

The *Boda* Moment. Positioning Socially-Engaged Art in Contemporary Uganda

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Abstract: This article examines two socially engaged Ugandan art projects: the Disability Art Project Uganda (DAPU), and Lilian Nabulime's AIDS sculpture. By analyzing both initiatives, I attempt to characterize a new moment in the relations between artistic practice and social intervention in the Ugandan context. I argue that projects such as DAPU and Nabulime's are confronting the current Ugandan situation of economic and political transformation, marked by the weight of the informal and the challenge of a nation-based cultural sphere. Finally, I point out some similarities with other African socially-engaged art initiatives.

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I

KLA ART is a biennial festival that has been held in Kampala, Uganda since 2012. In its first edition, the festival revolved around a public art exhibition called *12 Boxes Moving*, the result of a joint collaboration by eight local institutions.² After a call, twelve projects were distributed in equal numbers in containers throughout the city.³ The choice of the container as artistic venue holds a strong symbolism in the Ugandan context: containers evoke transitoriness, mobility and multipurpose use; they refer to the transit and exchange of goods, but also to informal economies within the city landscape, where they are a common sight. The idea behind this choice, furthermore, was to raise public awareness of contemporary art, a phenomenon traditionally associated in Uganda with the academic milieu, largely defined by gallery spaces and government-run museums.⁴ In this context, using containers meant a big step forward in the interests of giving contemporary art public relevance. The degree to which this goal was achieved was variable. Some interventions aimed for interactivity and performativity, while others were simply limited to hanging artworks inside the container space. While some criticism of the event focused on the fact that the containers were also “enclosing” art and *containing* it in public spaces in downtown areas,⁵ the festival did have a relevance in challenging views on art’s intentions, ownership and relevance. It also initiated a lasting dynamic of institutional collaboration binding together public and private agents. Katrin Peters-Klaphake, who recently dedicated a long essay to public art in Uganda, mentions that “*KLA ART 012* was a pilot, an experiment in many ways, from the outset with the intention of following editions in two or three-year intervals. The main aims were to create new physical and mental spaces for visual art projects and to interact with new and different audiences. The festival was strictly non-commercial to allow for ideas beyond a direct saleability”.⁶ She adds that “the festival had a visionary, experimental aspect, attempting to open up a space for new artistic but also curatorial approaches”,⁷ opposing the long tradition of solo shows mostly motivated by economic ends.

Contrary to that process of tagging and highlighting public places, the 2014 edition of KLA ART decided to frame public intervention in a different way. Titled “Unmapped”, the festival attempted to have a more intense projection into the public

¹ This article constitutes my first approach to contemporary Ugandan art. I wrote it during a month-length research trip to Kampala. I became interested in the two projects I discuss here as part of a longer investigation, which will take the form of a monograph about how coloniality and socially-engaged art can be related.

² Besides 32° East, the organizing institutions included the Makerere University, AKA Gallery, Nommo Gallery, the Ugandan Museum, Alliance Française Kampala and the Goethe-Zentrum Kampala. The partnership worked not only at the level of raising funding, but also at the level of curating and decision-making.

³ The chosen artists were Bwambala Ivan Allan, Emma Wolukau-Wanambwa, Eria Nsubuga “Sane”, Eric Mukalazi, Lilian Nabulime, Ronex, Ruganzu Bruno, Sanaa Gateja, Stella Atal, Waswa, Xenson and Sue Crozier Thorburn (a British artist living in Uganda and the only foreigner of the show).

⁴ The oldest art institutions in Uganda are the Makerere University, the Uganda Museum and the Nommo Gallery, the last two being state-controlled. In the last ten years, this panorama has been completed by the emergence of a large number of private art galleries. To that we have to add 32° East. Ugandan Arts Trust, an alternative space created in 2012.

⁵ See Katrin Peters-Klaphake, “Art in Kampala At Work 012” in Kerstin Pinther, Ugochukwu-Smooth C. Nzewi and Berit Fischer (eds.) *New Spaces for Negotiating Art and Histories in Africa* (Berlin: Lit Verlag, 2015), pp.52-72.

⁶ Katrin Peters-Klaphake, “Art in Kampala At Work 012”, 65.

⁷ *Ibidem*, p.66.

space. The second edition of the event was coordinated by 32° East. Ugandan Art Trust, and brought interesting novelties to the Ugandan artistic arena. The initiative was split into three interrelated projects: a “conventional” exhibition taking place at the Uganda Railways station in Central Kampala;⁸ a series of studio visits highlighting the workplaces of local artists;⁹ and a set of public interventions grouped under *The Boda Boda Project*. The latter, which was not intended to be the nucleus of the event nor the depository of the major part of the funding, outnumbered the “regular” gallery exhibition in terms of visitors and critical response. All local newspapers and cultural journals dedicated a space to the event, and the *ContemporaryAnd* platform featured the project as part of a special issue on Kampala.¹⁰

The initiative consisted of a series of collaborations between Ugandan artists and the *boda boda* drivers, whose motorcycles were customized and then used regularly throughout the city. The *boda bodas*, motorbikes providing taxi services, are the most common means of transport in Uganda. They also constitute a cornerstone in Kampala’s popular culture and informal trade network.¹¹ Choosing them both as artistic venue and as target community with which to collaborate amounts to acknowledging their role in configuring Kampala’s urban landscape and recognizing their legitimacy. At the same time, these practices raise questions about the capacity of one-time artistic interventions to create awareness on regulatory and customary issues such as urban gentrification and exclusion. Involving motorbikes that would have a regular use during and beyond the festival time made it necessary to reconsider the participatory nature of KLA ART in different terms. The interventions varied from project to project, but in this case the terms of the dialogue were now more balanced and horizontal, with each artist interacting with the *boda boda* drivers in a sustained way. *The Boda Boda Project* also functioned differently in terms of space, shifting the relatively controlled locations where the containers were installed in KLA ART 012 for more daring routes followed by the *boda boda* drivers.

In a recent article, Angelo Kakande has shown how Ugandan artists are increasingly tending to adopt partisan positions concerning the influence of extralegal forms of slow and not-so-visible violence in the definition of the debates on Ugandan public space.¹² The projects belonging to the *Boda Boda Project* made that concern evident. Among the issues raised were everyday violence against marginalized groups (Adonias Ocom Ekuwe, Xenson), the liability of passengers and drivers alike and the lack of respect for passers-by (Ronex Ahimbisibwe, Petro, Babirye Leilah Burns), and the invisibility of *boda boda guys* despite their constituting a central sector of Kampala’s economy (Kino Musoke, Enock Kalule Kagga and Sandra Suubi). While many of the interventions arose with a central topic in mind that was supposed to

⁸ Closed in 1992, with KLA ART the station was recovered for the first time since then for public use.

⁹ This element was original in Ugandan art. Besides putting the artists on the map, it served to encourage a climate of dialogue between the community of creators and the festival’s audience.

¹⁰ See <http://www.contemporaryand.com/magazines/kla-art-puts-east-african-art-on-the-map/>

¹¹ Here we should note the existence of a strong tradition of customizing and diversifying *boda bodas*, *matatus* and other vehicles dedicated to informal transport. KLA ART 014 encouraged this phenomenon, using art to channel some of the existing aspirations to social recognition and improvements in security conditions of the sector, while benefitting from the vibrant visual inventiveness of Kampala’s vernacular scene. It in no way initiates it.

¹² A. Kakande (2016). Art and the “Ghost” of “Military Dictatorship”: Expressions of Dictatorship in Post-1986 Contemporary Ugandan Art. *Start. Journal of Arts and Culture* (Kampala), 14th December 2016. Available at <http://startjournal.org/2016/12/art-and-the-ghost-of-military-dictatorship-expressions-of-dictatorship-in-post-1986-contemporary-ugandan-art/>

develop into a mobile artwork related to it,¹³ the format allowed more complex and more interesting forms of collaboration. The 2014 edition of KLA ART generated mostly positive critical responses,¹⁴ and was perceived by many of the persons I interviewed as the beginning of a “new mood” in contemporary art, more prone to project itself into the public space, but also deepening the terms of the collaborations set into motion.

In this article, I will tentatively define this mood as *the boda moment*. *Boda bodas* symbolize a whole cultural landscape characterized by the centrality and invisibility of the informal sector within the configuration of urban imaginaries. The landscape of informal economies and practices in Kampala has altered substantially since the creation of the Kampala Capital City Authority (KCCA) in 2011, which has developed a campaign to modernize the capital’s urban landscape, encouraging private investment and urban transformation. This has left many informal vendors and agents in a precarious and paradoxical position, for those same individuals still constitute the backbone supporting Ugandan economy. By referring to a “*boda moment*”, in this article I want to allude to this situation as a general concern in contemporary Ugandan artistic practice, one seemingly marked by: a) the success of collaborative and oppositional practices challenging and confronting the privatization of the urban space and cultural and educational institutions; b) the insertion of artistic collaboration within the sphere of the informal city; c) linked to that, a certain decentralization of the role that the academic context has had in the definition of contemporary Ugandan society, motivated by the irruption of economic neoliberalism in the Museveni era;¹⁵ and finally d) a constant questioning of the possibilities and limitations of artistic interventions operating in that terrain, something manifest in the rejection of “traditional” art audiences and contexts and representational means for political expression, but also in the adoption of an experimental and process-based approach to creativity.

II

KLA Art did not emerge out of nothing. It was the result of the confluence of a fundamental shift in the Ugandan artistic panorama, something that could be felt on an institutional, curatorial and representational level. Here I will ‘zoom in’ to both editions of KLA ART and select two long-term projects that will focus my discussion.

One of the containers of the 2012 edition of the festival was occupied by Lilian Mary Nabulime. She filled the space with a series of usable soap-made sculptures made of soap that suggested male and female genitals, which she used to articulate a conversation around HIV/AIDS. This topic was the main concern of her artistic practice from the early 2000s, after going through a direct experience of caring for her husband. As a Ph.D. student at the University of Newcastle, Nabulime started experimenting with sculpture as a way of generating social awareness of HIV/AIDS among Ugandan women residing in London. With a vast experience in artistic collaboration, for her

¹³ The *boda boda* project was especially eye-catching. For many, the *boda bodas* might have been perceived as crazy objects amidst the flow of vehicles populating Kampala. While this gimmicky dimension was certainly present in the relations between artists, drivers and audiences, it cannot account for the whole diversity of experiences and exchanges comprised by the initiative.

¹⁴ See E. Namakula. “Mapping Kampala with KLA ART 014” *Start. Journal of Arts and Culture* (Kampala), 20th November 2014. Retrieved from <http://startjournal.org/2014/11/mapping-kampala-with-kla-art-014/>; Moses Serubiri. “A Tree in Public Space” *Start. Journal of Arts and Culture* (Kampala), 1st June 2016. Retrieved from <http://startjournal.org/2015/06/a-tree-in-public-space/>

¹⁵ The beginning of Yoweri Museveni’s presidency in 1986 officially marked the end of the dictatorial period including the governments of Idi Amin between 1971 and 1979 and Milton Obote’s second term of office between 1980 and 1985.

intervention in 2012 Nabulime stood in front of her container, dialoguing with the audience about the meaning of her sculpture and the social relevance of AIDS in Uganda. Years before, Nabulime had attempted to develop a practice-based research project on “*The role of sculptural forms as a communication tool in relationship to lives and experiences of women in Sub-Saharan Africa*”, which focused on a variety of topics viewed from an art-historical perspective.¹⁶ This was the original Ph.D. dissertation proposal that she began to develop at Newcastle University. Soon, however, she started turning her interest towards the impact of HIV on Ugandan women. Sculpture (which Nabulime, after Beuys, understands as a social practice) was chosen as the artistic medium because it could cut across ethnic and religious boundaries (which constitute a real obstacle in the Ugandan context), but also because it presented a desirable balance between abstraction and objecthood. Finally, it allowed interaction and co-existence, simultaneously triggering and modulating the dialogical elements that lie at the core of the project.

When I interviewed Nabulime, I asked her what role sculpture played in her project. Since conversation and dialogical engagement are her central concern, why was she not getting rid of the “more conventional” process of carving? She replied that the manipulation of objects of everyday use was essential for ensuring a degree of confidence that would allow conversations to take place. Since many of the issues which arose in the project (such as polygamy or extra-marital relations) were taboo, only by relating them to the sharing of “neutral” everyday acts such as cleansing could they be dealt publicly and critically.

A first experiment, which took place between 2001 and 2002 with Ugandan and African women living in UK, found some problems in examining those conditions. Although some positive results were obtained, the experience revealed the participants’ difficulties in discussing personal issues. At this moment, her practice, Nabulime explains, “was informed by imagined ideas of the life experiences of women living with the disease and by personal experiences. Information was gathered through a worldwide review of the literature and practice, drawing on published material and ‘grey’ literature, web-materials and other communication resources”.¹⁷ Consequently, the targeted audience was not the most suitable one for the artist’s interests, and a gap between Nabulime’s expectations and her awareness of the specificities of context, audience composition and interests was also at play. As a result of this, not only were the dialogical aspects of the project closer to a symbolic enactment of the artist’s will than an open exchange; the sculptures also were dominated by a pedagogic objective (women with sad expression representing victimhood, etc.).¹⁸ This gap was only bridged by sustained engagement with her audience and her curiosity, over the following years.

The last stages of the project involve an active collaboration with populations (women and men) in rural areas with a low literacy rate, in which the sculptures are used to trigger a discussion that goes beyond AIDS to include issues on women’s rights, patriarchy, social (in)visibility and polygamy. Well aware of both AIDS art

¹⁶ See Lilian Nabulime and Cheryl McEwan, “Art as Social Practice: Transforming Lives Using Sculpture in HIV/AIDS Awareness and Prevention in Uganda”, *Cultural Geographies* 18 (3) (2011), pp.275-296.

¹⁷ Lilian Nabulime, *The Role of Sculptural Forms as a Communication Tool in Lives and Experiences of Women with HIV/AIDS in Uganda*. Unpublished Ph.D. Dissertation (Newcastle University, 2007), p.20.

¹⁸ It is important to note that some of the most complex issues the project would touch in the following years, such as concealment and public identification and the connection between HIV and care issues, appeared in an embryonic form at this stage.

activism and the social use of sculpture in the African context, Nabulime inserted her dialogical practice into a diversity of locations within Uganda.

III

Fred Batale, the initiator of our second artistic project, was one of Nabulime's collaborators in the 2012 project. One year after, Batale created the Disability Art Project Uganda (DAPU), which took part in KLA ART's *boda boda Project* in 2014. On that occasion, they modified a *boda boda* so it could carry a person with impaired mobility. The DAPU project brings together Ugandans with disabilities, and explores issues of accessibility, recognition and self-empowerment. The activities developed by DAPU include a series of practical workshops on design and art making aimed at people with disabilities living on the streets; public demonstrations and counselling on practical issues; gathering people for tuning their vehicles and prosthesis. These activities produce multiple outcomes, ranging from "conventional artworks" to collaborative processes in which each participant could customize his/her means of transportation, from open conversations to educational workshops. "We do art projects which lobby and sensitize the public about disability rights to equality, accessibility, among others", affirms the DAPU website. Batale's intention was to develop an open-ended aesthetic process where the interests of multiple participants could be brought together without a unique objective or final end. In that sense, the representational means of each activity and the production of artistic objects are collectivized, while individual decisions are also considered. Collaboration here is not just framed at the level of research, but also in the final outputs of each activity, which remain open **to the desire** of each participant. As we will see, those **dimensions** usually concatenate. How is this achieved, and why is it important?

IV

Now we know who initiated both projects, we may ask: Who are the subjects that belong to the communities that DAPU and Nabulime work with? How can we approach them? How do the projects shape those communities? How do the communities impact on these projects? In the case of Nabulime, audience is determined not only by personal or family exposure to AIDS; concerns around ethnicity, heteronormativity and literacy also play a pivotal role in configuring each experience.¹⁹ While the first element was clear from the beginning in the artist's mind, the others emerged as successive phases unfolded. The variety of reactions, ranging from misunderstanding to refusal and active engagement, revealed that complexity. This heterogeneity of topics and approaches led Nabulime to adopt an ambivalent aesthetics. A common argument in Nabulime's explanation of her own work is that the use of soap is related to the need of "avoiding many partners and sticking to one" in order to prevent AIDS contagion. Soap also epitomizes physical and moral cleanliness, as well as the transparency of those who "accept living with AIDS".²⁰ A margin for unconditioned interaction with the soap sculptures, in any case, is left, so the clinical and emotional valorizations derived from contact with the objects are transferred to each participant's individual experience. This is encouraged by limiting firsthand information on each piece and substituting it for conversational moments with the artist.²¹

¹⁹ A first experience took place in 2005 in Katikamu, Luweero. Since then, several experiments in different regions of Uganda have continued this original research.

²⁰ Nabulime, *The Role of Sculptural Forms*, p.186.

²¹ "It was noted that revealing the symbolism of the objects in the soap influenced the audience's response. It was important for the audience to view the sculptures for themselves, then to respond to the

Something similar occurred with the Disability Art Project Uganda. Although the group of participants joining DAPU could be seen as coming from an already existing group, the dynamic of the project shows how this point should not be taken for granted. When he started the project, Batale faced many challenges. Many people were reluctant to expose themselves in public; many others wanted to be paid for their participation; yet a third group of participants many could not understand why art was important as an engine for collective action. This poses a challenge to market-oriented artistic production, locating dialogue and collaboration at the center of the creative process. Lacking any (artistic) education in many cases and facing a harsh reality, design and aesthetics could have been seen as remote and abstract aspirations. Nevertheless, when I talked to Batale, he insisted on the importance of art in the whole configuration of the project, as well as in the cohesion of the collective agency displayed through DAPU. He explained that in their practice, creativity is not an ornamental element, but rather **a mean wholly inserted in the means** of living and in the everyday economy of Ugandan people with disabilities. DAPU does not “stand for” any collective; rather, it acts as an artistic platform enabling multivalent approaches and different degrees of engagement. Each initiative frames participation in multiple ways. For example, DAPU sets up an educational platform, which produces art objects that can be sold; the outcome of this process gives some of the participants the possibility of buying a means of locomotion. These can be customized, something which makes the customization of the vehicles a main asset in achieving DAPU’s goals of self-encouragement and public awareness. The customization is normally followed by public demonstrations. This chain, whose gears can be articulated in several ways, is fully controlled by the participants.

Although a first look at both projects could identify them as socially-engaged art projects addressing pre-existing communities of participants, the reality is far more complex. A first glance on both projects might locate them on the side of tangible acts of solidarity motivated by acute social problems. Under that logic, their aesthetic side would be very much based on a shared biopolitical condition, namely exclusion from the public sphere. However, this would be **misleading** many of the factors that are put into play in the specific context where they take place. In particular, it would mean **misleading** how the subjectivities and desires of the participants involved in both projects work in strategic and performative terms, avoiding any essential identification of these participants with a single social or cultural element. To put it in other terms, in both initiatives subjectivity is not something essential (derived from being a person with a disability or experiencing HIV at first hand or through the experience of a relative or close person). On the contrary, it implies self-definition, performance, external recognition, and economics. Because of that, their impact cannot be reduced to the dichotomy between aesthetics and politics, for doing so will involve losing sight of the existence of complex negotiations—*aesthetic as well as social*—within the conceptualization and the internal dynamics of both projects.

Interlude I: Locating Socially-Engaged Art in Africa

Articulating the relationship between economics, agency and representational medium has always been a central concern in contemporary African art. In the last decade, however, there has been an unprecedented renovation of institutional and collaborative practices. The creation of “power stations” (as Koyo Kouoh refers to African

soap and the objects embedded in them.” *Ibidem*, p.158. The illiteracy of the communities of participants is also behind this choice. **COULD YOU ADD IN A SENTENCE TO EXPLAIN THIS MORE FULLY?**

institutional and collaborative initiatives²²) is increasingly incorporating artistic practice into discussions of subjects as important as civil society, autonomy and urban gentrification. Above all, contemporary African art has kept pace with the main concerns of the continent. This runs counter to the construction of an external gaze on African reality that is detached from the contexts of production and engagement. Discussions over the “invented” nature of African art²³ and its commodification²⁴ have haunted the development of critical thought and practice on Africa, especially since *Les Magiciens de la Terre*. What projects such as Batale’s and Nabulime’s reveal is a direct connection with the respective participants’ lived reality. Terry Smith identified the three major challenges of contemporaneity as heterogeneity, collaboration and coequality and urges us to “picture all of the worlds in which we live in their real relation to each other; work together to create and sustain a viable sense of place for each of us; establish and maintain coequal connectivity between worlds and places”.²⁵ In our two projects, those three elements converge: the proximity between artists and participants is not only thematic; rather, it affects engagement and the temporal proximity between process and result.

The curator Elvira Dyangani Ose responded to the recent emergence of collaborative practices in Africa with a set of pressing questions that supersede the quest for identity and national relevance. It is worth quoting her at length:

For contemporary artists working today, the questions might now be: What does it mean to produce knowledge from a specific territory? How do artistic experiences produce new forms of counter culture or inform new urban solutions? What determines the success or failure of this kind of project? And, as in many of these cases where continuity and self-sustainability are unachievable outcomes, how does one rally against this to make the temporal experience develop into a permanent structure that at the same time would permit certain African actors to exercise their ability to live simultaneously in multiple temporalities [...]?”²⁶

Also addressing that turn, Euridice Kala characterizes the pioneer production of the Cameroonian artist Goody Leye as an “reflective and action-prone work in which the artist sprang between intense spaces for reflection—and spaces for action—across widening geographies”.²⁷ She adds something crucial: “By acknowledging that African art practice could be an ephemeral continuum of thought, rather than a halted representation of African narratives, Leye may have positioned himself in a space that

²² Koyo Kouoh (ed.) *Condition Report: Symposium on Building Art Institutions in Africa*. (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2013), p.17.

²³ See V.Y. Mudimbe, *The Invention of Africa: Gnosis, Philosophy, and the Order of Knowledge* (Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1988). On the impact of Mudimbe’s book, see Pierre-Philippe Fraiture, *V.Y. Mudimbe. Undisciplined Africanism* (Liverpool, Liverpool University Press, 2013).

²⁴ See, for example, Kwame Anthony Appiah, “Is the Post- in Postmodernism the Post-in Postcolonial?” *Critical Inquiry* 17(2) (1991), pp.336-357; Olu Oguibe and Okwui Enwezor (eds.) *Reading the Contemporary: African Art from Theory to the Marketplace* (London, InIVA, 1999).

²⁵ Terry Smith, *The Contemporary Composition (Contemporary Condition)* (Berlin, Stenberg, 2016), p.3.

²⁶ Elvira Dyangani Ose, “La poétique de l’Extra-ordinaire. L’esthétique de la Reconnaissance dans L’art Contemporain Africain.” In Koyo Kouoh (ed.) *Condition Report: Symposium on Building Art Institutions in Africa*. (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2013), p.118.

²⁷ Euridice Kala, “Introduction”, in Euridice Kala (ed.) *Boda Boda Lounge Project. From Space (Scope) to Place (Position)*. (Troyeville, South Africa, Vansa, 2014), p.8.

turned object-based art into a passive way of engaging with contemporary ideas, a way which removed the responsibility from the artist to challenge concepts and ideas just by allocating value to the aesthesis. A way, therefore, that was removed from representations of the African narrative”.²⁸

Ose’s and Kala’s remarks show the centrality of processes of mobility and active transformation within African artistic contexts. They also evidence the centrality of local operational contexts in the definition of African contemporaneity, something that challenges the role traditionally played by metropolitan art scenes in the definition and commodification of African discourses. The practices I have grouped here under the umbrella term of the *boda* moment can be seen as directly answering this shift. As we will see, this transformation also introduces an alternative temporal conceptualization of creative practice.

V

Political struggle, Stavros Stavrides argues, is a matter of the everyday.²⁹ To a great extent, the transformative potential of the initiatives developed by DAPU and Nabulime is based on the insertion of material exchanges in that day-to-day dimension. Both projects work in the realm of the everyday, on a sustained, day-to-day basis, bringing interesting consequences for their practice. It is precisely through a questioning of the social relevance of public artistic practice against the backdrop of increasing marketization and transnational exchanges that initiatives such as DAPU and Nabulime define their “horizon of intelligibility”. This permanent confrontation of central issues of the everydayness of both projects’ participants gives rise to adapting tactics of activism to present needs. In a well-known essay, Brian Holmes mentions that “a territory of art appears within widening “underground” circles, where the aesthetics of everyday practice is considered a political issue”.³⁰ Not that that territory is without conflicts. Speaking from Kenya, Ory Okolloh—herself an entrepreneur—points out the potential dangers of romanticizing cultural entrepreneurship as a response to structural situations of economic instability. For her, the increasing praise of cultural entrepreneurship runs the risk of masking the weight and the violence of neoliberal intervention in the East African region; it will also blur the dependence of local initiatives on transnational capital.³¹ The two projects I analyze here reject spectacular actions and temporary initiatives, developing long-term collaborations in contrast to (but not in total contradiction with) the nature of cultural festivals. In KLA 2014, for example, DAPU was the only part of the *boda to boda* exhibition that produced a permanent engagement. The customization of the vehicle also triggered a reaction among the participant members: many of those who did not participate started to customize their motorbikes. In that sense, the action operated in the fields of “high art”, urban creativity and amateurism, confounding them all. This confusion also affects the material results of the gatherings. Those include “conventional art objects”, public performances and actions of collective creativity. For example, DAPU is mostly joined by people without any education or previous interest in art making. Although it operates

²⁸ *Ibidem*, p.8.

²⁹ Stavros Stavrides, “Re-inventing Spaces of Commoning: Occupied Squares in Movement.” *Quaderns-e*, 18(2) (2013), pp.40-52. See also Stavros Stavrides, *Common Space. The City as Commons* (London, Zed, 2016).

³⁰ <https://brianholmes.wordpress.com/2007/04/27/do-it-yourself-geopolitics/>

³¹ “Ory Okolloh Explains Why Africa Can’t Entrepreneur Itself Out of Its Basic Problems” *Quartz Africa*. Available at: <https://qz.com/502149/video-ory-okolloh-explains-why-africa-cant-entrepreneur-itself-out-of-its-basic-problems/> See also Clive Thompson, *Smarter than You Think. How Technology Is Changing Our Minds for the Better* (New York, Penguin, 2014).

through skilling those people so art can contribute effectively to their personal economies, the act of teaching operates here in multiple ways: it is horizontal, it includes experimentation, it does not end with the production of artworks, its emotional consequences are as important as the economic ones. Skilling, then, is paired with a multidisciplinary approach and paradoxically leads simultaneously to de-specialization.³² Holmes establishes four elements for contemporary social movements. Since it is no longer possible for academic disciplines and professions to operate in the ivory towers, those **movements**, Holmes argues, are forced into an expanded field where critical research, “commitment to both representation and lived experience”, networking and self-organization are framed together.³³ Those four elements intertwine effectively in DAPU. Flexibility stands in opposition to a very reduced artistic milieu made up of *connoisseurs*; experience counters the marketable focus of exhibition-making, immediacy and art selling; skilling and de-specializing oppose the restrictions of public academic artistic education, and also the economic dependence of many cultural projects.

Interlude II: The Makerere Moment

My first field connection with Ugandan art happened at a very particular time, marked by the most prolonged strike in recent times at Uganda’s (and East Africa’s) main educational institution, Makerere University. After years of protests against budget cuts, political oversight of public education, rigidity in the payment of tuition fees and salary arrears, in April 2016 the demonstrations intensified, resulting in continuous police intervention and student detention. This situation came to a head in November 2016, when President Yoweri Museveni ordered the closing of the university, which only reopened by January 2nd. In this situation, professors and students were locked up in the university buildings and classes were suspended. It was in this context that I met the Makerere Art School staff in November 2016.

Strikes are a common element in Makerere’s history. The university has been an active platform for social struggles since independence, introducing critical thought with a constant revision of the potential threat to public education. Founded in 1921 under the Protectorate as a college, the educational institution that would develop into the University of Makerere soon became East Africa’s main high education institution. The university was established for a variety of reasons, among them the consolidation of British power in the region and the fear that the foreign education of Ugandans could bring dangerous ideologies to the territory.³⁴ Makerere was essential in fueling debates on artistic modernity in the Ugandan and East African context. From 1937, when Margaret Trowell founded the first art programs with the intention of addressing “local” ideas and creative expression, the university was a cauldron of theoretical discussions as well as a locus of artistic creativity. Trowell, Kyeyune argues, “believed that Africans had a kind of aesthetic intuition peculiar to themselves: an innate artistic imagination, which was radically different from that of Europe”.³⁵ It was Makerere’s mission, Trowell believed, to adapt this innate potential to the contemporary situation of the

³² In this case, the use of art as a means of protest and production of awareness redefines artistic exchanges. **HOW DOES THIS TIE IN WITH DE-SPECIALIZATION? YOU DON’T EXPLAIN IT. WOULD BE USEFUL TO HAVE A BRIEF EXPLANATION OR DEFINITION**

³³ Brian Holmes, “Eventwork: The Fourfold Matrix of Contemporary Social Movements” in Nato Thompson (ed.) *Living As Form. Socially-Engaged Art from 1991-2011* (Cambridge, MIT Press and Creative Time, 2012), p.73.

³⁴ George Kyeyune, *Art in Uganda in the 20th Century*. Unpublished Ph.D. Dissertation (London, SOAS, 2003), p.38.

³⁵ *Ibidem*, p.42.

territory. The main debates held at the art school thus revolved around the applicability of modernism to the Ugandan art scene. If, on the one hand, Trowell and some of her disciples defended an indigenization of artistic practice, other figures central to the development of Ugandan art, including Cecil Todd (director of the Art School since 1958) and Gregory Maloba, on the other hand, argued that only by including modernity in the dialogue would it be possible to engage Uganda's shifting contemporary situation. Those debates were not just a theoretical aesthetic consideration; on the contrary, behind them lay an interest in making artistic practice "meaningful to the African".³⁶ This involved recovering and promoting many non-figurative and non-representational practices such as dance, drama or music, attempting, in Trowell's words, to "[consider] the aesthetic, emotional response to life of ordinary man".³⁷ The history of Ugandan contemporary art was largely shaped by those debates, which, it should be stressed, were not just academic discussion. Rather, they were directly embedded in the political climate of the moment, marked by the decolonization of Africa, national independence and the emergence of neocolonialism. *Transition* was a direct consequence of that alliance between critical thinking and political action.

Transition was a journal founded in Kampala in 1961 by Rajat Neogy, then lecturer at Makerere. Like other publications emerging around the same time such as *Présence Africaine* and *Black Orpheus*, *Transition* grew out of a conviction of the role that culture should play in the execution of independence. Those, Neogy writes, were times "when idealism and action merge with various degrees of success".³⁸ This interest in action and anti-colonial praxis would therefore be present from the first editions of the journal, something that should be accompanied by a process of "testing intellectual and other preconceptions and for thoughtful and creative contributions in all spheres".³⁹ Although that situation is framed in cultural terms (a preoccupation with "what is an East African culture" closes this introductory remark), in the context of a Kampala at the gates of independence "culture" could hardly be understood as a contemplative, segregated *milieu*. Many of the articles published in *Transition* were directly provocative at a crucial moment for the configuration of independent Africa.⁴⁰ *Transition* was intended to have an impact in the field of politics and anti-colonial struggle. Stressing the links with the African political and intellectual avant-garde, Cédric Vincent reveals how figures such as Wole Soyinka, Ngugi Wa Thiongo, Chinua Achebe and Julius Nyerere were actively involved in the publication, and also emphasizes that *Transition* was identified "as the *Black Orpheus of East Africa*".⁴¹ Vincent also stresses the journal's interdisciplinary approach to present-day reality, pointing out how "[...] it became capable of providing a broad forum that went against the current of debates on immediate problems and fundamental questions that are

³⁶ Ibid., p.24. **Give full reference here. Too confusing for the reader**

³⁷ Quoted in Ibid., p.55. **Give abbreviated title**

³⁸ "Culture in Transition" *Transition*, 1 (Nov. 1961), p.2.

³⁹ *Ibidem*, p.2.

⁴⁰ This process was framed in a very nuanced and fertile way. This is especially evident in the letters to the editor section. For example, in a moment as significant as 1961, the journal addressed in a direct way the transformations taking place in Uganda and East Africa and linked to the process of independence. Issues of race, religion and economics were framed and discussed together, not only with reference to the immediate environment in which the journal was being published, but also in relation to a broader panorama.

⁴¹ Cédric Vincent, "Transition. A Review Tested by Post-colonial Africa". Available at <http://www.contemporaryand.com/magazines/transition-a-review-tested-by-post-colonial-africa/>

almost always confined to communication in a limited, closed circuit of insiders and partisans”.⁴²

This editorial standpoint, a mixture of commitment to the everyday colonial and postcolonial situation of Uganda and East Africa and an experimental understanding of culture, fermented a critical and non-celebratory questioning of the role that speculative theory should play in the configuration of a post-colonial citizenry and public sphere. *Transition*'s “nuanced commitment” to practice and action remained present in the Ugandan cultural milieu during the 1970s, although highly threatened by the violence and censorship enacted during the Obote and Amin regimes. Neogy was incarcerated in 1967 and exiled to Ghana in 1969. In 1972, the project faced a decisive turn and was transferred to London, where it was temporarily edited as *Ch'indaba* under the direction of Wole Soyinka. Currently, *Transition* is published by Indiana University Press on behalf of the Hutchins Center for African and African American Research at Harvard University, under the coordination of Kwame Anthony Appiah and Henry Louis Gates Jr. and the editorship of Alejandro de la Fuente. In any case, the sociopolitical situation in Uganda during that period was marked by censorship and political violence, something especially evident at Makerere during the dictatorship. The 1970s also introduced an interest in experimenting with new materials and creative techniques that, besides formal innovation, brought a more nuanced relationship with the local reality, stressing, as George Kyeyune argued, “[a better adaptation] to economies of scarcity”.⁴³ The arrival of “political normality” and “stability” after the election of Museveni in 1986 placed Makerere in a new position, where it had to compete with the increasing weight of private investment in the educational sector. This situation is what was at stake in the 2016 strikes.

The history of the university, as well as its centrality in the context of Ugandan civil society, can shed some light on the practices I discuss in this paper. In some respects, the KLA ART Festivals as well as the two collaborative initiatives I am considering represent a continuation of the interest in finding new ways of dealing with the political that are relevant to society. At the same time, however, they are a reaction against the centrality of academic education in the configuration of a restricted art environment. They also represent a decisive shift of the spaces where the political is framed from the “culturally sanctioned” location of the university and the art gallery to the quicksand-like terrain of urban daily life. The recent strikes have somehow brought back the importance of testing the limits of academia and its impact on society, on this occasion in relation to the loss of relevance of public education against the backdrop of a fierce modernization and the instrumentalization and privatization of academic life.⁴⁴ In this context, artistic collaboration, a central concern of “the *boda* moment”, becomes a vital tool for experimenting with ways of engaging the fault lines of economic modernization and political stagnation through cultural practices.

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⁴² Ibidem.

⁴³ Kyeyune, *Art in Uganda*, p.5.

⁴⁴ This is especially evident in the reconfiguration of the Ugandan academic landscape. In 2006, Kizito Maria Kazule, an artist and scholar and current Dean of the Makerere Art School, opened the Nagenda Academy of Art and Design, a private high education institution. The controversy arose in relation to the Makerere's social relevance and the preponderance of artistic and academic criteria in the choosing of fine art students. **CHECK THAT THIS IS CORRECT**

In the two cases I am analyzing, operating in those fault lines means challenging the locus and unidirectionality of power relations set in motion by the Ugandan cultural industries. Borrowing the potential of informal chains of knowledge and affect, they also negotiate with “official” frameworks such as art spaces, cultural festivals, and, in the case of Nabulime, health infrastructures and religious institutions. One question that kept coming up in my interviews with Fred Batale and Lilian Nabulime related to the suitability of using art to address the concerns they are dealing with. If many of their “audiences” are not familiar with art, why not just engage those communities and leave artistic creativity aside? Their answer to this question shows the usefulness of artistic collaboration for mediating across different spaces and formal and informal structures. In the conversations with Batale, a recurring element was the importance of art for achieving a critical self-awareness, besides the immediate pursuit of pragmatic ends. DAPU directly tackles issues of precariousness, social and urban exclusion and marginality. These issues, importantly enough, are considered alongside a challenge of the definition of utility and disposability from a personal and social perspective. In that sense, DAPU’s workshops are intended to develop economic tools of sustainability and an improvement of the participants’ self-image in a context where people with disabilities are stigmatized. However, this refusal is not addressed in a referential way, as something that must be denounced, rather it is defined as a decisive field where the agency of people with disability can operate. It is not conceived as a burden, but as a challenge. In the case of Nabulime, we saw how her incursion into “social sculpture” was the result of a process of trial and error in which formal perfection walked hand in hand with a betterment of the intelligibility and communicational capacity of the project. The interconnection of social awareness and personal consciousness is also noteworthy.⁴⁵ It is also symptomatic that our two projects address important nationally-sanctioned issues while also operating in the margins of what is left aside both by contemporary modernization and informal economies. DAPU could be inserted **in a right to** the city logic, but at the same time operates at the fractures of the urban reconfiguration of Kampala developed both through official and informal means.

Similarly, Nabulime challenges the logic of urban space as the only place of struggle, developing a complex territorial field of action. Her AIDS sculptures disperse the focus of cultural practices on urban spaces and contexts, pointing to the heterogeneity of the population linked to the epidemic. Jean and John Comaroff used the term “ID-ology” to refer to a similar experience in which “political personhood [is lived as] a fractured, fractal experience”,⁴⁶ in tension between an increasingly normative notion of national citizenship (a “grounding of citizenship in the jural”⁴⁷) and economically-conditioned ethnic identities. Considering the case of South Africa, they argue that this duplicity is shaping “a new popular politics [that] is catching flame as older struggles—under the signs of class, race and partisan ideology—fade away”.⁴⁸

⁴⁵ As Nabulime and McEwan point out: “The soap sculptures generated discussions in workshops and public exhibitions, but there is clearly scope for participants to take these into domestic spaces to precipitate discussion about sexuality. Translating what can be discussed in public venues into the spaces of the home is notoriously difficult in patriarchal societies, but this is essential in HIV/AIDS prevention. As relatively inexpensive and easily understood works of art, soap sculptures could provide an effective bridge between these spaces that changes personal consciousness and in turn leads to social change.” Lilian Nabulime and Cheryl McEwan, “Art as Social Practice...”, p.291.

⁴⁶ Jean Comaroff and John Comaroff, *Theory from the South. Or, How Euro-America Is Evolving Toward Africa* (Boulder, Paradigm, 2012), p.67. See also Jean Comaroff and John Comaroff, *Ethnicity, INC* (Chicago, Chicago University Press, 2009).

⁴⁷ Jean Comaroff and John Comaroff, *Theory from the South*, p.78.

⁴⁸ Ibidem, p.88. **GIVE SHORT TITLE?**

Focusing on Brazil, João Biehl also pointed at the corrosive character of economic power when channeled towards the invisibility and disposability of segments of the population within the borders of the nation state. Biehl looks at “the ways in which social destinies of the poorest and the sickest are ordered”.⁴⁹

In the case of Uganda, AIDS emerges as a central concern in a landscape where foreign economic intervention, ethnic and religious divisions and uneven modernization have a direct impact on the vulnerability of specific sectors of the population, and especially on illiterate women. In deciding to work with those sectors, Nabulime points at the hidden mechanisms (both “official” and “communitarian”) reinforcing that segmentation. In both cases, we see how there is a transposition between economies of care, affect and (self)recognition into the urban landscape. This introduces a novelty in the political tone of former generations of Ugandan artists, traditionally oriented towards the discussion of issues more easily perceived as having “national interest”.

Both DAPU and Nabulime are immersed in those debates; but this proximity operates in both cases by spreading the fields of political agency, and by mediating across the instances of community awareness, individual polarization, cultural criticism and collective decision-making.⁵⁰ The sphere of action of both projects is, then located at the crossroads of those four dimensions. This sense of strangeness from the field of “contemporary art” also positions both projects towards the body of Ugandan cultural practices and policies. Collaborative practices and public art festivals have brought many newcomers to the restricted terrain of the Ugandan art scene. National art history was built mostly from an academic (and, we must add, Makerere-centric) point of view;⁵¹ this was a natural consequence of the country’s political and cultural evolution.⁵² The analyzed processes challenge that centrality, not just because of their externality towards that system, but also because of their inassimilable condition, which makes it impossible to summarize any reduction of the collective exchanges triggered by Batale and Nabulime as specific, singularized interventions or artistic creations. Newcomers, Stavrides argues *through* Rancière, were “those who were “unaccounted for”.⁵³ It is symptomatic that the success of the “public” side of KLA Art was not anticipated. Rather, the attention that experiences such as the *boda boda project* were the result of an unexpected positive response on the side of an audience that greatly overtook that of exhibitions and other artistic activities. That success was, thus, very much the result of the multiplicity and the originality of the participants, the audience and the festivals themselves.

⁴⁹ João Biehl, “Vita. Life in a Zone of Social Abandonment” *Social Text* 68 (19/3) (2001), p.136. See also Ann Laura Stoler, *Imperial Debris. On Ruins and Ruination* (Durham, Duke University Press, 2013).

⁵⁰ On the importance of activism in decentering the sphere of politics and spreading the realm of power, see Raúl Zibechi, *Dispersing Power. Social Movements as Anti-State Forces* (Oakland-Edinburgh, Baltimore, AK Press, 2010).

⁵¹ As Margaret Nagawa explains (p.155), “for a long time, formal art training was only offered at Makerere University”, something that determined its centrality in the debates on artistic modernity and aesthetics, while also shaped the composition in terms of gender of the Ugandan artistic community. In that text, Nagawa outlines with detail how the cultural economy of women artists in Uganda is highly influenced by family relations, formal education, conceptions of modern art and indigeneity, and finally by the Ugandan institutional *milieu*. Margaret Nagawa, “The Challenges and Successes of Women Artists in Uganda”, in Marion Arnold (ed.) *Art in Eastern Africa* (Dar Es Salaam, Mkuki na Nyota Publishers, 2008), pp.145-169. See also Amanda Evassy Tumusiime, *Art and Gender: Imag[in]ing the New Woman in Contemporary Ugandan Art*. Unpublished Ph.D. dissertation (University of South Africa, 2012).

⁵² See George Kyeyune, “Pioneer Makerere Masters”, in Marion Arnold (ed.), *Art in Eastern Africa* (Dar Es Salaam, Mkuki na Nyota Publishers, 2008), pp.127-145.

⁵³ Stavrides, “Re-inventing Space”, p.47.

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The artistic initiatives examined here refuse any deferment of their capacity of action. What is more important, they are resistant to the divorce between the moment of practice, the heterogeneity of the participants involved in that practice, and any posterior theoretical or representative resolution. It is true that both projects have “a face”, a representative side that is articulated in multiple ways when they interact with cultural agents (for example, in their participation in the KLA Art Festivals), or when they negotiate their position between the local scenario in which they operate and the transnational arena to which they are linked.⁵⁴ We have seen, however, how ~~this~~ translatability does not mean a **deferral** or a simplification. DAPU’s activity can be seen as a concatenation of initiatives and forces sometimes working together towards a shared end, but also affecting the ways in which each individual conceives her own relation with the urban environment of Kampala as political. In this sense, the internal tensions within the project reflect the malleability of the project’s collective agency, but also the heterogeneity of the political voices behind those actions. Dealing with the articulation of “commons” in the context of contemporary cities, Stavrides mentions that “political subjectivation **through communing** is characterized by the rise of new collective subjects which are inherently multiple and which escape from the dominant classifications of political actions”.⁵⁵ This especially applies here.

In a similar way, the outcome of Nabulime’s practice we can define as “more aesthetic” (e.g. the production of sculptures) is indeed a intermediate step within a larger chain of actions and consequences that include the production of dialogue, the making of sculptures, the consumption and display of those (both within and outside the art world) and the insertion of HIV/AIDS awareness within an expanded field of action and discussion. The multiplicity of the effects triggered by the project is, thus, as important as the non-linear relationality and horizontality of all those aspects. The insertion of representational issues within behavioral elements is crucial for understanding the potential of social practice in the Ugandan context. In the two examples I have analyzed, artistic production is directly embedded in the intervention of the behavioral. The artists or project coordinators are the facilitators of this intervention, but in no way determine it. On the contrary, both projects’ role has to do more with triggering an active reaction from the side of the participants rather than with portraying or controlling it.

A second element of interest involves the way that both initiatives intervene in a space where the consequences of the continuity of situations of marginalization and political violence are in full play. Rather than exposing “the consequences of” the expulsion of a great part of citizenry from the public space, they operate from within that excluded citizenry, articulating a dialogue that would otherwise be impossible. This element establishes a link with activist and politically-committed forms of insurgence in the past: while *Transition* and Makerere attempted to have an impact in the not-so evident policies of segregation and exclusion at the time of the transition between colony and postcolony, contemporary Ugandan social practice updates and diversifies this concern. It does so by highlighting the continuities between colonial and postcolonial exclusionary policies; by placing issues of mobility and “factual” difference at the center of cultural debates; by connecting those issues with more

⁵⁴ This is especially evident in the ways both projects “articulate” themselves in order to apply for external funding. However, as I have attempted to show, this articulation is not essential, nor does it determine the rest of the initiatives and negotiations in play in each project.

⁵⁵ Stavros Stavrides, “Reinventing Communities in Movement: The Recent Square Occupations As a New Form of Dissident Politics”. Available at <http://paperroom.ipisa.org/>

abstract (but not more harmless) issues of gender violence, social acceptance, self-identification and right to the city; and, finally, by inserting politically-charged collective agency into the everydayness of social struggle. Furthermore, both projects evidence how African social practice is transected by the contradictions of the encounters of neoliberalism and modernization and cultural recognition, not in themselves subsumable to a single postcolonial national identity nor reduced to absolute pluralism and institutional vacuum.

Finally, a third key dimension of the project is autonomy. The need for help and development has always been a troubling presence for African artistic initiatives. Working from a difficult position, DAPU turns this around: the project's emphasis is on the capacity of a group of individuals to produce their own resources in a sustainable way. Constant engagement and creativity are not in contradiction with economic self-organization. DAPU succeeds not by applying a recipe, a unique mode of empowerment, but by offering a wide set of tools from which each participant can choose. This means that each participant can attain individual modes of sustainability and develop their creativity in the way they want to. In that sense, there is a strong component of inspirational influence, the capacity to “ripple[ing] into extra-artistic institutions and practices”, to borrow Doris Sommer's words.⁵⁶ The project as a whole also pursues this autonomy: unlike NGOs, which normally pursue a cause and work towards achieving an objective, in this case action is conceived as cyclical and fragmented, allowing the participants not just to join initiatives, but also to develop independent actions and to create new bonds of solidarity. DAPU's goal is not to “help” individuals, but to articulate individual and collective action in effective and innovative ways.

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⁵⁶ Doris Sommer, *The Work of Art in the World. Civic Agency and Public Humanities* (Durham, Duke University Press, 2014), p.7.