

## **Artists from the Slums. The new wave of African art starts from the outskirts of Nairobi.**

**November 2021 - November 2022**

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.

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 27, 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 hallucinated 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", which takes place every five years in the German city of Kassel, in Hessen.

For some years now, the slums of Nairobi have become an increasingly important laboratory of conscious artistic production, which conveys social contents through innovative works of great visual power. Works destined to create their own important space in the international contemporary art market in the future.



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



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 will participate in the international festival of contemporary art "Documenta", which will take place in the summer of 2022 in Kassel, Germany.



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 stay in Lunga Lunga and continue his work within the local communities.



James Wamae Gitonga is the very young, 22-year-old photographer of the Wajukuu Art Project.



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.



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.



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.





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.



Paul Irungu (Kach Kach) and Charles Muthumbi Githinji (edge\_upendoKe), two performers from the rap group Majeshi Mosteducated walk in Lunga 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, 34, one of the two female artists who are part of the Wajukuu collective. His 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.



Charles Muthumbi 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.



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.



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, such as the taking of "poor" drugs, very common among the minors of the slum.



Paul 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.



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.



La scena musicale rap a Lunga Lunga è molto attiva, con diversi gruppi che si esibiscono nelle strade in performance improvvisate. Kimathi Kaaria, artista del Wajukuu Art Project, suona un nyatiti, uno strumento africano tradizionale che il gruppo rap Majeshi Mosteducated utilizza durante le sue esibizioni, insieme a quelle elettroniche.



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.



Charles Muthumbi Githinji (edge\_upendoKe) and Irungu (Kach Kach), performers of the rap group Majeshi Mosteducated, on stage in Kassel, Germany, during the Documenta 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.



Ngugi Waweru, one of the artists of Wajukuu Art Project collective, at Documenta contemporary art festival, Kassel, Germany.



Shabu Mwangi and Joseph Ndung'u, two of the Wajukuu art collective, with a friend during the Documenta contemporary art fair in Kassel, Germany.



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



A detail of the installation created for the Documenta 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 at Lunga Lunga from Dec. 9-11, 2022.



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”.



Charles Muthumbi Githinji (edge\_upendoKe), performer of the rap group Majeshi Mosteducated, inside the space dedicated to the artistic collective Wajukuu at the 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 in Kassel, Germany.



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 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.



During the rainy season, the river that flows through the Lunga Lunga slum rises in level, flooding roads and houses.



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



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



Some of the activities of the “Wajukuu Kids Club” focus on play and dance.



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