

Art and Rebellion. The Wajukuu Art Project collective

Nairobi, Kenya. November 2021-December 2024

In the one hundred and ten slums of Nairobi, the capital of Kenya, 60% of its population lives, confined to 18% of the urban surface. A gigantic ghetto for over three million men and women, housed in shacks of straw and mud or sheet metal, without running water, without sewers, often without connection to the electricity grid. The perfect image of one of the most unequal metropolises on the planet. As in other countries of the Global South - writes the North American sociologist Mike Davis in the prophetic "Planet of the Slums", "rapid urban growth in a context of structural adjustments, monetary devaluation and state cuts has inevitably been a recipe for the production of mass of slums".

During the British occupation of Kenya, which ended in 1963, it was indigenous workers who were locked up in dilapidated barracks in Nairobi. With decolonization, however, the conditions of multitudes of poor people, pushed from the countryside to large cities by a series of factors, the last of which, in chronological order, is represented by the effects of climate change, has not improved. In fact, the existence and the frenetic growth of these endless expanses of shacks has become urban planning normality in the Kenyan metropolis, without any real political will to aim at their structural elimination. In these conditions, now considered de facto irreversible, new forms of resistance and resilience have arisen and developed from below, which use beauty and art as instruments of awareness, redemption and social antagonism.

Lunga Lunga is a slum located on the edge of the polluted industrial area of the city. Inhabited by 80,000 people, it is part of the larger one of Makuru, where a total of over 700,000 live. Here was born, in 2003, the artistic collective Wajukuu, in Swahili language, grandchildren, as a reference to the attempt to build a better future and a better world for them. Shabu Mwangi, now 29, is one of its founders. His dramatic past is that of a "street boy", who at 11 took drugs, lived by recycling waste and was part of a gang involved in criminal acts. Of the 12 artists who they gave birth to the collective with him, only six are still alive, the others, year after year, have died, killed by the police. Shabu says in an interview with "Il Manifesto", an Italian newspaper, "Crime has never prevented me from seeing who I was and listening to my inner voice. And since I have always drawn from an early age, art has been my cure, my rebellion and my salvation".

Today, the Wajukuu Art Project includes painters, sculptors and musicians, who in Lunga Lunga have created installations and works of art, mostly with recycled materials, and who have ateliers and rehearsal rooms here. Their artworks, often allucinated visions of a dystopian and violent urban universe, combined with elements of the African tradition, begin to be known even outside Kenya. A notoriety that will lead them, in June 2022 to participate, as guests, in the prestigious international exhibition of contemporary art "Documenta Fifteen", which takes place every five years in the German city of Kassel, in Hessen. Winning an important prize as best artistic collective. Shabu Mwangi and Ngugi Waweru have exhibited their works in major solo exhibitions at the prestigious Circle Art Gallery in Nairobi.

The artistic work of the Wajukuu collective goes hand in hand with equally important social work within their community. Every week, the artists become the teachers of the 'Wajukuu Kids Club', where dance, painting and music classes are held for children and teenagers living in Lunga, but also in other slums of the city. A commitment that has more recently extended with the establishment of free graphic design and photography schools open to teenagers from Lunga Lunga and other slums in the city.

For years, the Wajukuu collective has also organised a major art festival, offering art exhibitions, installations and music concerts, all absolutely free of charge. A work within the slum that the international notoriety attained by the collective has made more and more articulate and extensive, and in which the group has tried to involve as many people as possible, especially the youngest, who are more exposed to various forms of social degradation, such as addiction to 'poor' drugs, and co-involvement in criminal gangs.

A job within one's own community totally self-produced and self-managed. Like everything positive that takes place within the slums of the Kenyan capital, 'no man's land' where local and national authorities are generally only present with a view to harsh social control.



Shabu Mwangi, visual artist. In the background, the installations created by the collective along the banks of the Ngong River, which crosses the slum. A row of trees has been planted along its banks, but every single plant is wrapped in bottles and transparent plastic sheets, to show the contrast between the natural and the artificial.



The Lunga Lunga slum is inhabited by over 80,000 people. Most of its population has a daily per capita income that does not exceed a dollar. There is no sewage and public drinking water distribution system, nor a state-run hospital.



The entrance to the 'Wajukuu Kids Club'. An art school open not only to children from the Lunga Lunga slum, but also to those from other slums in the Kenyan capital. For everyone it represents a great opportunity for fun, but also a way to develop and hone their artistic skills.



Young "Wajukuu Kids Club" students learn to draw using colored pencils.



Ngugi Waweru, one of the artists of Wajukuu Art Project collective, with one of his artworks.



Shabu Mwangi, inside his atelier. Many of his paintings, as well as on canvas, are made on flattened aluminum sheet, mabato in Swahili, the same that is used to build the houses in the slum. He began using this material in remembrance of the victims of a fire, caused by oil spilled from a plant of the Kenya Pipeline Company, which devastated Lunga Lunga in 2011, killing hundreds of people.



The artists of the collective make many of their works using recycled materials, such as these metal bracelets, which are generally collected in the streets and landfills of the city.



Kimathi Kaaria, visual artist of the Wajukuu Art Project, with one of her works. The collective participated in the international festival of contemporary art "Documenta Fifteen", which took place in the summer of 2022 in Kassel, Germany.



A work made from recycled materials. The use of such materials is a constant in the achievements of the artists of the Wajukuu collective.



Some of the members of the collective work on the sketches for the realization of the installations that were exhibited in the slum during the Wajukuu Slum Art Festival, which took place in Lunga Lunga in December 2021.



The slum is crossed by the Ngong River, heavily polluted by the sewage from the nearby industrial area of Nairobi and by sewage from homes.



One of the preparatory sketches for the installation of the sculptures of domestic and wild animals, made by Ngugi Waweru. The works were created to be exhibited inside the slum during the Wajukuu Slum Art Festival, in December 2021.



In the large warehouse, the operational base of the Wajukuu collective, Lazarus Tumbuti, one of the artists who are part of it, works on the creation of an installation made using recycled waste materials, in this case of the metal rod, which will be shaped in the shape of an animal.



In the slum of Lunga Lunga, during the rainy season, the streets are invaded by mud and sewage. None of the houses have running water and, in most cases, there is no electricity.



Shabu Mwangi is one of the founders of the Wajukuu Art Project collective. Photographed here inside his atelier in Lunga Lunga. For some years, as a child, he lived the hell of the streets of Nairobi, recycling, making and using drugs. Today his career as a visual artist is constantly growing, but he has chosen to continue his work in Lunga Lunga within the local communities.



The main street of the Lunga Lunga slum, where the few commercial activities of this urban agglomeration are concentrated, The slum hosts, in conditions of extreme economic hardship and social degradation, over 80,000 people.



Two children, on the bank of the Ngong River, which crosses Lunga Lunga, collect plastic waste for resale. The children of Lunga Lunga are also involved in the work of the collective. Saturday and Sunday, the day when the school is closed, its participants opened the “Wajukuu Kids Club” for them. An experience that represents, as well as fun for the very young students, an attempt to avoid destructive experiences, such as the taking of “poor” drugs, very common among the minors of the slum.



Ngugi Waweru, one of the artists of Wajukuu Art Project collective, in his atelier in Lunga Lunga, a Nairobi's slum, works on a artwork made on paper using colored chalk. Many of his paintings are instead made using oil colors or mixed techniques that often make use of recycled materials also.



A street of Lunga Lunga. The slum is made up of an endless expanse of shacks made of aluminum sheet and other recycled materials.



Shabu Mwangi draws a buffalo's head on the shed floor which is used by the collective as a base of operations and rehearsal room for the musicians. The design was used for the construction of one of the installations made of metal rod that the group exhibited during the Wajukuu Slum Art Festival, in December 2021.



Palettes and brushes used by the artists of the Wajukuu collective to create some of their works on canvas, paper and aluminum sheet.



Charles Irungu (Kach Kach) and Paul Githinji (edge_upendoKe), two performers from the rap group Majeshi Mosteducated walk in Lunga Along the banks of the Ngong River, which crosses the Lunga Lunga slum. The group is part of the Wajukuu art collective.



Fletcher Njeri, 35, one of the two female artists who are part of the Wajukuu collective. Her activity as an artist began in 2008, attending the children's art school run by Shabu Mwangi. She is a painter who creates her works with oil and acrylic colors on canvas or with woodblock prints. Today she in turn has become an art teacher to children of the slum as part of the "Wajukuu Kids Club" project. She has participated in many group exhibitions, which took place in Nairobi and two of her works were exhibited during the Wajukuu Slum Art Festival.



Paul Githinji (edge_upendoKe), performer of the rap group Majeshi Mosteducated. His dreadlocks are a tribute to the hairstyle of the Mau Mau, the anti-colonial guerrilla group that fought the British occupation in Kenya, which included the artist's father.



A greenhouse for growing vegetables set up among the houses in the Lunga Lunga slum, not far from the river that runs through it. In other slums of Nairobi, international and local NGOs, or individual inhabitants, have also initiated attempts to implement subsistence farming. Attempts hampered by the very poor quality of water available for watering, which often comes from extremely polluted streams.



On the window of the atelier of Ngugi Waweru and Kimathi Kaaria, two of the members of the Wajukuu collective, brushes and rollers used by the artists dry, in the background the sheet metal houses of the Lunga Lunga slum. The work of the artistic collective has prompted many young people to start working on art projects within the community, projects that have culminated, for several years, with the organization of the Wajukuu Slum Art Festival, where the works of visual artists are exhibited, concerts are held and installations are created that will find their place in the streets of the slum.



The children of Lunga Lunga are also involved in the work of the collective. On Saturday, the day when the school is closed, its participants opened the “Wajukuu Kids Club” for them. Where you draw, paint, play and dance. An experience that represents, as well as fun for the very young students, an attempt to avoid destructive experiences.



Charles Irungu (Kach Kach), performer of the rap group Majeshi Mosteducated, born in the Lunga Lunga slum.



For some of his works, Ngugi Waweru uses tools, burins, halfway between a thin chisel and an awl, with a steel tip. With them the artist engraves and excavates the material of the support on which the work itself was created.



A woman walks the muddy streets of Lunga Lunga. Life expectancy for Nairobi slum dwellers is on average 30-40 years. Infant mortality is 90-100 children per 1,000 live births.



Lunga Lunga inhabitants on the banks of the heavily polluted Ngong River. The only bridge that allowed to cross it collapsed after a flood, causing further inconvenience to the inhabitants of the slum.



Among the children of the Lunga Lunga slum it is frequent to drop out of school and use “poor” drugs, such as glue and jet fuel, which are “snorted” causing serious and often irreversible damage to their health.



Kimathi Kaaria, artist of the Wajukuu Art Project, plays a nyatiti, a traditional African instrument that the rap group Majeshi Mosteducated uses during its performances, alongside the electronic ones.



The rap music scene in the Lunga Lunga slum is very active, with several groups performing in the streets in impromptu performances.



Paul Muthumbi Githinji (edge_upendoKe) and Charles Irungu (Kach Kach), performers of the rap group Majeshi Mosteducated, on stage in Kassel, Germany, during the “Documenta Fifteen” contemporary art festival (18 June 2022).



Shabu Mwangi during the making of one of his works in his studio at Lunga Lunga.



A group of children learn to draw in the “Wajukuu Kids Club,” an art school created by the artist collective that lives and works in Lunga Lunga. As a teacher the visual artist Fletcher Njeri, who approached art precisely through this school, opened many years ago in the slum by the Wajukuu collective.



Ngugi Waveru, one of the artists of Wajukuu Art Project collective, at “Documenta Fifteen” contemporary art festival, Kassel, Germany.



Shabu Mwangi and Joseph Ndung’u, two of the Wajukuu art collective, with a friend during the “Documenta Fifteen” ontemporary art fair in Kassel, Germany.



The pavilion of the "Documenta Fifteen" contemporary art festival in Kassel, Germany, set up by the Wajukuu art collective, based in Lunga Lunga, Nairobi, Kenya.



A detail of the installation created for the "Documenta Fifteen" contemporary art festival by Ngugi Waweru, one of the artists of the Wajukuu Art Project collective. The installation is inspired by an African saying that says "A knife that is too sharp hurts the owner".



Children from the “Wajukuu Kids Club,” of Lunga Lunga set up their chairs before starting their drawing and visual arts class.



For the children participating in the “Wajukuu Kids Club” in Lunga Lunga, women from the neighborhood who collaborate with the Wajukuu collective prepare a lunch.



Kimathi Kaaria, visual artist of the Lunga Lunga collective is one of the teachers of the “Wajukuu Kids Club.”



Wajukuu Collective artists in meeting to discuss the final organizational details of the fifth “Wajukuu Art Festival,” which will be held t Lunga Lunga from 9 December 2022.



Ordinary life in the slum of Lunga Lunga. A girl hangs laundry in the sun on the wall of one of the houses made of corrugated metal.



Community life within the slum of Lunga Lunga.



Two women prepare vegetables for the lunch that is offered every Saturday and Sunday to the pupils of the “Wajukuu Kids Club”.



Paul Muthumbi Githinji (edge_upendoKe), performer of the rap group Majeshi Mosteducated, inside the space dedicated to the artistic collective Wajukuu at the “Documenta Fifteen” contemporary art fair in Kassel, Germany.



A detail of the large installation created by Shabu Mwangi and the Wajukuu artistic collective from the Nairobi slum Lunga Lunga for the contemporary art festival “Documenta Fifteen” in Kassel, Gemania.



Some of the artists belonging to the Wajukuu art collective, based in Lunga Lunga, Nairobi, Kenya, in Kassel, Germany, during the Documenta festival. From left to right, Shabu Mwangi, Victor Chege, Lazarus Tumbuti, Joseph Ndung'u and Waweru Joseph Weche. In the background the installation "The Tunnel", created for "Documenta Fifteen" by Kimathi Kaaria and Lazarus Tumbuti, visually inspired by the home of the African Masai ethnic group, inside it reproduces the voices and sounds of the slum of Nairobi Lunga Lunga, where the artists live.



On the streets of the slum of Lunga Lunga a peddler of plastic bowls.



One of the students of the “Wajukuu Kids Club” engaged in making a drawing. Children who live outside the Lunga Lunga slum also participate in the club.



Within the “Wajukuu Kids Club” a music school with teachers from outside the collective trains very young percussionists.



Shabu Wangi in his atelier in Lunga Lunga.



One of Lunga Lunga's roads partially flooded during the rainy season.



One of the students from the children's art school organised by the Wajukuu art collective at work. Basic drawing and painting techniques are taught at the school. But also traditional African music and dances.



One of the paintings made by Ngugi Waweru for the large pavilion dedicated to the Wajukuu collective during 'Documenta fifteen,' the important international art fair held in the German city of Kassel in the summer of 2022.



Some of the activities of the “Wajukuu Kids Club” focus on play and dance. Sammy Mutinda, one of the artists of the collective, passes on his knowledge of traditional dances to the young people who attend at weekends.



Ngugi Waweru, one of the artists of the Wajukuu Art Project collective, paints inside his studio in Lunga Lunga.



The rap group Majeshi Mosteducated, during one of the free concerts they hold every Saturday in the slums of Nairobi. In this case the one in Lunga Lunga, where they live and where the group was born and set its videos.



All the activities of the Wajukuu Collective are in no way supported by the Nairobi city authorities. On the contrary, in some cases they are hindered. The Majeshi Mosteeducate's concert was interrupted by the local police, who accused them of obstructing the otherwise very little car traffic within the slum with their presence. Accompanied to the police station, the musicians were, however, released after a short time.



Over the years, the prestigious Cicicle Art Gallery in Nairobi has hosted a series of group and solo exhibitions by some of the visual artists of the Wajukuu collective.



Young “Wajukuu Kids Club” students learn to draw using colored pencils. The role of teacher is played by Lazarus Tumbiti, an established visual artist from the Wajukuu collective.



Following the overflowing of the river that runs through Lunga Lunga, due to the floods that hit Kenya in the spring of 2024, the government ordered the demolition of all houses built along its banks. A precautionary measure to avoid further casualties in the event of new floods. However, it has effectively deprived thousands of the slum's inhabitants of a roof over their heads, who have been offered no alternative solution to simple forced eviction.



The Wajukuu collective has numerous contacts with other international artistic realities, not only in Africa, but also in Europe. Caroline is a German art teacher who taught for a month as a volunteer at the children's school in Lunga Lunga.



The very young students of the Lunga Lunga art school are taught the techniques of drawing the human body. Often using themselves and their classmates as models.



In the Lunga Lunga slum, there are no cultural, or even simply sporting, public activities on offer for its residents. The work carried out by collective Wajukuu therefore plays a fundamental role in filling this total absence. Particularly with regard to the younger generation.



At the end of a painting session, one of the students washes the brushes used by the 'Wajukuu Kids Club' group of young artists. The school promotes practices and behaviour that stimulate cooperation among young people, both on a strictly artistic and social level.



Children play on a handmade slide built in the Lunga Lunga slum on the banks of the river that runs through it. There is no structure of any kind in the slum that allows the young and very young people living there to engage in sports or other forms of play or recreation.



What characterises the slums of Nairobi, besides a high rate of environmental pollution, is the almost total absence of greenery. Even a few banana trees can therefore serve to make the 'garden' of one's home more welcoming.



Two girls from the Lunga Lunga slum. Unemployment rates among young people in the slum are very high. The entire economy of a community of tens of thousands is based on informal work.

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In the Lunga Lunga slum, which extends in the immediate vicinity of the industrial area of Nairobi, a sugar refining factory was active a few years ago, which was then closed. What remains of the building has been painted and transformed by the collective into colorful installations, visible in different areas of the slum itself.



Shabu Wangi has successfully exhibited his works in group and solo shows at the prestigious Cicicle Art Gallery in Nairobi. His reputation and renown grew after the participation of the Wajukuu collective in the international art fair 'Documenta Fifteen', which took place in the summer of 2022 in the city of Kassel, Germany.



Some of the members of the Wajukuu collective have achieved considerable success as visual artists or musicians. This has not prevented them from remaining firmly anchored to their roots and their community, within which they continue to carry out intense work in the social sphere on a daily basis, aimed especially at the younger generation.