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# Public Artworks: Creative Spaces for Civic and Political Behaviour in Kenya

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## Abstract

The cycle of ethno-political violence experienced in Kenya every electoral period threatens democracy, development, peace and stability. The devastating effects of the violence have variously affected Kenyan society. A section of Kenyans determined to prevent the country from receding further as a result of the violence have (re)conceptualised and (re)formulated graffiti as alternative tools for social transformation. The physical space has become a rostrum of civic advocacy and citizen participation, as graffiti is (re)framed to engage the populace and political leadership, and to develop national consciousness and moral accountability. The graffiti writers ('artists') use symbols and objects as signifiers in order to relate and understand others, and express concepts in the daily life of Kenyans. Framed within the Symbolic Interactionist theoretical perspective, the study employs ethnographic methodologies to examine the conceptualisation, design and production of objects, physical signs and symbols as primary means of interaction, as used in the graffiti. The study advances a typology of the unique contribution of graffiti to the struggle for social change and contention in Kenya, which is distinct from more traditional social activism and protests. In particular, the study explores the ways in which the graffiti reflects a particular identity, agency, activism and advocacy that values daring, risk, rebelliousness, ingenuity, commitment and sacrifice, while at the same time calling upon and reflecting particular national and traditional values.

## Introduction

Kenya has witnessed cyclical upsurges in ethno-political violent conflict before, during and after elections since the (re)introduction of multi-party elections in the early 1990s. The electoral process, far from ensuring a peaceful democratic political environment, has in fact heightened existing tensions and in several cases fuelled violence. During the 1992 elections, violence spread across the country as politicians, including persons closely connected with the ruling elite fuelled the violence (Mokua, 2013). The violence subsided only to

resurface on a smaller scale in 1996, just before the 1997 elections. While the 2002 elections were calm, the period leading up to and immediately succeeding the 2007 elections saw renewed bloodshed, and the country was almost engulfed in a full-fledged civil war. In the lead up to the 2013 elections, the risk of mass atrocities was potentially high, in light of the past episodes of violence. Fortunately, Kenyans remained largely patient through a delayed and error-ridden voting and tallying process, although isolated incidents of violence did take place (Mokua, 2015).

The combination of historically poor governance, weak institutions, entrenched politics of exclusion, patronage, the ethnicisation of Kenyan society and a highly fraudulent electoral process, have been identified as the main sparks that tend to light the tinderbox (Mokua, 2013). Among other things, historical grievances—particularly around land ownership—the unequal distribution of the national cake (resources and opportunities) and weak national institutions prone to political patronage and manipulation trigger the mayhem (Mokua, 2014a, 2014b, 2015), which highlights and exposes the fragility of peace, order and stability.

Despite some reforms in the country and international judicial proceedings against personalities suspected of organising the 2007/2008 violence, many of the underlying drivers of violence remain salient. The triggers rooted in long-term, foundational issues that have remained unaddressed since Kenya gained independence in 1963 are still alive to the populace (Mokua, 2014b, 2015). The ramifications of the violence and its implications for peace, order, governance, development, stability and democracy are extensive, and it has become evident to Kenyans that the country should not be allowed to repeat such catastrophes in the future. Consequently, a section of Kenyan artists have (re)conceptualised, (re)formulated and (re)framed graffiti—rather unconventional but innovative methodologies—into alternative tools for peacebuilding. Peacebuilding refers broadly to what Heathershaw (2007) describes as activities undertaken to prevent violent conflict, address the root causes of violence and effect reconciliation.

This study explores the artists' occupation of public physical space. Specifically, it explores how artists use graffiti to create public socio-political spaces of engagement and behaviour in the midst of counter political and social-cultural resources. The study untangles how and why graffiti are an important tool of peacebuilding in the form of peaceful protest, resistance, struggle, educational awareness and sensitisation. Considering the ubiquitous and wide range of graffiti expressions, the study shows graffiti as (a) an instrument for

recruitment, (b) a strategy for the management of emotions, and/or (c) an expression of mass dissent. It expounds the ways in which graffiti reinforces, rather than undercuts, a particular version of protest assertiveness that values aggressiveness, daring, risk, rebelliousness, ingenuity, commitment and sacrifice, while at the same time serving as a resource for constructing identity, values, achieving status and respect among the public. Consequently, it considers graffiti as a resource for society's transformation that emerges from social interactions in shared public spaces.

### **Research Procedure**

While the participants for the study were purposively sampled, a combination of qualitative techniques including key informant interviews, focus group discussions, individual in-depth interviews, non-participant observation and content analysis generated the data. Art texts and murals often employ metaphors and irony, aesthetic and symbolic actions which constitute different features, meanings and emotions not plainly contemplated (Simons & McCormack, 2007). For this reason, a content analysis able to capture differences and similarities between mere art texts and political texts was designed. Note that, although the study uses pseudonyms to cover the identity of all the other respondents, Boniface Mwangi, a photojournalist and leader of the graffiti writers, insisted on making his identity public. He also photographed and made available most of the graffiti murals used in this study.

### **Symbolic Interactionism**

Symbolic Interactionism, the theoretical perspective that deals with the conceptualisation, design and production of objects, physical signs and symbols as primary means of interaction, was used in analysing the graffiti. Madison (2005) argues that Symbolic Interactionism is the concept that relationships between objects and people are based on assigned meanings, these meanings come from social interactions, and these meanings shift through an interpretive process. More specifically for Mead (1938), Symbolic Interactionism is closely related to the way in which the life of a group or culture is constructed. He states that interdependent relationships rely heavily on agreement on symbolic interpretations between group members within a given culture. The Kenyan artists use symbols and objects as signifiers in order to understand others, and express concepts in daily life. The symbolic expressions generated are constant, literal and specific to Kenyan society.

## **Artivism, Public Space and Democratisation**

Art and satire in public space play important roles in democratisation. Examining the use of street art in political protests in Hispanic countries, Chaffee (1993) notes that signifying objects are inexpensive and accessible tools for expressing collective consciousness. Thus, they are important “popular tools for democratization...[giving] expression to groups that otherwise could not comment upon...current or perceived social problems” (p. 4). Hamm (2003) and Fahmi (2009) document how social movements’ effective use of art for advocacy in both physical and virtual spaces, or in “spaces of freedom”, (Fahmi, 2009, p. 101) brings the streets to life. Farmer (2003) describes the use of murals and graffiti in struggles against occupation in North Ireland and Palestine. Goalwin (2013) examines the imageries produced in political wall murals in North Ireland and how they champion ideological causes of war and violence. He also notes how murals are used to mobilise cultural support for political and military struggles. Gröndahl (2013) considers the street graffiti used by the uprising in the great Egyptian revolution. Mokuia (2014b) examines the use of creative artistic objects and symbols to resist elite impunity in Kenya. Rolston (2014a, 2014b) describes murals in Gaza and Northern Ireland as being both messages of allegiance and defiance and objects of resistance and pride. He observes that in the relative absence of access to other forms of mass communication, graffiti easily becomes a form of mass communication. Equally, Rolston (2012) emphasises how murals are used to (re)imagine statehood and state formation in Northern Ireland. Examining the Libyan uprising through the lens of graffiti, Soumiea (2011) documents how the revolution inspired many young artists to express their hope for freedom and support for the revolution with graffiti. The graffiti and street art capture the culture, humour, resilience, strength, pain and hope of the Libyan people. Edelman (1995) talks of how the use of art in politics helps create and shape political conceptions.

All of this literature discusses how street art connects intentionally with the public, using public space as an impromptu gallery and playground. Art for protest is not simply art, but resistance. It directs, warns, informs, commemorates and provides critical commentary. It also makes demands on the community for civic engagement, commitment and sacrifice. In addition, it makes announcements, reports and consecrates sacrifice and martyrdom. It has the ability to quickly transmit messages. It acts as a notice board. In short, its purpose, as described in the literature, is to mobilise in the name of resistance.

Importantly, the very existence of 'illegal' art on the streets is itself a clear symbol of this resistance. Accordingly, art graffiti is a civic and socio-political act, but the expression of this in somewhat 'unwanted' public spaces.

### **Graffiti Revolution in Kenya**

Gearing up to the 2013 Kenyan general elections, the urban physical space became the new 'shrine' for graffiti. The display of graffiti on major street junctions, road highways, flyovers, underpasses, buildings, construction sites, and gates and walls within the city of Nairobi entered the Kenyan public space with a bang. The wave of anti-establishment participation in public space graffiti has since become a sensation. It has become the voice of the people and the conscience of the nation upon which a revolution by and for the masses is inspired and driven. Oyugi (2012) explains how the extensive thought-provoking graffiti, representative of political opinions, social awareness and lifestyle, covered walls and streets of Nairobi city. He avows the graffiti to depict Kenyans fed up with the political elite stepping on their rights.

The graffiti, grounded in forms of loyalty rooted in symbolism and national values, is a new channel for social interaction, citizen expression, free speech, public opinion, attitudes and values (Mokua, 2014b). Enmeshed in the graffiti are messages of sensitisation, education, advocacy, appeal and public voice. The graffiti attacks elite corruption, poor governance, and the ineffective and unaccountable leadership considered to be a threat to the prosperity, stability and cohesiveness of the nation. It calls for effective governance and morally accountable and responsive leadership. While graffiti may not be considered an enlightened means of resistance, the mural displays and graffiti illustrations cover the public physical space with slogans of uprising and protest that imagine the possibility of resisting elite oppression.

The graffiti provides building blocks for establishing, developing and strengthening national unity, collective identity and personal responsibility by encouraging constructive attitudes and behaviours that can lead to peaceful co-existence and mutual respect. It, for example, raises awareness of the benefits of promoting nationalism as opposed to maintaining entrenched politics of exclusion and patronage. The graffiti envisions the ultimate goal of facilitating an end to violence, corruption, nepotism and the unequal distribution of national resources. The graffiti is designed to achieve this through education and raising awareness, increasing knowledge and moulding public attitudes regarding the

acceptance of difference, as well as promoting shared histories, common goals and the aspirations of the Kenyan people as a nation. The graffiti is intended to be a powerful driving inspiration for democratisation.

### **The Graffiti Imagery**

At times comical and disturbing, the graffiti's distinctive imagery display a visual vocabulary transcending language, religious, ethnic and class boundaries. It depicts a political elite corrupted by greed and which has failed to address the major socioeconomic and political issues affecting the populace. The graffiti murals and texts voice frustrations with the country's political elites on issues touching individuals' daily lives. At the centre of the mural portrayed in *Photograph 1* below is an image of a greedy politician depicted as a big-beaked vulture, arrogantly staring at protesting citizens. The villain-like politician, seated beside parliament buildings, grinds his feet onto a woman's head, commonly referred to as *Wanjiku* (a symbol for the common citizenry), as he remembers how he hoodwinked citizens into electing him to the lavish position of power he now uses to impoverish them. The vulture recollects; "I am a tribal leader, they loot, rape, burn and kill in my defence, while I steal their taxes, and grab their land, but the idiots will still vote for me."

A second mural depicts the 'vultures' with one carrying a briefcase labelled "stolen loot." The graffiti text reads, "Describe your MP vulture" but "MP" has been crossed out with red paint. A list of adjectives is provided: "Thieves, irresponsible, selfish, pathetic and missing in action." Also lampooned in the graffiti are parliament buildings, which are displayed as the spaces where citizens have consistently been plundered since 1963, when Kenya gained independence. "MPs screwing Kenyans since 1963," reads the footnote.

Yet another mural depicts the faces of historical iconic martyrs; American civil rights crusader Martin Luther King Jr., American black nationalism leader Malcolm X, slain South African civil rights activist Steve Biko, assassinated Kenyan freedom fighters Dedan Kimathi and Tom Mboya, and slain Democratic Republic of Congo nationalist Patrice Emery Lumumba. Stencilled besides their face murals are excerpts of their renowned rhetorical speeches and/or words. The graffiti seems to say that 'the truth is revolutionary'. The face murals of these great civil rights activists and freedom fighters are intended to inspire sacrifice and defiant commitment to the cause of the revolution, for these leaders stood up for and advocated the truth and paid the highest prize—their lives—but ultimately the cause of their defiant



advocacy paid off. Nothing and totally nothing can therefore stand between the truth and the journey for its realization. Boniface Mwangi, the leader of the crew behind the graffiti, said:

*We are using images of a vulture member of parliament stomping on the face of protestors and parliament to tell Kenyans that when you sell your vote, you are mortgaging 'our' future—the young generation's future. The images of personalities who led revolutions and protests against oppressors the world-over inspire patriotism, commitment to social justice and suffering for a just cause. If they could do it and succeed, why not us? We can also achieve. There is no challenge that is beyond our reach.*

Mwangi continued, “[w]e are trying to encourage men and women of integrity and character to vie for elective office because if they don’t, you will just find vultures on the ballot...If they don’t, we are doomed.” He intimated that the graffiti crew’s greatest fear is that people will not pay attention; “I will be so disappointed because I am sacrificing my family comfort and sleep to do the graffiti. If we do all this and we don’t get the ballot revolution, it will be an...anti-climax.”

### **The Scandals**

Through numerous murals painted in public open spaces, and aided in circulation by both the mainstream print and electronic media, the graffiti artists not only interrogate the validity of certain decisions taken by the Kenyan political leadership, but also question the legal-socio-moral grounding for such. The graffiti challenges the political regime on a host of rip-offs and scandals that have engulfed the country, as well as other instances of political mischief. These include exploiting tribalism, land-grabbing, unemployment and economic scandals, famine, political assassinations, and the internally displaced persons (IDPS) resettlement scam (see *Photograph 2* below).

Stencilled, are the names of Kenya’s known major scandals—Anglo Leasing, Goldenberg, the Maize Scandal, the *Kazi Kwa Vijana*, etc. - all masterminded by a conspiratorial elite political leadership. The artists fuse artistic creativity with courageous commitment to the moral principle of accountability, and effectively bring out the anger and frustrations of the majority of Kenyans over corruption, impunity, poverty and inequality. The graffiti enables the population to see, consider and reflect upon the political situation of the country. In this

way, the graffiti crew have managed to get the voice of the people heard through shared spaces of national interest.

### **Motivation**

What has inspired the graffiti writers to continue making their artworks despite significant physical and legal risks? According to graffiti artist Uhuru Betero:

*Your enthusiasm to produce varies according to how you are feeling psychologically—what is going on around you and how well you are physically. I am humbled by the culture and heart of people who cannot draw or write but who are sacrificing their lives for freedom.*

For Swifo Simba, another graffiti writer:

*The graffitist is the one who produces an idea, but if that artist is not living within the community and going through what the masses are going through, then the artist cannot understand what is going on there and reflect on it. To be a good artist, you have to express the feelings and experiences of the people you are living with. Art graffiti is all about living with your own people, and having a vision about what their concerns are. You can't sit in your own room isolated behind your window and draw about life events.*

Accordingly, the graffiti artists have worked to make powerful and provocative murals and texts that are reflective of the daily realities of Kenyans. Graffiti artist Banko Slavo expanded on why they insist on using graffiti:

*Graffiti as a form of civil protest has some permanence, which survives longer than street demonstrations. Such artworks are permanent and effective works of civil activity. The idea is not to primarily create expressive works of art, but to present political, social and/or economic petitions, while at the same time calling on the people to act wisely.*

Graffiti crew member Smoki Lallah was more categorical on the use of graffiti:

*I think our graffiti is a way of defining what our generation wants for Kenya. All along, artists have been considered soft and mellow, a little bit kooky and non-political. Maybe we are a little bit more different. We defend our people*

*and our generation, and the generation to come we defend more fiercely.*

In other words Kenya's uneven income distribution, chronic poverty and unemployment, as well as its epic political struggles and the socioeconomic conditions that marginalise some groups of people, are the main engines fuelling the vibrant graffiti. In global terms, Kenya has one of the most uneven distributions of income. Laws and taxes change frequently. Such factors, graffitiist Mwangi argued, "[c]ontribute to a very fluid society, full of economic divisions and social tensions that underpin and feed folkloric corruption and space for the disenfranchised to protest. The street graffitiists voice the grievances of the alienated."

It is therefore clear that, on top of artistic expression, the artists use graffiti as a movement and an instrument to articulate the socio-political and economic concerns of the citizenry. These instruments are generally favoured because the group is marginalised by the political elite. The graffiti artists also justify their activities by pointing out that they do not have the resources or sometimes the desire to buy advertising space to get their messages across, and that the 'political formation' controls the mainstream media, systematically excluding their often 'radical' and alternative points of view.

### **Public Conscientisation**

The changing form of civic activism and the increasing legitimation of graffiti demonstrate a striking increase in the weight given by citizens to the health of democratic governance. The new form of citizen participation (re)defines the issues, emphasises the populace's concerns and champions specific issues. Active citizen engagement leads to better and well-managed state institutions (the judiciary, the police, schools, welfare, infrastructures, etc.). Moreover, like religious participation, political and civic participation increases the sense of community and ties people more closely together.

Through the graffiti the public is made to contemplate reality, and in doing so is able to engage in a critique of society. The graffiti artists rage a battle against 'vulture' politicians, in a graffiti revolution they hope will 'conscientise' Kenyans to discard politicians widely viewed as corrupt, ineffective and divisive. "When people are going to work, they see these artworks," graffitiist Mwangi says, "and they remember, my member of parliament is an idiot, a thug, he stole our land."

To avert more of the kind of scandals engulfing the nation, the electorate is reminded to be wise and elect only leaders that have the interests of the nation ahead of their own. The characteristics of "the

leaders we want” (see *Photograph 3* below) are those who are “visionary, patriotic, honest, solution-oriented, courageous, intelligent, competent, dedicated to serve, ready to declare their wealth and source of wealth, doesn’t buy votes/bribe, in touch with the people...” For the graffitiists, change must come through the ballot and not through violence. For this reason they spend their nights stencilling “vote the vultures out of parliament” on street junctions and every available physical space.

The murals and graffiti do not target only MPs, “Corporate Kenya join us in speaking against tribal politics. Stop sleeping with the vultures,” reads graffiti stencilled on the wall of a public toilet. A little lower is a message for technologically savvy, middle-class citizens, “Middle-class Kenyans get off Twitter and Facebook and do something positive offline.” Affirming the graffiti’s lamentations on how some Kenyans are “selling their souls for money” by “working for the corrupt and evil vultures,” graffitiist Mwangi offers moral advice; “The people you are working for bled this country through corruption and you know it. Why do you want them to assume leadership again? Curse the vultures for ruining our youthful dreams. Do not sell your souls to them.” The graffiti has a sharp message for the electorate: “Be wise and choose only leaders with the best interests of the nation in their heart.

### **Why Vultures?**

The assault by the artists has revolutionised the style and content of graffiti. Their work is largely satirical of the sociological state of the nation and political leadership, and often use vultures and other predators, such as serpents, as motifs. The artists characterise politicians using the symbolism of vultures, “because with their predatory appetites, politicians like vultures thrive by scavenging, excluding, cannibalising and feeding on the weak, the poor, the dead, the marginalised and the most vulnerable in society,” sums-up graffitiist Uhuru Betero.

While not exhaustive, the graffiti presented here gives a sense of the millenarian and rebellious spirit, tempered with a good sense of artistic wit, through which the artists remind Kenyans of the many social injustices and high-profile crimes committed by political elites. In addition, their message to the public, as concluded by artist Smoki Lallah, is clear; “We want visionary and patriotic leaders who are solution-oriented and in touch with the realities of the people. A leader must be dedicated to serve, be competent and not corrupt.”

## **The Great Debate**

The viral spread of the graffiti saw its transformation from an activity typically involving the defacement of public and/or private property to its acceptance as a legitimate tool, instrument and weapon for political protest, social activism and collective conscientisation. This earned the graffitiists general hostility from the authorities and individuals whose properties were scarred, but admiration from the public whose concerns were articulated. Accordingly, as its value increased debate over controlling its production, distribution and consumption (re)shaped politics and public opinion. The public was drawn into a raged debate around the substance of graffiti in inspiring social transformation. The great debate was based on the question of whether graffiti is art or vandalism.

## **Graffiti as Art**

On the one hand is the more complex perspective in which graffiti is considered an art form and part of social commentary, conversation and debate: a constitutionally protected form of expression. The graffiti constitutes a particular practice and forms just one tool in an array of resistance techniques. It can be hilarious or disturbing. In any case, it speaks to the viewer in one way or another, such that they end up having a conversation with the artwork.

Instead of staging street protests to express the ills bedevilling Kenyan society, the graffitiists educate the public on matters of governance and leadership and offer a way forward. The graffiti emphasises the need to transform the country by the power of the vote. Voting for good visionary leaders will usher in the anticipated changes. However, the political class, the target of the graffiti, are not amused. They, not surprisingly, question how talented artists can waste themselves in vandalising other people's property.

## **Graffiti as Vandalism**

On the other hand, the conventional view propagated mainly by those in positions of leadership, sees the graffiti as part of a subculture that rebels against authority. "It is an organised criminal activity, bedecked in revolutionary, anarchist, situationist slogans and attitudes," contends the Inspector-General of the city's inspectorate department. This proposition attributes urban decay and decline to signs of disorder, and signs of disorder such as graffiti signal a perceived lack of control in the community. In this view, graffiti is not art. Graffiti is a crime that requires injunctions. Proponents of this proposition call for restrictions,

controls and injunctions on the activities of 'gang graffiti', to address, and protect public and private physical space from, damage and vandalism.

### **The Authorities' Response**

Graffiti is largely viewed as crude, underground, rebellious and illegal by Kenyan authorities. The Nairobi city authorities saw a threat to social order and public safety in the graffiti. They depicted the graffiti as an offensive expression, even as they criminalised graffiti in general. They immediately moved to cover all the graffiti with blue paint, and wrote a "No Graffiti" sign on it. The police summoned the graffiti crew for interrogation and contemplated pressing vandalism charges against its members. This led to a public outcry in support of freedom of expression, and debate over the lack of government tolerance. However, the authorities through the police spokesperson were emphatic: "At its best graffiti is just a way for immature vandals to seek notoriety and at its worst they are messages between rival gangs and drug dealers." In addition, the police spokesperson was strongly dismissive of the freedom of expression rationale: "I have a message for the graffiti vandals out there—your freedom of expression, your freedom of information ends where my property begins!" The authorities maintained that graffiti 'degrades the urban fabric' and 'soils the public space.'

### **Defiant Activism**

Nonetheless, as the authorities increased their crackdown on the graffiti crew, politically charged, socially driven and multihued murals and texts continued to appear in the city. In the development of the graffiti are the heroes and heroines who battle against the forces of social control and political domination. Accordingly, the graffiti assumed a radical activist character that continues to include hints of rebelliousness and machismo. Rooted in the experience of poverty, marginalisation, minority status and grand corruption, the graffiti has become a resource for the construction of a revolutionary identity. The graffiti artists urge Kenyans to get rid of 'incompetent' and 'corrupt' political leaders through a 'revolution' of the ballot. The truth of arrogant governance, mismanagement and ineffective leadership is at the heart of the graffiti's credibility.

The humorous but informative art presents revolutionary slogans and murals intended to galvanise the national psyche into what the graffiti artists baptise as the 'Unga' Revolution. *Unga* (Swahili for flour) is the

staple meal for Kenyans. This is symbolic because it signifies a revolution of those who sleep hungry versus those who eat to their fill, a revolution of the have-nots against the haves, a revolution of the poor against the rich and the wealthy, a revolution of the oppressed against the oppressors, a class revolution—a revolution against inequality in Kenyan society.

Even with the threat of arrest and confiscation of their tools of trade, the graffiti crew remained defiant. As graffitist Uhuru Betero stated:

*Our graffiti is revolutionary, in my opinion, and any revolution must be considered a crime. We will go back and paint again. We will not give up. The guys in power have been raping this country for as long as Kenya has been there. We speak for Wanjiku [Kenyan symbolic lexicon for the ordinary citizenry]. We want to tell the story of Kenya with graffiti.*

### **Who are these Graffitists?**

The graffiti is produced and coordinated by youthful citizens who are poorly endowed in resources like financial largesse, political leadership and/or official power, but talented and competent enough, and personally committed to these forms of expression. The youthful artists, in their thought-provoking graffiti, merge creativity with modern technology to highlight society's socio-political and economic concerns. Exploring themes of people's power, popular inclusion, participation and mobilisation (see *Photograph 4* below), the artist imagine the possibility of real change in a 'Ballot Revolution' led by the young generation. The power of the people's vote will strangle the 'vultures' and free the loot they have always stolen from the public. Consequently, a new Kenya will dawn guaranteeing social justice and inclusivity for all.

These instruments of social activism are more private and self-determined, though they are also collective (like inspiring protests). While there is clear overlap with institutional engagement, this form of civic engagement is less bound by the needs, interests, rules and routines of institutions and, ultimately, is more focused on the individual voices of the masses. Thus, the graffiti empowers the masses even as it helps individuals tap into their 'inner voices' via their own active as well as latent creative ability.

The graffiti crew aim at bringing about a revolution at the ballot by urging Kenyans to sideline a political class accused of protracted corruption and of exploiting inequalities and tribal differences to win



power. The crew decries the culture of impunity among the political elite, many of whom are tarnished by corruption scandals, which emerge regularly, with lasting consequences for the masses. The thrust of the graffiti is that good leadership starts with the citizens and the power of their vote—who the people vote for matters. For the graffiti crew, the decision solely rests with the Kenyan masses; they should vote-in the right people to leadership positions and rout out the ‘vultures.’

Inspired by the 35<sup>th</sup> American President, the late John F. Kennedy, the graffiti echoes and contextualises the words of his inauguration speech which challenged citizens to - “[a]sk not what your country can do for you, ask what you can do for your country” (see Hossell, 2005). The graffiti poses in Swahili, “*Kama Si Sisi...Ni Nani?*” Literally translated to mean, “if it is not us, who else?” Artist Uhuru Betero declares that the graffiti “[i]s for a cause, a revolution, we have to wake up people’s minds...and a picture is worth a thousand words...If it is not us, it won’t be done. We have the resources, we have the skills. It’s now.” Artist Banko Slavo concurs, describing the graffiti artists as “the activists with artistic sphere of influence.” Artist Mwangi concluded, “All that we do now must be done in a sacred manner and in celebration. We are the ones we have been waiting for.” This philosophy propagates the idea that it is for Kenyans to decide, define and choose the future for themselves.

### **Public Support**

A strong alternative public view supports graffiti as a legitimate and powerful form of social, economic and political protest. As one pro-graffiti advocate put it:

*Nowadays, public spaces are reserved for those who have enough money. Advertising dominates the urban public space and we are constantly bombarded with slogans from corporates everywhere we go...Architecture and the streets are shaped by commercial interests, not by the residents of the city. It is impossible to avoid, the public have no access to these spaces, that is, unless we (re)claim them for our own... Graffiti art are the only ways that citizens can interact and own public spaces actively. These art forms [see Photograph 5 below] can, for example, express emotions, give critique on current leadership, politics or society, or just offer venues for public skill.*

The graffiti is also seen as an alternative source of news, offering sometimes-credible information. Graffiti artist Banko Slavo quipped,



“Mainstream media will never say a word of truth. In 2007/2008 when our brothers and sisters were falling to the bullets and arrows of violence, insecurity and rape, the mainstream media and the vultures remained mum with their stories.” He wondered, “Who will defend *Mwanachi* (the public)? We use graffiti as an alternative channel to mainstream media, to disseminate the true information, which they often keep back. We will somehow succeed.” The argument is that formal public spaces (including the mainstream media) have an exclusivist character deriving from, among other things, expense, accessibility, knowhow, political, social and economic realities and networks, and legal restrictions. Graffiti provides the excluded with the avenue to challenge their exclusion and articulate their aspirations in a simple and accessible way. In this mode, graffiti informs, reinforces and amplifies public demand for change at a minimum cost and at a level that provides for greater inclusivity.

A number of Kenyans interviewed at graffiti sites considered the somewhat radical graffiti to be quite attractive (see *Photograph 6* below), both in the way the simple yet stinging messages are delivered as well as in the sheer boldness of the gesture. They welcomed the graffiti as a new instrument for conducting civic education, saying the artistry should bedeck the entire city and be allowed to flourish in other urban centres as well. “The graffiti tells the truth about how we have been taken for a ride by our leaders for a long time,” said businesswoman Nyiva Mwendu. Motobo Makara, a businessman next to one of the murals, confirmed that many people had thronged to the ‘spaces’ of the graffiti and virtually all were delighted. “Many people have trooped and jammed here to have a look at the paintings. I have a feeling they like the messages. This is a good teaching, because for long politicians have taken us for fools to be swayed around,” he said. Reading the graffiti, Mrs Nyuka Waudo nodded in agreement, looking clearly dumbfounded as she scanned the list of injustices the political class had perpetrated against its own people.

Some members of the public were clearly grateful, liked the graffiti and saw some promise of talent and opportunity beyond the murals. “How did they do that? Surely, we should give a chance to these kinds of talents which can be nurtured and help our country to create job opportunities,” Jemimah Nyankura opined. Many people decried the authorities’ move to summon the graffiti writers as autocratic, and defended graffiti as a form of expression to be protected. “Graffiti is an avenue for the downtrodden to shine and sparkle,” Kimmende Harrison, a student leader at one of the public universities, shouted *in*

*fury* during an interview. “The truth hurts,” Modobo Makari, a member of the public, told the researcher at the site of one of the murals. “They can deface the murals but they can’t stop the messengers of truth,” concluded Smoki Lallah for the graffiti crew.

The argument around the public cost of the graffiti also generated debate but Jemimah Nyankura, a member of the public, was quick to respond:

*While complaining about malicious damage, the authorities clean the spray-painted and pasted walls, just to see them painted again. It would be a much more effective use of public resources to invest the money used for the cleaning in training and painting lessons, in order to raise the quality of the graffiti.*

### **Public Opposition**

However, not everybody was excited. Some members of the public found the graffiti to be untidy, offensive and invasive. Reacting to the graffiti Kemmunto Kelly commented:

*I am not inspired... I am saddened. I was becoming so proud of my city. The streets are being cleaned, park benches installed, and beautification is being done everywhere. The city was truly becoming the once famed ‘City in the Sun.’ There are many ways to make a point, desecrating our beautiful city is just not that makes me rally behind your cause. Sorry.*

Sumanga Sasana reacted in outrage, “We should not allow this to happen in our city...graffiti makes the city look neglected and residents feel unsafe. When people see graffiti of any kind, they think it’s dangerous.” Interestingly, these same attacks are rarely levelled against commercialised forms of public art, such as advertising billboards and posters. Yet, it all boils down to taste. So, why is society prepared to tolerate forms of commercialised art that they find distasteful but not graffiti? Whose opinion of ‘cleanliness,’ ‘desecration’ and ‘beautification’ do they pander to?

### **Is Graffiti Art or Vandalism?**

Are these youths who use graffiti to champion the cause for social justice and good governance, victims, perpetrators or both victims and perpetrators of crime? Above all, should graffiti be seen as a symbol and/or instrument of freedom; freedom of speech and information; freedom from marginalisation and poverty; freedom from corruption;

freedom from dictatorship, tyranny and oppression, etc? One thing seems clear however, society must recognise the symbolism of graffiti as an alternative avenue for social transformation and, in this sense, welcome it.

## **Conclusion**

The youths are the primary ‘engineers’ and key ‘engines’ of socio-political transformation. Specifically, the youth’s use of space is integral. As civic actors, they (re)configure and carve out spaces, build links between spaces, occupy forbidden spaces, and inhabit conventional spaces in new ways. In the midst of these spaces, they challenge leadership, power, authority and their own, and society’s subordination.

Citizen participation through graffiti provides alternative but innovative avenues for society’s social transformation. This is because art in protests makes a unique contribution to resistance. It informs and raises awareness, reinforces and emboldens on existing beliefs and, persuades people towards a specific idea, belief or course of action. In particular: (1) art in protests values individual, along with collective empowerment. Art addresses both the intimate and the public dimensions of social problems and resistance; (2) art represents an alternative resistance, which ignores conventional political arenas and mundane rules but concentrates on a resistance that works at impacting on the socio-political and economic concerns of the people’s daily lives. In other words, art in protests seems to be the cognitive answer to resistance emotions and understandings, which the ‘conventional forms of resistance’ do not take into consideration. Artistic expressions are therefore, neither just instrumental nor just emotional/expressive; in contrast, they represent different understandings and cognitive articulations of the civil and popular advocacy movement.

### Photograph 1: *The Vulture Politician.*

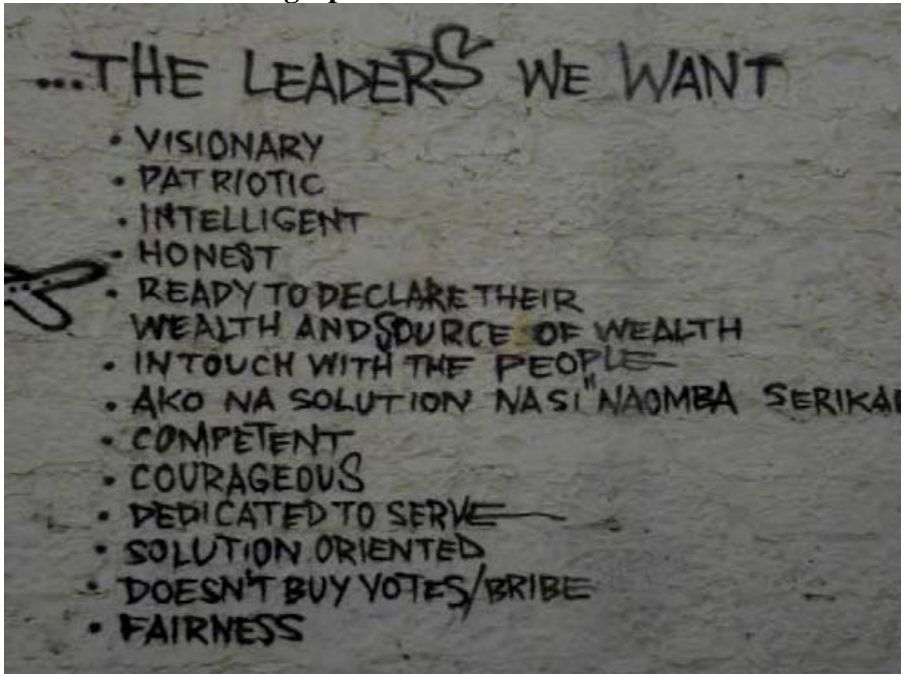
All Photographs by Boniface Mwangi reprinted with permission.



### Photograph 2: *Major scandals committed by the vultures*



Photograph 3: *The Leaders We Want.*



Photograph 4: *People's Power Strangles the Vultures*





**Photograph 5: *The Public Engaged by the Graffiti***



**Photograph 6: *Graffiti Murals in one section of Nairobi City***



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