

INSTALLATION ART; IDENTITY OF MILLENNIALS IN KENYA

Maryam T. Abdi

maryamafrah20@gmail.com

University of Nairobi

Dr. Michael Munene

michaelm@uonbi.ac.ke

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ABSTRACT

Background: Due to the emergence of social media and constantly changing trends on who to be, what to wear, and how to look, millennials have experienced such an identity crisis in recent years that their own cultural identity has become obsolete and unimportant to Kenyan youth. *Problem:* This paper focuses on how Installation as contemporary art affects the identity of today's generation, the millennials, by addressing cultural and traditional ways in which they are perceived and generally expected to behave in society and the world at large. *Objective:* Installation art is explored from the standpoint of containing a potentially essential message and, as a result, has the ability of expression to pervade the social, economic, and political spheres. By projecting a feeling of cultural identity and a style of behaving that fosters greater knowledge of issues such as unattainable beauty standards, the role of women in modern society, and stereotypes that currently surround the identity of a Kenyan millennial. *Research Design:* this paper uses multiple case study design with the nature of exploring the impact of installation art in the identity of millennials in Kenya. Data was primarily collected from secondary source such as websites and articles.

Keywords: Identity, installation art, millennial

1.0 INTRODUCTION

In recent years the millennials have had a huge identity crisis due to the emergence of social media and constantly dynamic trends on who to be, what to wear (shah, 2019) and how to look that their own cultural identity becomes useless and not of importance to the youth in Kenya.

Installation art is viewed from perspective of containing potentially important message and, thereby, having the power of expression that can penetrate the social, economic and political spheres (David & McCaughan, 2007). By projecting a sense of cultural identity and a way of behaving (Murray, Michael, 2012) that promotes more understanding on themes such as unrealistic beauty standards, role of women in modern society and pre conceived stereo-types that are currently surrounding the identity of a Kenyan millennial (Biagioli, Monica, 2014).

1.1 Installation art

Installation art is a genre of contemporary art which involves the configuration or “installation” of objects in a space, such as a room or warehouse. Installation allows the viewer interact with some of its elements through engaging several of the viewer’s sensory elements including touch, sound and smell, as well as vision (Kadirkaikobad, Najmul, Bhuiyan, Zafar, Parveen, Shahina & Anwarr, 2016). This art form places emphasis on the presentation of the main message than rather than the material used to present it (Reiss, 2014).

1.2 Identity

According to Erik Erickson identity comprises of properties based on the uniqueness and individuality which makes a person distinct from others (Erikson, 1994).

Growing up as children, much of our identity is formed by association with our parents, grandparents and our whole communities. It is formed by the things we are taught in school, the attitudes and behaviors directed toward us by others (Erikson, 1994). The elements of identity are passed down from generation to generation through elders and society leaders in various tribes and clans in Africa (Mami, Fouad, 2011).

Installation art as an approach to empower identity of Kenyan millennials makes two assumptions. First, that art has the capacity to be healing, and evoke social change. Second, that the environment, historical context, and societal structures we develop and live-in effect our identity and culture (David & McCaughan, 2007). Installation art can enhance social identity by:

1.3 Installation for social change

Art is often a vehicle for social change. It can give voice to the politically or socially disenfranchised. A song, film or novel can rouse emotions in those who encounter it, inspiring them to rally for change. artworks are aimed at raising awareness of social and environmental problems, alleviating these conditions, and empowering people to create change (David & McCaughan, 2007). The impact that art has on society is threefold, it comes from the individual’s reaction to the work, the power inherent in the work and the environmental factors surrounding the work (Mazzucotelli Salice, 2010).

It targets the audience which looks up to the social-theme based artworks. The audience finds a lot of new questions in these works. They find answers to some of the old riddles in the process. The

role of art installations is to awaken people to some of the most challenging issues of their times. The contemporary art installation is an attempt made by the artist on his or her part. They put a question or answer or both in one. The audience needs to decide which aspect of the theme they want to associate (Mazzucotelli Salice, 2010). Several aspiring artists consider contemporary art installation the right medium to express themselves.

1.4 Challenging expectations of society

Installation art questions and challenges the deeply rooted perceived expectations in the Kenyan community (Gaztambide-Fernández & Rubén, 2008). These expectations are rooted on themes like

1.5 Stereotypes in the community

Stereotypes are representative of a society's collective knowledge of customs, myths, ideas, religion etc. It is with this knowledge that an individual develops a stereotype about a certain group in this the different genders (Aronson, Joshua & McGlone, Matthew, 2009). Stereotypes was implemented and mastered in Kenya during and after the colonial period. Key texts point at tradition as a purposely-created classification of Africans by missionaries and colonial administrations (Ogechi, 2019). These stereotypes have a significant effect on the identity of the youth. Stereotypes according to tribes is just about the most rampant and has existed for long. There are many stereotypes in Kenya and is one of the nation's biggest problems. People judge others before they even get a chance to hear them speak. Judging people because they're from a certain tribe, prefers a specific fashion, or because of their name has made many people lose great opportunities (Ogechi, 2019). Since every individual is a complex combination of different values, beliefs, assumptions, and behaviors therefore, stereotypes make the youth- millennials really deny them thereby making them confused with who they are.

Wambui Kamuiru is a visual artist based in Nairobi has done an installation called "*Your Name Betrays You*" coined from the very famous words by Former Vice President Kalonzo Musyoka who unknowingly but pointed to the conversations that we have in private concerning "the other tribe"

The installation sought to bring to public what we say about other ethnic groups and consisted of a wall of all the stereotypes we hold for each other, some known some unknown. The discussions then centered around understanding the root of the stereotypes that we carry today and the historical contexts under which such descriptions were necessary. This was represented by the 5ft 7in giant chair against the backdrop of nursery school chairs. The work is founded on the key text, "The Invention of Tradition" by Prof. Terence Ranger. The show was exhibited at Kuona Trust (Wambui & Wambui, 2015).

In The white chest of drawers acts like a tangible "boxing in" of each other within labels for each ethnic group – like a library catalogue of each group's traits.

The large chair represents the seniors in the community such as parents, chiefs and elders in a community, while the small chair represents the younger generation and the youth who grow up with these stereotypes passed down through generations.

This installation really proves that stereotypes are not our real identities therefore should not confine one's identity especially the millennials in Kenya (Wambui & Wambui, 2015). Wambui brings to light how stereotypes are a tool for division between the Kenyan tribes. These stereotypes create confusion in the identity of the Kenyan youth and whether to define with these stereotypes or not.



Fig. 1 'your name betrays you' illustration by Wambui Kamuiru
Source: <http://wambuikamiru.com/your-name-betrays-you/>

1.6 Unrealistic Beauty Standards

In this day and age, the quest to attain Eurocentric beauty standards within the Afro-, Black, and African communities have come to an all-time high. Media outlets have contributed greatly to the madness by constantly advocating blue-eyes and straight hair— the natural appearance of many European descendants compared to natural African features (About Cisi Eze Cisi Eze is a freelance journalist, 2021). Unfortunately, our young, and often impressionable children and youth subconsciously aspire to obtain those traits, due to the lack of proper representation. These unrealistic beauty standards are only products of our society, as are we all. Since our media perpetuates Western ideals to our girls and women, and we consume this information continuously from a young age, how can we fault anyone who is susceptible to these ideals (men included), without challenging the people that are creating them (Awad et al., 2014).

Fortunately, there are those within the African diaspora who fight against white supremacy's propaganda and question these standards through diverse mediums.

Artist Wambui Kamuiru is using her platform as a means of social responsibility by creating honest narratives to uplift and challenge popular Eurocentric beauty standards through installation, *Akili Ni Nywele - Series III* (2020)

"Akili ni nywele, kila mtu ana zake." – Kiswahili Proverb (Intelligence is like hair, everyone has their own)

An exhibition about femininity and colonialism's cultural impact in the view of African and Black women's beauty (Wambui, 2017). *Akili ni Nywele* investigates African beauty perceptions in connection to hair. It examines the present custom of weaving hair onto women's own heads, which is often used as a show of success in urban areas and as a lifestyle choice for the modern Nairobi lady. It inquires as to the genesis of that sense of beauty as being associated with long, "flappable," straight hair. It also raises the question of who decides what the "norm" is (Wambui, 2017). The work investigates the notion that women with natural hair are unattractive because they are rebellious and uncontrollable. It also calls into question the hierarchy that favors some hair types over others. Russian hair, for example, is more expensive and sought after for hair weaving than Indian hair. In the end though, the goal is the same, to

alter the look given by African Hair.

Where do African girls pick up Western concepts of beauty and Femininity?

In this installation Wambui brings forth that the origin of these western beauty standards is from 2nd hand Barbie dolls that young girls played with from their early childhood and romantic novel girls read in their youth.



Fig. 2 Mitumba barbie dolls and romantic novels.

Source: <http://wambuikamiru.com/portfolio/akili-ni-nywele/>

"What African women [and girls] are intended to do to be beautiful and feminine is defined by society as a whole," Wambui explains. To demonstrate this point, she paints the entire room pure pink, which is, of course, the stereotypical hue for feminine. It has a bookcase full of love novels and an entire shelf full of mitumba white Barbie dolls. The room also features a matching pink 'vanity' table with a mirror (Figure 3) and images of 'beautiful' little white girls who imprint foreign ideals of beauty in the minds of tiny black girls.



Fig. 3. Pink vanity with chemical hair straightener product box.

Source: <http://wambuikamiru.com/portfolio/akili-ni-nywele/>

Wambui enlisted the services of two professionals, one a makeup artist, Nzilani Kimani, and the other a photographer, Emmanuel Jambo, to demonstrate how wearing human hair, whether in the form of a wig or glued-on extensions, may help women achieve Western ideals of beauty

Wambui even constructed a carpet out of real and artificial wavy long hair, the type she claims wealthy Black women (because to the high cost of human hair) stitch or glue onto their African hair.



Fig. 4. Wambui's Pink Room with Human Hair carpet.

Source: <http://kenyanartsreview.blogspot.com/2021/08/contestedconcepts-of-african-beauty-at.html>

To disprove the notion that synthetic hair is somehow superior to natural African hair, Wambui broadcasts a seven-minute split-screen video in the Loft. One side shows Wambui in a bathroom, surgically removing her long artificial braids layer by layer. She's symbolically silenced by a red tape around her mouth, which will be removed only until all of the fake hair has been removed. The other side is set in the same bathroom, but this time we only see her feet and the cut braids that have fallen to the floor. To conclude, the film indicates that the braids, being foreign, were also robbing her of her ability to freely speak and think. To back up that claim, Wambui reappears in the film wearing a turban towel, which she removes to expose her natural hair and a freshly washed face, which is equally gorgeous but more authentic than the bewigged Wambui (Gacheru, 2021).

Wambui has curated one final room, which she has filled with all the gadgets found in the finest upmarket beauty salons. She's painted a brilliant sparkling silver and has a large table display of vital products used by the top hair stylists, such as hand-held hair dryers, brushes, curlers, combs, and even hot combs. She even brought three used sit-down hairdryers to show how industrialized and evolved the African women's hair industry is (Gacheru, 2021).



Fig. 5. Hair tools in saloons.

Source: <https://www.instagram.com/wambuikamiru/>

Akili ni Nywele seeks to review our immediate social environment by looking at what has been told to us as African girls growing up and what we continue to say to our own little girls about what beauty is. It also looks at men's role in the construction and perpetuation of ideals of beauty. From this, the work discusses expectations of women, first as items of beauty and secondly as accessories that need "tidying" up.

The work involves a video piece within an immersive installation that amplifies and analyses stereotypically defined societal expectations and definitions of femininity and women's image. This informs the identity of the Kenyan youth especially the millennials who are the current generation, and how they define beauty and feminism according to their culture and not the predetermined unrealistic beauty standards.

1.7 Historical Interpretation

The importance of visual arts extends to understanding, commemorating and recording history through the creation of artworks. Installation arts is considered to be the repository of bringing to light an almost forgotten collective memory of a society. Art preserves what fact-based historical records cannot: how it felt to exist in a particular place at a particular time. Even though, installation art is temporary and exhibited for a period of days it brings to light the idea of the almost forgotten heroes and culture of a society thereby prompting the youth to try and understand their ancestral identity through the exhibition (W. Collymore, 2021).

Wakaruru is an exhibition about the destruction of language for everyday things and the accompanying loss of orally documented knowledge. It looks at memory and the forgotten history of the role of women in the Mau Mau war.

Wambui uses language, faceless portraits of women in colonial Kenya and other tokens of the past to evoke memory in aspects of history.

In my opinion, Wakaruru is a representation of the countless men and women who fought for independence. It is a statement that challenges what we remember about the information hidden deep inside our languages and, it is an experience of a life and past that is buried, dormant but not forgotten.

1.8 Encouraging Self-Expression

Generally, artists draw or depicts something in order to tell a story and make people believe in something beyond what they can see (essayrx, 2020). This enables the deep, emotional and self-expressionism of such artist informs the identity and cultural background in which their work is based upon. This encourages the journey of discovering identity therefore promotes self-expression.

Syowia Kyambi is an artist who works in a variety of media. She created *'Fracture I'*, an installation and performance in which she uses the feminine body to express her message. Rose is the protagonist of Kyambi's novel, and she is a woman who is full of doubts. She has lost her sense of self and is unable to live with herself, whether in the context of rural tradition or urban modernism (Reinink, 2021).



Fig. 6. Figure dressed in a beaded sisal outfit.
Source: <https://syowiakyambi.com/fracture-i/>

Kyambi's performance installation begins with a figure dressed in a beaded sisal outfit. The word "sisal" alludes to a traditional weaving process as well as colonial times when sisal industries were owned by colonizers. The beads represent trade tools. The figure destroys blood-filled jars and vases, allowing the blood to flow freely. It depicts not just the annihilation of Kenyan culture and traditional life, but also the destruction of one's own personality (Reinink, 2021).

"It's a vicious character. It's not in a human state of mind. The being interacts with the audience; intimidating them and looking for people to engage with who will allow themselves to be drawn in and become equally aggressive. The vases are a representation of a culture, of a practice, of people who get destroyed." The figure transforms into Rose, a character who comes from a rural place in upcountry Kenya and moves to the city to deal with city life and capitalism.

Rose has the mindset of a successful buyer and strives to live the ideal modern existence, complete with a two-story home, a spouse, two children, a job, and a car. Rose gets ready for her day during the performance, but she can't seem to keep up. She falls again and over again, lamenting the past while attempting to rebuild the broken pots and vases. She stumbles upon the relics of her past devastation,



Fig. 7 Figure in sisal outfit breaking jars filled with blood.
Source; <https://syowiakyambi.com/fracture-i/>

finally confronting her losses and relinquishing the position she has carved out for herself.

Kyambi explains: *“Acknowledging that destruction is a very important step in the reparation process. If you understand your history, then you understand the present-day relationships and circumstances better.”*

Finally, Rose transforms into the artist who suspends the sisal clothing in front of a mirror, which reflects and absorbs the audience into her act. Kyambi: *“The work is layered and has more than one purpose. It has more than one narrative, because the things that influence me come from many sources. People can connect to my work in different ways. It can be read as a woman who is confined but people can also relate to the colonial history. Both stories are totally relevant.”* (Reinink, 2021)



Fig. 8 Figure with sisal outfit on the floor with bloodied legs.
Source: <https://syowiakyambi.com/fracture-i/>

Another example of installation that encourages self-expression is *“Who I Am, Who We Are”* is a project that explores the concept of nationhood and how it manifests in our sense of self and daily interactions. It’s a concept based on the idea that today’s world represents a multifaceted and unique reality. At 50, nowhere is this idea truer than in Kenya.



Fig. 9. Ideal look of urban woman with wigs. Source: <https://syowi-akyambi.com/fracture-i/>

The initiative serves as a starting point for contemplation and contribute to the conversation/debate on Kenya's path forward after 1963, in which each individual share personal accountability for the country's development.

"*Who I Am, Who We Are*" is a process-based project that examines our connections with individuals and public spaces, as well as how they influence our sense of self (Kamiru, 2016). This pilot project focuses on the people of Nairobi.

The project brings about conversations and encourage the public to reflect on important issues by creating appropriate spaces in various venues in Nairobi and using diverse expressive tools such as Body Mapping (process and sharing with the public) and a public art intervention called "*In a Silent Room.*" At a time when there was commemoration of 50 years of independence, these themes include memory, identity, aspiration, change, and diversity. The audio and visual material collected throughout these initiatives serves as the foundation for identity study and published as part of the project's documentation (Kamiru, 2016).

2.0 CONCLUSION

Since the emergence of social media, the millennials have had a huge identity crisis due to dynamically changing trends on who to be, what to wear and how to look that their own cultural identity became not of importance to the youth in Kenya. Installation art is a tool that contains potentially important message and, projecting a sense of cultural identity and a way of behaving that promotes more understanding on themes such as unrealistic beauty standards, role of women in modern society and pre conceived stereo-types that are currently surrounding the identity of a Kenyan millennial. By having a strong, healthy and positive identity, it makes the youth feel confident enough to pursue what anybody else would in terms of working towards life goals, attaining education and feeling empowered to influence change despite whatever negative messages from others based on identity.

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