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## Chapter 14

# Stage Dynamics: Presentation and Representation in the Nairobi Art Market

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Chapter 14

# Stage Dynamics

## Presentation and Representation in the Nairobi Art Market

*Danielle de Lame*

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*Translation revised by the author*

### Introduction

The history of the development of visual art—and other art forms—in Nairobi reflects and condenses the history of networks between the city and the world through personal interactions. In general, art objects give us a specific material representation of the insertion of goods in the international chain of commodities. In Nairobi, the creation of graphic art—which is the subject of this article—is rooted in the local social dynamics operating in synergy with various markets and in connection with the knowledge of international artistic trends, past and present. It could be argued that in Nairobi as elsewhere the quest for sponsors and access to markets exerts a multiform influence on artistic content and form. If the insertion of artists in these circuits is a necessary pathway to secure their access to market, the modalities of their insertion result from a synergy between the transnational and the local perspectives. In Kenya, the social ethos of mutual support has for a long time been, and to a certain extent continues to be, the source of a creative blossoming from which great individuals emerge. The transformation of the capital city over time and the mobility of its areas of insecurity and of transit zones have shifted its traditional points of contact. The emergence of online trading in art has disrupted the more conventional gallery and studio networks. Some of these networks continue to operate from shantytowns that remain attractive to a certain public. However, most galleries today attract an audience of “connoisseurs”—and collectors—even though consecration by the pundits of “African Art” remains largely dependent on chance encounters. A recent trend tends to circumvent traditional channels and give more value to peer recognition at the international level.

## 1. The Flower-Power Years

I will recount the journey of some artists and their works as the capital city of Nairobi, now a great metropolis, got increasingly inserted into the world-system. I do not intend to theorise, but simply to provide some ideas that could encourage an accurate collect of facts, which further studies could push forward, hopefully free of exoticism. The blooming of visual arts during the “golden sixties” in Kenya, and more specifically in Nairobi, is partially anchored in local cultures and in the colonial training belatedly initiated by the Kenya Art Association. The extraordinary coifs and jewels worn by different groups, the Kisii soapstone sculptures, the engraving of calabashes, etc., all demonstrate, if needed, the deep-seated aesthetic sensibility and cleverness in the use of materials. An informal<sup>1</sup> trade for tourists existed, especially for sculptures. In addition, beyond a rudimentary school training (Robarts 1981), the splendid “ethnic” representations by the Austrian Joy Adamson materialise a form of contact—characteristic of that era—between worlds that claimed to be so different: the world of the those who represent and that of the represented. For some Kenyan observers, these pictures may have constituted an incentive to a documentary self-representation, which is found in the early times of the local pictorial production in bars, for instance, where oral traditions can be have been put in painting, as I have observed in Ngecha.<sup>2</sup> The use of commercial signs,<sup>3</sup> which were a source of income that made it possible for artists to develop a more elaborate art, may have allowed for the emergence of creativity which the educational system did not favour (Robarts 1981). Finally, as elsewhere in Africa, a new trend emerged that was tied both to, on the one hand, the local effects of the independences and the pride and enthusiasm they generated, and, on the other, the American Pan-Africanist, Black Power and “Flower Power” movements, themselves growing within the more general movements of liberation from social constraints and anti-Vietnam war protests.

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1. Equating the entire informal Kenyan art market with the informal sector, locally called *jua kali*, as done by Margareta Swigert (2011), does not seem to capture the reality. Her work provides interesting information— sometime in need of cross-checking—about this first period of artistic development in Nairobi. Margareta Swigert, under the name Margareta WaGacheru, publishes an art column in two Kenyan newspapers belonging to the same group, *The Daily Nation* and *The Business Daily*. Her often-partisan articles contain a lot of interesting information, though.

2. Kiambu County, 30 minutes from Nairobi. See below.

3. See the magnificent book by Steve Bloom (2009). Today’s signs differ from those created earlier, which belonged to the art of graffiti that can be seen on the well-known *matatu* vans.

Art education opened to Africans, as shown by the case of Francis Kahuri, a Kenyan artist trained by Dora Betts at the KAS<sup>4</sup> (Swigert 2011, 65), who joined other East African artists, notably Kenyans, trained at Makerere University (Uganda) by Margaret Trowell (*ibid.*, 66). At the beginning of the seventies, a dynamic scene emerged where several artists crossed paths, such as Elimo Njau, a Tanzanian artist who had arrived in Kenya in 1958 and was commissioned by the Anglican Church to design murals at Fort Hall,<sup>5</sup> as well as avant-garde poets and writers, such as Ngugiwa Thiong'o. Elimo Njau, who had a solo exhibition in London in 1961 (*ibid.*, 69) and travelled to Europe, founded the first African art centre in Nairobi in 1966, PaayaPaa; it was an art gallery as well as an international art centre,<sup>6</sup> a refuge for artists from African countries experiencing social and political unrest, especially those from the African East Coast. Kenya also attracted American artists; among them, one finds the three founders of Watatu Gallery<sup>7</sup> in 1969, Yoni Waite, Robin Anderson, and David Hart. These three prestigious artists created, according to Swigert, what was perceived to be an artistic universe for expatriates (*ibid.*, 72). Other initiatives left their marks on today's Nairobi artistic scene, such as the establishment of jewelry workshops in the slums. Two Americans, including Alan Donovan,<sup>8</sup> who had a significant role in the Nairobi arts market, were behind these activities (*ibid.*, 75).

This is the period (1977) when the Alliance Française, locally known as the "French Cultural Centre" set up a first important exhibition, displaying Acent Soi (Michael Soi's father), the Ugandan artist Jak Katarikawe and other artists during the "Wildlife Awareness Week" (*ibid.*, 74), which presented mainly pieces exalting nature.

4. The Kenya Art Society was linked to the East African Women's League, which still exists; it holds weekly meetings and intends to be "multiracial."

5. Fort Hall was the name of the city of Murang'a during colonial times. The paintings are known as "the Murang'a murals" and their creation was linked to a commemoration of the victims of the Mau Mau anti-colonialist attacks reprimanded by expeditions launched from Fort Hall. It seems ironic that a personality like Elimo Njau, the first artists to have promoted the arts in Kenya, could be linked to this controversial work. See also Miller, 2014.

6. PaayaPaa and its activities remain in the memory of those who were present in Nairobi at the time (John Lonsdale, personal communication, Paris, February 2015.)

7. For a detailed history of the Watatu Gallery, critically read Margaretta WaGacheru: WaGacheru, Margaretta. 2013. "Nairobi's Upmarket Red Hill Opens a New Gallery." *Business Daily*, 16 September. <http://www.businessdailyafrica.com/Nairobi-upmarket-Red-Hill-opens-a-new-gallery/-/1248928/1498086/-/6k5jqc/-/index.html> [archive].

8. Alan Donovan promoted not only painting and jewelry making; he organised "afro" fashion shows and still exhibits an interesting collection of paintings in his "Heritage House" not far from Nairobi National Park.

During the 1980s, the Watatu Gallery, which welcomed all types of artists, changed hands as the three founding artists prioritised their artistic activities rather than the management of the gallery.<sup>9</sup> After a brief period of management under Rhodia Mann and Sherri Saittoti, the American Ruth Schaffner<sup>10</sup> became the owner of the gallery and orientated it towards the promotion of African artists. It is hard nowadays to form an opinion on Ruth Schaffner's personality as she was both vilified and glorified. She had created a familial atmosphere around the Watatu Gallery, took charges on school fees and made loans to artists in exchange for absolute loyalty, exclusivity, and... a 50% commission as from the 1990s (Littlefield Kasfir 1999, 79)—an unusually high rate in Africa and never required again in Kenya. As the owner of two galleries in Los Angeles, she had a significant influence on the artistic development in and around Nairobi. With her, anyway, the field of painting grew along with the opportunities she was offering by establishing contacts between artists during workshops and encouraging certain shapes (even certain hues) which connected artists from the village to the American market, expatriates and tourists. The existing galleries—Watatu, PaayaPaa, the Stanley Hotel gallery, and later the Donovan “African Heritage” Gallery—were located in the heart of Nairobi, a place insuring a cosmopolitan clientele at a time when the downtown, alive with activity, was safe, where the cafes were welcoming passers-by. This city centre is hard to imagine today, described by the cliché phrase of the time: “the green city under the sun,” with a postcard optimism that dropped the mask during the 1982 riots, the beginning of the spread of crime from the slums to the city centre (Grignon 1997; de Lame 2006).

Just like the jewelry artisans from the Mathare Valley slums who worked for Donovan, the up-and-coming painters had experience making small earnings in the art of advertisement and in the often-mediocre works sold in small curio shops. While Donovan created many jobs in the “hybrid” (Swigert 2011, 75) jewelry field, but also, later, in the textile and fashion industries, thanks to Ruth Schaffner, the painters who tried to earn a living in a field where they developed their talents, real or imagined, were able to emerge, create their style, and adapt to a market they, themselves, influenced. Wanyu Brush, who is settled on the green hills of Kiambu County in Ngecha, and who was taught painting at the YMCA Art Center, took with him Sane Wadu, Chain Muhandi, Sebastian Kiarie, Alan Githuka, and many others. The Ngecha Artist Association was born. It provided many

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9. Y. Waite, personal communication.

10. “the formidable German-born Californian who'd long given up her social life in America for Africa's savanna and a sixth husband twenty years her junior” “Wanyu Brush.” S.d. *Art Nanadede* [[archive](#)]. For more biographical data, see Littlefield Kasfir (1999, 78-84).

young artists—a number of them still active—with training—and attracted other artists like Shine Tani.<sup>11</sup> Ruth Schaffner supported this movement: in addition to advice, she provided the necessary supplies, organised monthly workshops and bought the works of artists to resell them to the Watatu Gallery or to galleries in the United States.<sup>12</sup> She emphasised on the autodidact nature of these artists (according to Yoni Waite, there were not many others), in tune with a naïve form of “African Art” as she wanted to sell it.<sup>13</sup> WaGacheru insists on the pioneering aspect of Schaffner at the commercial level: she has supposedly been the first to perceive the value of Kenyan art on the international market.<sup>14</sup> Painting became a feature of local culture in the village of Ngecha, as the organisation of an annual festival demonstrates. As early as 1993, the Banana Hill Art Studio, founded by Shine Tani, ten kilometres away from Nairobi, welcomed and exhibited local artists’ works,<sup>15</sup> including those from Ngecha. As nowadays, it offered training to the youth, a typical and persistent feature of the life of many Nairobi painters. The Banana Hill Art Studio and the One Off Gallery, founded in the same year by Carol Lees,<sup>16</sup> started two different yet interconnected orientations of the market, at a time when Ruth Schaffner

11. Shine abandoned his bread and butter as an acrobat downtown after he discovered painting in a hotel and touched base with R. Schaffner (personal communication).

12. On the topic of prices, see WaGacheru, Margareta. 2013. “Good Old Gallery Watatu in Limbo.” *Daily Nation*, 5 August. <https://nation.africa/kenya/life-and-style/dn2/good-old-gallery-watatu-in-limbo-880584> [archive]; details also received from Shine Tani (one of WaGacheru’s informants), personal communication.

13. Lucki Mutebi interviewed by Margareta WaGacheru: “Tani didn’t like the way she bought Kenyan art for very little then sold it at much higher prices. He felt she was not benefiting the artists.” WaGacheru, Margareta. 2012. “Artist of Two Worlds Finally Traces His Way back to Kenya.” *Business Daily*, 22 March. <https://www.businessdailyafrica.com/lifestyle/society/Artist-of-two-worlds-finally-traces-his-way-back-to-Kenya/3405664-1371484-q8467p/index.html> [archive].

14. International ignorance of the art produced in Kenya lasted until a decade ago: see below.

15. Here is a list of the pioneer artists as it was communicated to me by James Mbutia: Shine Tani, Kamuyu Martin, Kamondia, Livingstone Miringu, Jim Gay, Lucky Mutebi, late Alex Mbugua, late George Thairu, Joseph Cartoon, Anthony Muya, Daniel Kinyanjui, Jeff Wambugu, Peter Kibunja, John Silver, Jonathan Mbugua, Julius Kimenia, Sebastian Kiarie, Hosea Muchugu (Giko), Shade Kamau, Baba, Willie Wamuti, Mary Ngugi, Rachael Wangari, Rahab Shine, Mwura. Personal communication on March 14, 2014.

16. The gallery, located as it is today “off Limuru Road,” on Carol Lees’ property, is halfway between the CBD and Banana Hill and Ngecha. Carol Lees, just like Yoni Waite and Mary Collis, are Kenyans.

was redesigning her action in order to strengthen artists' training; she did it together with her assistant Rob Burnett, who gave it a decisive momentum and transformed the artistic scene in Nairobi.

Some sociological aspects of that time are worth noting, such as the habit of artists to work with one another, to train the youth, often for free, and to represent social and political events in diverse pictorial styles, going from the descriptive to the satirical or even typical daily life scenes. In this first phase, the influence of galleries was stronger than that of sponsors, who, other than providing exhibit space, were quasi absent. These exhibits and the work of some gallery managers transformed the Nairobi artistic scene, starting in 1996 when the Kuona Trust was founded. The artists connected to the Ngecha Artists Association and the Banana Hill Art Studio have pursued their work until today, in their own styles that they had developed from the early days. According to Sidney Littlefield Kasfir (1999), these artists embody Kenyan contemporary painting, adding Kivuthi Mbuno, an artist who was notably published in *La Revue Noire*.<sup>17</sup> Littlefield Kasfir's choice, in the Schaffter and Watatu Gallery exoticising line, can explain why Okwui Enwezor, the Pope of modern African art,<sup>18</sup> did not include Kenya in his piece on contemporary African painters (Enwezor & Okeke-Agulu 2009). This world of critics, centered on the Atlantic coast from Nigeria to Congo to South Africa, and the festivals of francophone Western Africa, does not mix with an immerging artistic scene such as Kenya.<sup>19</sup> For Kenyan artists to be connected to a wider world, which galleries had failed to do up to this point, required the interest of important sponsors, persuaded of the social benefits of training artists in the field, and willing to provide them with common workshops and with means allowing them to develop their creative freedom.

The galleries, located in Nairobi's city centre when the owners could afford it, were connecting the works and the buyers, but not the artists. Restaurants and hotels also exhibited Kenyan and more generally East African painters. As much as they can afford it, galleries are located where the potential clients are, which varies depending on urban development.

17. *Revue Noire*. 1994 (March-April-May): 13. Kivuthi is present in numerous collections including the Pigozzi collection. Its theme—the proximity, see the equal value of men to animals—is also present with other painters, notably Richard Kimathi. Kivuthi is very particular in his technique of pencil drawing.

18. See Azimi, Roxana. 2015. "L'homme de l'art." *M Le magazine du Monde*, 24 January: 29-35. Enwezor was commissioner of the Dokumenta 2011 in Kassel and at the Venice Biennale in 2015.

19. In an article published in *Le Monde* on July 27, 2016, André Magnin gives a description of his work as collector at the service of Pigozzi, illustrating the interaction of coincidences, research, and exhibits in the creation of collections, but also of markets.

During this first period, the city centre was attractive.<sup>20</sup> The less wealthy galleries were located in Ngecha and Banana Hill and exploited—and still exploit—the appeal of an authentic village-like Africa to attract potential buyers. With the same goal, others bet on the fascination for slums where artists set up their studios serving as galleries.<sup>21</sup> The artists, at that time, had very little direct contact with the artistic world abroad.

## 2. The Era of Sponsors

The Ngecha Artist Association looked for sponsors<sup>22</sup> through rather usual means while Shine Tani and his group benefitted from the help, among other sponsors, of a Mennonite couple, Bob and Betty Baumann. They organised the exhibition “New Art from Nairobi” in Philadelphia (USA) that gave Shine Tani the opportunity to participate in many workshops in Europe (Swigert 2011, 93). Yet, with the creation of the Kuona Trust situated next to the National Museum, the search for sponsors became more professional. This creation caused a chiasmus between the two types of activities of the Watatu Gallery: on the one hand, sale, and on the other, artists’ development. This schism coincided not only with the creation of the Kuona Trust in 1996,<sup>23</sup> but also with the passing of Ruth Schaffner.

The systematic search for sponsors and the connecting of artists to international workshops, gave the painters the means to display their work internationally, which was a necessary step to the construction of a *resume* that was previously left to chance encounters. The Kuona Trust was two-years-old when I met there numerous artists now in vogue. The location within the National Museum was ideal in a climate of growing insecurity that made the city centre unsafe (de Lame 2006). Lead by Rob Burnet, the

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20. The city centre has recently been the object of a new interest, as shown by the establishment of artists’ studios near the Railway Museum, the GoDown installation and its studios in the industrial area, as well as the “Naini who” initiatives aiming to make Nairobi known thanks to the organisation of events in different urban locations, or even the project of a modern art museum at the heart of old Nairobi, not far from the National Archives.

21. Certain artists continue to aim for this goal, such as the Msaï Mbili group combining the line of exoticism of misery with the more recent form of “installations.” One should note that the “two Masai,” Otieno Gomba and Otieno Kota are not Masai but decided to label themselves as members of the ethnic group favoured by tourists (personal communication with Otieno Gomba). Their success—supported by the Goethe Institute—is linked to personal relations, today with the artist Sam Hopkins.

22. See the magazine *Caravan*, 2001, where the painter King Dodge expresses his desires to create an artistic centre in Ngecha and where this pacifist militant magazine launched a fundraising plan to fund the project.

23. For details that I was not able to verify, see Swigert (2011, 94-104).



centre was managed with dynamism by Judy Ogana<sup>24</sup> and included a music workshop and storytellers, in addition to a space shared by a dozen of preselected painters. Among those painters were, as I recall, Michael Soi, Patrick Mukabi, Peterson Kamwathi,<sup>25</sup> Peter Elungat, Richard Kimathi, Simon Muriithi, Jimnah Kimani, Justus Kyalo, and Beatrice (Wanjiku) Njoroge. Many of them had benefitted from artistic training before their arrival to the Kuona Trust,<sup>26</sup> for example at the Creative Arts Center, such as Patrick Mukabi who obtained his certificate in 1988. Since the selection was based on the promising character of the candidates, a previous training was an advantage. This training could come from a family environment, as it was the case for Michael Soi or John Kamicha,<sup>27</sup> or from more formal centres. The Buruburu Institute of Fine Arts (BIFA) was founded in 1993, next to the Creative Arts Center in Nairobi. Initially, it intended to give youths from the popular area of Buruburu, an artistic training that was aimed towards their entry into the profession. In addition to a three-year curriculum, courses lasting a month to a year focused on skills as varied as ceramics, technical drawing, floral arrangements, event management, and... graffiti. Even in this field, the emphasis is put on access to employment but creativity is successfully promoted. Beatrice (Wanjiku) Njoroge, an internationally renowned painter, completed her training there and, henceforth, the BIFA attracts youths from all over the country. These painters of the Kuona Trust were often labeled as the “second generation,”<sup>28</sup> somewhat strangely, since, on the first hand, the first generation had not been clearly defined, and on the other hand, the tendencies of styles and themes of the early days are still seen in many painters, notably in Ngecha and Banana Hill.

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24. See the interview of Judy Ogana by Zaidi in *Msanii* no. 10, 2004: “Art as a Statement of where People Are at.” The content of the interview completes in a structured (and contrasted) way the allegations communicated without critique by Swigert (2011, 108 and following).

25. The biography of Peterson Kamwathi by Olivier Marcel (2012) and the interview by Sam Hopkins (2011) complement each other. Otherwise, David Kaiza (Hopkins 2011) brings to light the social insertion of art in Nairobi through the life trajectory of Kamwathi—an artist whose “Series” convey a political message. See “Contact Zones NRB”: <https://www.contemporaryand.com/fr/publication/contact-zones-nrb-a-book-series-of-the-goethe-institut-kenya-and-native-intelligence/> [archive].

26. This preliminary artistic training is shown in the biographical notes given by the artists themselves in the “Kenya Arts Diary” calendars published annually as from 2011.

27. John Kamicha is the son of Zachariah Mbutha, artist at Banana Hill.

28. The “young guns” launched this year by Circle Art Agency (see below) might form a new generation and we will have to see how it distinguishes itself from the previous ones.

Insecurity, the oppressive political climate to which an opposition, cautious in its verbal expression, responded,<sup>29</sup> and the increase in both economic and retributive crimes influenced the themes adopted by artists, but also the themes that defined the search of sponsors. The artists felt they were the privileged interpreters of a silenced majority “since the police officers didn’t take painters seriously”<sup>30</sup>; painters, above all, made themselves the intermediates in the expression of grief and popular irony. Additionally, they responded to the buyer’s interests in the expression of social problems and the opposition to the dictatorship. Besides, all means were to be used to “cleanse” the city of its “street children.” The issue of urban poverty was a powerful engine to mobilise funds. While the slums, violence, and corruption became common themes for the Ngecha artists and others, the potential of art as a means of employment was—and is—used, as much to attract buyers in the slums as to encourage the generosity of donors and the youths searching for employment and training. The prospect of seeing the end of the Moi era sparked fervor for a Kenya that would have an optimistic and prosperous future and encouraged the generosity of donors.

Rob Burnet proved to be an extraordinarily efficient lobbyist. On the one hand, he was able to obtain funds from the Ford Foundation and numerous donors within the framework of development and cultural policies; on the other hand, by entering the Triangle Network,<sup>31</sup> he put Kenya on the map of international artistic networks. When he was hired by the Ford Foundation in 2000, he subsidised many Kenyan organisations, among which were the Wasanii workshops, Kuona Trust, and RaMoMa. The move of Kuona Trust to the industrial zone of the city centre, in the heart of the much vaster GoDown complex, allowed to, not only shelter artists’ workshops, but also to host a performance hall. At the time when Kuona Trust was moving again, this time towards Hurlingham, the GoDown opened training workshops in fields as diverse as computer science, dance, classical music, graphic design, etc. while maintaining a few artists’ studios, notably those of Michael Soi, and, until recently, Patrick Mukabi.<sup>32</sup> The creation,

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29. We remember, for example, in the weekly editorial signed by Wahome Jutahi “Whispers”; on Wahome Mutahi, see Maupeu & Mutahi (2005).

30. Personal Communication, Chain Muhandi, 2000.

31. Officially known as the Triangle Arts Trust, the organisation was launched, in 1982, by Robern Loder and Anthony Caro, with the goal of creating links between visual artists, organisations, and independent creative workshops held by artists; it is now present in 30 countries. See: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Triangle\\_Arts\\_Trust](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Triangle_Arts_Trust).

32. In 2015, Patrick Mukabi, who introduced numerous young students to painting, founded the Dust Depo Art Studio, located in the studios next to the Railway Museum, downtown.

and later management and multiple moves of Kuona Trust, resulted in a diversification of the location of artists. Numerous artists present during the early days of Kuona Trust left for areas where they found themselves close to one another, such as Kitengela, where is located the workshop of artistic glass creation of Nani Croze, an artist of German origin and an important player in the Nairobi art scene, and organiser of many training workshops in the art of glass. Next to the daily emulation created by the proximity, the more formal workshops,<sup>33</sup> such as the Wasanii Workshops organised annually at Naivasha, Lamu, etc. gave artists connections beyond borders. From the beginning of Kuona Trust, the opportunity was given to artists, active on site, to visit workshops abroad and stay there in residence, in Africa as well as in Europe and the United States. The artists thus found themselves in contact with other cultures while also building a reputation and creating opportunities for exhibits abroad. The notion of an autodidact artist, dear to Ruth Schaffner, became a differentiating criterion—and also became partly obsolete—compared to a majority of artists who had been trained in one way or another<sup>34</sup> and who advertised this training and their participation in workshops, artist residence, or exhibitions abroad.

Another sign of the times in the search for sponsors is the contrast between the engagement of private donors and the search for official or commercial sponsors. Thus, the PaayaPaa gallery, destroyed by a fire in 1998, was reopened on a distant<sup>35</sup> site thanks to the aid of an individual donor and through *harambee* fundraising, organised by leaders in the world of art. As for RaMoMa, founded by Mary Collis and Carol Lees, while the gallery benefitted from Ford Foundation grants, it gradually became sponsored by for-profit firms (Dormans, Safaricom...), and received donations from diplomatic offices, such as the High Commission of Canada to Kenya.<sup>36</sup> RaMoMa, located in the wealthy area of the Upper Hill,<sup>37</sup> under Carol Lees' leadership, immediately symbolised an evolution that continues

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33. For a list of the workshops over the course of the years, see also Gerschultz (2013). Informal workshops where artists train young students are added to the list. Yet, we are far from the “hundreds” of artists mentioned by Gerschultz. Another reservation: Gerschultz underestimates the role of two Kenyan women, Mary Collis and Carol Lees, signaling that “a few expats” appear on the scene. Both are Kenyan.

34. The University of Nairobi offers a “Masters in Fine Arts.”

35. PaayaPaa Arts Center, Ridgways Road, off Kiambu Road.

36. See, for example, the *Msanii* magazine, no. 14, March 2006, p. 2: “News.”

37. The location of administrative buildings and the Hotel Fairview, in the Rahimtullah Tower property of a Kenyan family (hence the name of the gallery which also alludes to the New York MoMa) near offices, avoided downtown neighbourhoods.

today at the GoDown Arts Center and Kuona Trust. In harmony with the actors of the city's art scene, RaMoMa was able to offer, in addition to workshops, beautiful exhibition and sale spaces; it attracted an educated public through the organisation of cultural activities involving foreign African artists from other horizons: concerts, modern dance, etc. Each exhibit premiere, along with other artistic Kenyan events, was recorded in a quarterly magazine from 2002, *Msanii*.<sup>38</sup> This magazine, dedicated to the manifestation of visual arts in Nairobi, was a first in establishing a continuous contact between the public and the artists. The now well-known photographer, James Muriuki, designed the graphics of the magazine while the painter James Mbuthia<sup>39</sup> participated in the organisation of workshops. The freedom left to the artists by Carol Lees facilitated the Ngecha and Banana Hill autodidact artist's participation who were intimidated by the criteria required to be part of Kuona Trust.

At the Watatu Gallery (where the activities were now limited to sale), the Ngecha and Banana Hill studios had been added, as well various art centres such as RaMoMa and Kuona Trust. Art was also spreading through the city, whether in form of graffiti, notably by a team of the National Museum on the bridge that leads to its buildings or, in an omnipresent way, in hotels, restaurants—The Rustic, that no longer exists today, is a good example—and the Coffee Houses. Original paintings by Jimnah Kimani<sup>40</sup> still decorate all the “Java House” cafes that have been designated as interior design models. The Sankara Hotel (Westlands) possesses one of the best collections in the country<sup>41</sup>: the works are exhibited in public areas, as well as in the rooms and a proper gallery attracts a posh clientele accordingly.

The cultural centres and embassies had offered exhibit spaces to Nairobi's artists as well as all Kenyan artists, and, occasionally, to artists from all over East Africa—as early as 1977 when it comes to Alliance française. Harsita Waters' constant presence, responsible for Cultural Affairs and Communication at the Alliance française for over twenty years, contributed to the institution's solid cultural policy, founded on the knowledge of the

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38. The last edition holds no. 25, November 2008—January 2009, little before the closing of RaMoMa.

39. James Mbuthia, of Banana Hill, was supposed to launch workshops for sick children at the Nairobi hospital. This activity, which he is still pursuing, illustrates the frequent social engagement of artists.

40. “With their signature Jimnah Kimani artwork, brick red and cream walls grounded wood and wrought iron...” Awori, Jordan. 2016. “Restaurant Inspiration: Java House Inspiration.” *The Interior Decorator*, 16 March. <https://www.jordanawori.com/?p=253> [archive].

41. Mark van Rampelberg, already present at the Watatu Gallery where he had designed the furniture, is the curator.

Kenyan and East African art scenes,<sup>42</sup> and, more generally, on the social issues that often gave their themes to the exhibitions. The situation is slightly different at the Goethe Institute, which for a long time had been a partner on the Nairobi art scene, but where the successive directors managed the cultural policies. The visitor can thus pass, with a few years' interval, through an exhibit of expertly painted wooden birds (1999) or through an avant-garde exhibit whose authors, members of the Masai Mbili group, were little experienced. Johannes Hossfeld, the director of the Goethe Institute from 2009 to 2013, clearly favoured fashionable artistic forms: installations, performances. He was at the source of the financing of "Half-Life Nairobi," a highly successful movie, remarkable for its social realism, and of the publications of artist monographs. His choices influenced the way Kenyan artists were represented abroad, as can be seen in the *Afropolis* volume where the Masai Mbili group artists, based in the slums of Kibera, appear. In this volume, distributed internationally, the section dedicated to Nairobi focuses on the slums. The chosen groups rely on the personal networks of the Goethe Institute's director at the time. Hossfeld had clear opinions when it came to which artists to promote: painting and sculpture that he considered "outdated" had to be replaced with installations (Sam Hopkins, Miriam Siowia Kambu), and performances (Ato Malinda), video clips, cinema (notably "Half-life Nairobi"<sup>43</sup>) and street art, specifically the famous *matatu*, yet relatively sober at the time of the *Afropolis* edition.<sup>44</sup> Paradoxically, while the Masai Mbili group of the slums appears in *Afropolis* as a typical group, Hossfeld considered "good manners" to be a prerequisite for the international scene, next to high quality art. Embassies also organised exhibitions, following the individual artistic interests of their ambassador. This was the case, for example, during the two terms of Belgian Ambassador Bart Ouvry. Finally yet importantly, the National Museums of Kenya, that had for a long time a rather jumbled sales gallery, opened itself to contemporary art following its renovation.

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42. The Alliance française in Nairobi possesses a collection of paintings, recently digitised, constructed over the course of exhibits. The artists only have one obligation when they are exhibited and that is to leave one work.

43. Personal communication.

44. From 2005 to 2015, the Kenyan Government prohibited paintings on the usual minibuses, VW type, the *matatu*. This is an aspect of the laws that affects them, and in addition limits the number of passengers and imposes various security norms. To respond to the limitation of the number of passengers, the owners focus on buying larger vehicles which escape the white and yellow striped colors that had become the mandatory and uniform design of the traditional vehicles. The current president has lifted the ban regarding the decoration of vehicles, reestablishing a dialogue between the styles of art visible to the public, the *matatu* being the most obvious example.

### 3. The *Buzz* Years

On the extremely dynamic Nairobi art scene, every withdrawal has sparked momentum. The move of the Kuona Trust to the industrial area, still under the management of Judy Ogana, allowed for the opening of GoDown in 2003 and a diversification of the artistic activities offered. Kuona Trust separated itself after Judy Ogana's short absence and settled in Hurlingham, under the management of Danda Jaroljmek, an artist member of the Triangle Network. The two institutions, now very different, experienced continuous expansion. Today, in the industrial area of the city, near a slum, the GoDown, managed by Judy Ogana and Joy Mboya, attracts a young crowd by various means: varied and popular training programs—break dancing, for example—but also now almost weekly “live” concerts, the organisation of annual exhibits with specific themes, “Manjano,” taking place in the chic and popular area of “Village Market,” and encourages young talents by connecting them to current social themes. The opening of GoDown was a major social event (given the “trendy” location) where were artists from all walks of life could meet and during which *TheLatini*, the first reference publication on Kenyan painters and sculptors, was launched. The selection of artists, probably more difficult during that time than today, was conducted with an emphasis on impartiality by a double committee of artists, gallery owners, and collectors (Kuona Trust 2003, 8). In 2017, Susan Wakhungu Githuku published a less selective and much more voluminous piece, which was, as a result, much more representative of the variety of pictorial production since the seventies (Waghungu Githuku 2018).

The ambitious move of RaMoMa to a safe and attractive location in Parklands radically transformed its activities by installing many galleries and exhibit spaces, workshops for children, a restaurant, a major monthly exhibition, the creation of a collection, etc. Carol Lees was its curator. The *Msanii* journal kept on publishing the artists and was even sold in kiosks. Swigert<sup>45</sup> suggests a collusion, “a cartel” of subsidised centres producing for sale in the RaMoMa galleries. The reality is different: on the one hand, artists were free; on the other hand, in order to deny this allegation, it would be enough to consult the program of exhibitions and to recall the origin of each artist exhibited. The second version of RaMoMa offered a unique space for interaction where one could find, just like in the Kuona and GoDown workshops, artists from Ngecha and Banana Hill.<sup>46</sup> These different locales, by the various people they attracted, allowed artists to

45. Swigert (2011, 118) speaks of a “cartel.”

46. It was at this time that the Banana Hill Art Studio, after a crisis, stopped being a cooperative and became the property of Shine Tani.

evolve out of the ghetto of naïf art, a movement that was accentuated by the progression of the Kuona artists as well as the increasing individualism of the artists. These years coincided with a certain dormancy of the Nairobi Museum, which was being renovated. Its reopening, in 2008, was a national event marked by the addition of a new exposition space, “the old PC’s office building,”<sup>47</sup> where temporary exhibitions<sup>48</sup> are being held in the heart of the city centre. The renovated museum also included the works of local artists, notably Miriam Syowia Kyambi,<sup>49</sup> whose exhibit retraced the political Kenyan history.

The year of 2008 (who would not remember it?) was the beginning of a major economic crisis resulting in a drastic decrease of subsidies. For Kenya, it was also the beginning of a year marked by post electoral violence and the successive displacement of dozens of thousands people. These two events, one could argue, had important repercussions on the development of the Nairobi art scene as we know it today.

The decrease of donations from sponsors hindered the personal initiatives and created a need for more visibility. In particular, the government’s attention to the economic potential of artistic activities was drawn on multiple occasions, notably by the GoDown team.<sup>50</sup> This team, with the support of the Ford Foundation, took control of the coverage of the post electoral violence conducted by nine talented photographers, to lead a campaign and spread awareness in various cities in the country. The photo collection “Kenya Burning” was even sold in supermarkets. Favouring raising awareness, the spread of these terrible images also allowed for the realisation of the power of images that would be demonstrated again in the years to come, notably through a pre-electoral graffiti campaign. The name of the photographer Boniface Mwangi is linked to the two events<sup>51</sup>: that of

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47. Located in the city centre, at the intersection of Kenyatta Avenue and Uhuru Highway.

48. I was able to visit an exhibition of photographs taken by young artists from Eastleigh in the context of a competition organised by the National Museum: this testifies to the social engagement of art.

49. Laureate (second) in a UNESCO artistic competition in 2004, Miriam SyowiaKyambi graduated from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. In 2016, the artist chose to no longer use her European first name and now goes by Syowia Kyambi.

50. Personal communication of Judy Ogana: many meetings and a lot of research was organised.

51. See also Meyerfeld, Bruno. 2016. “L’hyperactiviste.” *M Le Magazine du Monde*, 23 January, 38-40: “Une ‘guérilla artistique’ menée sans illusions.” A few elements of the interview seem to have not been verified by the author.

the artistic centre Pawa254 (that he manages) is linked to the second.<sup>52</sup> The events of 2007–2008 and the camps set up for the displaced people served as inspiration for many painters and became themes for workshops as a rather common representation of social and political facts.<sup>53</sup>

The years 2008 and 2009 were transitional years for the Nairobi arts scene. These years were the beginning of personal initiatives, as much from galleries as from artists: it became necessary to multiply events, make yourself visible, and create a “buzz.” Media and internet became omnipresent and essential means of communication for those interested in the field. Many events mark this period: the closing of RaMoMa (2009) and the reopening of its own gallery by Carol Lees (*One Off*)<sup>54</sup> in 2010; Danda Jaroljmek’s arrival to the scene, first in 2009 as director of Kuona Trust, and later in 2012 as director of the Circle Art Agency (or Gallery); the unwavering dynamism of GoDown, which, in 2018 initiates a crowd funding for a renovation of its buildings<sup>55</sup>; the remarkable persistence of the Banana Hill studio under Shine Tani’s management; the opening of Red Hill Gallery, a new gallery concerned with the whole East Africa, by a German couple, coincide with the new dynamic of the Nairobi Museum where a contemporary art curator, Lydia Gatundu Galavu is working and progressively deploys temporary exhibitions, as she resorts to experienced curators in specific domains; the project “Amnesia,” which explored multiculturalism and post colonialism was led by Siman Njami<sup>56</sup> and was

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52. Ni Chonghaile, Clar. 2012. “Kenyan Graffiti Artists Step up Battle against ‘Vulture’ Politicians: Protesters Want Voters at Next Election to Kick out MPs Accused of Corruption.” *The Guardian*, 21 March. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2012/mar/21/kenya-graffiti-artists-politicians-vultures> [archive].

53. Well before these events, numerous painters had used the abuse of power, corruption, and police violence as themes... An exhibit on these themes was organised at Kuona Trust<sup>2</sup> under the title “The Eyes have it,” which is also the title of a work by Kimathi. Among the painters who used these themes, we cite S. Kiarie—at their beginnings—P. Kamwathi, R. Kimathi, Bertiers, Michael Soi, J. Mbuthia, J. Kamisha, A. Githuka... See also Whalley, Frank. 2010. “Thin Line between Arts and Politics.” *The East African*, 26 July.

54. Located on her personal property, the gallery is an original architecture created by Dominic Martin and like to “create the buzz.” Group visits are frequent.

55. On the GoDown Arts Centre site (<http://www.godowntransforms.org> [archive]), a reader interested in the history of GoDown will be able to hear from its director, Joy Mboya, outlining it and, above all, the philosophy.

56. The presence of Simon Njami in Nairobi promises a disembarkation of Kenyan artists. Co-founder of *Revue Noire*, artist and critic, Simon Njami can make artists known by an informed public. The project was also presented in Brussels by Africalia. Another sign of opening up is the intervention of artists



presented there in 2009. All the other places are engaged in the regular and frequent creation of events, widely publicised on the internet; some, in fact, exist only on the web. It is crucial, for artists, to be very present online and to distinguish themselves by style, quality, and the presentation itself.

In addition to the annual events, such as the Manjano competition organised by the GoDown and the exhibition organised by the art centre at the International School of Kenya, we find the monthly openings of the exhibitions at One Off, and the slightly less frequent ones at Red Hill Gallery and Banana Hill Arts Studio, as well as, recently, the initiative of Circle Art Agency. The artists regularly find themselves at the One Off exhibition openings, a place of conviviality and continuity with a history that they share with Carol Lees, a place where they converse with art amateurs or young talents who are seeking recognition. This proximity with the artists, in an informal way also present at Banana Hill, is typical of One Off where Carol Lees uses her knowledge and her networks to help the artists she represents and immediately pass on their success to those in her mailing list. Since 2012, one can also find these artists, and in a more sensational way, in the events created by Circle Art Agency.<sup>57</sup> Led by Danda Jaroljmek, Circle Art Agency mostly functions around punctual events that, during several years, were organised through three-day sales in various places and, until today, by organising auctions. Recently (in 2017), the openings in this gallery and the launch of little-known<sup>58</sup> young artists shook the Nairobi art scene once again. The first auction had taken place in November 2013, displaying mostly Kenyan painters put in perspective thanks to the works of other East African artists. It followed the most “buzzing” event of the year, the controversial auction sponsored by the Watatu Gallery when it permanently closed.<sup>59</sup> Interestingly, the news of the Circle Art auction of 2017<sup>60</sup> presented works of Kenyan artists from the seventies and eighties:

linked to the group “White Cube” (see below) to put Nairobi on the international scene.

57. Contrary to what is written on its website, Circle Art is not, the reader realises, the first “independent agency” in Kenya.

58. The “Young Guns” exposition was opened at the Circle Art Gallery on June 7, 2017, presenting the works of 26 artists “especially young men, who have lots of energy and talent, and are becoming successful.” Some of their works are proof of the innovation of techniques, such as those of Mwini Mutuku, who works digitally and with lasers.

59. See WaGacheru, Margareta. 2013. “Good Old Gallery Watatu in Limbo.” *Daily Nation*, 5 August. <https://nation.africa/kenya/life-and-style/dn2/good-old-gallery-watatu-in-limbo-880584> [archive].

60. On February 27, 2017, in a big hotel in the centre of Nairobi, this sale auctioned a few ancient works sold at very high prices in the typical emulation of the circumstance, at the pleasure of a few artists who were present. The

now individualised, these artists of the early days should take their own place in the market... and their collections become more valuable.<sup>61</sup> Indeed, such collections do exist, as they have been patiently constituted by art connoisseurs for three decades or more, whether they were shown<sup>62</sup> to the public or not. Any success abroad gives value to African artists... as do all artists that find themselves “in the right place.” For a long time, Carol Lees has used her contacts to make works travel, notably to London where she has gone annually since the first edition of the Contemporary African Art Fair where, in 2018, Circle Art and ArtLabAfrica were also represented. From her Karen house, ArtLabAfrica’s director Lavinia Calza plays a systematic role in the diffusion of Kenyan artists to places as prestigious as London and New York. Born in Nairobi, based in London, producing works clearly inspired by Kenya, the artist Michael Armitage, thanks to the “White Cube” network to which he belongs, put Kenya on the map by organising a three-day seminar with the title “Art, Space and the City,” bringing together about fifty artists and personalities of the “cultural world,” coming from sixteen different countries. The last day, “The Gathering,” was open to a wide Nairobi public, with a bus allowing anyone to travel for free from Nairobi to Naivasha, where the seminar was taking place.<sup>63</sup> The presentation of the artist Theaster Gates, based in Chicago, made it an unforgettable day and, without being closed, elitist, in a way that called on emotion as much as on analysis to promote the implantation of an urban art giving beauty to its environment, as poor as it may be.

The promotion of public urban art also appears as an efficient way to stimulate an artistic sensibility and familiarise the public with art and artists: this is the explicit goal of the installation of a monumental and tactile work by Peter Ngugi at the “Hub,” the commercial mall in Karen.

Classically, two journalists systematically report artistic events in the press. One, Margaretta (Swigert) waGacheru,<sup>64</sup> has long been present through

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attraction for works produced in the seventies and eighties was obvious, despite the small number of works presented, while current artists proposed one or another of their works at the auction: sign of the slowing down of this type of sale requiring a search for works or artists’ attempts to raise their prices? They are not mutually exclusive.

61. As for big auction houses, only Bonham’s sold works by Kenyan artists.

62. Hotel Sankara, Alan Donovan’s African Heritage House, Red Hill Art Gallery...

63. More precisely, from February 17 to 19, 2017, at Great Rift Valley Lodge.

64. WaGacheru, Margaretta. 2012. “Nairobi’s Upmarket Red Hill Opens a New Gallery.” *Business Daily*, 16 September. <http://www.businessdailyafrica.com/Nairobi-upmarket-Red-Hill-opens-a-new-gallery/-/1248928/1498086/-/6k5jqc/-/index.html> [archive].

her columns in the *Daily Nation* and *Business Daily*. In 2008, a more informed critic, Frank Whalley “evaluates the quality of works offered in the public and private galleries by placing them in national and international context both in the present and past...”<sup>65</sup> each week in *The East African*. His desire to educate his readers is clear.<sup>66</sup> Finally, starting in 2010, at the request of the glass-artist of German origin, Nani Croze, the “Kenya Arts Diary” calendar, presenting mostly Kenyan artists, was published; its annual launching is an opportunity to honour an artist of which the most recently honoured was... Elimo Njau, the now octogenarian<sup>67</sup> “father” of the artistic scene with his PaayaPaa gallery. Nani Croze attempts to individualise the artists and, by the sale of a luxurious and artistic diary, make them known abroad—thanks to the travels of expatriates—by showing their works, their biography, and their contact. Her contribution accompanies the desire of Kenyan artists to be, simply, artists, with a name, a style, a personality expressed in their works and universal themes: whether one buys a Sane Wadu (for example), and not a Kenyan or African painting. Whalley immediately echoes the successes of artists in his weekly art column, as he did, for example, for Paul Onditi<sup>68</sup> or Beatrice Wanjiku, the latter declared, in 2016, best artist of the Contemporary African Arts Fair in New York.<sup>69</sup>

## Conclusion: In the Big Leagues

The considerations of specialists of contemporary art apply to Kenyan art, matured since its beginnings, immune to the “empty period” of contemporary art deplored by Azimi and Bellet<sup>70</sup>: there is still enthusiasm

65. Whalley, personal communication on July 13, 2016.

66. See, a.o. Whalley, Frank. 2014. “From Kenya to the US with Love.” *The East African*, 22 August [archive]. Paul Onditi, a Kenyan artist, lived ten years in Germany where he received a thorough artistic training. His works, created with materials resulting from personal research, testify to societal concerns that far exceed the context of Kenya. Following the election of Donald Trump, he created a series of paintings expressing the anxiety of many of us facing the drastic change of a world that he glimpses without optimism.

67. “The Kenya Arts Diary Launch and Arts Exhibition 2015.” 2014. Heinrich Böll Stiftung Nairobi, 6 November. <https://ke.boell.org/2014/11/06/kenya-arts-diary-launch-and-arts-exhibition-2015> [archive].

68. Whalley, Frank. 2015. “Smokey Leads the Charge at International Arts Fair.” *The East African*, 9 October [archive].

69. Whalley, Frank, 2016. “Wanjiku Featured No 1 in New York’s African Art Fair.” *The East African*, 14 May [archive].

70. Azimi, Roxana, and Harry Bellet. 2015. “Désespérance de l’art contemporain.” *Le Monde*, Cahier n° 21976, 12 September. [https://www.lemonde.fr/culture/article/2015/09/13/desperance-de-l-art-contemporain\\_4751360\\_3246.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/culture/article/2015/09/13/desperance-de-l-art-contemporain_4751360_3246.html).

in Kenya. More than ever, the Kenyan capital best embodies the description by these two authors: “Contemporary art is now part of the urban or media landscape (ibid.)” Nairobi is one of the greatest examples of omnipresent art, in the events that take place, as well as in everyday billboards, innumerable and magnificent graffiti, and the *matatu* that President Uhuru Kenyatta has returned to their colourful flow. This street art is taught and has become the subject of competition launched very recently by the Alliance française. The events that celebrated art—such as the Oscar awarded to the actress Lupita Nyong’o for her role in the film “Twelve Years a Slave,” result in as much national pride as the successes of athletes. In contrast, the lack of appreciation for arts by the authorities continues to be lamented, but everything is done to inform, put the Kenyan elites at ease, and create a market on the national scene.<sup>71</sup> The intervention of the authorities in the context of financial support for the job market sometimes results in the sponsoring of groups, which at first glance, would not have access to the international market, which is still confusing.

Kenyan painters arrived on a scene already structured by festivals and by the—still rare—publications dedicated to modern works realised by Africans. Some have succeeded in circumventing these circuits and putting themselves on the forefront of more open stages. Often, the connection between works and stereotypes of naïve and primitive African art alleviates the ignorance of emerging networks, whether in Kenya or abroad. As shown recently by a public exhibit of a work by Peter Ngugi, the success of Paul Onditi, the consecration of Beatrice Wanjiku or that of Peterson Kamwathi, who has, among other successes, a work exhibited at the British Museum, the artist emerges alone if he escapes the clichés and if s/he embodies universal themes on the international art scene which s/he reaches through intermediaries.<sup>72</sup> Freed from the clichés of exoticism, s/he no longer needs the faded laurels of a conventional biannual exhibit.<sup>73</sup> International art

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71. Thus, on July 22, 2017, the First Lady of Kenya, Margaret Kenyatta, was present at the launching of the *Visual Voices* book by S. Wakhungu Githuku.

72. The crucial role of intermediaries and collectors in the promotion of artists is not unique to Kenya or Africa. A striking example is the role that Peggy Guggenheim played in the emergence of Western abstract artists. Lavinia Calza, with ArtLabAfrica, presents African artists at the International Contemporary Art Fair in London (Somerset House, in the heart of London) and in New York.

73. The Kenyan Pavilion of the 2013 Biennial presented 11 artists of which 9 were Chinese, that of 2015, 8 Chinese artists and two Kenyans. This is self-explanatory and it is most fortunate that Kenyan artists and intellectuals reacted with force. See Serubiri, Moses. 2015. “The Double Life of Kenya at Venice. Serubiri Moses about the Kenyan Pavilion at this year’s Venice Biennale.” *Contemporary&*, 6 April. <http://contemporaryand.com/magazines/the-double-life-of-kenya-at-venice/> [archive].

fairs, such as the Contemporary Arts Fair in New York and London, bring new Kenyan works to the attention of the public each year. Computing technology plays a remarkable role in the international diffusion of Kenyan art and the creation of events that make the city vibrate and attract its elite and middle class. The purchase of works by Kenyans has become increasingly common, particularly if they have a cosmopolitan background. The media certainly helps the diffusion and the education of artistic judgement. Numerous artists are standing out, as much through style—as they intend to define their own artistic criteria—as through their means of access to the market. When they can, they install home studios and create a website, some going to greater lengths and creating their own network of representation without using an intermediary.

The galleries mostly (but not only) present Kenyan artists; the diversity of the origins of the works creates a context for the Kenyan works.

Long linked to sponsors, to their own objectives and their perception of the sociopolitical situation and possible solutions, the Kenyan art scene has partially emerged in the wake of the success of great individualities. It is characterised now, in Nairobi, by the diversification of the production and of the markets, as much as by a diversification of the means of diffusion and the mobility of major artists. The art sometimes finds itself at the service of social issues, for example workshops dedicated to children in hospitals or AIDS patients, as done by the group Art2Be, or at the service of issues of national unity—the role of artists as social mediators was remarkable during the attack of the American embassy in Nairobi,<sup>74</sup> by the Al-Shaabab group in 1998, or during the post-electoral violence when the government itself encouraged the artists to favour “the good governance,” a manipulation that testifies to aesthetic ignorance as well as economic benevolence. Recently, the lifting of the ban on decorating the *matatu*, the most democratic vehicles of graffiti art, was an opportunity to highlight the role of art on the local job market. For potential buyers, a demand remains for the remaining of pictorial, colourful, and naive works evoking the countryside, the slums, or everyday poverty, sometimes on a humorous model. But how can one talk about the extraversion of Kenyan art while this type of work, corresponding to clichés, is specifically awarded by international art fairs, notably in Dakar, while the best artists have followed different tracks?

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74. On August 7, 1998, Kenya suffered from its first terrorist attack in a still unfinished series: this one targeted the American Embassy. The Kenyan victims, including 300 deaths, were numerous. Several painters, notably Patrick Mukabi who reported this to me, laid out large canvases in the streets adjacent to the incident to paint the suggestions of passersby and help them express their emotions in this way. See also Azimi, Roxana. 2015. “L’homme de l’art.” *M Le Magazine du Monde*, 24 January: 29-35.

These artists access the international market through the universality of their message and the quality of their works. The Kenyan Pavilion of the 2017 Venice Biennale resets a quality standard absent in previous editions of the Biennale and presents five Kenyan artists under the leadership of Kiprop Lagat, a commissioner linked to the National Museums of Kenya.

The art scene in Nairobi, even if one limits it to graphic art as I do in this case, appears to be essentially multifaceted with its overlapping practices and subjects, conventions, and freedoms. It is also an exciting scene because, despite its international dimension, it remains a hotbed of clearly identifiable social networks and illuminates the more general development and operation of the art market. The (cyber) gallery operators and knowledgeable collectors could spark a surprise... unless that is already the case. The Kenyan art market is reflective of its imbrication in a city of tentacular growth engulfing galleries such as One Off, not so long ago on the outskirts, and—whilst now urban in its own right—is “popping up” in the new Riviera Mall, or even in Red Hill, to which the city is gradually getting closer.

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## *Post-scriptum*

This contribution was revised several times and completed in November 2019. Since then, the Covid-19 pandemic has hit the art world hard, in Kenya and elsewhere. In Nairobi, the art market has declined considerably, despite the

tremendous efforts of a few galleries also affected by the situation. As soon as the confinement was lifted, which roughly coincided with the summer holidays (2020), the wealthy left the city, already largely abandoned by expatriates; as a consequence, a large proportion of the art buyers were absent. At the time of writing, at the end of September 2020, a slight upturn was starting off but, as elsewhere in the world, the fear for a downturn in the Nairobi art market is there, which raises questions about when and how the extraordinary dynamism of the Kenyan art scene will pick up again. But it will!

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