

Co-Creating with Youth *Artivists* in Uganda: Authors of Our Own Becoming

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I hope to encourage (policy makers) to make youths feel they are part of the society and even involve them in their policy making. I want them to know that Ugandan youths are too ambitious and ready to learn ... that our biggest challenge is that we lack support as people don't trust us, leaving us behind ... we youth artivists in Uganda are examples of what youth can achieve if given chances.

—Mashakalugo, Interview, 17 February 2012

Introduction

In *The Human Condition* Hannah Arendt expresses her belief that political activity is not just about coming to a consensus about what is good in society, rather it is what allows individuals agency and the power to develop their own capacities. We hold that agency can only be recognized by its effects, that is, only when someone acts as an agent can he/she actually become an agent and not before. Thus, agents become such when they “disturb the causal milieu in such a way as can only be attributed to their agency” (Gell 20). Thus both political activity and agency are performative in the sense that they do not exist prior to the moment of their manifestation. In essence, they only come to *be in the doing*.

We understand the notion of action, again following Arendt, as a kind of articulation of human relationality: “Action, moreover, no matter what its specific content, always establishes relationships and therefore has an inherent tendency to force open all limitations and cut across all boundaries” (170). Her epigraph from Dante Alighieri takes us one step further:

For in every action what is primarily intended by the doer, whether he acts from natural necessity or out of free will, is the disclosure of his own image. Hence it comes about that every doer, in so far as he does, takes delight in doing; since everything that is desired is its own being, and since in action the being of the doer is somehow intensified, delight necessarily follows. Thus, nothing acts unless [by acting] it makes patent its latent self. (155)

Both action and agent are mutually formed and informed in the manifested moment of becoming.² In this sense subjectivity formation and agency are inseparable. The question then becomes, how do we locate or discern such a fluid and intangible (yet known through its effects vis-à-vis the context) phenomenon? In recognition of its mobility we do not attempt to fasten meaning to any so-called “change”; rather we shift the focus to points of

traction where we can understand there is a becoming in progress as revealed through expressions of individual and collective awareness of the development of what Chela Sandoval calls a differential consciousness (140).

We rely on Sandoval's notion of differential consciousness as a principled point of reference key to activism's approach to the issues of agency and subjectivity. Differential consciousness entails confronting psychically intrusive forms of domination and subordination. As speaking coherently regarding non-static conditions demands that we also develop a mobile way of understanding, we stress, a differential consciousness is one that is always already thinking about the production and maintenance of ideologies. Thus, it works to create an interior gap, distinction, or discrepancy, to better provide a space for a response allowing oneself to manage his or her image and somewhat reduce the level or intensity of the dominant ideology over his or her actions, words and even thoughts.

Figuratively, we are working at a metabolic level in the social body; the work is invisible but its effects are tangible. The terrain is overtly ideological and is embodied in the signs of text, actions and images, both as enunciations as well as in the manner enunciated. Sandoval's technologies become a compass to help citizen-subjects move through social and cultural territories *conscious* of how they are doing so, and thus "transfigur[ing] subordination into resistance" (55) or passivity into protagonism.

The key to understanding how a differential consciousness operates is to remember that one simultaneously sees from the perspective of the dominant viewpoint as well as one's own shifting place, and then renegotiates and re-navigates all possibilities. Thus by coming to a differential consciousness we can "recognize dominant social reality as an *interested* construction, composed of peculiar symptoms that make up a specifically raced and cultured milieu" and then we can read forms of domination as artifacts of that particular neo-colonialism (Sandoval 86).

We can also voluntarily focus "on the very moves of consciousness that ideology demands of its host" (104) by tuning in to ideology's work on perception and consciousness, and then replay those moments in order to interrupt their discursive strategies. The dominant ideology is thus denaturalized. For Sandoval then, being rooted in a differential consciousness creates space for an ever-tactical differential movement (146). The ability of the Ugandan youth expressed in this article to both live within and under a certain postcolonial ideology that promotes suffering, but at the same time work to create a gap to position their own subjectivities and enable them to interrupt this dominant narrative, is in many ways a concrete demonstration of the possibilities of a differential consciousness.

Only in that moment of action addressing a specific situation does the differential consciousness manifest and gain traction. Simultaneously, our relationship to social reality changes because it is a "kind of dual action on an object and on oneself" (Sandoval 155). Thus movement permits ways

to maintain both an active disinterestedness while allowing us to develop a “new kind of coalitional consciousness” (182) that binds scholars, artists, youth and community into one proactive social collective.

Thus, the creative aesthetic activity and commitment to modelling the ideas being developed in the *artivists 4 life* working manifesto reveal critical moments where a differential consciousness has made possible certain subjectivities and actions. Sandoval’s *Methodology of the Oppressed* guides our understanding of a pedagogical practice that grapples with hegemonic power in order to shift it. Finally, artistic approaches guided by activism embody an implicated praxis that is explicitly change-oriented, driven by the desire to communicate, inspire awareness or change with an identified audience or social group (Asante).

First, we discuss the collective’s history and aesthetic processes, tools, principles and the results of ongoing projects. In the second part, we discuss some of the statements made by *artivists 4 life* members with an eye to elaborating themes that arise indigenously from them in concert with those that we understand through the lenses provided by Sandoval’s theoretical constructs. But before proceeding we will comment briefly on how we define art and how it comprises a central part of both subjectivity and agency as these youths articulate it here.

In a recent plenary, Kenyan writer and philosopher Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o describes the artistic consciousness as “driven by a force, an irresistible desire to give to the inner impulses, the material form of sound, colour and word. This desire cannot be held back by laws, tradition, or religious restrictions” (par. 3). He makes the link between art and consciousness forcefully explicit. For wa Thiong’o:

Art particularly in its prophetic tradition embodies the conscience of the nation. In that sense Art and the freedom of expression are essential to culture for culture is not the same thing as a particular tradition. Culture reflects a community in motion. Culture is to the community what the flower is to a plant. A flower is very beautiful to behold. But it is the result of the roots, the trunk, the branches and the leaves. But the flower is special because it contains the seeds, which are the tomorrow of that plant. A product of a dynamic past, it is pregnant with a tomorrow. (par. 4)

Ugandan youth in *artivists 4 life* are culture creators defining their own futures through the development of new sociabilities as a result of the actions of the collective. If art is “a system of action, intended to change the world” (Gell 6) then the emphasis of art for *artist 4 life* youths is clearly on “agency, intention, causation, result & transformation” (Gell 6) rather than mere symbolic communication. Art thus becomes a powerful social tool rather than a mere cultural product to be seen off-handedly and momentarily cherished.

Finally we acknowledge our positionality in that while *artivists 4 life* co-author this paper as leaders and co-founders of the collective using it as an opportunity for creative and critical reflections on their own praxis, Robinson, as project co-founder and advocator, provides coordination support and studies the use of artistic processes in social contexts as part

of her ongoing collaborative research. And Cambre, ally and honorary member of *artists 4 life* since the inception of the project, teams up through ongoing collaboration and develops points of theory building for her own work on art and the social. As decolonializing scholars, artists and activists, we do not see collaborative work as outcome-driven, but rather part of a process of human challenges to hierarchies of power from wherever they are acting. While responding to particular challenges, we are also part of a larger struggle to engage in processes of conscientization³ that enable the emergence of critiques and challenges to relations of power predicated upon the status quo. These processes also encourage the building of relationships constituting a solidarity, which is fluid and porous enough to reflect our different social locations but from which we can clearly enunciate radical alternatives.

Background: *artists 4 life* Youth Collective

Co-founded in 2011 by a handful of Ugandan youth artists and activists along with Robinson, the collective evolved out of a 3-year history of collaborations. A shared desire for a collaborative and sustainable creative space of resistance was a driving force and today *artists 4 life* include 33 registered members in Kampala, Kayunga and Mukono.

As a grassroots collective, the sources of income are largely provided by annual contracts to develop community arts programming including the co-creation of community messages. Through international and local educational exchanges *artists 4 life* have also built a network of partners. In terms of support for local members, *artists 4 life* has grown to provide part-time modest employment to youth facilitators and other youth leaders within the group and some transport refunds to workshop attendees. This kind of structure presents a possibility for self-sustainability.

Artivists 4 life fuse art and activism through consciousness-raising activities and artistic interventions. As described in the collective's 2012 working constitution,

We are a youth oriented non-profit making project that brings all arts together ... Our group engages fellow youths and other community members through educative art activities in rural Kayunga, semi-urban Mukono and the Kampala capital.

As articulated in a self-made promotional Youtube video, "the *artists 4 life* project emphasizes the use of art, drama and dance to inform, sensitize and empower our communities on issues that affect them. ... As *artists 4 life* we seek to create for a better world" (Artivists4life Uganda).

When it comes to resolving major social issues affecting Ugandan youth such as unemployment, drug abuse and HIV/AIDS, policy makers and implementers often overlook youth as protagonists. Ugandan youth, like young people elsewhere in Africa, are viewed as destructive, ignorant or otherwise problematic (Best and Kellner; Comaroff and Comaroff).

Revealing an acute awareness of this problematic rhetoric about African youth, Nalubowa desires inclusion saying, “I wish youths were given a chance to share ideas, to not be sidelined in policy making, to not be overshadowed by these older people, to not be looked at as troublesome and chaotic” (focus group, 29 March 2012). Nalubowa’s comment expresses not only a strong desire for social inclusion, but also a deep longing by youth to be part of key socio-cultural and political processes that shape and define their experiences in both rural and urban spaces in Africa.

Led by a talented team of youth facilitators with various art and/or counseling skills, *artists 4 life* co-identify local youth issues and respond by creating, assessing and disseminating messages and interventions with and for their communities. Members create illustrated teaching tools and other resources so that their processes can be shared with incoming members, community partners and any other practitioners seeking to engage youth to be “creating for a better world” (motto). Obol’s artwork in Figure 1 depicts how they work together to arrive at messages about identified issues.



Figure 1, *artists 4 life* message development (Obol)

Obol describes the overall message development techniques:

I want the outside world to know ... We start by introductions then icebreakers which are very interesting. We do funny gym stuff to warm up for discussions starting with brainstorming on problem identification. Once the problems are decided upon we start to develop messages. Me personally, I am engaged through illustration. Other youths take part through acting so I can get dramatic poses to illustrate. From message development we go ahead to test in the communities, test if the locals get it. Once it's all good we go ahead to photography using our own youth and other people from the community. We take it to design, add in text, when all is done and approved

we put it on billboards, t-shirts, murals, whatever media is good. Using that message we put all the arts together to spread it so the community gets it. (Interview, March 30, 2012)

Following Obol, above, these seven processes (Table 1) comprise the activities that make up the development of messages for *artists 4 life*.

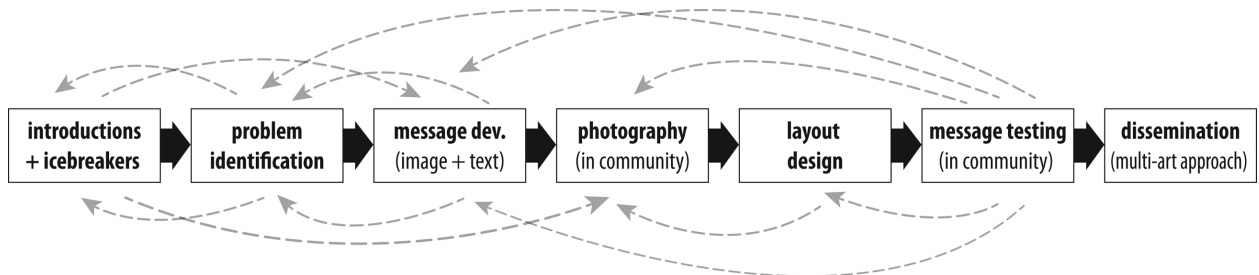


Table 1, *artists 4 life* problem identification and response process

Deliberate problem identification techniques serve to ground action, politicize thinking and lead to carefully and contextually situated work. Kakome, for example, relates his experience taking part in these processes for the topic of condom use: “it has helped me to know the value of my life [better] than before. It has helped me to know the correct ways of using a condom ... it has helped me to educate the community about condom use” (Questionnaire, 24 July 2012).

Messages (text and images) are shared with community groups such as teachers, ‘boda boda (moto-taxi) guys’ and restaurant workers to elicit responses as Figure 2 shows. Improvements on the art pieces continue until community members and project partners approve the message, often requiring multiple visits to various community sites.



Figure 2, *artists 4 life* message testing process (Obol 2012)

When photographs are required, *artists 4 life* and other community members are invited to be models (with written consent). The message testing process is revisited as needed. Then final messages are reproduced on a variety of media and serve as teaching tools when *artists 4 life* do community outreach. Messages are disseminated to the community through dance, drama and visual presentations alongside other interventions such as condom distribution.

What needs to be recognized is that youth are already influential inventors of popular culture in Uganda and elsewhere in Africa—using diverse media to respond to their realities and re-create their own identities (De Boeck and Honwana). Performing as creative and generative forces, actively taking part in community initiatives, Mashakalugo observes that *artists 4 life* are developing sustainable youth-led Ugandan pedagogical arts because so “many youths are so talented in different ways” (Interview, 17 Feb 2012). The collective is a living example of creative agency manifested through collaborative engagements for critically re-imagining shared circumstances. Nalubowa observes that “(youth) have brilliant up to date ideas and solutions to current challenges. ... The youths in *artists 4 life* are definitely changing lives and will continue to do so. That’s something all youths anywhere in the World can do if given a chance” (Focus group, 29 March 2012).

Artists 4 life Process Principles

“We are process driven.”
—2011 Working Manifesto

Artivism has been defined by African American scholar and hip-hop enthusiast M. K. Asante as the fusion of art and activism in the struggle for social justice. Thus the “term *artivism* is a hybrid neologism that signifies work created by individuals who see an organic relationship between art and activism” (Sandoval and Latorre 82). The idea of artivism can be traced back to Chicana artist Judy Baca’s collaborative work with youth since 1996. Additionally, comparable concepts exist including the practices of the ‘griots’ in West Africa (Asante 205) and through the Latin American idea of ‘Artivismo’ (Melo 3). Artist practices existed prior to the term through those who used “artistic talents to fight and struggle against injustice and oppression by any medium necessary” (Asante 203). Although artivism can be found across Africa in diverse contexts and under various names such as theatre for development (see for example Kamlongera), “break-dance for positive social change” (“Break-dance Project Uganda”) or “graffiti for a cause” (“Spray it Uganda”), it emerges more as a youth attitude than as points on a historical continuum. Consistently, artivism manifests itself through the mobilization of minoritarian perspectives as a re-politicized art practice that adopts an

understanding of art that is concerned with what art can do rather than what it means (Jagodziniski and Wallin 103).

Taking up the notion of activism, *artists 4 life* explicitly commit themselves to intervening with collaborators to change power relations through artistic acts of resistance and renewal. Recognizing that circumstances are constructed by greater socio-political forces, activism demands that practitioners ethically invent new ways of knowing and communicating to re-position themselves socially through any media available. For *artists 4 life* art processes are never simply decorative add-ons for illustrating educational research. Instead, following Asante, “we cannot afford, nor could we ever, to make art just to be makin’ it ... the idea of art for art’s sake ... has been a luxury that all of those who seek to fight oppression simply do not have” (207).

Additionally, activism resists being slotted into a particular discipline. As a transdisciplinary approach, it inherently resists the “academic apartheid” that Sandoval decries as a segregation of knowledges into disciplines or subjects, resulting in a “prohibitive and restricted flow of exchange ... that insists on difference” (70). Thus activism offers alternatives as practitioners take on multiple roles as social catalysts, facilitators, authors, co-creators, activist-academics and ‘happeners’ (Asante; Faud-Luke).

The sophisticated activism practiced by *artists 4 life* draws on various methods sharing a common social justice perspective and collaborative focus. In many ways, Sandoval’s “set of processes, procedures, and technologies for decolonizing the imagination” (69) describes the overall approach. This particular activism then, remains open and adaptive in order to respond to the fluctuating needs, desires and realities of the various communities. Artistic methods and participatory design, critical and engaged pedagogies,⁴ and participatory approaches, described in what follows, are the key approaches informing the processes as lived within and around the *artists 4 life* collective.

Artistic methods, when paired with the understanding that all art is political (Asante 206; Preziosi and Farago 13), synergize artistic ways of thinking and doing such that they become synonymous. Artistic inquiry in this way acknowledges that working creatively always already *includes* the cognitive modalities and the capacities to create and critique knowledge and understanding. Meaning-making takes place as “embodied encounter constituted through visual and textual *understandings and experiences* rather than mere visual and textual *representations*” (Springgay et al. 902). In this way artistic methods help us come to understanding through creating. What sets apart the artistic methods that inform activism from popular arts-based research is an explicit commitment to intervening with collaborators to transform power relations through artistic acts of resistance and re-existence. Artistic methods that inform activism then must be considered only in relation to the circumstances that call them into action.

Participatory design (Sanders and Stappers 6) best describes the artistic approaches used by *artists 4 life* for message creation with and for the community. Combining any art processes including dance, drama, visual art and music with educational approaches, *artists 4 life* embody Asante's understanding that the "activist must not be afraid to learn a new language in order to inspire and empower new people" (209).

Participatory design from the lens of activism transgresses disciplinary boundaries such as those of art, design, education and youth studies and is a useful framework for those working with egalitarian social movements in creating possibilities for effecting differential social movement through creative and critical intervention in communication systems.

Embracing critical and engaged pedagogy (Freire, Giroux, hooks, McLaren) as reflected in the 2011 working manifesto's "we are all learners and teachers," *artists 4 life* guide a de-colonizing educational practice that aims to reinstate participants' will to reflect on self and world, nurturing processes of critical thinking. More specifically the group draws on Freire's notion of "problem-posing education," (71) which posits creative stimulation of "true reflection and action upon reality" (71) toward a fuller awareness of reality and of one's self. Such conscientization feeds the development of activist messages and interventions.

This unique creative process helps *artists 4 life* members understand how their lives are continually shaped by mechanisms of social control, or what Mignolo describes as the rhetoric of modernity and the logic of coloniality. Coming to understand in this way allows them to relocate blame from individual failures to the systemic structures of power relations. Facilitators encourage members to openly identify and discuss problems in their lives and intervene through artistic reflection and collective action.

Thus youth, fellow community members and activist-scholars join in a shared struggle to transform colonial and hegemonic power relations that define and shape their lives in undignified ways. This pedagogy is grounded in an understanding that knowledge and ways of knowing are always partial, interested and potentially oppressive. In this transdisciplinary and shared space, artistic processes help to activate inner feelings, ideas and narratives, bringing them together in relation to outside others, events, histories, etc. reforming both self and other and relations in between. Relative to conventional and dominant evaluation-driven, discipline-focused educational practices that represent "knowledge as a thing already made" (Ellsworth 29), pedagogical spaces for *activism* take shape on the outer fringes of education's radar; in cracks and crevices where the alternative, artistic and experimental options can flourish. Without a predetermined curriculum or exams to pass, *artists 4 life* were free to define their motto as "creating for a better world" and they share hooks' (2010) understanding that "when we are free to let our minds roam it is far more likely that our imaginations will provide the creative energy that will lead us to new thought and more engaging ways of knowing"

(62). As the 2011 working manifesto underlines, “we are all active collaborators: co-creators, co-researchers, co-learners and co-educators working toward shared goals in a collective project.”

Participatory action research’s (PAR) call for situated, self-critical and explicit practices and values (McTaggart) is taken up by the *artists 4 life* collective which also welcomes the notion that research is something humans do together through democratic dialogue, as co-investigators and co-subjects (Fals-Borda and Rahman). To avoid co-opting participants’ knowledge for primarily academic or institutional ends, the *artists 4 life* collective honors the inherent potential of participants to generate knowledge through lived experiences that will benefit them through transparency of ideas and processes. Achieving *genuine* participation requires a balance of power that favors the community—one that demonstrates accountability to place and the goals of the participants themselves (Zavala 64).

Projects and Results

This section includes a series of quotations from members of *artists 4 life*. This is a necessary departure from traditional academic writing in order to create space for the orality and voices of youth authors as they share their responses to the group-identified issues of youth unemployment, HIV/AIDS and drug abuse.

Youth Unemployment

In Mukono, a team of youth came together in 2011 with *artists 4 life* in Kampala and Kayunga to create a sister group and engage in participatory processes to identify their most critical concerns. In a country reported to have the youngest population in the world and the highest youth unemployment with an estimated rate of 83 percent (“Africa Development Indicators”), it was no surprise that unemployment became a key issue amongst the youths. Mukono member Nampanga describes her feeling of precarity; “youth unemployment has impacted me in a way that though [I] am educated, [I] am still moving up and down looking for a full time job suiting my qualifications” (questionnaire, 24 July 2012). The countrywide ‘GENext’ “Small Families’ Advocacy Campaign” shown in Figure 3 provides a snapshot of how even highly educated youth like Nampanga are portrayed as doomed (“Uganda Health Marketing Group”). While the small text includes a call for smaller families as a partial solution, the overall message communicates a feeling of hopelessness and even denigrates or demotes higher education. Messages such as the one in Figure 3 are highly visible through widespread billboards as well as related TV campaigns. They contribute to a climate of hopelessness and serve to perpetuate a sense of doom for youth in Uganda.

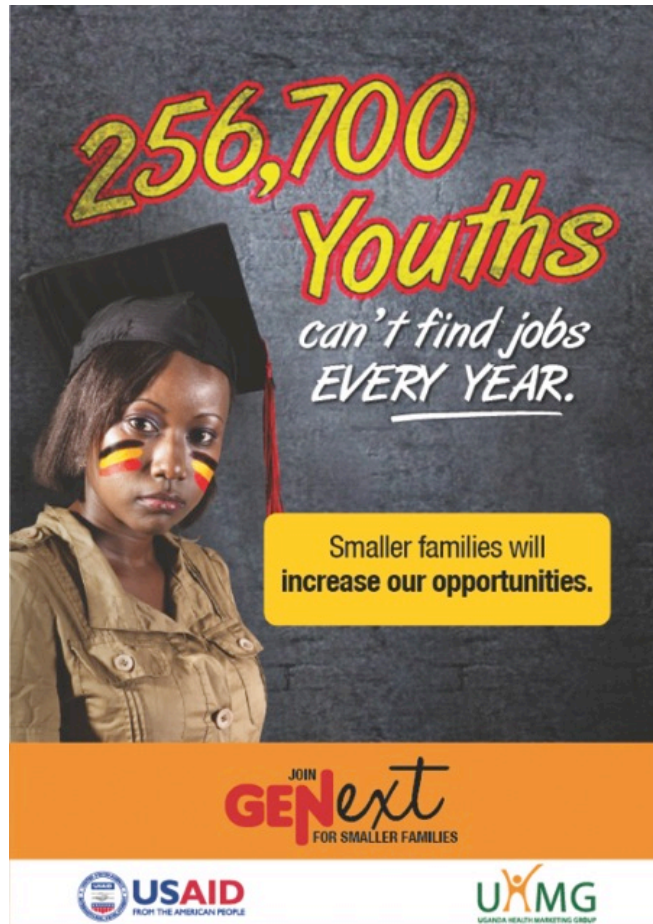


Figure 3, 2012 billboard message in Kampala by Uganda Health Marketing Group

The extremely high levels of youth unemployment have created a context in Mukono, like elsewhere in Uganda, of desperation and exploitation. For example, “some male bosses ask for “carpet interviews” (sex) before giving young people jobs, and in case one refuses, the job is denied to her, hence making (such young women) unemployed for a long time.” In case they accept, such women become at risk of being “infected with HIV and loss of dignity” (Nampanga, questionnaire 24 July 2012). Here we see how Ugandan youth are often doubly victimized by a patriarchal order that seeks to squeeze pleasure and wealth from the sweat and dignity of young people.

The sites where *artists 4 life* fuse art and activism are amidst issues of unemployment intermingled with school dropout, sexual exploitation and HIV/AIDS among other insufferable circumstances that translate into despair. Positive peer group creation has helped members achieve a self-sustainable space of resistance and renewal: “This group brings hope among the hopeless youths that they can still be useful to the community” (feedback transcript, 27 March 2012). Usefulness has been the result of the *artists 4 life* ‘chokolo’ project, an intervention that responds directly to their own unemployment. As described in the *artists 4 life* ‘chokolo’ brochure, “the project recycles bottle tops (chokolo) creatively to produce

earrings and other jewelry products so the youths can have a modest source of income.”

Drug Abuse

The problem of drug abuse stems from the systemic exclusion of young people from the societal structure. Constructed as youth idleness, this has immediate and long-term consequences as articulated by Mukono member Kizza: “many youths choose to take drugs just because they find their selves idle and they start forming groups which are not helpful for their lives” (questionnaire, 24 July 2012). Nampanga elaborates on the presence of ‘bad groups’: “it makes me fear moving at night and in lonely places since such men can easily rape me and in the end may (impregnate) me or infect me with HIV” (questionnaire, 24 July 2012). Drug abuse keeps young people in an ongoing trap whereby they are collectively perceived as problematic as articulated by Likicho: “the community no longer trusts youths due to drug abuse” (questionnaire, 24 July 2012).

The creation of *artivists 4 life* in Mukono as a positive peer group has resulted in profound personal transformations when it comes to drug abuse. Kizza explains her case: “I personally first used to take alcohol just because I had friends who influenced me to start taking alcohol, and reason being that I didn’t have anyone to guide me in whatever I was doing” (questionnaire, 24 July 2012). *Artivists 4 life* have responded by providing guidance through venues for discussing solutions, messages and counseling. Visual messages and plays for the community feature alternative behavior to drug abuse such as sports or other positive activities.

HIV/AIDS Related Issues

When HIV/AIDS was first identified as a major problem in Mukono it was simply listed as “lack of information on HIV/AIDS.” *Artivists 4 life* members from Kayunga, who are also HIV/AIDS counselors, were then invited to facilitate a series of workshops that resulted in the emergence of three themes—condom use, faithfulness and positive living—as chosen by Mukono members.



Figure 4, Current MUWRP billboard message in Mukono created by *artists 4 life*

For example, one of the key projects pursued by the *artists 4 life* youth collective is the “One partner one love” campaign which one of the youth members, Nampanga, describes as a social crusade that promotes “one sexual partner only by being faithful to him or her and satisfied/contented with him or her ... this is one of the major ways of how to prevent HIV infection” (questionnaire 24 July 2012). This message responds to what is locally known as the ‘sexual network’, providing an image of an alternative relationship along with a corresponding easy-to-remember message. Following the popular 2011 *artists 4 life* message ‘love condoms, love life’, this 2012 message was designed with the hopes that community members will be “adopting the saying and putting it into action” (questionnaire, 24 July 2012). This has been the case for Mukono member Kaddu who declares “I am not having those worries of getting HIV/AIDS because after me and my partner testing for HIV we decided to (live) one partner one love and we’re living safely and faithful to each other” (questionnaire, 24 July 2012).

As understood by Nampanga, “condom use is another way of avoiding HIV infection but it can only prevent one from HIV infection if used correctly and constantly” (questionnaire, 24 July 2012). Batenga, who helped facilitate the message development process for condom use, remarked that “each and every member can at least teach condom use and if they can it means they can move with them” (questionnaire, 24 July 2012). Such steps toward behavioral change are helping members, as

Nampanga suggests, achieve “control in making the right choices for one’s life, not just to be influenced by others (feedback transcript, 27 March 2012).

Discussion

In written statements prepared for this article, feedback transcripts produced in process evaluations, and interviews and questionnaires, *artists 4 life* reflections show prominent themes emerging through content analysis and their subsequent consideration of this article as it took shape. Broadly, themes have been grouped into three clusters under the categories of artists becoming/becoming artists, creating new sociability, and owning the change. These indigenous themes from the reflections are then interpreted through a broader set of lenses provided by sensitizing themes from the salient literature.

1. Artists Becoming / Becoming Artists

New subjectivities and identities emerge, in the course of becoming an artist, as Mashakalugo notes: it “wakes up and stimulates and tunes up the talent in you.” In her case this has meant gaining the confidence to “do things comfortably without shaking” (feedback transcript, 14 February 2012). For another member, “artists is good coz it has made me confident that I can now express myself in public ... and I feel myself” (Anon, feedback transcript, 27 March 2012). One member who “used to keep quiet in case of any danger” now breaks the silence, having become “an important youth” validated in her own eyes “who is able to decide for herself” (Anon, feedback transcript, 27 March 2012). The artist’s actions are thus both creative and self-transformative by necessity.

Members recognize the need to extend their teachings to others in the community. Learning “to talk to people, brainstorm and come up with something good for the community” (Kakome, questionnaire, 24 July 2012), members are positive and creative contributors. For example, Nampanga notes that “we go to different communities and perform plays to the community members present and they pick some message from such plays” (questionnaire, 24 July 2012). Nalubowa describes recognition and respect as an artist in the community:

With *artists 4 life* I feel useful to society because I’m using the little I have to help someone else change their life for the better. Going out in the community, meeting these people, giving the messages and getting positive response fulfills me. To me it’s more than a whole months pay working in sales or any other job. (Focus group, 29 March 2012)

With their motto of “each one teach one,” members model the process of becoming responsible with enthusiasm and a vision of radical pedagogy embodied in their understanding of knowledge and dissemination that is

both visionary/future-oriented and shared/collective. Lived experiences in such ways denaturalize modern constructions of individualism as the norm and open possibilities for new subjectivity formation where the emphasis is not necessarily on the self, but on the collective interests of the whole.

In response to the group-identified issue of unemployment, the collective is teaching youth “to be job creators not seekers” (Najjuko, feedback transcript, 27 March 2012). The ‘chokolo’ income-generating project not only illustrates creative resourcefulness but has also fostered independence and functions as a catalyst for members to achieve autonomy and intervene directly into their own circumstances.

As Muwanga asserts, “the main mission of *artivists* is to train youth in day to day life and if these youth get experience they also train others in society” (feedback transcript, 5 May 2012). His belief in the positive future and contribution of youth who gain experience is clear. In fact the desire to involve more fellow youth in the horizontal structure of the collective is repeatedly iterated. Jjita for example, states, “I hope to set up a workshop so that I can employ more youth” (questionnaire, 24 July 2012) while Kisitu wants to share his new skills “by teaching other youth in our community to learn how to create their own jobs as I did” (questionnaire, 24 July 2012). Artivists are thus becoming proactive opportunity makers: with each step and personal change they make they are envisioning stepping ahead again with another, thus epitomizing the new social subject capable of positive and transformative resistance.

2. Creating New Sociability

Through the autonomous creation of safe spaces and an emphasis on relationality, these artists are creating new sociabilities, thus enabling personal transformation and fostering a productive sense of belonging as a basis from which to engage in change. Guided by collectively made and governed rules and regulations, *artivists 4 life* “express ourselves by creating safe spaces and rapport to enable open, honest, passionate and creative ideas” (2011 working manifesto). Safety in the collective is underlined by Kabanda: “there has been development of trust and a good relationship consequently creating a room for freely sharing personal problems and discussing possible way outs” (focus group, 29 March 2012). Such intense conversation spaces resemble what hooks (2010) describes as engaged places “where knowledge acquired stays with us, empowering us to abandon fear and insecurity and find the place of compassion and connection” (46). Here pride in belonging, through newfound compassion, is evinced by repeated calls for marking membership including collective efforts to create *artivists 4 life* ID cards and t-shirts for all registered members.

Supported and supportive, members of the collective have transitioned away from former stereotypes such as ‘idle’ or even ‘useless’, becoming purposeful. Kakome describes a profound shift of focus and

demonstrates his awareness of deeper impacts: “the project keeps my brain active since most of the time I have activities to do and to think of which is also good for my life” (questionnaire, 24 July 2012). In their own ways Kakome and others are practicing their abilities to get excited and synergized by ideas and possibilities and use knowledge in transformative ways. Jjita explains how members develop personal skills in various sectors of art: “Now one can’t live idle you just need to implement or work on the skills given” (questionnaire, 24 July 2012).

A sense of purpose in contributing to both the collective and the larger society is emphasized by Obol who notes not only that “the project has been very good to me in that it keeps me busy as an artist” but also that “I teach youth and children how to take their own ideas and communicate them visually ... because I have the chance to teach them, so many have picked interest in art” (Interview, 30 March 2012). New sociability is exhibited through the realizations that “*artists 4 life* has given me a chance to meet and make friends and with the great group members, I feel like I have a whole big family” (Nalubowa, feedback transcript, 29 March 2012). *Artists 4 life* are building themselves a community out of ‘love for this thing’ resonating with hooks’ (2010) thesis that “anytime we do the work of love we are doing the work of ending domination” (176).

3. Owning the Change

Through active participation in message development and setting *artists 4 life* ‘ground rules’, members are modeling the messages and processes they develop, creating a shared ethics of social responsibility as well as a shared image of an activist collective identity.

Obol, who led illustration development for messages responding to HIV/AIDS prevention including ‘love condoms, love life’ and ‘be proud of your partner’, explains how he has “fallen victim of [his] own messages.” He describes a personal transformation: “developing messages about condom use makes my conscious [sic] stronger ... I can take care of myself and if my neighbor is HIV positive I can help” (Interview, 30 March 2012). Obol, who used to keep his personal relationships secret, is breaking the silence saying “hey this is my girlfriend” (Interview, 30 March 2012) and taking the next step toward faithfulness.

Project co-founder Mashakalugo reveals her integrity in honoring the *artists 4 life* notion of being “examples to our society” (2011 working manifesto). She recognizes that her ethical stance, that is her commitment to embodying her words, has been noticed encouragingly in the community:

Through my involvement in this project I have managed to secure a job at the youth center and I returned to school for a Bachelors degree ... I have become a role model for many youths both in and out of school. The community now accords me respect. (Interview, 9 April 2012)

It is in everyday experiences—discussing girl/boyfriends, working on ‘chokolo’, making confessions—that differential consciousness does its work, when no one or no one act is privileged over another, and through the acknowledgement that each intervention is as potentially valuable as another.

Coming together as a collective with a shared vision to change their destinies, *artivists 4 life* are fusing collective action and artistic reflection, opening up imagination and creating the potential to “rupture the present with counter-narratives” (Faud-Luke xxi). Members are becoming synergetic forces determined to create in the face of doom and to encourage others to join them. So between contending ideologies, those shared by a body of social actors seeking egalitarian social relations and those of the dominant social body where we struggle, exists a shared space where both limits and possibilities arise from the same oppressive space.

In terms of limitations, the desire and processes are now in place to extend activist practices further, but the collective lacks the resources to take on new members. Muwanga explains, “you find that in Mukono, members are meeting somewhere and the number is limited. Yet there (are) many youth in villages who would wish to join us but not given that opportunity” (questionnaire, 24 July 2012). Similarly Obol insists, “the project should keep going on as it’s *artivists 4 life*. To keep youth busy and earning the project needs to be sustainable forever. In future I would like to collaborate with all sorts of people who are interested like getting people to intern and get the experience of how we do our work. I am sure that’s something a student wouldn’t wanna miss out on or even an eighty year old professor” (Interview, 30 March 2012). It will be an ongoing and collective effort to sustain *artivists 4 life*. This is a challenge that members like Nalubowa are ready to face, so that we can all “look back and be proud of ourselves when we grow old knowing the youth who will be, shall keep lifting the light of creating for a better world” (focus group, 29 March 2012).

Conclusion

Mashakalugo’s words in the opening epigraph express a desire for recognition, a wish for the concrete realization on the part of policy makers to re-frame the way they see youth from being “at risk” to being at promise. *Artivists 4 life* are already doing the work of creatively re-positioning, re-imagining and re-constructing the social bodies of their communities beginning with their own personal change. Their engagement is deeply transformative and enables their identification of the imposed limits of the social order, which become transparent and dissolve in the creative new sociabilities of the collective. They are refusing to remain,

using Aimé Césaire's term, "thingified" (Césaire 1995: 19; qtd Ogonga 234).⁵

Effective activism requires a continuing and transformative relationship to the social whole. In seeing this way, and in living creatively and refusing compromise, action and reflection can blend together artfully, presenting research practice itself as a ground for radical co-consideration. Both the working manifesto and the working constitution iterate a commitment to an ethics where *the end is the means* and the projects that continue on are subject to continual reformulation by communities and co-researchers.

Artivists 4 life provide a concrete and vivid response to Ogonga's recent call for "a common vision as a common people" (234) while refusing the preordained "stagnant positions where relationships between the spectator and the action are confined to fixed positions as a security measure for keeping our imaginations sterile" (234). Instead, the collective is not only imagining "a space for cultural rituals that create situations where catharsis may happen" (235), but also resoundingly through their own actions and becomings, answering the call to create alternative spaces in the streets of their own communities "not yet in existence, for young artists to produce and present their works, engage anew with contemporary audiences and design fresh relations with their societies ... to corrupt the zones of silence ... to invent curiosity where none exists" (235).

By working in a cooperative and communal manner ("each one teach one") with/within communities and sometimes in concert with international allies, *artivists 4 life* are successfully creating "horizontal circuits that act as cultural life spaces" contributing "to pluralising culture, internationalising it in the real sense, legitimizing it in their own terms, constructing new epistemes, unfolding alternative actions" (Mosquera 21).

Activism is transformative; activists are necessarily transfigured in the midst of the process itself and it is no different for the writing of this article or for the creative engagement in community projects. Out of this change-experience of becoming co-authors and learning from/with each other we have begun to experience the shattering of the singular sense of self as the skill that allows mobile identities to form gathers strength. As artists/scholars/educators, developing a deep affinity and sense of belonging with fellow *artivists* allows us all to involve ourselves in processes of deindividualization.

As we learn to teach, theorize, resist and re-exist it seems to us that there are many key questions with which we must seriously engage. And the question of how we participate in what Sandoval calls the "emancipation of consciousness" (88) begs even more questions. We consciously foster awareness of our own wounded and situated subjectivities, realizing at the same time that they are necessarily always fragmented, fraught with privilege and power relations and in perpetual negotiation with the emergent challenges of an implicated scholarship. Insistently, we attend to the work of shifting academic desire away from

the hegemonic domain of scholarship toward creative new ethics and forms of social relations. Artist Kabanda concludes: “it is our responsibility as youth to think and plan with no limitations as the only way of creating a better world” (focus group, 29 March 2012). This positive shift in consciousness is at the heart of what the *artists 4 life* collective is doing.

Notes

1. *Kampala*: Aturinda A., Kabanda J., Nalubowa A., Namulondo D., Obol A. J., Robinson L., *Kayunga*: Batenga D., Bogere M., Kamoga R., Kayemba A., Kiryagana J., Likicho H., Lubega B., Mashakalugo C., Nanteza E., Nsamba E., Sendege I., Ssebunya I., Ssenkindu J., Ssetimba F., Teopista P., *Mukono*: Jjita M., Kaddu K., Kakome P., Kalungi J., Kisitu J., Kizito J., Kizza H., Mukasa V., Musisi C. N., Muwanga J. J., Najjuko E., Nampanga M.

These youths range in age, the majority between 20 and 25 years, with a handful slightly below or above that range. When names are used in the body of the paper they are members of the 33 *artists 4 life* members listed here.

2. While it is not our focus, we acknowledge the notion of becoming we operate with is similar to what Deleuze and Guattari describe at various points in *A Thousand Plateaus* and *What is Philosophy?* as a zone of indetermination and indiscernibility where all involved bodies whether concrete or virtual both form and inform one another.

3. A process whereby participants nourish critical thinking skills through dialogue to take action against oppressive circumstances.

4. Although most *artists 4 life* members do not use these terms, the ways in which critical and engaged pedagogies are described in literature accurately describe the actual approaches members take.

5. Césaire’s original French term is *chosification*. See Césaire 1950: 38.

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