from bronze metal by George Kyeyune and Maria Naita, the iconic sculpture was designed for the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM) held in Kampala in November 2007. Like the 50th Independence Monument, the military police are routinely deployed in its vicinity, discouraging public engagement.

In contrast, the first Kampala Contemporary Art Festival (KLA'ART) challenged twelve artists to work within twelve open locations in Kampala using shipping containers as working studios. The containers symbolised the creative and innovative aspects of traders, who use the structures as venues for conducting business. Artists engaged the public in their work by creating

pieces that provoked public reaction (already the twelve shipping containers dotting the different public spaces were a subject of curiosity and conversation among locals). Several people were seen engaging with festival artists — Ronald ‘Ronex’ Ahibisimbwe, Samson ‘Xenson’ Ssenkaaba, Eria ‘Sane’ Nsubuga, Bruno Ruganzu, Ivan Bwambale, Sanaa Gateja, Stella Atal, Sue Crozier Thorburn, Donald ‘Waswad’ Wasswa, Emma Wanambwa, Eric Mukalanzi and Lilian Mary Nabulimeand — and asking questions about their respective works. Such interactions provided an opportunity for the public to educate themselves on pressing social issues.

Addressing a number of issues, from cultural identity and civil rights to waste management and HIV awareness, the festival became a vehicle of knowledge for the public. Lilian Nabulime’s container at Kampala International University, Kansanga, became a hub for literacy lessons on HIV/AIDS. In the form of familiar household objects (i.e. baskets, soaps, mortars and pestles), her sculptures facilitated better understandings and discussions on HIV transmission. Inviting the public to speak about and physically engage with her artwork, Nabulime encouraged public participation in hopes of raising awareness. Endeavouring to sculpt domestic utilities like a dress closet, bed and shoes to communicate a local relevance, Wassad’s *Elephania* sculptures were decorative in form and covered with leopard spots. Bwabale’s *Nakayima* installation was inspired by a popular Buganda legend of a big tree in Mubende that gives fertility to women. The artist shaped an incarnation of the mythical tree out of metal sheets — his popular medium — to bridge a gap between traditional and contemporary art. In his container, he wanted to provoke dialogue between the public and the installation by creating a shrine atmosphere. Using plastic debris, Xenson’s installation Nakivubo Channel aka *Omwaala Gwe Nakivubo* was a metaphor for waste management and the dumping phenomenon in Kampala. These projects emphasised a practical component of art in public space.

The city council’s collaboration with the artists and the respective art institutions opened an opportunity for future partnerships within the city. Two years later, during the Garbage Collectors Exhibition, Xenson created a life size sculpture of beer cans that mocked the syndrome of consumerism and material culture among the political elite and middle class. Both his installations evoke the need to engage the audience on social issues, as well as the significance of location, medium and technique. The artist’s choice of medium serves the purpose of creating a dramatic visual effect on the audience, giving the two installations an element of conspicuousness and engaging the attention of the viewer. Promoting public participation, Laba! Art Festival celebrated artists’ creativity and experimentation. The city offered the Goethe Institute two venues free of charge and waived taxes for festival advertising. Such a partnership presented artists with the opportunity to work in public without restrictions. And while these modes of contemporary art in Kampala are still young, such collaborative projects between artists, the public and the city are propagating change.

Indeed, in a city saturated with politics, it is obvious that the government is promoting its own political vocations at the expense of the public. In this context, art is used as tool for gratifying the government’s ego and promoting political ambitions. Such priorities are reflected clearly in pieces, such as 50th Independence Anniversary monument and *Stride*. However, new initiatives and opportunities, such as KLA’ART, present alternatives to the constant threats of living under the fickle nature of of the State. Public art is used as a medium to educate the public on their civic rights, provide basic infrastructure and promote social change.



Samson 'Xenson' Ssenkaaba, *Omwala gwe Nakivubo*, KLA ART 012 (Source: Ugandan Arts Trust).



Ronald 'Ronex' Ahibisimbwe, *Truly Gifted*, KLA ART 012 (Source: Ugandan Arts Trust).