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MAMBO!

Recent research findings in Eastern Africa

From Theatre Royal to Pop-up Galleries

Timeline of Art Venues in Nairobi

Olivier Marcel

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Maybe one day Nairobi will be laid out with tarred roads, with avenues of flowering trees, flanked by noble spaces and stately squares; a cathedral worthy of faith and country, museums and galleries of art, theatres and public offices.

Dutton Eric in *Kenya Mountain*, 1929

While Nairobi is praised as East Africa's new cultural capital¹, a closer look into the city's art history shows that such a function is nothing new. At a glimpse, the 1980's saw substantial investments coming from international music industries such as *Polygram*, *CBS* or *EMI* that attracted major artists from around the world: Alpha Blondy from the Ivory Coast, Burning Spear from Jamaica or Ladysmith from South Africa all came to Nairobi to record music². Around the 1960's, a whole host of fine art galleries opened: *Sorsbie's Gallery*, *New Stanley Gallery* or *Gallery Watatu*³ and ambitious panafrican art centers such as the Chemchemi Creative Centre were started with the goal to "radiate to the benefit of the rest of Kenya and of East Africa"⁴. From the 1940's, cultural and artistic infrastructure were built including a *Conservatoire of Music*, a *Literature Bureau* and

a *National Theatre* that would become critical venues for Kenyan and East African art worlds. In fact, the city has nested a century long struggle for the establishment, access and control of urban art venues ever since the foundation of its first theatre hall in 1912: the *Theatre Royal*, now a casino on Kenyatta Avenue. This short paper aims to provide a reference timeline of art venues in Nairobi for the purpose of artists, organizers and researchers.

The intention is primarily to acknowledge the existence of a diverse range of art venues throughout Nairobi's history. Far away from central contemporary art markets, promoters of art in Nairobi are used to claiming novelty as a tactic to attract attention and funding. In 2013, such claims as "first ever art auction" or "first ever art museum" still echo in the local art world. Besides, even the wealthiest and most established institutions have extremely limited archival inclinations. An astonishing example is the fifty year old *Goethe-Institut*, which has virtually nothing but testimonies to account for the activity that preceded the arrival of the current director in 2007. Additionally, when a

1 Warah Rasna, 2009, "Yes, Nairobi is East-Africa's cultural capital." *Daily Nation*, 09/08.

2 Malm K. and Wallis R., 1992, "Case Study: Kenya", *Media policy and music activity*, Psychology Press, pp. 84-107.

3 Miller Judith, 1975, *Art in East Africa*, London: Frederick Muller, 114 p.

4 Mphahlele Ezekiel, 1965, "Chemchemi Creative Centre", Nairobi, *The Journal of Modern African Studies*, vol. 3, n°1, pp. 115-117.

venue shuts down, as did Wahome Mutahi's popular *Citrus Whispers Theatre* in Ngara, its memory is only shared orally in small circles of theatre enthusiasts and progressively fades into oblivion. Beyond these symptomatic local shortcomings, the lack of historical consciousness should be analyzed at a global scale in which art and culture are seldom included in Africa's urban history. While Western donors and art organizers are obsessed with the idea of "putting Nairobi on the map", it is of public interest to establish a comprehensive timeline of the art venues that Nairobi has actually hosted over time.

A second objective is to situate art's main driving forces and their chronology. If Nairobi has been a cultural capital for years, the question here is rather: for whom has it been a capital? In 1981, Ngugi wa Thiong'o stated that the central divide in Kenya was "the fierce struggle between the cultural forces representing foreign interests and those representing patriotic national interests"⁵. Nairobi, as a periphery of the British Empire and then a periphery of the "developed world", has indeed been very dependent on foreign donors, foreign market and exterior assistance in attempts to organize places for art. But such aid has not come uniformly in time and space; neither has it impacted uniformly on Kenyan society. Furthermore, national interests in the field of arts and culture are anything but a homogeneous bloc. George Odera Outa has tried to nuance Ngugi's antagonistic landscape making the point that even foreign cultural

centers are "sites of ambivalence, complexities and contradiction"⁶. Nevertheless, this fundamental grayness that characterizes many art venues should not obliterate the imbalanced "competition for the right to use a venue"⁷. While they do not always determine content, the gatekeepers have an obvious edge in this competition. Therefore, the proposed timeline includes information to visualize this imbalance by distinguishing State-led, commercial-led, donor-led and community-led venues. It has to be noted that these categories are rarely perfect fits. For example, the *National Museum of Kenya* was refurbished with money from the *European Union* and their gallery is partly commercial. The *Kenya Conservatoire of Music* hosted the *British Council's* offices up to 2006. For *The Nest*, an art hub in Kilimani area, support from the Dutch development organization *Hivos* was decisive in launching the project, but it was initiated beforehand by a group of young Nairobians.

The scope of this timeline is framed by three guiding principles. First is to consider Nairobi as a metropolis. This puts the focus on urban influence rather than urban setting. In that perspective, venues such as *Banana Hill Art Gallery* are included despite being in a rural environment and outside of Nairobi's provincial boundaries. Indeed, their activity and market derive from the spatial proximity to places like the *Village Market*, the *United Nations Headquarters*,

and the upper class neighborhood of Gigiri. Limuru is arguably a similar case: the *Kamirithu Cultural Center*, although initiated against what the city culturally represented, derived from connections made between the *University of Nairobi* and *Makerere University* in Kampala and therefore falls into the scope of Nairobi taken as a metropolis. Secondly, the approach is openly multidisciplinary, tackling equally literature, visual arts, performance arts and music. The reasoning behind this choice is that most of the studies of art in Africa are limited to one specific field: theatre, dance, painting, etc. Do these western subdivisions apply to Nairobi? Since the British established Nairobi's first artistic infrastructures, most of the venues are discipline-specific. Nevertheless, immediately after Independence, the first indigenous African efforts to establish art venues discarded such separations. Both *Chemchemi* and *Paa ya Paa* were open to writers, painters and performers. The *GoDown Arts Centre*, that built its legitimacy on claims of being local⁸, also shares the same multidisciplinary logic. Additionally, many artists' trajectories embrace versatility: *Maasai Mbili* artists are such chameleons, shifting from sign-painting to fashion or installation. Beyond the dubious application of disciplinary categories, an open approach allows the establishment of parallels between political and artistic contexts: What type of venue opened during the Emergency? What impact did the Coup attempt or the introduction of multipartism have on the art landscape? When did the State invest the most in arts

5 Ngugi wa Thiong'o, 1981, *Writers in Politics*, Nairobi: Heinemann, p.42.

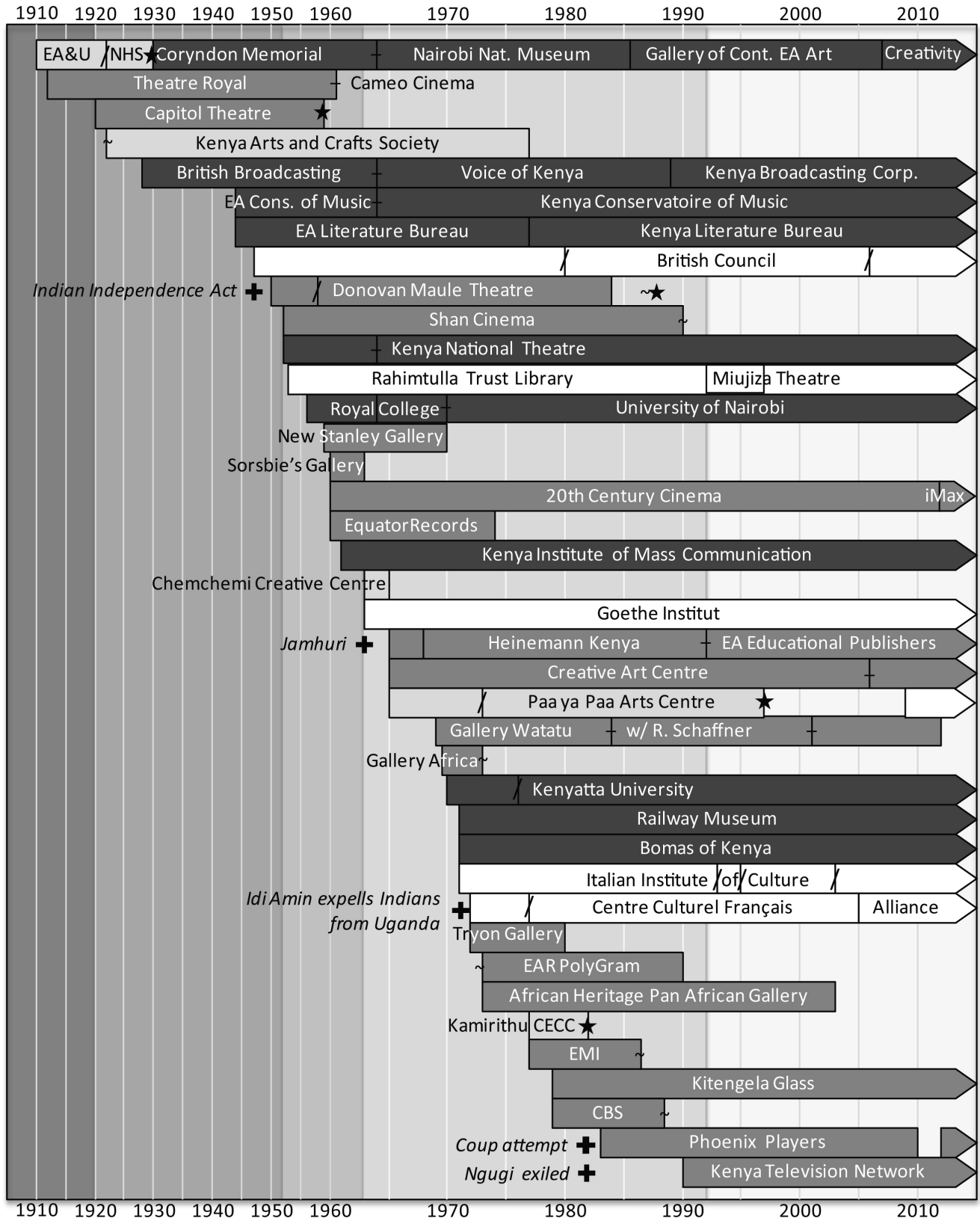
6 Odera Outa George, 2009, *Performing Power: Ethnic Citizenship, Popular Theater and Context of Nationhood in Modern Kenya*, Book Surge, Charleston, p. 6.

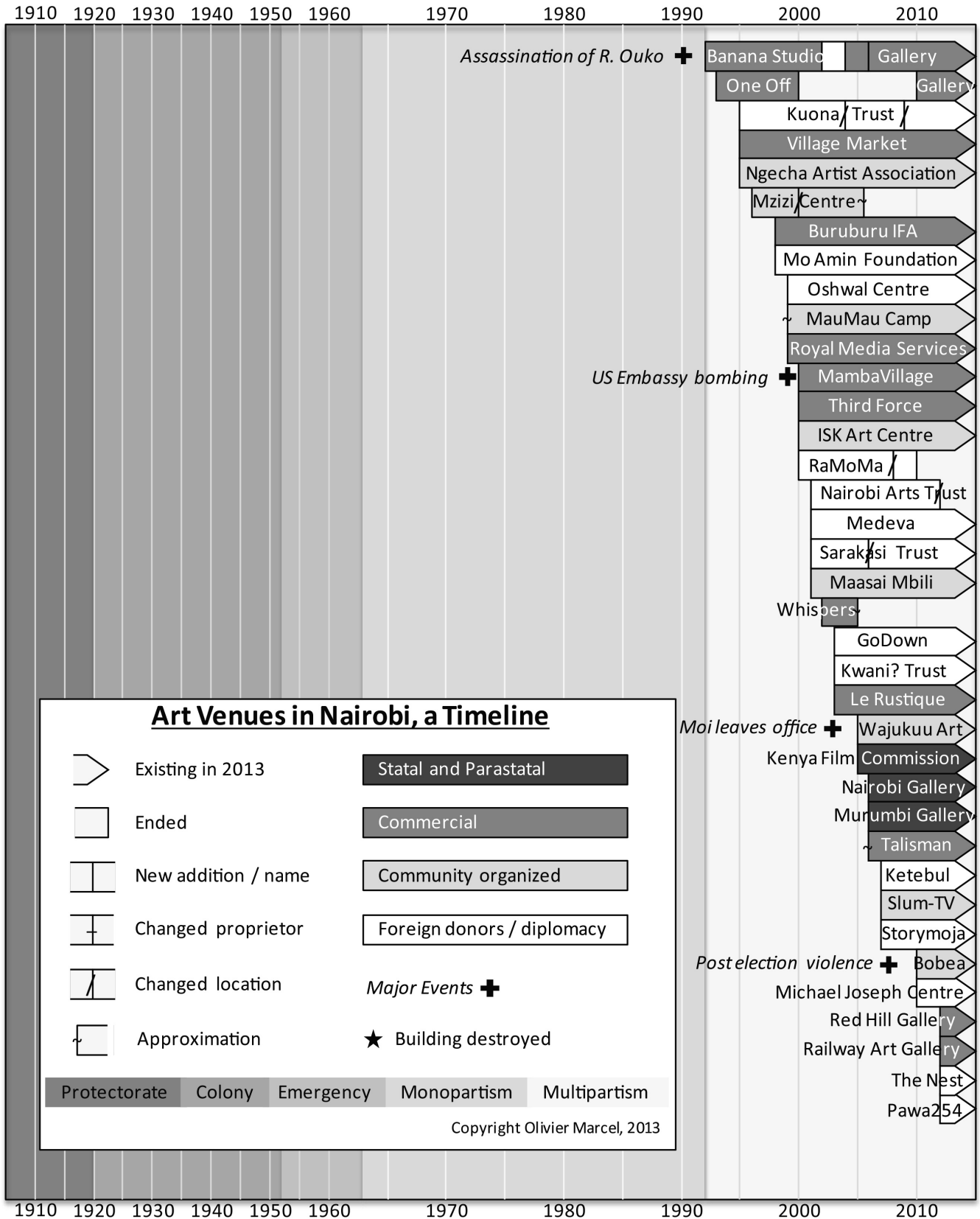
7 Ndigirigi Gichingiri, 1999, "Kenyan Theatre after Kamirithu", *The Drama Review*, n°43/2, pp. 72-93.

8 Mboya Joy, 2007, "The Story of the Godown Arts Center: A Journey to Freedom through the Arts" in Njogu K. and Oluoch-Olunya G. (ed.), *Cultural Production and Social Change in Kenya: Building Bridges*, Arts, Culture & Society vol. 1, Nairobi: Twaweza, pp. 169-186.

and culture? What link is there between the arrival of new donors in the 1990's and community led initiatives? Such questions can only be addressed in a multidisciplinary approach. A last methodological choice is to look at places rather than groups or institutions that occupy them. This restricts the timeline to physical places that are organized for the sole purpose of art education, production, exhibition or distribution: theaters, galleries, cultural centers, cinemas, museums, concert halls, art schools, publishers, recording studios, etc.

These guiding principles have their limitations. For example, organizations with no venue such as the feminist group





Hawa Women or the online *Little Art Gallery* are not featured. Neither are extra-mural collectives such as the graffiti art group *Spray Uzi*. Another difficulty is to render venues activity and decline. A place like *Mamba Village* was quite busy after *Kuona Trust Museum Studio* shut down in 2004 leaving dozens of artists studio-less. Today, very few artists occupy the centre that is more of a tourist attraction. *Paa ya Paa*, once a thriving art centre now opens up merely two or three times a year and appears isolated from the Nairobi art scene. On the other hand, the myriad of bars and clubs that sometimes play a decisive role in the arts (*The Starlight Club* that opened in

the 1965, *Simba Saloon* at *Carnivor Restaurant*, *Wasanii* bar that topped the *National Theatre* in the 2000's, all the live benga, ohangla, mugithi or lingala clubs and the myriad of open-mic bars) are too numerous to be listed here and had to be left out. The problem is similar with more informal venues. The music industry in River Road that really took off in the late 1980's only appears in negative as they suffocated the formal market leading to the departure of the international industries. As for the *Riverhood* cinema hydra, the most visible unions like *Third Force* at *Simba Centre* badly represent their reach. Today, ephemeral venues brought up by organizations like the *Circle Art Agency* add to the difficulty of the exercise.

Despite these limitations, the timeline confirms some assumptions and reveals some of the complexities of Nairobi art history. Art and culture in Nairobi are almost as old as the city's first buildings. However, the timeline shows that the process of becoming a cultural metropolis is both gradual and cumulative. Never have so many art venues been active at the same time and Kenya's capital city is indeed witnessing an acceleration that matches its population growth and that only slowed down during

the most repressive years of the Moi regime. In that regard, Ngugi's argument on the role of foreign cultural imperialism during the Emergency should be nuanced. Indeed, many British-led artistic and cultural venues were pushed forward at a time when the empire was contested. Nevertheless, they seem to also reflect a genuine cultural movement of settlers wanting to express themselves, rather than only a strategy to fight the peasant rebellion, as expressed in Annabelle Maule's testimony of the *Donovan Maule Theatre*⁹. That would explain why similar places flourished even after 1963. Whatever opinion we might have of such venues (a "ludicrous colonial affair" in Ngugi's words)¹⁰, they cannot simply be discarded as foreign since they existed in Nairobi's artistic landscape and impacted more or less on Kenyan artists careers. The question asked in 1956 by the patrons of the *Kenya Arts and Craft Society* to eventually "open membership to all races"¹¹ is quite revealing of an ambiguous yet effective merging. Furthermore, after Independence, the State heavily relied on those older venues established under

9 Maule Annabel, 2004, *Theatre Near the Equator: the Donovan Maule Story*, Nairobi: East African Publishers, 294 p.

10 Ngugi wa Thiong'o, *op. cit.*, p. 44.

11 Frost Richard, 1997 [1978], *Race Against Time*, Nairobi: Transafrica Press, p. 197.

the colonial rule. By then, most of the new venues were foreign commercial ventures that tried to tap into local creativity. *Heinemann Kenya*, a spinoff of the British publishing house, *Gallery Watatu* or *Polygram* all shared this logic in different fields. It is only since the 1990's and the negotiation for multipartism that foreign donors stepped in Nairobi as the major driving force for art venues and turned their development and soft power agendas to arts. Interestingly, the arrival of *Ford Foundation* or *Hivos* on the art scene is also the time when slums became attractive for art projects: *Mau Mau Camp* in Dandora, *Wajukuu Art Gallery* in Mukuru, *Slum-TV* in Mathare and of course *Maasai Mbili* in Kibera.

The timeline in this article merely lays down the foundations of Nairobi's art history and certainly raises more questions than it answers. Although it is imperfect due to the lack of substantial archives, inevitable methodological choices and predictable omissions, this timeline helps to put in perspective an important chronology that is the making of a cultural metropolis in East Africa.

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