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Public-making in a pandemic: The role of street art in East African countries

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ABSTRACT

Street artists around the world have been prominent in depicting issues concerning COVID-19, but the role of street art in public-making during the pandemic is unexplored. Despite burgeoning street art scenes in many African countries since the early 2000s, African street art is relatively neglected in critical street art scholarship. In response, this paper examines street art created during the pandemic in East African countries, principally Uganda, Kenya, Rwanda, and Tanzania, and explores the ways in which it is engaged in highly distinctive forms of public-making. Drawing primarily on qualitative online interviews with East African artists creating street art, and image analysis using online search tools, the paper argues that street art in urban areas is attempting to create knowledgeable publics through countering disinformation about the pandemic, to responsibilize publics through public health messaging and, through community activism, to build resilient publics. The paper concludes that street art is potentially an important tool in tackling the COVID-19 pandemic in East African countries due to the proximity, and mutual constitution of, creative practices and publics, which emerge from the embedding of street art within the social spaces of cities and everyday experiences of the pandemic.

1. Introduction

This paper explores the role of East African street art in the creation of publics during the COVID-19 pandemic. It has long been recognised that the proximity of African artists to their communities, and the fact that they use a common language, places them in a uniquely privileged position to raise awareness of pandemics, as well as to provoke thought and dialogue concerning issues of fear and stigma associated with diseases such as HIV/AIDS ([UNAIDS, 2007](#); see also [Marschall, 2004](#); [Nabulime & McEwan, 2011, 2014](#)). In the context of COVID-19, artists creating street art¹ have been prominent in depicting concerns about the pandemic, and have received considerable publicity in global online and print news media. Even oft-neglected African street art has featured prominently in recent global news stories about the pandemic.² Despite this and burgeoning street art scenes across the continent since the early 2000s, academic research has tended to neglect African street art. In

seeking to address this neglect, this paper examines street art created during the COVID-19 pandemic in East African countries, principally Uganda, Kenya, Rwanda, and Tanzania. Inspired by Chinua Achebe's ([in Randall-Tsuruta, 1989](#)) assertion that art arises out of and is, therefore, always in dialogue with its social context, we argue that, in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, East African street art is engaged in highly distinctive and significant forms of public-making. Moreover, as both a public-making process and a social act ([Baker & Blaagaard, 2016](#)), we suggest that street art has the potential to play a significant role in shaping responses to the pandemic, particularly in urban areas and informal settlements.

In addition to a distinction between *the public* – “a kind of social totality” – and *a public* – “a concrete audience, a crowd witnessing itself in visible space ... bounded by the event or by the shared physical space”, [Warner \(2002: 50\)](#) outlines a third sense of public that “comes into being only in relation to texts and their circulation” and “by virtue

^{*} Corresponding author.E-mail address: [\(C. McEwan\).](mailto:cheryl.mcewan@durham.ac.uk)¹ We refer to ‘artists creating street art’ here because most of the people we interviewed do not describe themselves as street artists, but as artists creating different forms of art, including street art. Thus, we use the term ‘artist’ in the remainder of the paper to refer to the creators of street art.² See, for example, articles in *Voice of America* (<https://www.voanews.com/science-health/coronavirus-outbreak/senegals-graffiti-artists-offer-covid-19-information-murals>), *The Guardian* (<https://www.theguardian.com/world/video/2020/may/04/the-coronavirus-murals-trying-to-keep-kenyas-slums-safe-video>), *The Conversation* (<https://theconversation.com/the-importance-of-art-in-the-time-of-coronavirus-135225>), and in UN briefings (e.g. <https://www.unodc.org/westandcentralafrica/en/2020-05-12-un-street-art-covid.html>) (all accessed 22/06/21).

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of being addressed". Drawing on this idea, we approach street art as a visual text that brings multiple, self-organising and reflexive publics into being discursively. Geographical research on street art has tended to focus specifically on graffiti (e.g. Brighenti, 2010; Chmielewska, 2007) – a graphic practice of (mostly urban) lettering with sub-cultural ties to hip-hop music – and its potential to transgress and redefine normalized understandings of both art and space (Bonnett, 1992; Cresswell, 1996). Consequently, publics created through street art are often understood as counterpublics – alternative publics constituted by citizens in marginalised positions (Fraser 1990) or subcultures (MacDonald, 2001). However, in East African contexts these publics are not always straightforwardly counterpublics since they are also spaces through which the systemic, bureaucratic, political sphere (specifically, in this case, government, civil society and public health) intersects and intertwines with the life world of the public (Torgerson, 2010). Therefore, we draw on Stephansen's (2016) conceptualization of publics to explore street art publics as spaces of pedagogic and political practice, where practice extends beyond the production and circulation of the artworks. We examine how, in East African cities, practice extends into activism, knowledge-forming and community-building that are intended to shape individual and collective responses to the pandemic. This enables consideration of the material, embodied and social aspects of processes of public-formation which, in turn, allows a conceptualization of street art as more than simply a communication infrastructure, but as a multiple constellation of practices that contribute to the making of publics. In this sense, therefore, we draw on Barnett's (2003: 9; also 2014) notion of publics as emergent: "more or less durable networks of communication" that are brought into existence by the practices of representation that constitute them.

We use street art as a general term to describe art found on 'streets', defined broadly as public thoroughfares that can be either paved or unpaved. Definitions of African street art sometimes include graffiti, alongside other forms of public art, but focus on "more illustrative artworks and murals rather than lettering, incorporating spray painting, stencils, stickers, and paste-ups" (Waddacor (2020: 265). Our analysis of East African street art departs from assumptions that street art is "likely to be ... illegal [and] anonymous" (Riggle, 2010, p. 246) or, at best, morally unacceptable and socially undesirable. The incorporation of street art into urban tourism, branding strategies and gentrification means this is no longer always the case in many cities (Andron, 2018), but in the diverse political, cultural, and urban contexts in which African street art is flourishing, illegality and anonymity are not always and, in many cases, rarely a feature. Focusing on the role that East African street art has played in constructing publics during the COVID-19 pandemic, we suggest that in many instances its moral acceptability and social desirability has increased. We also seek to add nuance to recent assertions in critical street art studies of a widening gap between members of the public and the exercise of creative practices, driven primarily by social media (Bengtsen 2020, in Steinfeld, 2020; MacDowall, 2019). In contrast, we argue that in East African urban contexts, the siting and experiencing of street art *in the street* and the proximity between artists and the publics they are forming are highly significant, especially in informal settlements where street art proliferates.

In what follows, we first provide an explanation of the research design and methodology used to collect the data informing our arguments, followed by a brief analysis of the street art scene in East African countries. The paper then draws on a range of sources and evidence to analyse street art in diverse East African contexts, and its potential for public-making during the COVID-19 pandemic. Our analysis focuses on three themes: the possibilities of street art for creating knowledgeable publics through attempts to counter disinformation about the pandemic; the ways in which street art attempts to responsibilize publics through public health messaging; the relationships between street art and community activism, and the role this seeks to play in creating resilient, socially engaged publics. Finally, the conclusions reflect on the significance of street art in East African countries in public formation during

the COVID-19 pandemic. Pandemic-related constraints on research methods limit the claims we can make about the influence of street art on informing and responsibilizing citizens. However, we suggest that street art is highly visible in attempts to tackle the pandemic, especially in informal settlements, and anecdotal evidence from artists suggests it has some influence because of the proximity, and mutual constitution of, creative practices and publics, which emerge from the embedding of street art within the social spaces of cities and everyday experiences of the pandemic.

2. Methodology

The research design informing this paper was conditioned by travel restrictions and social distancing measures during the COVID-19 pandemic and the ethics of internet-based data gathering, necessitating a reliance on publicly available data (Kozinets, 2002; Langer & Beckman, 2005).³ Consequently, we focused primarily on analysing textual, graphic, and photographic data across a spectrum of online platforms and channels, identified images of COVID-19 street art in East African countries, and subsequently identified and contacted the artists who produced them. We worked initially through our existing artist networks in Uganda to identify artists, arts organisations, curators, and arts publications, and used snowballing techniques to widen our search into Kenya, Rwanda, and Tanzania, which have thriving street art scenes. To obtain a sense of the COVID-19 street art milieu in East Africa, we immersed ourselves in online discourse via media coverage, conducted searches of online African arts journals, street art blogs and specialist street art websites, and followed relevant hashtags on Instagram and other social media accounts of individual artists. Online street art images have also been captured by photojournalists and used to illustrate stories about the pandemic on digital news websites (often the same image illustrating multiple stories). Analysis of this imagery and narrative provided an understanding of the broader global pandemic street art landscape and facilitated the design of a specific data collection strategy relevant to East African contexts. Narrowing from this breadth, we gathered two more focused tranches of data with which to engage in iterative phases of in-depth analysis: image-gathering via online search tools and online qualitative interviews with artists in East Africa.

Using three criteria – the image could be evidenced as located in East Africa, was created during the pandemic, and referenced COVID-19 – we sourced 38 initial street art images for close analysis sourced via a geo-controlled, time-limited search (16th March–20th December 2020) using relevant Boolean search terms on Google Image. Since there was a preponderance of images from Uganda, Kenya, and Rwanda, we next examined a total of 120 street artworks by 68 artists from these countries on Instagram, specialist art websites and in media outlets. General content and specific iconographic analysis were undertaken of these images, along with the identification of thematic associations and trends. Between December 2020 and April 2021, semi-structured interviews were conducted via Zoom or WhatsApp with sixteen artists and one photographer involved in producing COVID-19 street art images within our data set, plus one curator and an art gallery administrator. Of these, eleven participants were from Uganda, three from Kenya, and five from Rwanda. Participants were identified through Facebook, Instagram, and personal websites, and purposively selected because their work focused on COVID-19 and was visible in social media and, in some cases, online news media. The interviews, which were conducted in English, explored artistic intent in depictions of pandemic-related images and meaning derived from the resulting artworks. Analysis of interview transcripts relied on thematic coding and narrative patterning. Whereas publicly available images are attributed to specific artists or collectives, we have followed best practice guidelines regarding

³ The research received ethical approval from [details removed for anonymity].

protecting confidentiality and anonymity of interviewees when quoting them directly. The subsequent analysis explores key themes emerging from both the street art images and interviews with artists to provide a deeper understanding of the social and political significance of pandemic street art in public-making in East Africa.

3. Street art in East Africa

With the exception of South Africa, where scholars have explored politically-motivated, anti-apartheid graffiti (Pawlowska, 2018) and the use of murals in promoting post-apartheid multiculturalism, peace and democracy (Marschall, 2002), and Northern Africa, where political street art garnered attention during the revolutionary uprisings of the 'Arab Spring' in the 2010s (Blaagaard & Mollerup, 2020; Lennon, 2020), the African continent has tended to be neglected in studies of global street art (see, for example, Ganz & Manco, 2009; Ross, 2016; Schacter & Fekner, 2017; cf.; Waddacor, 2020). One reason may be that in many African countries, street art as a form of freedom of expression has not traditionally met with tolerance or social acceptance (Steinfeld, 2020). Ugandan street art is constrained by government crackdowns on dissent and attempts to control public discourse; political street art in Kenya is banned; Rwandan street art is restricted by the country's sensitive history and strict public cleanliness laws; social norms in Tanzania associate street art with vandalism and rebellion. There are few surfaces available for street art, and artists take considerable personal risks in using highly visible areas and public spaces to comment on social ills such as poverty, political corruption, or neo-colonialism. Moreover, art is taught in few schools and there is little government support. Consequently, artists tend to be self-taught and:

... stick to the slums, because in the slums, you can paint anything, it's free, like nobody's gonna come and ask you why you are painting graffiti ... In the CBD you require the permit from the metropolitan office, or the county government office. You have got to pay a huge amount of money ..., you have to talk to too many people. (Interview male artist, Nairobi, 23/02/21)

Creating street art usually requires support from arts-based non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and permission from authorities, communities, and residents. Most of our interviewees are full-time artists involved in underground hip-hop movements and street art activism. Most rely on small-scale commissions from friends, informal businesses such as matatu (minibus) drivers, and communities. Some receive support from voluntary, non-profit organisations like Breakdance Project Uganda. As COVID-19 spread, some artists took risks to paint murals on thoroughfares to advertise their talents and attempt to secure work:

The main reason for making that mural was to demonstrate a sample work to the [Ugandan] Ministry of Health to get a contract making murals around the country, passing on COVID information to create awareness. (Interview male artist, Kampala, 23/02/21)

In some cases, this worked, but reliance on commissions risks co-optation of this supposedly insurgent aesthetic through processes of 'artwashing' (Schacter, 2014), especially when linked to international or government funding. Efforts to boost creative economies have generated some opportunities in East Africa, and global media and tourism are important influences on the cultural field and symbolic capital (Bourdieu, 1996) of street art. However, our research suggests that East African street art is being reshaped and legitimized largely by artists themselves and flourishing mainly through grassroots empowerment projects seeking to connect street art to social justice movements. As Zambian artist, Take, argues,

Most communities in Europe and America are saturated with graffiti and the negative connotations that precede it, but in Africa we as artists have the unique opportunity to mould perceptions of how it

will be initially perceived. We can use graffiti as a positive tool to uplift communities. (in Waddacor, 2020: 38)

We argue that the roots of these shifts lie in what Mbembe (2013) refers to as uniquely African attributes: multiplicity – the profusion of cultures, knowledges, world-views and philosophies that characterise African societies; circulation and mobility – the context of cultural experiences in which almost everything is always on the move; and, composition – the idea that African lives are compositional and relational, for example in the ways in which the economy is lived on an everyday basis or people relate to one another.

Profusion of cultures, circulation and mobility ensure that street art is a "travelling modality" (Blaagaard & Mollerup, 2020, p. 7) in East African countries. Peripatetic South African artists have been influential in the growth of graffiti and street art in East Africa, especially in Zambia and Kenya (Waddacor, 2020). Street art has existed in Kenya for over twenty years, but because of parochial stigmas, remains a mostly underground movement in which approximately 30 artists engage (Waddacor, 2020). It draws on the tradition of spray painting matatus, which emerged in the 1960s with airbrush and vinyl artworks painted on vehicles to attract customers. First generation Kenyan graffiti artists credit monthly WaPi (Words and Pictures) events, originating in Nairobi's underground hip-hop movement in 2006, for building national and international artist networks and advancing spray painting as an art form (ibid.).⁴ WaPi received funding and performance space from the British Council as part of a programme to support the development of a creative economy in Africa, but those involved view WaPi as a tool of social justice. As one of its founders claims, it "has taken many young people off the streets and has created a great future for them. That's social justice" (Mbasu 2014). WaPi peace concerts were a feature of anti-government protests during the 2008 political upheavals in Kenya and "gave young people a sense of pride that wasn't there before" (ibid.). WaPi encouraged collectives such as Bomb Squad Crew, who have initiated projects such as *Spray for Change* and *Kibera Walls for Peace* in response to Kenya's challenging political climate, and Graffiti Girls Kenya,⁵ who raise awareness of issues affecting women. In informal settlements such as Kibera, graffiti is welcomed by residents for bringing colour to the community and positive change to the environment, and for its positive messaging concerning education, sanitation, peace, and unity.

Street art styles also travel through digital platforms, and African artists use mobile phones to copy styles and circulate their own artworks. However, many of the artists we interviewed discuss the challenges they face because of shortages and the expense of modern technologies and art supplies. For example, spray paint is expensive, especially in landlocked countries, and there are difficulties in accessing modern spray paints even in Kenya. In response to these challenges, street art pioneers have adapted and innovated. Renowned Kenyan artist Bankslave, for example, burns a hypodermic needle into the can nozzle to enable him to create finer lines (Waddacor, 2020, p. 54), and other artists describe mixing spray paint with roller paint to make it easier to use. Such innovations, grounded in the compositional nature of everyday life, have created a multiplicity of distinctive styles, and inspired a new wave of contemporary muralism that Waddacor (2020) claims, alongside fashion, music and science, places Africa at the vanguard of artistic expression.

Everyday challenges may provide one reason why street art in East Africa is also highly collaborative, rather than competitive and rivalrous as it is in other parts of the world. For example, street art emerged in Uganda as part of a wider urban art movement centred around hip-hop in the 2000s, especially in Kampala and Gulu (Waddacor, 2020). First

⁴ WaPi also inspired street art in Tanzania, where Mejah Mbuya established the Wachata Crew in Dar es Salaam in 2007.

⁵ See <https://www.facebook.com/graffitigirlskenya/> (accessed 29/06/21).

generation artists, such as Xenson and Mos Opten, inspired and collaborated with new artists like Sparrow, who began painting in 2011. Sparrow and Mos Opten founded the Kampala Afri-Cans Street Art Festival in 2017. While more established street art festivals in North Africa have been accused of ignoring or marginalising local talent in favour of international artists or famous 'names'⁶, Afri-Cans features prominent and upcoming urban artists from Uganda, Kenya, Tanzania, Rwanda, and Zambia. It is sponsored by local and international not-for-profit arts-based collectives such as Afrika Arts Kollective (Kampala) and Sanaa (Adelaide), and has generated international interest, with some artists securing successful art residencies in Europe following exposure at the Festival. Its footprint across the region is also expanding, with events in Kigali in 2019 organised around the theme of 'The Power of Women'.⁷ One of the founders describes Afri-Cans as a culmination of vision to bring together artists to share knowledge, empower young Africans, encourage unity and collaboration, while strengthening the community and creating street art with the power to effect change (interview male artist, Kampala, 25/02/21). This commitment to collaboration and social change is rooted in the origins of many artists in impoverished neighbourhoods, and their passion for breaking down barriers, engaging at grassroots levels, and inspiring others to use art to address social problems. It has also been an important factor in the burgeoning street art scene during the COVID-19 pandemic, and the prominence of artists as role models and influencers within local communities.

4. Street art and pandemic publics

Publics emerge from the multiple ways in which individuals and communities express themselves (Baker & Blaagaard, 2016). Street art, grounded in physical spaces and concrete relations, is one medium through which this expression takes place and, in the context of COVID-19, has become an important form of citizen media through which publics are formed. In East African countries, with often poor communications and public health infrastructures, high rates of illiteracy, and cultural preferences for oral and visual forms of knowledge-making, street art is an important means by which people in marginalised communities have sought to engage in social and political life. It has become an important mode of communication during the pandemic. While authorities often do not tolerate street art as a transgression of physical space, in some countries the wider arts are now being recognised through state-sanctioned projects. In Zambia, for example, Modzi Arts was founded in Lusaka in 2016 and works with the Southern African Development Community to promote and expand the contemporary arts scene as an important element of social development.⁸ Elsewhere artists are working creatively within political constraints to forge alliances with or create subaltern publics (Blaagaard & Mollerup, 2020) in ways that are tolerable to authorities, or at least elude their notice. For example, many have formed collectives supported by community-based and non-governmental organisations, and it is their artworks – usually in the form of murals, large in scale and depicting scenes of everyday life – that have proliferated in public spaces during the pandemic. Often endorsed or commissioned by organisations and governments, this street art is legitimised and afforded access to specific locations and buildings. However, it retains its radical edge through "its insistence on occupying public space" already occupied by the state, private enterprises and/or the police, "sparking public discourse, creating a new public" (Blaagaard & Mollerup, 2020, p. 3). As discussed subsequently, it also affords opportunities for expressions of resistance and subaltern positioning.

Governments and public health advocates around the world have

stretched the concept of 'the public' – in terms of both people and space – in policies and recommendations to stem COVID-19 transmission. In East African countries, public health is equally as entangled with socio-political questions, not least because infrastructures are fragile. Governments have adopted pandemic response measures that are also entangled with issues of compliance, surveillance, and security, providing an important backdrop against which COVID-19 street art has emerged. The Ugandan government imposed a strict lockdown between March and May 2020, including a 45-night curfew from March 30th, with some easing of restrictions in the summer. Political tensions concerning the 2021 national election coincided with the pandemic, and even the use of facemasks, which the government encouraged people to wear in public from the summer of 2020, was politicised (Anguyo, 2020). The Kenyan government imposed strict lockdowns in March 2020 and again in March 2021. The Rwandan government imposed a strict lockdown between March and May 2020. In April it made mask-wearing outdoors in public compulsory, and reintroduced lockdown measures in six districts of Kigali in June 2020 and again during winter. All three countries were praised for the initial measures they took to curb the spread of the virus, but all have been accused of human, civil and/or political rights abuses. The social and economic costs of preventative measures have been especially high among already marginalised populations. Stringent measures such as closing borders, compulsory quarantine, closing schools, and banning public transport and the sale of non-food items at open markets were effective, but had dire consequences for the most economically marginalised, children and the sick, who were unable to access medicines and healthcare (Akumu, 2020; Wafula, 2020).

While new virus variants and slow vaccine roll-out threaten to reverse trends, East African countries experienced a slow-moving, sometimes stalling rate of infection and a comparatively low death toll during 2020. Scientists have speculated about the reasons for this, which may include prior experience with infectious diseases such as Ebola, youthful populations, and timely government responses, including border controls, travel bans, enforced social distancing measures and mask-wearing (Maeda & Nkengasong, 2021). However, one overlooked factor is the possible role of street art in creating pandemic-aware publics, especially in informal settlements. As Achebe (in Randall-Tsuruta, 1989, p. 224) argues, art arises out of its social context and is always in dialogue with that social element:

Art has a social purpose [and] art belongs to the people. It's not something that is hanging out there that has no connection with the needs of man [sic]. And art is unashamedly, unembarrassingly ... social.

Achebe's assertion is borne out in our analysis of COVID-19 street art in East African countries, which reveals the deep ties between street art movements and community-driven projects for social change and justice. As Rwandan artist Bonfils Ngabonziza explains, "My goal is not to become famous, but to use arts as a vehicle for positive change and see my work have a lasting impact on society" (in Arslanian, 2015, n.p.). Street art is powerful because it enters into a conversation with the surrounding society in which it produces political publics (Cresswell, 1996). The commitment of artists to collaboration and social change, their ability to engage at grassroots levels, and their desire to use art to address social problems, have been important factors in public engagement concerning the COVID-19 pandemic. In what follows, we explore examples of how East African street art has attempted to produce knowledgeable publics, for whom pandemic prevention measures are normalized and celebrated as enactment of responsibility which, in turn, may help to build resilient publics oriented towards social justice.

4.1. Knowledgeable publics and countering disinformation

Public health messaging in East African countries about the pandemic is complicated by a competing mix of interpretations, and

⁶ We are grateful to a reviewer for drawing our attention to this.

⁷ See <https://www.facebook.com/africansstreetart/> (accessed 21/03/21).

⁸ See <http://www.modziarts.com/> (accessed 29/06/21).

claims to legitimacy, by diverse actors including the state, the Church, civil society, and the public. As Ogola (2020) argues, this has given rise to divergences in the interpretation of the disease and multiple narratives about the pandemic, particularly online, which can in turn divert attention away from the crisis. In some countries, this problem is compounded by the undermining of trust in public health messaging by governments “following years of official misinformation practices” (*ibid.*: 441). This results in ambivalence amongst publics sceptical of governments whose sole interest lies in controlling the message. For example, government data on the number of COVID-19 infection and mortality rates have been questioned through social media in Kenya, Tanzania, and Uganda. An Ugandan artist claims that infection rates were deliberately under-reported by the government: “they are still high, they’re just not being reported, they are hiding things” (interview female artist, Kampala 08/02/21). Disinformation has circulated claiming that COVID-19 affects only white and rich people, is spread by mosquitoes, or is cured by alcohol.

In response, volunteers, activists, and health organisations have set out to create knowledgeable publics by disseminating accurate information about the pandemic, and artists have played a prominent role in these efforts. As a member of the Wachata Crew, a team of urban artists in Tanzania that painted a large mural promoting mask wearing, explains,

Street art plays a big role in Tanzania, especially in matters of delivering messages ... Much of the population finds it more entertaining and convincing than [TV and newspapers] (in Steinfeld, 2020: 102).

Kenyan artist, Brian Musasia Wanyande (aka Msale) has used street art to counter disinformation in Nairobi’s informal settlements.⁹ His murals are simple, self-explanatory, and intended to convey facts to large numbers of people as they walk past. A series in the high-density neighbourhood of Kawangware, painted in collaboration with Nairobi-based NGO Health Studio on the walls of Kabiro Human Development Centre, warn of disinformation, challenge falsehoods about COVID-19 being spread by mosquitos and affecting only the elderly, and advocate preventative measures such as mask-wearing. Msale is concerned with illustrating the seriousness of the pandemic, and encouraging recommended precautions such as social distancing and handwashing:

Painting is a powerful way of passing on information ... I use simple illustrations in my murals so that everyone can understand them – from young children to the elderly. The importance of my painting is to educate the masses about the ... virus. I use it to make sure I impact my communities positively by disseminating the correct information.¹⁰

This commitment to an ethical relatedness with multiple communities is apparent in a striking mural created by Mutua in collaboration with Mathare Roots Youth Initiative, of which Msale is also a member (*Fig. 1*), which communicates the message that ‘COVID-19 is real,’ while also referencing CGHRD (Coalition for Grassroots Human Rights Defenders – a social movement of grassroots social justice activists), ‘Feminists Fighting,’ and ‘Africans fighting against COVID-19’. This is one of several examples of street art in Kenya’s informal settlements in which a politically tolerable message about the pandemic is interwoven with more radical expressions of resistance and subaltern positioning.

The collective and collaborative nature of street art, as well as the proximity of artists to marginalised communities, is central to efforts to create knowledgeable publics and shape responses to the pandemic. Mathare Roots, based in Nairobi’s second largest slum,¹¹ is one of

several community-based, youth-led, street art projects in Kenya. Their Covid-19 street art initiative was inspired by UN-Habitat training on public messaging using street art, which had been effective during the Ebola outbreak in Sierra Leone, and by the graffiti art featured on matatus. As with initiatives elsewhere, their street art emerges from the grassroots and is not officially sanctioned, but seeks to counter widespread disinformation about COVID-19 and mistrust in information from authorities.¹² They have painted seven large-scale murals on the walls of buildings in public spaces around Mathare, including areas close to taps and public toilets, depicting mask-wearing alongside messages in English, Kiswahili and Sheng, the local slang widely used in urban areas. Msale’s 2-m-high mural on the side of a water collection point and hand-washing station depicts a man in a baseball cap wearing a blue surgical mask alongside the message ‘Corona is Real’ (see *Fig. 2*). A similar modern-style mural with the same message depicts a young woman with a fashionable afro hairstyle and leather jacket wearing a red and green patterned facemask. Another youth-led, community-based initiative in Nairobi, Mathare Environmental, has used murals to counter disinformation and promote handwashing, and claims success in keeping infection levels low in Kibera and Mathare.¹³

These examples capture the ways in which street art attempts to create knowledgeable publics constituted through their participation in street art discourse. Mbembe (2016, n.p.) argues that the distinctiveness of African art derives from its “capacity to inhabit the commonplace and sensible, precisely with the aim of transforming it into an idea and an event.” Of all art forms, street art is especially ephemeral, evanescent, and fugitive, and thus inhabits spaces of essential fragility and vulnerability. For Mbembe (*ibid.*), this finitude “is the reason why caring and nurturing life are the main functions of the arts”. Street art enacts caring and nurturing through the self-organisation of a public via discourse that implies an orientation to others, openly addressing people who are identified primarily as viewers of the street art who are not known in advance (Warner, 2002). In the context of everyday life in which, as Mbembe (2013) argues, everything is compositional, this relationality is made and remade through ethical interaction with others, in this case through knowledge sharing, countering disinformation, and exhortations to take the pandemic seriously. As discussed below, by participating in street art discourse concerning the pandemic, strangers are also brought into social relationships that are intended to have positive outcomes for disease awareness and prevention.

4.2. *Responsibilizing publics*

Mbembe’s (2016, n.p.) claim that caring and nurturing life are the main functions of the arts plays out in the often-close relationship between art and public health in East African countries. This is driven not only by the arts (and artists), but also by wider societal understanding of their capacities. In the context of the current pandemic, governments in East Africa have certainly recognised that street art is potentially a more powerful mode of communication than other media, not only in countering disinformation (itself ironic given the role of authoritarian governments in spreading disinformation), but also in encouraging behavioural changes (Tasamba, 2020). Street art has thus been allowed to proliferate during the pandemic because it potentially plays a significant role in responsibilizing publics. As a member of the Wachata Crew in Dar es Salaam argues,

Wachata Crew stick within the legal framework and try to avoid issues that might be contentious and get them in trouble. But that still leaves room to cover important issues, including ... promoting mask

⁹ Source: <https://www.health.studio/en/archives/3511> (accessed 21/06/21).

¹⁰ Op cit.

¹¹ <https://mathare.org/mathare-roots-youth-center/>.

¹² Source: <https://unhabitat.org/youth-in-nairobi-slum-use-murals-to-educate-the-community-about-covid-19>.

¹³ Source: <https://mathareonestop.org/what-we-do/>.



Fig. 1. Mathare Roots Initiative, 'Feminists Fighting Against COVID-19' (Mathare, Nairobi), source: <https://www.instagram.com/p/CBylZfypNou/> (accessed 16/7/2021).

wearing when Covid-19 was first in Tanzania, which was well-received (*ibid.*).

Even in Uganda, where street art was severely inhibited by restricted mobility, the closing down of space for civil society actors, and widespread fear of election violence and police brutality during 2020, non-political COVID-19 murals appeared in informal settlements in cities like Kampala. These murals are often located in the same areas where street art has previously been used in social initiatives to raise awareness about water and sanitation. They thus tend to be in informal settlements that lack health infrastructure, specifically in areas where people regularly congregate (markets, playgrounds) or visit (toilets, water points), and where preventative behaviours such as social distancing, mask-wearing and handwashing are important. Street art is thus enrolled in community-based attempts to establish these preventative behaviours as accepted practices in contexts in which there is no prior mask-wearing tradition, where hand-washing and social distancing are very difficult due to poor living conditions, but where disease is an everyday reality for many people. As one Ugandan artist explains:

... public art influences how people think. So many people from ghettos are not exposed to formal communication, so it was a great source of awareness to people in the community. Perhaps more people put on masks after observing the mural. As a public artist, I feel that I'm a community informer. (Interview, male artist, Kampala 25/02/21)

In Rwanda, street artists have collaborated with Kurema Kureba Kwiga (To Create, To See, To Learn)¹⁴ – a public arts social enterprise that brings together contemporary Rwandan artists and community stakeholders and uses street art to highlight social issues – to create awareness about health protocols to stem the spread of COVID-19. Early

in the pandemic, a group of 14 artists painted murals across Kigali to encourage proper wearing of masks as an everyday norm rather than simply a mandatory requirement (interview male artist, Kigali, 09/04/21). For example, one mural in Kiyovu (an upmarket area in Nyarugenge District of Kigali) depicts a young scholar (Fig. 3) and an older man both wearing masks next to bottles of hand sanitizer.¹⁵ Another in Gikondo (a mixed income neighbourhood in Kigali), by Jim Rolland, depicts a masked woman and blends safety messages ('Stay Safe') with cultural references (fashionable hairstyle and jewellery) and vivid colour to attract attention.¹⁶

The Kigali murals are officially sanctioned and thus need to be viewed differently to those that have appeared in informal settlements. While Covid-19 prevention may be a relatively benign topic, there is still potential for co-optation of street art into national narratives, especially in Rwanda where street art is otherwise strictly prohibited.¹⁷ In contrast, in Uganda and Kenya where initiatives have emerged from the grassroots, the potential of street art to responsibilize publics lies in the proximity of artists to the communities in which they work, and its ability to ground preventative measures in the social and cultural practices and realities of affected communities (Van der Westhuizen, Kotze, Tonkin-Crine, Gobat, & Greenhalgh, 2020, p. 4). For example, women feature prominently in artworks in informal settlements, perhaps because they are more likely to congregate in the spaces where street art is located and most often engaged in the day-to-day tasks captured in the artworks; women may also be assumed to be more receptive to health-related messaging, and influential in modelling responsible behaviours in families and communities. As one Ugandan

¹⁴ Kurema Kureba Kwiga was initiated in 2013 and has government backing. Topics usually range from water and sanitation, HIV/AIDS, formal education, women's empowerment, and environment.

¹⁵ Source: <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/africa/rwanda-artists-join-with-colors-to-fight-pandemic/1969946>.

¹⁶ Source: Kurema Kureba Kwiga (<https://www.instagram.com/p/CFZvp6sgM2F/>) (accessed 06/12/20).

¹⁷ Examples elsewhere suggest there is also potential for conflict between artists and officials over the role of murals in state-sanctioned projects – see *Opdyke (2016)* on the USA, *Grieb (1984)* on Mexico.



Fig. 2. Mathare Roots/Msale 'Corona is Real'(Mathare, Nairobi), source <https://twitter.com/BrianInganga/status/1251544452713365509> (accessed 12/01/21).

artist explains:

Young people most of them they don't see the pandemic as an issue to them Some keep a distance but generally there is a lot of complacency around ... But the majority of the women do put on the masks in the marketplace [and] in taxis. (Interview male artist, Kampala, 09/02/21)

As discussed, there is also a strong youth presence among the artists and collectives, and in the art itself, related to the presence of young people in groups or activities tailored to community building or social justice initiatives. Much of the messaging is designed to appeal to young people and to tackle complacency. As a Kenyan artist explains:

I like children being around me, the children will be like "yo look at the person which has been painted over there, he, she is wearing a mask, let's go and put on a mask" and they sit there like the whole day and even the next day and the coming day until the piece is done and they will be having their masks on. (Interview male artist, Nairobi, 13/04/21)

Cartoon, comic-strip, and graphic novel-style depictions of coronavirus are common. Meanwhile, representations of people tend towards realism designed to appeal across generations, depicting ordinary people wearing masks and frequently making use of traditional dress and fabrics, and fashionable patterns and colours. There is also a collectivist tone to the images themselves in that they articulate collective action and social responsibility in practices such as mask-wearing and

handwashing.

Kenya's street art scene has continued to thrive during the pandemic despite lockdowns. This has been driven in large part by self-taught artists supported by longstanding community 'artistivists' initiatives in Nairobi's informal settlements such as Kibera, Mathare, Korogocho, Githogoro, Mukuru and Huruma, through which artists have engaged with communities in the development of public-health messaging. This has produced a proliferation of COVID-19 street art, with at least 21 separate large mural projects in Nairobi and Mombasa, especially in the capital's densely populated informal settlements that lack basic infrastructure and health care systems. People living in these areas have limited or no access to social and mainstream media, which is further exacerbated by limited literacy. Mitigation measures to prevent the spread of COVID-19, such as handwashing, social distancing and physical distancing are often impossible, and impoverished people prioritise other needs when not persuaded of the importance of using a mask. In these contexts, street art can be important in raising awareness of health and wellbeing issues, with different publics responsibilized in subtly different ways. For example, murals by Wajukuu Arts Collective in Mukuru, depicting images of figures in black wearing fashionable clothing, trainers, blue surgical masks, and sunglasses,¹⁸ are designed to appeal to young people who might see masks as 'uncool', but are

¹⁸ Source: <https://www.port.ac.uk/news-events-and-blogs/blogs/health-and-wellbeing/act-nairobi> (accessed 07/07/21).



Fig. 3. Innocent Kagabo (Kigali, Rwanda) 'The everyday fight against COVID-19', source: Kurema Kureba Kwiga https://www.instagram.com/p/CGGAW_g9ii/ (accessed 06/12/20).

perhaps less likely to influence a person more concerned about feeding their children. In contrast, murals in Kibera by Art360 – a group of young independent artists and activists born and raised in informal settlements – depict people wearing masks while going about everyday life. In Korogocho, Hope Raisers – a community-based organisation – has used murals on walls along roads with heavy pedestrian traffic to communicate public health messages, including to residents with limited resources, about the importance of mask-wearing and other preventative measures, again depicting everyday activities such as carrying food and children playing.¹⁹ Some of the street art in Nairobi's informal settlements has also been instigated by individual artists who seek funding and permission to paint from individuals and organisations in their communities, rather than through collectives:

I was walking in the streets and not many people have masks. Now people they are like "ok, are we looking for what to eat to feed our self or are we looking to wear a mask. How can I afford to buy a mask?" I was so worried so I decided to take the initiative ... Let me go out and do something about it, talk to people about it, spread the pieces [artworks]. (Interview male artist, Kibera, Nairobi, 12/02/21)

This artist recruited others in Kibera to "go to just one wall and draw something that people will pass there each and every time, and it will be in their mind ... that they will need to put on a mask." Artists claim that initiatives such as these have been effective because of the presence of both artist and artwork in the street:

Yah, people put masks on ... When you do a piece in an area, they are able to engage in a conversation with us more: "How could we fight this thing? Apart from washing hands, what should we do?" Now you advise them: "when you go out put on masks, make sure your child

puts on a mask" ... It's quite positive, people are listening. (Interview male artist, Mathare, Nairobi, 24/02/21)

One Ugandan artist explains the significance of street art in responsibilizing publics through storytelling illustrations that resonate with people:

The COVID mask really didn't have a believable narrative to Africans and Ugandans. We took long to appreciate what this pandemic was ... "Why do I have to wear a piece of cloth?" ... Now imagine wearing a mask, it's one sign of saying "don't speak to me". Then they [the government] brought this scary theme 'tosemberera' which means 'don't come close to me'. All those sort of slogans, really, really do not resonate with our cultural structure. Our culture's structure really, really entirely believes in speaking. (Interview, male artist, Kampala 08/04/21)

In this context, he argues that street art is effective because it "is basically utilitarian ... that's why we have a lot of storytelling."

Street art murals have depicted pandemic mitigation measures through narrative forms to which people in diverse East African communities can relate and understand. This promotion of individual responsibility might be viewed by critics as instigating practices of neoliberal responsibilization, transferring responsibilities for managing health risks from the state to individuals. Sikka (2020: 6), for example, argues that a more effective pandemic response to promoting mask-wearing "would include health system [sic] that is well funded and sufficiently equipped to treat, test, and support vulnerable populations." However, Sikka accepts that "decades of austerity have made this a vanishing prospect in most countries" (*ibid.*), and the reality is that such robust health systems simply do not exist in most East African countries. In these contexts, street art is attempting to responsibilize publics and protect lives by raising awareness of preventative measures. For some people, these measures remain challenging because of extreme poverty. However, street artists are aware of this through their connections to the realities of life in urban informal settlements. As discussed below, the

¹⁹ Source: <https://www.akdn.org/project/using-murals-raise-awareness-covid-19-kenya> (accessed 07/07/21).

strongly collectivist and community-oriented nature of street art also ensures it retains a measure of radicalism in attempting to create resilient publics during the pandemic.

4.3. Community and resilient publics

Feminist and postcolonial conceptualisations of substantive citizenship understand citizens not simply as those engaged in political participation, but as undertaking ethically grounded activities, in private and public realms, that are relevant to their lives (McEwan, 2005). This idea of a citizen having an ethical, non-instrumental social status, distinct from both political and economic participation, makes visible spaces of radical citizenship shaped by marginalised groups. Drawing on these ideas, street art can be understood as citizen-producing in two distinct ways. First, street artists themselves “become citizens when they engage in practices – perform political or aesthetic acts of citizenship – that transform their sense of self and their environment” (Baker & Blaagaard, 2016, p. 13) without any expectation of reward in the form of cultural or financial capital. Second, the practices they instigate have a life beyond the production and circulation of street art in forming COVID-aware publics, who also perform acts of citizenship such as mask-wearing and handwashing, in the interest of the wider community. We suggest that pandemic street art is not simply performing the service of public health promotion but is a public-building practice instigated at the grassroots by individuals and collectives and engaging “participants directly in multiple and grounded ways” (Baker & Blaagaard, 2016, p. 14).

Without exception, all the artists we interviewed express a strong sense of belonging to and working in and with communities. For many, COVID-19 awareness-raising through street art is interwoven with a wider commitment to community-oriented activism, and street art thus emerges out of and helps create resilient publics. For example, an Ugandan artist explains his involvement in COVID-19 murals: “I thought it was a good idea for the community ... It involves the whole community ..., using art as a voice to the voiceless, those people who cannot stand up and speak out” (interview male artist, Kampala, 09/03/21). Many of the measures taken to stop the spread of COVID-19, including producing affordable face masks and disseminating information and advice through murals, were enacted in informal settlements long before any involvement of public health officials. In Nairobi’s Kibera informal settlement, for example, as soon as information began to spread about the pandemic tailors began producing affordable face masks, while artists simultaneously advocated their use in vivid murals on walls and other surfaces across the informal settlement:

Most of the initiatives were started by individuals and implemented by the people from the community, people who know the needs of the community and are also part of it. The people of Kibera didn’t wait for humanitarian aid or outsiders to come and intervene or help. In the beginning, they took it on all by themselves. (Otieno in Jones, 2020)

Underpinning many of these efforts is a strong tradition of creative, grassroots responses to promoting public health in high density neighbourhoods. As community activists, many artists are experienced in engaging with communities in the development of public health messaging, using credible and legitimate sources, addressing uncertainty quickly and with transparency, distilling information from multiple sources, and designing messages to increase understanding, induce social responsibility, and empower personal control.

There is also a strong commitment among artists to use art to build resilience by promoting solidarity and hope in marginalised communities. For example, a Rwandan artist explains his mural design in Kiyovu district of Kigali,

I decided to show a kid ... just ... [at] home maybe, and wearing mask ... Just showing them even if there is a pandemic or a virus, we

can also live with it, and just do what we are supposed to do ... I tried to use sky-blue so I could also show how beautiful our lives are ... (Interview male artist, Kigali 13/04/21)

Another Rwandan artist explains his mural design encouraging people to wear masks by referencing familiar cultural images,

My message was, like, you can stay with your culture, you can still be where you are, but then wearing a mask ... We can still be where we are, but staying safe and staying strong, you don’t have to change a lot of things. (Interview male artist, Kigali 09/04/21)

In Kitui, in East Kenya, David Munyao paints murals on buildings of people wearing masks, with messages in Kamba dialect, English, and Swahili. One example on a corner wall in Kitui Central depicts a woman’s face in profile with a headscarf and surgical face mask, balancing a green basket of fruit on her head, alongside a cartoon image of coronavirus and the slogan ‘#spreadhopenotfear’.²⁰ When asked why artists were creating such hope-filled images, another artist explains:

I think art ... makes people feel that as artists we care about them, because when the disease struck everyone was like “oh now we are in slums the government has abandoned us, we will all die,” but the moment they started doing the street pieces people were like “no, the artists are trying to tell us something.” So I think the feeling is positive, it’s giving people the morale to do what is right. (Male artist, Mathare, Nairobi, 24/02/21)

The creator of a mural in Kigali, Rwanda of two smiling faces explains its message: “despite all the masks and everything, we can still smile ... regardless of the COVID” (interview male artist, Kigali, 31/03/21).

While street art catalyses hope, it is also enmeshed in structural injustice and human frailty, of which many artists are all too aware. Several express concern about rising infection rates in poorer communities. For example, as one artist explains,

The other day I saw the numbers have started again increasing ... because the people are becoming careless, and I cannot blame the people, because people have to survive. You look at a point where either you buy a mask, sanitizer, soap, or you buy food. You are in a dilemma so you choose the only thing that you can survive with, which is food. (Interview male artist, Mathare, Nairobi 24/02/21)

This awareness of structural inequality inspires many arts-based community activist groups, such as Nairobi-based PAWA 254 Initiative,²¹ a grassroots non-profit artist organization promoting ‘artivism.’ PAWA’s strategy is to combine activism and art to address social justice and governance challenges by working with artists to develop and disseminate art (including street and other visual art, music and spoken word), and to create resilient publics through conscientizing and engaging citizens in social change. Through programmes including PAWA Cafes, Open Fridays and Literary Thursdays, the collective seeks to popularize artivism as a means through which young people can use their skills in socially just transformation. During the pandemic, PAWA has partnered with youth and community groups in Nairobi to build community resilience through street art, including the creation of a ‘talking wall’ promoting handwashing and mask-wearing at the Dandora Community Justice Centre²² (see Fig. 4). This is just one example of community street art in Kenya that attempts to intertwine resilience-building in informal settlements with wider engagement and activism

²⁰ Source: <https://www.the-star.co.ke/counties/eastern/2020-04-19-youth-creates-covid-19-awareness-through-street-art/> (accessed 27/11/20).

²¹ PAWA is a Swahili corruption of ‘power;’ 254 is Kenya’s international dialling code (see <https://pawa254.org/>, accessed 21/06/21; also Waddacor, 2020).

²² Source: <https://twitter.com/pawa254/status/1252299106971762689> (accessed 21/06/21).



Fig. 4. Daddo Omutitii 'Place-making, public engagement community awareness through #TalkingWallProject advocacy in intervention during Covid19' (Dandora, Nairobi), source: Black Clarity Pictures <https://www.instagram.com/p/B-0NUyjg5c1/>(accessed 06/12/20).

based on artists' own experiences of injustice in these spaces.

As Bloch (2020: 2) argues, "Walls are where people have looked for centuries to gauge public reactions to and personal perspectives on major events that cannot be left to those in power to convey." Both governments and civil society organisations are not unaware of this and in some cases have sought to co-opt street art in efforts to encourage resilience during the pandemic. In several East African countries, NGOs have launched initiatives to provide a platform for artists, including those creating street art, to sell their works and promote COVID-19 awareness. For example, the Trust for Indigenous Culture and Health, a non-profit organization based in Kenya, has launched an initiative to create a mobile mural made up of different artworks entitled 'Resilience,' which provides economic support to artists while spreading COVID-19 public health messages.²³ In Mombasa, a group of artists was commissioned by the County Government and Department of Trade, Tourism and Investment to design large-scale murals to create awareness of precautionary COVID-19 measures, encourage resilience, celebrate leadership and thank health officials. They were also designed to let tourists know that Mombasa was still open for business. The murals were painted on walls of high-rises in Buxton (a middle-class residential area in central Mombasa), the Coast Provincial General hospital, and Star of the Sea School.²⁴ One mural on the side of a building features the Swahili proverb Umoja Ni Nguvu (Unity in Strength) and depicts several masked figures including healthcare workers and police officers. In the foreground is a cartoon depiction of a universe with planets and, at the centre, a virus particle encircled by a pair of white gloved hands; surrounding both and symbolizing hope are sunflowers. Another enormous image on the same building depicts a medical professional in blue

scrubs, medical mask and gloves cradling an image of the Kenyan flag in the shape of the country against her chest. The text below reads: 'We'll protect you'.²⁵

On the one hand, this co-optation by civil society and governments could be considered a de-radicalisation of street art. Critics argue that institutional endorsement can have a deadening effect, leading to "muralization and touristification of streets and surfaces" (Andron, 2018, p. 1037) and an evacuation of radical politics from street art (Abaza, 2013). On the other hand, however, co-optation in East African countries confirms the importance of street art in creating resilient publics. These publics share similarities with, for example, the counterpublics in Brazilian favelas that have emerged through social movement street art to diffuse the World Health Organization's recommendations and counter president Bolsonaro's campaign to minimize the impact of the pandemic (Pleyers, 2020). Co-optation also signals official recognition of the talent and popular appeal of artists creating street art. Moreover, artists have seized opportunities to shore up their own resilience by showcasing their work, publicising their skills, and making a living during a pandemic in which public spaces and economies have been locked down. As one Rwandan artist explains, the pandemic has presented opportunities for strategic positioning regarding government funding priorities,

We were helping the government to mobilize to prevent the COVID, so it was our initiative, and we say you know we can do this and we help. The government is investing in creative industries, so we show them that we're here and we can do something to help. (Interview male artist, Kigali, 31/03/21)

Some artists, therefore, are willingly co-opted if it means their own economic survival, as well providing them with opportunities to use

²³ Source: <https://www.voanews.com/arts-culture/artists-kenya-spreading-health-messages-through-their-works> (accessed 24/06/21).

²⁴ Source: <https://lifeinmombasa.com/mombasa-streets-arts-001-covid-19-awareness-edition/> (accessed 21/06/21).

²⁵ Source: <https://www.the-star.co.ke/news/2020-04-30-photos-mombasa-artists-salute-medics-using-street-art/> (accessed 21/06/21).

their skills for the benefit of their communities.

5. Conclusions

This paper has sought to address the relative neglect of African street art in existing critical street art research through a focus on street art created in Uganda, Kenya, Rwanda, and Tanzania during the COVID-19 pandemic. In common with street art everywhere, East African street art is highly creative, visually striking, and extraordinarily skilful. However, because painting can be risky, it is rarely illegal (cf. Riggle, 2010). Street artists need to navigate complex terrain, with their work sometimes sanctioned by authorities or commissioned by NGOs as a form of citizen media and public health messaging. There is a risk, therefore, of co-optation and ‘artwashing’ (Schacter, 2014), especially when linked to international or government funding aimed at boosting creative economies. However, much of the pandemic street art we encountered, especially in informal settlements, is co-produced with communities and emerges from grassroots empowerment projects seeking to connect street art to social justice movements.

Significantly, our research suggests that making sense of pandemic street art in these contexts requires understanding its presence in the shared, ignored, practical, and political spaces of the ‘street’. This departs from recent studies of street art that claim that, with the advent of digital platforms, it is no longer experienced in person, but “rather through images on social media” (Bengtzen 2020, in Steinfeld, 2020: 202–3; see also MacDowall, 2019). In contrast, in East African cities, street art is a creative practice always embedded within the social spaces of streets (Hardy, 2020). While some artists we interviewed source inspiration from and share their designs on Instagram and other social media platforms, the siting and experiencing of street art *in the street* remains paramount, especially in informal settlements where street art proliferates. Moreover, we argue that street art is potentially important in tackling the pandemic precisely because of the proximity, and mutual constitution of, creative practices and publics. While it is increasingly sanctioned through social movements, social enterprises, and even governments through collaborative creative practices and occupation of space, it remains a creative practice embedded primarily within the social spaces of cities. Consequently, both sanctioned and unsanctioned, COVID-19 street art in East Africa is always in dialogue with the realm of everyday experiences of the pandemic.

The paper has also illustrated ways in which East African street art as a social act is a public-making process and, through visual discourses and socially shared spaces, the publics it seeks to create are multiple, self-organising and reflexive (Warner, 2002). Like street art everywhere, “instead of delighting merely the refined sensibilities of an elite few” it is a practice that “has the power to engage, effortlessly and aesthetically, the masses through its manifest creativity, skill, originality, depth of meaning, and beauty” (Riggle, 2010, p. 243). East African street art is notable for its collaborative and collective nature, with a strong youth presence in the artworks, and in the individuals and collectives that produce them. Youth, street art and community are intertwined in these contexts because young people are already engaged in collective community building and social justice initiatives. The publics created by pandemic street art are thus spaces of pedagogic and political practice, where practice extends beyond the production and circulation of street art (Stephansen, 2016). For example, street art and the artists producing it have sought to encourage people to embrace care for and responsibility towards self and others by making and wearing masks where there is no precedent for this; to maintain social distancing protocols in the most overcrowded of city spaces, contravening norms that, as one Ugandan artist argues, are profoundly “social and communal [in] nature” (Kayem in Mukholi, 2020: n.p.); and, to engage in handwashing where possible, despite the challenges of often negligible or extremely poor sanitation provision. We suggest that in the context of COVID-19, East African street art goes beyond providing a communication infrastructure for public health messaging in areas of cities where this is

fragile and, instead, seeks to enable the emergence of knowledgeable, responsible, and resilient publics through multiple practices and networks of communication (Barnett, 2003) brought into existence by artistic practices of representation that constitute them. Although it has not been possible to assess the impact of street art on public behaviour, anecdotal evidence from the artists involved suggests that at the very least it encourages conversation and, in some cases, influences responses. Street art is thus potentially influential in the self-organisation of publics and countering an otherwise immobilising sense powerlessness in the face of a pandemic that governments and public health systems have struggled to contain.

Studies of artists involved in HIV/AIDS awareness campaigns in South Africa during the 1990s and early 2000s found that very few saw their role as direct public health messaging. As Marschall (2004: 167) argues, artists understood themselves primarily as ‘artists’ not as designers of educational messages; they saw their artworks “as expressing some of their personal feelings about the disease, perhaps presenting a different perspective or challenging ways in which the issue has been dealt with”. In the context of COVID-19, while there is a strong pedagogic element to East African street art, our research suggests that it is similarly an expression of personal feelings by artists: concern for communities precariously positioned in relation to a pandemic; desire to encourage responsibility and care; commitment to challenging disinformation and engaging within communities that are otherwise neglected in public health messaging. The dominant public health flavour to the street art makes sense given previous experience in East African contexts of campaigns targeting HIV and Ebola. Yet, importantly, all interviewees identified first and foremost as artists, for whom both the street and art have significance. In their artistic practice, which some define explicitly as ‘artivism’, they exemplify Achebe’s assertion that “An artist is committed to art which is committed to people” (in Randall-Tsuruta, 1989, p. 224). The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the potential in East African countries of everyday creativity in the formation of knowledgeable, responsible, caring, and resilient publics able to protect and nurture the health and wellbeing of citizens and communities, even in conditions of extreme structural inequality and poverty. The possibilities of this everyday creativity as a resource rooted in cultural attributes of multiplicity, circulation and mobility, and the compositional and relational qualities of everyday life (Mbembe, 2013), as a resource for creating new publics, and even as a resource for remaking the African continent, are worthy of further research extending beyond the context of the current pandemic.

Declaration of competing interest

None.

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