Moments of Freedom?
A Tale of the Evolution of Contemporary Kenyan Art

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What is Creative Freedom?

Is it true that artists can do whatever they want? Can they really make anything they want to make and work only when they want to work? Are they completely free from dictation by others about how to do what they want to do? C. Joybell avers that "Freedom is a place, an area".[1] If this is indeed the case how much of the content and process of the Kenya Arts Diary can be quantified as an opportunity for self-determination, as a site for free expression?

On the face of it the spaces for free expression in Kenya have multiplied a hundred-fold. For that we can thank the 1990 invention called the World Wide Web and the boom in connectivity and mobile telephony that hit our shores circa 2007. In addition, we must thank many self-serving and a few selfless fighters for constitutional reform. Undoubtedly, the passing of a new constitution in August 2010 consolidated the *haki yetu* movement and allowed for a radical shift in mindset. Today, the right to speak and to be heard comes with legally enforceable guarantees.

This context of our new-found freedoms is incomplete, however, if we do not consider the constraints that are created by free market economics. Aside from the acute want that continues to lock millions out of sites of freedom such as the Internet, the pursuit of creative freedom is hampered by a terrain of state neglect, ballooning taxes and shrinking incomes. The struggle to raise these incomes is at the same time, a commitment to being time-poor. Many work longer hours, stretched between more than one job in what we often term *jua kali*, independent spaces that give temporary, short-term assignments yielding what many now call the gig economy. Against this background, the pursuit of art begins to sound like a frivolous indulgence, a luxury that will surely cost more than it can ever yield.

When we talk of the creative industry, we are lured into counting jobs and crunching dollar numbers. But does the creative industry thrive solely because artists make tons of money from their trade? If the creative industry thrives, it might be because the urge to create is often so overwhelmingly powerful, that considerations of costs and sales are totally overshadowed by this desire to "speak", to weave ideas and emotions into a communicable experience. This is what creative freedom is about – an urge, a commitment, a lived practice without assurances or guarantees. The artists unwavering conviction in the value of his/her art to humanity drives the creative process and marketing artistic productions becomes a matter of cleverly cultivating taste in the buying public and creating demand for the act of simulating everyday human experiences.

Even without the dollar numbers in sales and contribution to our nation's GDP, a study of the Nani Croze's Kenya Arts Diary, from its inception in 2011 to date, signals a clear growth in the

marketability of Fine Art as a profession and as a product. Such a cursory study also raises worthwhile questions about the nature of what we call contemporary Kenyan art and what freedoms exist to create in that space of the modern. It also raises questions about the value of patronage in the local art world. Interestingly, that history of patronage has noteworthy ties to yet another white woman.

The Myth of Authenticity

Pre-colonial Kenyan societies did have discernible traditions of decorative arts of the body, the curio genre, functional art, rock art and allied modes and sites of creativity. There are still many who view African art as unchanging and expect it to adhere to these so-called African traditions of art. Indeed, the most widespread assumption has been the before/after scenario of colonialism[2] in which art produced before the colonial period immediately passes the test of authenticity because it was untainted by Western ideologies. Art produced in the colonial and post-colonial period is then "relegated to an awkward binary opposition: it is inauthentic because it was created after the advent of a cash economy and new forms of patronage from missionaries, colonial administrators, and more recently, tourists and the new African elite."[3]

This static framing of Africa and African art has had a negative effect on many contemporary Kenyan artists. They are discouraged by the muted response to their work and their inability to make sales when they market their work as African. We can allow ourselves to be bogged down by these old arguments about the authenticity and purity of old Africa and the contamination of that Africa by rabid Western influences, resulting in a contemporary art that is "inauthentic" due to its indistinct link to traditional or ethnic African work. However, to argue this way robs us of an opportunity to acknowledge the very idea of traditions as an ever-changing space of inventions[4] and to celebrate the ingenuity and value of the hybridity that comes with contact zones.[5] That ethos of contact, exchange and ingenious amalgamation has been at the heart of the growth of Fine Art in Kenya.

The idea of Fine Art as a professional course for Kenyans dates back to 1937, a woman called Margaret Trowell and what was then Makerere College, in Uganda.[6] As the pioneer Head of the Art School at Makerere, Trowell is reported to have made regular field trips to schools in Kenya in the early 1950s, spotting talent and scouting possible recruits for her budding Fine Art Department at Makerere.[7] Her patronage did not stop upon enrolment. She was a tireless mentor, encouraging ailing students and hosting numerous painting parties on the verandah of her house on Makerere Hill. It was from these verandah gatherings that Trowell had earlier convinced the Principal of Makerere to include Art in the courses taught at the College. Upon the graduation of her students, she introduced them to opportunities for employment and continued to collaborate with them on her ongoing projects and shows.

When Trowell first started teaching Art at Makerere, she borrowed many pedagogical approaches from the Slade School of the University of London where courses on the European masters were key in the well-established field of Art History. But she did more than bring a little

Europe to East Africa. In her 1957 autobiography, *African Tapestry,* she explains how her approach evolved,

> …I learnt that I must not criticize before I could understand; that I must put all my effort into seeing the visual world through African eyes, and further into trying to understand their spiritual and social attitudes towards their own works of art,[8]

With this approach that sought value in the anthropology of African communities, Trowell's painstaking research and publications on African arts and crafts established a hybrid pedagogy and practice that she urged her students to explore to the fullest.[9] They were encouraged to use local materials and to identify and promote African ideas of beauty. To launch the careers of her students, she organized Art Exhibitions in Kampala and occasionally, at the Commonwealth Institute in London.

The curriculum at the Makerere Art School grew with additional input from the Slade and from the Department of Fine Art at Leeds University. The faculty of the Makerere School of Art was also expanding. It included dynamic locals such Gregory Maloba, a sculptor whose skill had been spotted by Governor Henry Moore at St. Mary's Yala in 1940.[10] Moore organized a colonial government scholarship to support Maloba's education and he went on to Makerere where he trained under Trowell.

By 1953 the Makerere faculty had "designed courses leading to a Diploma in Fine Arts and in Education."[11] This upscaling meant that Makerere was training the next generation of Art teachers, within a pedagogy of freedom to explore and define new traditions in East African Art. Consequently, Trowell's "intellectual and spiritual influence … continues to find expression in the work of successive generations of students."[12] Most important of all, the freedom to be local as well as to imbibe and use western modes of practice has indeed become the defining quality of contemporary Kenyan art and Margaret Trowell played a significant role in establishing this tradition of bricolage.

Rethinking Spaces and Markets

Arguably, since Trowell, contemporary Kenyan art has been shaped by a host of other white women. Their techniques have included the use of "non-conventional" materials as diverse as beads, *makuti* (palm fibre) and "hardened giraffe droppings", whilst their patronage has ranged from building galleries and hosting exhibitions, to offering free classes, workshops and organizing residencies abroad.[13] Does the mere creation of all these spaces guarantee local artists their free expression?

The community of practice that these female patrons have built is not without controversy. There are those who see their involvement on the local art scene as diluting and delimiting, subjectively determining who rises, gets noticed and rewarded, and who doesn't.[14] Indeed, "The visibility of African art on the international stage has always been contested, filled as it is with dodgy high-priests, opportunistic brokers and outright racist interpretations."[15]

Nonetheless, there are credible grounds for celebrating the capacity of some patrons of Kenyan art to provide original insights, inventively expand the spaces of free expression and attract international interest in local practice.[16] Nani Croze of Kitengela Glass is amongst the noteworthy white female patrons of Kenyan art. Not only has she built her art around recycled material, she has built a community whose livelihoods depend on art and she has transformed the physical landscape of a semi-arid area. She explains,

> Kitengela started [in 1979] as a pioneer homestead and grew into an oasis. As the area is semi-arid, few trees would grow, so I began to build my own shade in the form of sculptures. I encouraged artists from all around to join.
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> Money was always scarce so we used available materials; grass, mud and stone. This has not stopped and we are still using mainly recycled materials; old glass, scrap metal and wastepaper. Glass is my favourite recycling material. I started with bottle shards as mosaic, this evolved into stained glass and then into glass blowing (by my son, Anselm) and beads (by my daughter, Katrineka).[17]

But Croze has done more than safeguard one physical space through the creation and display of art. Through the Kenya Arts Diary, she has built a new physical but portable space whose multi-functionality allows local artists to display their craft, advertise their skills, join a regional network, and find belonging.

First published in 2011, the Kenya Arts Diary is a week-by-week calendar. It is also a catalogue - complete with descriptors - of photography, installations, oils, acrylics, patch-work quilts, wood, cement and scrap metal sculptures, some from "stitched found objects". The Diary also carries artists' bios and a directory that provides artists' contacts and announces the range of collectives and studios where contemporary artists pursue their passions. This multi-functional or collective format is at once a personal gallery wall that allows one to walk through the breadth of local talent and concerns. It is also a study the range of materials and methods evolving in the local craft of creating visuals. In addition, the Diary is a veritable market through which the actual sale of artwork can happen. "It's a way for artists to be further exposed to a wider audience and for them to potentially sell their work as well…"[18]

Private Patronage and Public Art

It is worth asking why only 23% of the artists featured in the 2019 Diary are women. Indeed, how democratic is this Diary, or does it sink into the easy elitism of privileged circles in capital cities? There are more than 70 East African artists from a variety of socio-economic backgrounds included in the 2019 Diary and the majority are Kenyans. Young, upcoming local painters and sculptors surpass the few resident expatriate artists who qualify. Reportedly, Croze worked with a team of volunteers who

> made the effort to attend as many art exhibitions in and around Nairobi in the course of the year so that the Diary was sure to have the freshest new talents represented in it. They also made some effort to visit artists in their studios as a means of seeing 'works in progress' which had the potential to be considered for the Diary 2019. The final selection was made by a slightly larger team that

> expressed their likes and dislikes in order that the final choices would represent a broad range of voices and views, tastes and aesthetic perspectives.[19]

The artists' bios are a rare repository of life-stories for one who wants to study the making of the artist. There are stories of people who art chose and of people who agreed to choose art, consciously signing up for a season of uncertain incomes and volatile work spaces. But without doubt, regardless of where they were born, where they trained or where they discovered their passion for art, all these artists gravitate towards Kenya's capital city at some point in their careers. That does not say much for the sustainability of art on the provincial margins. If "Freedom is a place", a place where people explore, expand and thrive, then Nairobi is the surest home of Kenya's Fine Art.

Though there is no stated theme in the 2019 Kenya Arts Diary, the selected pieces seem to me to focus on questions of infrastructure and freedom. It is difficult to ascertain that the expression of these ideas were what the volunteers and judges were looking for, but they certainly emerge very boldly from the depiction of actions, spaces, transitions and materials deemed to be local.

There has been a significant growth in new arts spaces over nine years of the Diary's existence. Not surprisingly, only 16% of the total number of galleries, cultural centres and restaurant galleries listed in 2019 are outside Nairobi. Aside from the exciting newer studios such as Brush Tu Art, Karen Village, BSQ and Dust Depo @Railway Museum, the Diary also reminds us of the ones like Kuona Trust that have persisted through various financial troubles and somehow survived. Are these spaces enough to capture the wealth of talent in this region?

The formal launch of the Diary in the last two years has been accompanied by an exhibition of the works. Both the launch moment and the exhibitions which run for several weeks provide all-too-infrequent opportunities for valuable inter-generational dialogues. By including a music concert and a film screening in the 2018 launch, the sponsors help to shape audiences and to further artists' opportunities for collaboration and growth. By combining old artists such as Kevin Oduor, Mary Collis, Camille Wekesa, Michael Musyoka and Meschak Oiro with new voices like Evilidah Wasai, Ritesh Barot, Hannington Gwanzu and Ron Eloch Luke, the Diary contributes to building a movement of practitioners and raises the profile of Fine Artists and their professionalism.

"Proceeds [from the sale of the Diary] are used to fund artist residency and mentorship programmes at the Kitengela Art Centre."[20] It would be instructive to know how many direct sales and/or other opportunities of work for financial gain have been made by artists as a result of their showing in the Kenya Arts Diary. Nonetheless, as long as emerging artists like Michael Nyerere Odhiambo, a member of the Dust Depo Art Studio who won this year's residency, have to rely on these privately initiated programmes to escape state neglect and further their skills, visibility and market, then we can conclude that there can be no Kenyan contemporary art

scene without patronage. And if those patrons happen to be visitors to our shores, we can only weigh them for their commitment to integrating the local into the global. The freedom to create, display learn and earn that they offer, might come with the risks of transience, subjectivity and prescription. It might be "contestatory and discontinuous or precarious" as Johannes Fabian would argue but can we really afford to shut our doors on the innovations, ingenuity and benevolence of these patrons? To reiterate, creative freedom does not come with guarantees. And freedom, in and of itself, "comes in bursts, moments, rather than existing as a permanent state of grace."[21]

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[1] Available at: https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/429973-freedom-is-a-place-an-area-it-s-a-higher-place
[2] Kasfir, S. L. 1992: African Art and Authenticity: A Text with a Shadow. African Arts. Available at: http://www.artafrica.info

[3] Ibid.
[4] Waterman, C. 1997: 'Our Tradition is a Very Modern Tradition': Popular Music and the Construction of Pan-Yoruba Identity in Karin Barber (ed). Readings in African Popular Culture. London: James Currey, pp. 48-53.
[5] Pratt,M-L. 1991: Arts of the Contact Zone, Modern Languages Association, pp. 33-40.
[6] In 1949, Makerere became a constituent college of the University of London and was henceforth officially known as University College of East Africa, but for most people it was simply known as Makerere (see https://www.mak.ac.ug/about-makerere/historical-background).
[7] *From Misery to Joy,* the unpublished memoir of Asaph Ng'ethe Macua, Makerere Class of '54.
[8] African Tapestry, London: Faber and Faber, p.28
[9] Court, E.J. 1985: Margaret Trowell and the Development of Art Education in East Africa, Art Education, 1985 p.35.
[10] Nyairo. 2013: The Kenyan scholar who carved his way to fame in Uganda. Availabe at: https://www.nation.co.ke/lifestyle/weekend/The-Kenyan-scholar-who-carved-his-way-to-fame-in-Uganda/1220-1913228-lthb1d/index.html
[11] Ibid, Court, p.41.
[12] Ibid, Court, p.35.
[13] Robin Anderson, co-founder of gallery Watatu; Carol Lees of One-Off Gallery who co-founded RaMoMa in 2000 with Mary Collis and Geraldine Robarts who taught at Makerere from 1964-1970 and at Kenyatta University College from 1977-1979 are good examples of the white female curators who, over the years, have commanded influential space in the interpretation and growth of local art.
https://www.oneoffafrica.com/carol-lees.html
https://geraldinerobarts.com/
See Margaretta wa Gacheru's exposition of Geraldine Robarts's experimental method and her brilliant fund-raising idea for the Giraffe Centre in Painter Who Forgot to Retire. Available at:
https://www.businessdailyafrica.com/lifestyle/art/Painter-who-forgot--retire/3815712-3993518-10cfnbmz/index.html
[14] See my critique of Paola Poponi's involvement in the Kenya Pavilion at the 2013 Venice Biennale.
We need a good explanation for Kenya's disastrous display at the 'Art Olympics. Available at:
https://www.nation.co.ke/oped/opinion/440808-1888292-atiwrgz/index.html
[15] Ibid, Nyairo
[16] Mutu, K. 2018: Geraldine Robarts' Final Exhibition. Available at:

https://www.theeastafrican.co.ke/magazine/Geraldine-Robarts-final-art-exhibition-/434746-4580282-8m2mxlz/index.html

[17] http://kitengelaglass.co.ke/_kiten-philosophy.htm

[18] Gacheru, M. 2018: "Kenya Arts Diary 2019 features more local artists. Available at: https://www.nation.co.ke/lifestyle/artculture/Kenya-Arts-Diary-2019/1954194-4811816-pd0dq/index.html

[19] Gacheru, M. 2018: Kenya Arts Diary coming out Friday. Available at: https://www.businessdailyafrica.com/lifestyle/art/Kenya-arts-diary-2019-coming-out-Nov-2-/3815712-4832606-7dx6h3z/index.html

[20] Mutu, K. 2017: "Scenic pictures sit next to appointments." https://www.theeastafrican.co.ke/magazine/Kenya-Arts-Diary-/434746-4173034-141y6vxz/index.html

[21] Nyairo, J and Ogude J. 2005: Popular Music, Popular Politics: *Unbwogable* and the Idiom of Freedom in Contemporary Kenyan Popular Music. African Affairs pp. 1-26.