

PROXIMITY TO POWER

*an investigation of the location, manifestation,
and operation of political power*



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Front Cover: Nicholas ODHIAMBO, Persuasion (Detail)



“Proximity To Power” is part of the Goethe-Institut Kenya’s work in the field of contemporary art, which is conveyed by the exhibition series ‘Sasa Nairobi’. This series has been realized since 2008 and has showcased more than 40 artists. It aims at portraying the creative and innovative contemporary art scene in Nairobi that consists of a number of young artists with an innovative approach to art and who work with different kinds of media.

In 2016, for the first time a curatorial workshop was conducted as part of the series’ programme. It focused on the training of curators who already have a basic knowledge and primary experience in this line of work. At the end of the project, the participants developed exhibition concepts and presented them to a consortium. Based on the presentations and participation in the workshop, three participants were selected to curate an exhibition each in 2017.

The selected participants are encouraged to work with one of the other participants as a curatorial assistant in order to continue the learning and experience process.

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Peterson KAMWATHI, Six Piece (I) (Detail)

Proximity to Power

Re-questioning the hate that (self) hate produced as an aftermath of colonization while revisiting scars from our past

Proximity to power is a curatorial project coming at a time the country is preparing for the 2017 General elections.

It critically looks at the Kenyan voting patterns while trying to understand why as Kenyans, we have repeatedly let the ruling class chaperone us into ethnic enclaves with politicians negotiating/cutting deals on the account of their ethnic populace; and the common perception being that all Luos will vote for a Luo candidate, while all Kikuyus are automatically aligned to a Kikuyu candidate etc.

As a country that has previously thrived on our diversity, Proximity to Power interrogates how the prospect of a person from our tribe, race or religion ascending to political power influences our choices making us temporarily compromise our moral values/standards and congregate with 'our own' regardless of their reputation. It is an objective confrontation of the rising xenophobia in Kenya while looking within to interrogate this uncomfortable subject.

It looks at the irony of copying from the colonial guide book – divide and rule, detaining & banishing dissidents, intimidating & executing opponents, high handedness and marginalizing communities perceived to be anti-establishment as a way of solidifying one's ethnic base while attempting to dissect how innocent phrases like "It's Our Turn to Eat", "Tyranny of Numbers" and "My People" have been twisted into political slogans that are misconstrued therefore leading to exclusion and inequalities.

It's an attempt to interrogate how this Proximity to Power syndrome has been used as a political strategy to ascend to and retain political power with the illusion that 'I' shall benefit more if someone from 'my' community ascends to political power while looking at how ingrained hate for the 'other tribe' has created prejudices and a discriminative culture and stereotypes that we use to justify the fear we have for the other ethnic group/race/religion.

Proximity to Power seeks ideas from the five participating artists to use their own unique experience to articulate the subject at a time political campaigns are at their peak and the country's general elections are less than a month away pitting candidates from the two (perceived) most polarized communities. It demonstrates contemporary art's ability to generate intellectual discourse while challenging the viewers to re-examine their attitudes towards the perceived 'other tribe/race/religion' while initiating a discussion most 'older generation' Kenyans have been unable to have constructively.

Four Kenyan based artists; Peterson KAMWATHI, Onyis MARTIN, Longinos NAGILA, and Nicholas ODHIAMBO – whose everyday practice is research based and draws from history, philosophy, migration, consumerism and geopolitics have been part of this exciting process. This selection reinforces the curator's philosophy of working with young prolific artists while presenting them alongside more recognizable individuals in a bid to introduce them to highly professional contemporary platforms while encouraging peer-to-peer artistic collaborations.

Their work is presented at **Circle Art Gallery** – 910 James Gichuru Road, Nairobi on the 12th July 2017 and runs until August 12th 2017.

Ogonga Thom.

A MOTH TO A FLAME

As elections loom every 4-5 years the electorate mark their ballot paper and in so doing exercise their right to hold political leaders accountable. However, what influences their choice? Is the electorate like 'a moth to a flame' – irresistibly tempted to vote in accordance to the dictates of identity politics? And if so, how and why is voting behaviour shaped?

The politicisation of identity can be traced back to colonial policies of 'Divide and Rule'; the disjointing of ethnic groups within rigid boundaries. These strategies became adopted following independence in 1963. Kenyans were given leaders who placed 'tribe' before country, failing to build nationalism. Parties forged ethnic alliances rather than country-wide movements. Following the harassment and banning of opposition, the one state era stifled political competition and prospects of issue-based parties. Clientelism and patronage bought support while dissidents were suppressed. The reintroduction of political pluralism in 1992 instilled optimism for a politics beyond 'tribalism'. Fragmentation of the opposition deepened mobilisation around ethnicity prompting 'competitive tribalism' and confrontation, witnessed in 1992, 1997 and 2007/8

This competition has continued (at the expense of parties uniting around common principles and ideals) and is used to mobilise support based on ethnicity and manipulate fears of exclusion from power and access to resources. Ethnicity per se is not the problem, but rather the political elite capitalise on it to win votes in order to access a share of Kenya's wealth – let it be 'our turn to eat'. In an era of 'unbounded politics', shaped by no single ethnic group having a majority, coalitions are inevitable and party loyalty languishes.

The tactics of political 'big men' are rationally embraced by citizens, who see it as their chance to 'have a seat at the table'. Elections nevertheless also revolve around other identities such as gender, youth, or religion. More recently Kenya's 'middle class' have been rallied as supporters of democracy, seen as more likely to vote according to policy and performance than identity. Support harnessed by appealing to these identities has though, failed to deliver votes in the same ways ethnicity has.

Since colonialism, Kenyan politics has seen the entrenchment of ethnicity that is prevalent in the dynamics of contemporary electoral behaviour. The struggle for the control and distribution of state resources is fundamental to voting patterns and rationale. Metaphorically speaking, some voters act 'like a moth to a flame' (though this varies considerably depending on factors such as education, income or rural/urban locations). Despite options to back other candidates, many Kenyans (though certainly not all) opt to vote along ethnic lines – choosing individuals of questionable character. Ethnicity seemingly evokes emotive feelings of 'belonging' and 'community' that are unconvincing in other identities. These reasons are boosted by mistrust of 'other' groups (stoked during campaigns), voter buying, grievances and the absence of distinct political ideologies. While voters do consider other factors it is apparent that, for now, ethnic politics is the 'modus operandi'. In a room full of candles 'seeing the light' is not easy to distinguish from a flame. The question often comes down to 'which flame will you prefer to be burnt by? – One from your 'own group' or an 'other'. Though if the wicks of 'politics based on rigid identity' wither and the flames fade will the electorate 'see the light' and if so what will it represent?

Craig Halliday is a PhD candidate at the University of East Anglia, UK. His research looks into the role art can play in creating social change. Prior to this Craig completed a MA in African Studies, MSc in International Development and has worked and lived in Kenya, Malawi, Myanmar, Sierra Leone, Tanzania and Zambia.

STATE OF THE NATION

There is a common street joke that if you fall victim to witchcraft and the witch dies before reversing the spell, your woes might never cease. That is how one is compelled to think of Kenya - as a bewitched nation, lost in a jinxed colonial maze under the leadership of a looney class of post-colonial opportunists. The petty-bourgeoisie, as Ngugi Wa Thiong'o baptized them in 'Decolonizing The Mind', the post-independence ruling class, ascended to power wielding hope, tricking the peasants into thinking that they were still local despite freshly acquired education and lifestyles.

Many African rulers recognized that basing their rule on ethno-nationalism is unfeasible in their multicultural states. Instead, they sought to present themselves publicly as the 'father(s) of the nation', representing all of the country's people rather than only those from their ethnic groups and the population, blindly, truly, and hopefully, put its trust in these founding fathers, national heroes who had won against colonial rule. Now, however, it seems as though they merely won the colonizer's trust, and that they would never uplift the citizens.

Half a century later, nationalism has proven itself to be just another political myth, either by design or from the sheer magnitude of the public's expectations. What follows is a government pretending to integrate the country around a common ethics while, individually, leaders continue to drive wedges between the people through ethnic stereotypes, purely for self-aggrandizement.

One wonders whether the former (sic) colonial powers ever look at present African leaders and nod with approval as would a good father does at a good son. What have our leaders done that would upset the master? Nothing; it is impossible to ignore the weight of the refurbished yokes of colonial oppression still brutally fastened on our necks.

On a trip your local grocer, forgetting to carry your national ID card could see you having to spell out your surname and list your father's origins, all while trying to M-Pesa that bribe for loitering with intent to buy milk; what is this, 1952?

To be famous, to be significant, and have something to call your own, don't undertake that groundbreaking study, don't bother inventing that airplane, you poor boy from the swamps. You're wasting your time! Instead, rob a bank, steal some relief food, maybe put some ARVs in your illicit brew. Better yet, hire a police uniform from a policeman and become an officer yourself. Mark your own street and milk the citizenry dry. If you're lucky enough to go to school abroad, upon completion, don't come home. Instead, get a nice job and settle down there so you can occasionally criticize your home government on Facebook for not being as swift as your new government. But if you come back, get a job wanking off a dumb politician because you could become the CEO of a ghost company.

Deep down, in our hearts, we know that we are just pawns in a never-ending game, with no finale in sight. Players will change but the game is the same. At the end of every round, the numbers too refuse to make sense, causing boundaries to break. Then words start to fly, preceding machetes, spears and bullets. And when the analysts do their thing, the prime suspect is none other than the tyranny of numbers.

Kill the irony already.

Ronjey, Francis-Carrey is a multi-talented artist and Cool Master General currently unsettled in East Africa. As a journalist, producer and founder of www.nairobiunderground.co.ke, he continues to champion for contemporary culture through multimedia, design and interdisciplinary collaborations. #NuNairobi #NuNairobiLive

Peterson KAMWATHI

Born, 1980 – Nairobi, Kenya | Lives and works in Nairobi, Kenya

Kamwathi's recent artistic practice has focused on interrogating social, economic and cultural spaces in a post-colonial context. Taking on the role of an observer, he extracts modes of behaviour, staging scenarios that express the farcical nature of the masquerade inherent in social conventions and imposed political norms – norms that are both inherited from colonial rule and re-appropriated. In his most recent body of work 'Constellations and sediments' he explores the potential of anatomy, and the symbolism of individual and collective aspirations in the face of the difficult realities inherent in human migration.

'Six Piece'

In the current Kenyan election campaign season the phrase 'Six piece' is being used across the political board to induce voters to choose only candidates from a single party when casting their ballots. As stipulated in the Kenyan constitution, there are six electoral posts in every national elections cycle. For him, the metaphor of a six piece suit stands for the desire and move towards the creation of monoliths in Kenya's political landscape. This is highly contradictory when one considers the supposed inroads made towards transparency, social justice and accountability. Interestingly, so far there are fewer 'suits' being seen during the current campaign cycle.

Kamwathi's work has been exhibited in numerous venues around the world including Kenya, Rwanda, South Africa, France, the UK, the USA, Holland, Austria, El Salvador and Finland. He has participated in several residencies in Europe, Africa and America.

Six Piece (i)
Mixed media drawings
Variable Dimensions

Six Piece (ii)
Mild Steel
VariableVariable Dimensions



Longinos NAGILA

Born, 1986 – Busia, Kenya | Lives and works in Nairobi, Kenya

Nagila is an experimental multi-media visual artist. He studied Art at the Buruburu institute of Fine Arts, Nairobi, and documentary & film making at the Apulia Film Commission in Bari, Italy. Primarily focusing on video art and the exploration of digital imagery, Longinos' work is influenced by a deep love of early cinema and black and white photography, which he blends with paint and transferred images on paper and canvas.

He is currently exploring exclusion and inclusion on different platforms with a bias in democratic processes within the continent and incorporates use of archival material – images, texts & sound in his work

'Descent of 'Monuments' into the Mountains of National(ism) Garbage'

This body of work is an interpretation of Kenya's social and political descent into tribalism and nepotism in post-independence and contemporary time. Political monuments, symbols of nationalism and national pride are shown sinking into piles of garbage, swallowed in decay, rot and garbage. Most of the public monuments in Nairobi have historical importance, commissioned at different times by different authorities to symbolise power and immortalise past leaders. Here, they are used to show the country's descent into the rot of corruption, and tribalism.

He has exhibited extensively locally and internationally.

Descent of Monuments into Mountains of National(ism) Garbage
Photographic Print and Highlighter on Paper
21 x 29.7 cm

Descent of Monuments into Mountains of National(ism) Garbage
Photographic Print and Highlighter on Paper
21 x 29.7 cm



Nicholas ODHIAMBO

Born, 1992 – Kisumu, Kenya | Lives and works in Kisumu, Kenya

Nicholas is a holder of a diploma in Fine Art from Mwangaza Art College, Kisumu.

His work – mainly drawings are intended to evoke feelings and provoke a response from the viewer. It is informed by his observation of the everyday actions and behavior of the society around him. He is interested in the ways people respond to socio-political events, which leads him to create allegorical images, which highlight and question dominant ideologies. Drawn from both conscious and my sub-conscious, these images are meant to encourage careful examination from the viewer(s), and provoke responses based on their individual interpretation of the work.

The series of drawings included in Proximity to Power deal with the different ways that power can be used to seduce, to manipulate, but also ho power itself can also constrain people’s capacity to act. In these works, Nicholas explores the relationship between so-called leaders and their followers.

His work has been exhibited in locally and in Italy and the United State of America. He, most recently, completed a residency at the Brush Tu Art Studio in Nairobi, and he has been based there since.

Twist and Turn
Graphite on Paper
90 x 62 cm

Untitled
Graphite on Paper
90 x 62 cm



Martin ONYIS

Born, 1987 – Nairobi, Kenya | Lives and works in Nairobi, Kenya

Onyis developed his practice at The Godown Art Centre and Kuona Trust through apprenticeship. He is interested in global geopolitics delving into global concerns such as human trafficking, migration, political and institutional corruption, repressive environments and displacement. His works also explore issues of freedom, communication, rapidly evolving technological information and consumerism.

In 'The Society of Spectacles' Onyis explores the desire to belong to - a place, a family, a tribe and the ways in which this belonging is exploited in the conducting of politics and governance. The work looks at favoritism, the enforcement of exclusionary policies, and the perpetration of injustices premised on ethnic allegiances.

The doors are a metaphor for belonging, informed by two common phrases, Ja-dhot among the Luo, and Adú wa Nyúmba among the Kikuyu. The act of 'letting one in' marks them as one of the group/family/tribe. The faces and implements etched onto the doors referring to people whose status as belonging or not belonging is as yet undetermined and implements of power, respectively. Soil and skulls around the base of the doorways symbolize land, a contentious object in our history, and the casualties of the constant battles for ownership and control. Viewers are forced to go around, or over the skulls, or push them to the side, to view the etchings on the doors; this becomes a violent, alienating act of its own.

Considered one of the most prolific young talents, he won awards to exhibit in Taiwan at the Taipei International Art Competition in 2014 and 2015 and participated in THAT Art Fair in South Africa (2016). He was awarded The First Merit Award at the 2016 Barclays L'Atelier Competition in Johannesburg and is currently in a residency at the Fordsburg Artist Studios in Johannesburg, South Africa..

The Society of Spectacles (Detail)
Etching on Plexiglas, Reclaimed Wooden Doors, Fiberglass, Soil
Variable Dimensions



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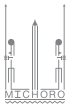
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Back Cover: Martin ONYIS, *The Society of Spectacles* (Detail)

Inside Back Cover: Longinos NACILA, *Descent of Monuments into Mountains of National(ism) Garbage* (Detail)



Circle Art Agency was founded in 2012 in Nairobi to provide an professional advisory service to individual and corporate collectors and art institutions, and build audiences through curating ambitious exhibitions.

In 2015, we opened our permanent gallery space, aiming to be the foremost exhibition space in East Africa. Our intention is to create a strong and sustainable art market for East African artists by supporting and promoting the most innovative and exciting artists currently practicing in the region. We exhibit carefully curated, challenging and thought-provoking contemporary art.

At Circle we enjoy working with members of our art community by giving guest curators the gallery for exhibitions that help to expand knowledge and push boundaries.

Gallery hours:

Weekdays 10am - 5pm, Saturdays 12pm - 5pm
or by appointment outside these hours, closed in Sundays and public holidays

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