

# Beyond The Gallery:

## *Interactions Between Audiences, Artists, and their Art Through the Kampala Art Tour 2007–2010*

**W**hen one walks into an art gallery in Kampala, the capital city of Uganda, one sees a predominantly non-Ugandan audience. Visitors to homes of Ugandans, even those wealthy enough to afford art, find typically bare walls. This begs broader questions: What is it about the education and presentation of contemporary art that excludes local audiences? How can it become more relevant to a broader range of viewers? In this article, I focus on the immediate context of spaces where art is exhibited, contrasting the experience of viewing art in a traditional gallery or museum setting versus an interactive group visit to artists' studios as an alternative means of experiencing contemporary art.

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BY MARGARET NAGAWA

Compared to dedicated art museums and galleries, artists' studios have received very little attention as learning environments for art. The museum has been described as a carefully constructed ritual site where visitors go to perform the ritual of seeing art in a contemplative state (Duncan, 1995). According to Duncan, visitors to museums are expected to behave with certain decorum while treating the objects and the space with respect. Art historians, curators, artists, and sponsors carefully choreograph this ritual. The museum environment therefore becomes a 'scripted platform' (Enwezor & Okeke-Agulu, 2009, 23). The museum acts as a filter, sheltering the visitor from the humdrum of the everyday. But how is this ritual reproduced and sustained in society? French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu coined the term *habitus*, which encompasses the idea of self-reinforcing practices structured through different forms of capital—knowledge, wealth, social connections, and networks (Bourdieu, 1984). Thus, the practice of undergoing the ritualised museum experience, sometimes starting from early childhood, justifies and reinforces the demand for art itself. Such self-sustaining mechanisms and the capital required to sustain them have

yet to take root in Uganda. Art infrastructure is notably weak. Until recently, Uganda boasted only a handful of art galleries concentrated in the capital city, and one national museum housing an ethnographic collection. Formal education in art is limited to wealthy secondary schools and some institutions of higher learning. Public and critical discourses on art are also limited as elsewhere in Africa (Nicodemus, 1999), reflected by the lack of public lectures, seminars, journals, libraries, and archives devoted to art. Public discourse on art is limited to those with access to social and occasional print media articles. According to the Ugandan art historian Kivubiro Tabawebbula, the contemplative tradition of art galleries in developed art markets is incompatible with the more communal nature of appreciation in music, dance, architecture, and other forms of African artistic expression (personal communication, March 15, 2011).

By contrast, art studio tours are more consistent with the local values of communal appreciation and participation. They do this in a number of ways, including: providing direct interaction between artists and audiences, and audiences with each other; conducting a more personal interface with the art in the artist's presence; taking an opportunity to touch as well as see the art, art materials, and work surfaces at various stages of development; and hearing stories about artists' daily routines as well as ideas behind artworks. In this way, visitors get rounded learning experiences while bypassing the alien constraining rituals of the museum. This approach is consistent with constructivist learning theory, which encourages students to be active learners playing a central role in mediating and controlling the learning process (Jonassen, 1999), and learning in small groups where successful

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communication results into identifying peers as resources rather than competitors (Strommen & Lincoln, 1992).

This article examines the experience of the Kampala art tour from 2007 through 2010 in five aspects: the character of the art tour, the artists, the visitors, the museum, and studio spaces; and the sharing of reflections on the tour experience. In preparation for this article, I interviewed 20 artists and 13 visitors who took part in the art studio tour.

### The Kampala Art Tour of Artists' Studios

The Kampala art tour was made up of a group of three to fifteen people who were invited by mobile phone text messages. They met weekly for pre-arranged visits to artists' studios, carpooling in private vehicles. Afterward, the group had refreshments either at the studio or at a restaurant.

As initiator and leader of the art studio tour, I straddled multiple roles of teacher, student, artist, and curator. The position required familiarity with a network of artists, their studio locations, and their work, obtained over more than a decade of organizing local art events and exhibitions. The Kampala art studio tour was presented not as a checklist of studio venues, but as an exploration of different dimensions of art ranging from artists' personalities, ideas, and techniques, to places of production and marketing strategies.

The art studio tour was local to Kampala because of the concentration of artists in the city and time constraints involved in travelling further out. Because most galleries are stationary spaces, the mobility of the art tour was unique. The group at a preceding tour agreed upon the ensuing order of studio visits. People with shared

artistic interests formed informal discussion groups to explore ideas, assumptions, and insights, and compare the differing artists' working circumstances. The visitors' interest was maintained by offering variety in art and location on a weekly basis. Gallery spaces could only reignite visitors' interest by offering new exhibits, but not exhibition locations.

### The Artists

Typically, young artists in their twenties and thirties dominate the Kampala art gallery circuit as they make art in quantities from which galleries can select displays. Older artists, and some of the young, have salaried jobs that offer economic stability as they continue to make art. The majority of artists visited were educated at the Makerere art school. A few were self-taught, often within proximity to other artists who greatly influenced their work. For instance, painter Enoch Mukiibi's father is Augustine Mugalula-Mukiibi, a well-known artist educated at Makerere.

Few practicing artists can afford to rent studio space, so most work from their homes. Most still welcomed the idea of a studio art tour as an opportunity to exhibit and sell their art while avoiding travel expenses (R. Ahimbisibwe, personal communication, March 24, 2011) and time away from family (R. Edopu, personal communication, March 29, 2011). Others reported they felt honored by home visitors whose presence, news, and views are traditionally appreciated and valued in Ugandan culture as signs of friendship. Artists expected possible commissions and sales, socializing, as well as making and strengthening networks that would offer other kinds of marketing opportunities.

During the art tour, artists were prominent as protagonists on the stage of art production

and dissemination. They had the power to present and interpret their art, while occupying the same space as the art, which was displayed according to their desires. The artists explained the materials they used and provided justification for them. Sanaa Gateja works alongside a women's cooperative, providing livelihoods for about 30 women while using non-traditional art materials of barkcloth and recycled paper. Artists also revealed the issues they elucidate hidden behind seemingly mundane imagery, such as Fred Mutebi, whose woodcuts seem to present ordinary activities like football games. Yet they also present social commentary, especially about poor governance at various levels of political administration.

In an art gallery setting, the art and the gallery owner are the protagonists. Aside from opening nights when they are introduced, artists often disappear from the interaction, leaving the gallery as mediator, or the art to speak for itself. Gallery owners typically play an important role in selecting what is displayed, based at least partly on what is most likely to sell. As tour organizer, I did not control what or how the artist chose to show their works, since according to Ugandan values, guests do not tell hosts how to arrange their homes.

### The Audience

Ironically, the idea of the art tour and its predominant client base originated from regular gallery visitors already acculturated to viewing art, and who desired to learn more about practical and philosophical aspects of art and artists. Gallery exhibitions were generally lacking in contextual information about the art and artists. Art on display was perceived as too limited in terms of the number of galleries and the adventurousness and originality of art that was too eager to conform to perceived consumer demand.

Home studios as exhibition spaces share something in common with museums, since the latter evolved from private collections of curiosities originally established in domestic settings. Thus the art tour has a paradoxically museological provenance, a circular motion around inclusive and excluding approaches to art viewing.



Ritah Edopu discussing her artworks at her studio in Najjera, Kampala.

Many gallery visitors were expatriates from Europe or North America who came to Uganda to work on health or development projects. The Ugandan visitors were typically highly educated, with disposable income and a desire to buy as well as learn about art.

Art studio tour visitors interviewed for this study described participation in the art tour as an opportunity for self-enrichment for personal or professional reasons. Some desired to learn about artists' lifestyles, influences, stories, and working environments for historical record purposes and social awareness (M. Kaur, personal communication, March 16, 2011). Others sought knowledgeable guidance that would allow them to meet, interact, and possibly build relationships with artists. Others wanted to see art from the perspective of the artist rather than the gallery owner (A. Bartels, personal communication, March 11, 2011). The art tour on a few occasions ran on weekends and was expected to be a whole family affair. Parents wanted to interest their children in art and artists' ideas as an interesting aspect of where they live (R. King, personal communication, March 15, 2011).

At the studio, each artist had a distinctive way of engaging viewers, but all offered an open forum to observe, comment, and ask questions. Where artists and time allowed, visitors would have hands-on artmaking sessions. These allowed for exploration, experimentation, and collaboration. At the end, visitors shared refreshments, which automatically provided discussion time.

### **The Experience: the Museum, the Gallery, and the Studio**

Artists revealed their thought and technical processes, values, and thematic concerns within completed artworks and works in progress, as well as those that would never show in a gallery. The symbolic and interpretive strategies artists used revealed the complexity and beauty of lived experience as well as the sublime. Maria Naita works on a table assembled from a stepladder and paints women and children in states of joy or work. Sarah Nakisanze has shelves full of barkcloth and raffia and hopes to keep traditional arts practices alive by appropriating them into her work. Joseph Ntensibe works at easels. Enoch Mukiibi has one of many rooms in the back of a building in Wandegeya where tea and food ladies<sup>1</sup> tend to big charcoal stoves piled high with steaming matooke<sup>2</sup>. While Yusuf Ssali and Kasper share a small shop-front on a busy marrum<sup>3</sup> roadside in the

Kasubi neighbourhood. Dusty cars navigate potholes, children stop and stare, while others wander in and ask questions or admire what they see. Ssali and Kasper's studio is more inviting to a local community than a gallery in its present contemplative form.

A Luganda adage, *Amaaso g'Omuganda gali mu ngalo*, means that to fully comprehend something, it has to be touchable. But if an uninitiated gallery visitor tries to touch an artwork, a quick rebuke from a gallery attendant will ensure the rebuked never does this again, or even never returns to this particular ritual space. The gallery ambience may change the meaning of the artworks, narrowing their significance to merely forbidden objects, as opposed to objects inviting [AQ: Is this word appropriate?] social criticism. This is evidenced in Fred Mutebi's woodcut prints, or historical archives such as those espoused in Taga Nuwagaba's totem paintings.

The differing display contexts of galleries and studios confer upon art varied meaning and value for the viewer. In the studio, artworks are rolled up or laid against a wall, and other pieces are hung on walls, easels, and tables. Seen in the pristine spaces of art galleries, which are guided by policies, politics, and commerce, artworks tend to act as independent arbiters of their whole story, looking authoritative in their allocated spaces. They also command a certain respect and sometimes fear due to the prices and titles on the labels. Many Ugandans find this environment uninviting.

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### **Shared Reflections and Meaning Making**

The art tour had an aspect of self-discovery and a possibility of forming personal narratives of what was experienced. The philosophical base from which visitors looked at reality—some idealist, others materialist—affected their attitude toward the artists and artworks. Their discussions considered values, ideas, and spiritual as well as material reality. Some saw the art as static while others perceived it as dynamic. Many made links between the positive and negative aspects of Uganda, like the environmental beauty and

the HIV-AIDS epidemic, as feeding into the art, while others perceived them as separate and mutually exclusive issues. [AQ: Rewrite ok?]Visitors were able to learn in this creative environment through conversations that encouraged responsiveness and speculation rather than conformity to a set of predetermined notions of behavioural or intellectual measures. Learning in this informal context was not achieved by telling or being told, but by active engagement through conversation and social interaction around art.

I observed that people valued connections to others as a way of supporting meaningful experience. Friendships formed outside of the art tour, and people organized visits to art events separate from the art tour. These connections resulted in more memorable experiences with the art and the artists. The art tour became a site for cross-cultural conversation, similar to the Ugandan tradition of storytelling where varied conversation tones and culture-specific associations make the discussions resonant. The tradition of group reception of art shared with a spirit of openness and generosity, enhancing aesthetic pleasure, provoking interpretation, comments, and discussions, is still evident in dance at Ugandan traditional marriage ceremonies and theatrical performances.

Artists also had a positive experience with visitors to their studios. It was inspiring as they realized that artworks could be seen in any place (L. Nabulime, personal communication, March 29, 2011). Visitors felt welcome to the studios, found the visit illuminating and inspiring, and the artists forthcoming. Nuwagaba enjoyed raising visitors' cultural awareness by explaining the relation between animal paintings and

traditional totems that define family lineage structures in Uganda. Without his mediation, his paintings would have remained merely beautiful renditions of Uganda's wildlife.

Artists also benefited in sometimes unpredictable ways from hearing viewers' direct reactions to their art. Artists sometimes found visitor comments disturbing, especially when non-artists pointed out shortcomings in technique. Others like Ronex Ahimbisibwe appreciated the opportunity to learn about one's strengths in art practice, and generate new ideas from visitors' comments. As the Luganda proverb goes, *Amagezi, gakuweebwa munno*—wisdom is garnered from others.

## Conclusion

In this article, I review the experience of the Kampala art studio tour from 2007 to 2010 in Uganda from the perspective of artists and audiences, and contrast this to the gallery and museum experience in the same setting. The studio tour offered important lessons for how to make art more accessible and engaging for audiences. Viewing art in studios encouraged a collaborative spirit of interactive viewing and conversation, relationship formation, and creative interpretation for both artists and viewers in a range of non-uniform settings. As an educational strategy, studio tours lend themselves to a more constructivist approach to seeing and learning about art. The art studio tour enabled visitors to decide what they wanted to see, question how they perceived it, and define what they valued. The interpersonal and interactive nature of the tour removed fears of the hidden rules and expectations for correct behavior that are part of

the ritualized gallery viewing experience. Because they did not assume an ingrained habit of viewing art, art studio tours seemed more compatible with local ideals of sharing found in more accessible forms of Ugandan music and dance performance.

The art studio tour had notable limitations. Although I wished for the tour to attract local audiences as well as the expatriates, it ultimately attracted visitors who were already comfortable with the rituals of viewing art in galleries and museums. Thus, learning how to create initial demand to join art tours was not addressed. It may be impractical to increase mass appeal of contemporary art through such small-scale intensive approaches. However, the success of interactivity and relocation of art viewing outside the staid confines of galleries and museums offered important lessons for how art could be taught and exhibited in Uganda and similar settings to attract broader audiences. The implications for art educators is that they can lower barriers to appreciation of contemporary art by diversifying learning environments for their students and enabling face-to-face interaction and discussion with the art and artists.

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## ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Tea and food ladies are women who prepare tea and lunch in small back rooms and corridors in Kampala, take orders, and deliver to clients at their places of work.
- <sup>2</sup> Matooke is a staple food in central and South Western Uganda. It is a green banana that is prepared by steaming and mashing in banana leaves, then steaming again to achieve a delicate flavor and a melting-smooth texture.
- <sup>3</sup> Dirt, unsealed road.