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# Globalizing Kenyan Culture: Jua Kali & the Transformation of Contemporary Kenyan Art: 1960-2010

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LOYOLA UNIVERSITY CHICAGO

GLOBALIZING KENYAN CULTURE:

*JUA KALI* AND THE TRANSFORMATION OF CONTEMPORARY KENYAN ART:

1960-2010

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO

THE FACULTY OF THE GRADUATE SCHOOL

IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

PROGRAM IN SOCIOLOGY

BY

MARGARETTA SWIGERT

CHICAGO, IL

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For Migwi, Lisa, Faith Wairimu and Maya Imani Gacheru

## PREFACE

### ***Jua kali* City: The Nairobi Art World as a Site of Cultural Production**

We live in the age of the city. The city is everything to us—  
It consumes us, and for that reason we glorify it.

Onookome Okome: “Writing the Anxious City...”

This dissertation began with the intention of focusing on three separate art worlds in Kenya and examining the impact of globalization on the Banana Hill Art Studio, Kisii Soapstone Cooperative Society and Rahimtulla Museum of Modern Art. But that plan quickly changed once I hit the ground in Nairobi after being away from the country for a decade. I had been an arts reporter for leading Kenyan newspapers for many years, and although my focus had been on both performance and visual arts, I had steered clear of the visual for several years just because the contemporary visual art scene had become too political for my taste. Like some of the artists you will read about, I felt local artists were being used as ‘stepping stones’ for other people’s advancement in the international donor world, so I stepped back from covering art exhibitions and spent most of my nights reviewing plays in Nairobi. I had to leave the country for family reasons just before the new millennium arrived, but once I returned to



**Figure 1. *Nairobi City Life*, an oil painting by the Banana Hill artist Alex Mbugua**

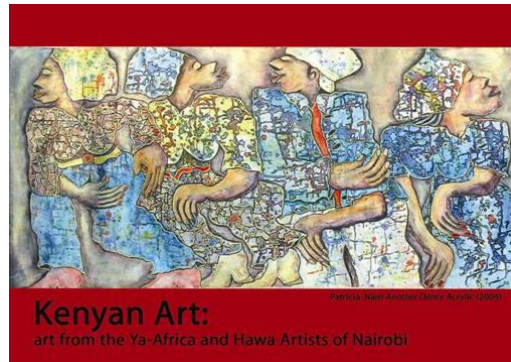
Kenya a decade later, I found so much vibrant cultural activity, so much dynamism, innovation, creative energy and global flows, that I knew I couldn't confine myself to only three art worlds; I had to see the city holistically as a site of cultural production and an 'art world' in its own right. Certainly the number of formal art institutions has increased exponentially in the last ten years: There are also more training sites for aspiring artists. Otherwise, the first two post-independent commercial art galleries still exist, one indigenous (Paa ya Paa, meaning "the antelope is rising"), the other expatriate (Gallery Watatu); thriving foreign cultural centers-French, German, British and Italian are also still active and accommodating, and the National Archives and National Museums are on-going, although the latter has been transformed with millions of European Union euros brought in to renovate and provide some funds for the arts from 2006.

Donor money has played a central role in transforming and even globalizing Nairobi's art world over the last decade not only at the National Museums of Kenya, but in the start-ups of new institutions. The RaMoMA Museum of Modern Art and The GoDown Art Center might never have gotten off the ground without substantial funding from the Ford Foundation and other development aid agencies. The same is true for another art center, Kuona Trust, which had started up with donor funds in the mid-90s ostensibly to help develop contemporary Kenyan art and artists. But as the artists themselves will explain, donor funding can be problematic, particularly when the funds dry up as many of them have since the 2008 Global Recession. And as Rasna Warah, a Kenyan journalist and former United Nations staffer explains, donor aid often leads to donor dependency among its recipients. At the same time, "Dependency on aid (donor



funding) also allows development workers and other do-gooders to continue justifying to themselves why their work is so important” (Warah 2008: 13).

The point is that while one dimension of globalization in Kenya is donor money coming into the arts community, having both positive and negative effects, foreign funding is not the only factor contributing to the tremendous growth in *jua kali* arts activity in the past few decades. On the contrary, part of the dynamism has been due to artists’ *resistance* to donor controls. In this regard,



**Figure 2. Kenyan Art, a poster by Patricia Njeri went global when *jua kali* art went on exhibition in the United Kingdom**

Rasna Warah again made the valid point when she wrote: “Aid-dependency also ensures that rich countries retain some control over their former colonies” (2008: 12). One group especially resistant to this kind of neocolonial control was the Hawa Women’s group. They had actually applied for funding to build a fully-equipped women’s art studio, and received approval for \$800,000 grant from an American donor. But when one of the donor managers refused to disperse the funds except on terms that he specified, the Hawa Women went elsewhere to raise funds from both global and local sources to conduct rural women’s art workshops that took them all over the countryside. They also managed to expose the donor’s controlling practices in the media. Other *jua kali* artists reacted to donors trying to determine where they could work. Rather than be controlled by the donor’s dictates, these artists simply moved out from under the donor’s gaze. In the spirit of *jua kali* self-reliance, they fanned out and found new spaces from which to work.

Having been lulled into complacency while the donor’s promise of ‘free things,’ once the

artists realized that nothing—not even foreign aid -- came for free, they were aroused and energized by that awakening. Quite a number of creative initiatives have resulted from that awakening.

Based on my research findings, spending many months working with, listening to and writing about Kenya's *jua kali* artists, I argue that much more than donor money has brought about the tremendous cultural productivity among Kenyan artists, a productivity that's been aptly named an African Renaissance. More than money has scattered artists all across the city where they are at work in slums and industrial areas as well as in posh suburbs and peri-urban sites. I argue that it is what Raymond Williams calls an "emergent cultural practice" and what I call a *jua kali* survival strategy which has unleashed infinite possibilities for creative expression among *jua kali* artists.

Given that the term *jua kali* has historically referred to informal sector employment, which is where millions of Kenyans migrating to the city in search of work go to earn some kind of livelihood, however meager it may be, it is hardly a surprise that a fair percentage of them resort to *jua kali* artistry. What's important to note however is that a major factor contributing to the growth of the informal sector was the World Bank-IMF-led structural adjustment programs of the late 1980s and 1990s, which reduced or eliminated subsidies on basic services in urban areas. Not surprisingly, it was around this same time that the Kenya government began to take note of the immense entrepreneurial potential of the informal sector. Ironically, it was again the World Bank that assisted the government in 1988 to set up a *Jua Kali* Development Program. However, it was *jua kali* artisans—not artists-- who got all the attention and the funding.

One reason the artists have not been the beneficiaries of government grants is because nobody has classified local artists as being *jua kali*, which is one reason why I feel my research has significance. In some circles, the term *jua kali* is pejorative and even derogatory, having racist connotations which suggest *jua kali* work is inferior. But as Kenneth King points out in his book, *Jua Kali Kenya* (1995), since the early 1970s when the term was first coined, it has gradually come to refer to anyone who is self-employed. As such, the vast majority of Kenyan artists are *jua kali* because they are self-employed. But in my usage of the term, *jua kali* artists are not only free-lance; they are entrepreneurial in the best sense, meaning they are innovative, adaptable, inventive and original. So in my view, it is a major oversight by the government not to understand the value and vast economic potential of *jua kali* artists as well as *jua kali* artisans.

The artisans tend to be more visible as they often work in clusters, in estates (what South Africans call townships) such as Gikomba and Kawangware. In that regard, they are also more statistically accessible than *jua kali* artists who as I have noted are more scattered around the city and less inclined to be counted or classified. For instance, no one quite knows, not even the Ministry of Culture, how many artists are working in Kenya, leave alone in Nairobi today. However, at the 2010 Nairobi Province Visual Art Exhibition, which was partly sponsored by the Kenya Government, over 200 artists brought in works of art for possible inclusion in a one month exhibition held at The GoDown Arts Center. That number is understood to be a fraction of the *jua kali* artists working in Nairobi currently. “Many didn’t want to be bothered. They don’t trust the government and figured participation in such a show would only take away from the time they could be working on their art,” said *jua kali* sculptor David Mwaniki.

Meanwhile, a good number of *jua kali* artists have moved out to the peri-urban edges of Nairobi to form enclaves of artists. A recent informal count of working artists based in one such enclave, Ngecha, amounted to 94, but the art collector Anthony Athaide who made that count early in 2010 claims he is sure he still has more artists to count. When one realizes there are comparable artist enclaves scattered all over Nairobi, from Kahawa West to Kitengela, Kibera to Kayole and from Ruaka to Ridgeways, one has to appreciate that something exciting is happening in Nairobi as far as cultural production is concerned. It's no wonder that Kenya's leading novelist and cultural critic, Ngugi wa Thiong'o refers to a Renaissance taking place in the region (Wa Thiong'o 2009).

In addition, the number of individual artists working at open-air *jua kali* sites set up in spaces available or at their homes is practically incalculable. However, in many instances, their work can be found in up-market galleries, such as RaMoMA or Watatu or in curio-filled shops where art is bought and sold like potatoes. The latter "culture industries" cater less to collectors and more to tourists; but to the artists who want cash to carry home, these shops (which tend to be run by East Indians) provide artists with a willing buyer. The cash they carry, however, is a pittance compared to what they would get if they had taken their art across the street to the commercial gallery; but then the up market galleries take time to sell artists' work and the need for cash can be pressing. "It's a vicious cycle, selling to the Asians because artists get addicted to being given the cash on the spot," said *jua kali* artist Patrick Kinuthia. "Often, those artists don't know how to manage their money. Instead, they go out and drink it all, which is what I used to do until I got saved," he added.

One factor that enables artists like Kinuthia to break out of the cash-to-carry cycle is the *transnational* connection that they are able to make with art markets overseas. In Kinuthia's case, it was a brother living in the United States who opened up a whole new revenue stream when he began selling prints of Kinuthia's colorful paintings in galleries around the country. Other artists, such as Mary Ogembo and Rahab Njambi, are selling their art on line at websites designed by Germans, Dutch and Americans. And increasingly, Kenyan artists, such as Ato Malinda, Samuel Githui, Peterson Kamwathi and Gakunju Kaigwa have been able to be present when their work goes on exhibition overseas. These kinds of global connections are what most Kenyan artists aspire to have. And increasingly, *jua kali* artists are becoming transnational as they figure out ways to travel abroad for artists' workshops or residencies. However, gaining the cultural capital required to be sought after in the global art market is still a cache that eludes most Kenyan artists. In this study, I will theorize this dilemma and posit some of the challenges and possibilities for ways *jua kali* artists can move beyond these barriers.



**Figure 3. *Market Women*, an oil painting by Patrick Kinuthia**

In the meantime, the works by *jua kali* artists are increasingly visible in Nairobi as the number of art centers proliferate and ordinary Kenyans gain appreciation for both the economic and the aesthetic value of the visual arts. In part this new appreciation is due to the Kenyanization of local media, particularly through popular television channels such as KTN and Citizen TV, which regularly run programs on the visual arts. The Internet has also played a significant role in rousing public awareness, especially among tech-savvy youth, as to the value of the visual arts. Kenyans are increasingly taking part

in the ‘global flows’ that Arjun Appadurai writes about in *Modernity at Large*, meaning through their increased access to new technologies they are more attuned to cultural currents and thought trends (what Appadurai calls ideoscapes and mediascapes) which include appreciation of visual culture. For instance, it was the Kenyan public that put pressure on their government to immortalize national heroes like the Mau Mau leader Dedan Kimathi, leading the government to commission a larger-than-life size bronze statue of Kimathi. What’s more, public art projects have mushroomed across the land; among them are two- and three-story wall murals featuring social messages related to everything from the need for ‘good governance’ and peaceful politics to HIV/AIDS awareness and family planning.



**Figure 4. *Water Conservation*, a wall mural by Ngecha artist Ann Muthoni Turugah**

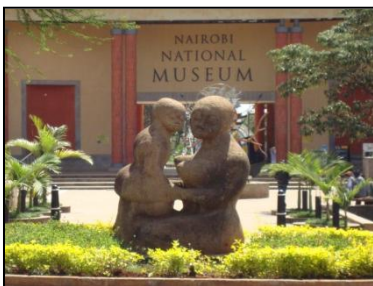
Environmentalists have also taken to the arts to drive their message home that Kenya’s wildlife needs to be preserved for the sake of the eco-system and the country’s tourist-fueled economy. Thus, scores of local artists were called upon in 2009 to decorate 50 life-size fiberglass lions to rouse public awareness of the plight of Kenya’s dwindling lion population and raise millions to keep them alive.

And probably the most popular yet controversial art form weaving its way around Nairobi today is the multicolored *matatu*, a public service mini-van that is used by the vast majority of low and middle income Kenyans on a daily basis. *Matatu* art as well as ‘bar art’ (found in local hotels, cafes, bars, barber shops and tearooms all across Kenya) are two of the most prolific popular art forms that may be found in every sector of the city populated by the less-than-posh majority of Kenyans.

All this is to say that Nairobi is one vibrant art world in which *jua kali* artists take every opportunity they can to show off their work, be it on the front and backside of *matatus*, in up-market restaurants (like Talisman, Le Rustique, Race Course and Café des Arts), five-star hotels, city parks where homeless people spend their nights or in museums and shopping malls.

It was based on these research findings that I came to the realization that there was no way I could do justice to contemporary Kenyan art by solely focusing on three separate institutions. I had to treat them as art networks interconnected at many levels: first by virtue of the artists shifting from site to site depending on their priorities and preferences, next by virtue of the institutions working together on one project or other, and third, by virtue of the markets that Kenyan artists aim to penetrate and which cause them to collaborate in devising ever-more ingenious strategies to break into both local and global art markets.

Once I discovered the fluidity of the Nairobi art world and especially the mobility of the *jua kali* artists, I realized I had to revise my research program. Now my research schedule would require my traversing the city many times in a single week. I could be in



**Figure 5. *Mother and Child*, a sculpture by Francis Nnaggenda, sits at the entrance of Nairobi National Museum**

the Kibera slum on Monday, in the peri-urban areas -- visiting Village Market, Kilele Art Studio at Ruaka and Banana Hill Art Studio all on a Tuesday, trekking to the Ministry of Culture in Nairobi's city center on a Wednesday followed by a *matatu* ride up to Kuona Trust in the green leafy suburb of Hurlingham on a Thursday, then on Friday walking up the steep Museum Hill to see an exhibition at the Creativity

Gallery at the Nairobi National Museum. On a Saturday, I could travel out on another *matatu* to Ridgeway Road, after which I would hop on a *piki piki* (motorcycle for hire) to save myself the 20 minute walk to reach Paa ya Paa Art Center. And finally on a Sunday I could take another *matatu* and *piki piki* ride, this time to Kitengele Glass Museum where Nani Croze also has her home and studio.

Every week was filled with comparable foot work on my part to collect valuable data about this under-researched arena of contemporary East African art. To see Nairobi as a *jua kali* city and art world makes a good deal of sense to me. But in the coming chapters I will elaborate on the reasons why I feel comfortable describing Nairobi as both a *jua kali* city as well as a global city, irrespective of the fact that Saskia Sasson has not seen fit to include Nairobi on her list of “cities in a world economy.” Nairobi is a *jua kali* city because it embraces artists who employ *jua kali* as a strategy for survival at many different levels: they use *jua kali* tactics to collect art materials, find sites wherein to create their art, obtain skills training to improve the quality of their work, and devise innovative ways to market their art.

As for it being a global city, Nairobi increasingly qualifies for this ranking for several reasons. One is that it is the only city in the South that contains several United Nations headquarters. Those UN employees are one of the main reasons *jua kali* artists take their art to up-market restaurants and elite malls since UN personnel tend to be connoisseurs of contemporary art. Another key factor in contributing to Nairobi qualifying to be considered a global city is its increasing connectivity. Ever since fiber optic cables reached Nairobi in July 2009 (Ross 2009), Kenyans have been thriving on high speed internet access. Plus they pioneered “mobile money” (Dizikes 2010), the cash



that Kenyans send by their mobile phones all over the country. Finally, the other reason why Nairobi ought to be up for a change of status is because the Nairobi Stock Exchange is among the leading Stock Exchanges in Africa (Mwangi 2010). The founder of the Nairobi Stock Exchange Jimnah Mbaru, is one of the most canny African entrepreneurs in the world, which is one of the reasons why, in spite of the post election violence of 2007/8, the Kenyan economy is bouncing back and is far less damaged by the 2008 Recession than stock markets in Europe and the US since they played no part in the derivatives/credit default swap games of American and European stock brokers.

Kenyan *jua kali* artists still have a problem, which the Ghanaian journalist Osei Kofi put rather well. He said Kenyans need to be buying their own people's art (Kofi 2009). *Jua Kali* artists still have a serious problem with marketing and distributing their work in both the local and the global art market. But this too is changing. As Nairobi gets more globalized and Kenyan artists get more *glocalized*, the Nairobi art world is bound to change. We will be monitoring that change, which is already under way right now.

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## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

BHAS	Banana Hill Art Studio
BIFA	Buru Buru Institute of Fine Art
BFF	Born Free Foundation
CAC	Creative Art Center
EU	European Union
GTZ	German Technical Assistance
ICC	International Criminal Court
IMF	International Monetary Fund
ISK	International School of Kenya
KANU	Kenya African National Union
KAS	Kenya Art Society
M2	Maasai Mbili
MOMA	Museum of Modern Art
OBE	Order of the British Empire
PAVA	Pan Africa Association of Visual Artists
PYP	Paa ya Paa Art Center
RAMOMA	Rahimtulla Museum of Modern Art
TARA	Trust for African Rock Art

UK	United Kingdom
UNEP	United Nations Environment Program
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
US	United States
USAID	United States Agency for International Development

## ABSTRACT

In an age of globalization, when as a result of enhanced telecommunication and global media, the world's population is more interconnected than ever, the public at large still tends to associate Africa with poverty, disease and political instability. Yet keen observers of the social landscape have observed that despite Africa's legacy of woes, cultural productivity in the region is on the rise, leading scholars to refer to the phenomenon as an African Renaissance. This is particularly the case in Kenya where a contemporary art movement is flourishing through both local and global art networks. But the question remains: how in the midst of poverty and political instability can there be so much cultural productivity? Based on field research involving participant observation and interviews with more than 200 artists and cultural workers in Kenya's capital city, I argue that it is due largely to an 'emergent cultural practice' given the Kiswahili term *jua kali*. By virtue of *jua kali* artists 'making do' with minimal resources and maximum ingenuity, imagination, originality and entrepreneurial acumen, they are creating new art forms or *bricolage*, the clearest evidence of which is what Kenyan artists call 'junk art'; which is made from global garbage garnered from dump sites, then recycled into original artworks, and finally shown/sold in local and transnational art markets, thus reflecting global flows. This genre of contemporary Kenyan art defies stereotypical myths of "tribal art" and "the primitive other." These hegemonic myths still

pervade most Western art markets, but *jua kali* artists—working through both local and transnational networks -- are striving to debunk them by their works with increasing success.



## CHAPTER ONE

### INTRODUCTION

The decades following Kenyan Independence in 1963 have witnessed a tremendous flowering of the arts. In every field from literature, music, dance and drama to filmmaking, photography and the other visual arts, Kenyans have been contributing to what the country's leading writer Ngugi wa Thiong'o has called an African Renaissance comparable to Europe's Renaissance of the 14th-16th<sup>th</sup> century (2009). Ngugi's claim has been echoed by other Africans ranging from Nelson Mandela and Thabo Mbeki to Kwame Anthony Appiah who notes that despite the history of poverty, political instability, corruption and disease commonly associated with the region, "African cultural productivity grows apace (and even) thrives ... The contemporary cultural production of many African societies ... is an antidote to the dark vision" of many Western analysts" (Appiah 1992: 157).

This study addresses the question implied by Appiah's observation, namely how, in the face of what Kenya's Nobel Prize laureate, Wangari Maathai calls Africa's "legacy of woes" (2009: 25) can cultural productivity be thriving in the region today? How credible is the claim that Africa, and specifically Kenya is in the midst of a cultural renaissance? What follows is a sociological analysis of the cultural transformation that I argue has been underway in Kenya's contemporary visual art world since Independence, with a special focus on local and global art worlds and the inventive role of Kenyan *jua*

*kali* artists in advancing the cultural movement, which has been called the African Renaissance. Howard Becker's concepts of art worlds and art networks will serve as the cornerstone of my analysis of contemporary Kenyan visual culture and art, in so far as his concern, like mine, is with understanding the ways that art networks operate as dynamic forms of social organization that have immense potential for producing and distributing works of art. They also have the capacity as cooperative entities to develop and change over time.

Art networks as forms of collective activity also have the wherewithal within themselves to construct what Becker calls "fully developed art worlds" which can meet all the needs of especially local or *jua kali* artists to effectively create and market their art both locally and trans-nationally. This approach to an investigation of Kenyan art worlds is less concerned with the aesthetics of the artworks, which is the dominant tradition in the sociology of art, and more involved with examining the social organizations of working artists who interact with both local and global art worlds through what Appadurai calls *mediascapes, technoscapes, financescapes, ethnoscapes and even ideoscapes*. (1996: 33) These are five dimensions of a special kind of interactivity that has come into being as a result of globalization with its advances in technology and communication, advances which have come to Kenya relatively recently but which are transforming the cultural landscape dramatically. These five types of "global cultural flows" have had a profound impact on Kenyan art networks and art worlds; and this study aims to examine how those global flows have seeped into the most humble sectors of

Kenya's informal or *jua kali* economy and affected changes in local *jua kali* art networks and art worlds.

### *Art Networks*

Becker defines art worlds not as spheres where elite “fashionable people” meet and mingle with genius individuals who create art as a singular social phenomenon, which again is the dominant perspective embedded in the sociology of art. Instead, his



**Figure 6. Maasai Mbili artists work and exhibit together at their Kibera studio**

notion of an art world, which is the working definition that I use in this study, is a “network of people whose cooperative activity, organized via their joint knowledge of conventional means of doing things produces the kind of art works that art world is noted for” (Becker 1982: x-xi). In this regard, my study is not so much about the sociology of art as it is about the sociology of work, and more precisely the artistic work carried out in Kenya’s informal or *jua kali*

sector. It is also about globalization and the role that global flows have played and continue to play in the development of contemporary Kenyan art.

### *Jua Kali*

The Kiswahili term *jua kali* (which literally means “hot sun”) has multiple meanings: it is synonymous with the informal sector economy as well as with the informal sector worker (King 1996). In other words, it is used as both a noun and an adjective, depending on the context of usage. It is also used to describe an “emergent cultural practice” (Williams 1977: 123) by which local artists, working through networks,

“make do” (Levi-Strauss 1966, Harper 1987, De Certeau 1988) by using minimal resources and maximum ingenuity, innovation and entrepreneurial acumen to produce original works of art or bricolage. This study investigates and analyzes how *jua kali* art production networks have contributed to the cultural transformation or renaissance of Kenya’s contemporary art world over the past half century, particularly since Independence.

“Renaissance” is a term derived from the Latin word *renascor*, which means “to be born again.” Within the European context, the word renaissance refers to a period in history when there was a great revival in the



**Figure 7. *Jua Kali* artists Ng'ang'a, Mwaniki and Wanjau at Kuona Trust**

arts and letters, in painting, sculpture, science, commerce and literature. As interpreted by the Cambridge scholar Peter Burke, the Renaissance was a turning point in European culture and civilization and a cultural movement inspired by an “enthusiasm for antiquity” whose response in different countries was shaped by local social structures and political conditions (Burke 1998:1-2). In Africa, a serious cultural revival has been afoot since Independence, and while it is not based on Greek or Roman antiquity, it clearly has roots in the recognition that pre-colonial African history was far more civilized, enlightened, and organized than what colonial powers, particularly those engaged in the notorious 19<sup>th</sup> century “scramble for Africa” claimed to be the case throughout the colonial period (Okumu 2002: 39). For example, W.E.B. Du Bois quotes the German ethnographer Leo Frobenius in his book *Africa and the World* (1996) to illustrate the way

African history has been distorted and diminished. Frobenius in his book *Histoire de la Civilisation Africaine* (1936) writes:

What was revealed by the navigators of the 15<sup>th</sup> to the 17<sup>th</sup> centuries furnishes an absolute proof that Negro Africa, which extended south of the desert zone of the Sahara, was in full efflorescence, in all the splendor of harmonious and well-formed civilizations, an efflorescence which the European conquistadors annihilated as far as they progressed (Frobenius 1936: 56).

The chief proponent for the African Renaissance has been Mandela's presidential successor Thabo Mbeki, who picked up on the theme that Mandela expressed upon his emergence from 27 years in prison. Mandela exhorted his fellow Africans to rise to the occasion and fulfill their capacity for creating a renaissance. He spoke prophetically in 1994 when he said:

We know it is a matter of fact that we have it in ourselves as Africans to change all this (alluding to apartheid and underdevelopment). We must, in action, say that there is no obstacle big enough to stop us from bringing about a new African renaissance (Ngugi 2009: 120).

Following that call Mbeki spoke often about the African renaissance during his tenure in office. Most notably, his 1996 "I am an African" address had a resoundingly Renaissance ring to it, so much so that it has been equated to Harold Macmillan's "Wind of Change" speech which the former British Prime Minister gave in 1960 and which marked a turning point in the history of African independence and decolonization. "Clearly, the African renaissance seems to be an idea whose time has come," writes Ngugi in his 2009 book *Something Torn and New: An African Renaissance*. He also notes that since 1996 the number of books, articles, journals, and conferences on the topic further suggests that a renaissance consciousness has taken root in the region.

Kenya's cultural revival has been noted not only by Ngugi, but by local writers such as Rasna Warah of *The Daily Nation* and Peter Kimani of *The East African Standard*, both of whom have commented publicly that the current cultural scene is thriving in all arenas, from music, dance and theater to literature-including fiction, poetry, and even science fiction, to film and the visual arts. Their observations might be seen as merely "parochial facts," but as Clifford Geertz observes, it is in such "local knowledge" that the social scientist sees "broad principles" (Geertz 1983: 167). Quoting an African proverb, Geertz explains that "Wisdom comes out of an ant heap," which is an apt insight given that so many Kenyans themselves are seeing broad principles in operation through the productive activities and everyday lives of *jua kali* artists. For instance, one of the country's leading scholars, historian Washington A.J. Okumu actually founded an African Renaissance Institute of Science and Technology in 1998 which, despite being based in Gaborone, Botswana, not Nairobi, Kenya, nonetheless reflects the quality of intellectual rigor spurring on the dynamic cultural movement that this study examines and analyzes from the vantage point of the visual arts.

Nonetheless, despite the vibrant developments in contemporary Kenyan art and culture, the visual arts in particular has received scant attention from Western scholars and even less from fellow Africans, be they art historians, sociologists or anthropologists, who tend to be preoccupied with West African and South African art movements, disregarding the developments in the field of Kenyan visual culture. The clearest evidence of this neglect may be seen in the 2010 publication *Contemporary*



**Figure 8. Vase created by ceramicist Magdalene Odundo**

*African Art Since 1980* by Nigerian scholars Okwui Enwezor and Chika Okeke-Agulu, which highlights no more than four Kenyan (out of over 200 cited), all of whom are what I will call *transnational* artists in so far as their work is part of the global mediascape, resident in public and private art collections around the world. Two of them live outside of Kenya, one, the ceramicist Magdalene Odundo lives in London and received an OBE (Officer of the Order of the British Empire) in 2008; the other the Deutsche Bank 2010 “Artist of the Year” award winning painter Wangechi Mutu lives in New York. Of the other two, only photographer and RaMoMA Museum curator James Muriuki is grounded in the Nairobi art world. Painter Richard Onyango stays at the Coast and is one of the few Kenyans whose work is hanging in the Geneva-based Pigozzi Collection, the largest contemporary African Art collection in the world. Otherwise, the abject neglect on the part of the two Nigerians for what is happening on the ground in Kenya currently is stunning in light of the fact that during the period of my fieldwork in Nairobi, from June 2009 to April 2010, there were exhibitions opening literally every week (often 2 or 3 a night), even as there were public art performances going on hourly in the streets as public ‘mobile art galleries’, also known as *matatus* or public service vehicles (PSV), were careening around the city traveling to all the African estates (or suburbs) covered in colorful iconic imagery that especially Kenyan youth appreciate. In less than a year, I managed to interview more than 200 practicing African artists, many of whom had exhibited their artwork both locally and globally, all the way from Shenzhen, China to San Francisco, from Venice to Vermont and from Naples to New York. The cosmopolitan character of these artists reflects quite a contrast to the Kenyan art world at

Independence when there was one colonial art school established in 1922 and one art gallery set up in 1961 by Sir Merlyn Sorsbie in the elite expatriate suburb of Nairobi known as Muthaiga. Immediately upon the declaration of Kenya's independence in 1963, a number of foreign cultural centers, notably the British and the German were established with the French following shortly thereafter. The Americans opened their usual United States Information Service library, but also chose to work behind the scenes and fund the South African exiled writer Ezekiel Mphahlele's *Chemchemi* Art Center; however, that project was short lived. It wasn't until 1966 that Kenya's first indigenous-African owned art world was born, and since then, more than 25 art venues have been conceived in the last decade alone (see Appendix E). The exponential progression of art venues that have opened up over the decades is just one indication of the Kenyan renaissance in the visual arts.

Table 1.

Nairobi Art Networks (Galleries, Centers, Studios) Opened by Decades: 1950s-2000s

Originated in:	1950s	1960s	1970s	1980s	1990s	2000s
Number of art networks	2	9	8	5	15	28

This study of art networks, global flows, and *jua kali* emergent cultural practices should rectify this omission in the scholarship and reveal the dynamic developments in contemporary Kenyan visual culture since Independence. It will document and analyze one segment of the cultural phenomenon that Ngugi calls a renaissance—that of contemporary Kenyan visual art. Some of the questions that should be answered by the study include: What are the sociological factors that have led to the formation of this



cultural movement? How can they be measured? Is it accurate to claim that Kenya's contemporary art scene constitutes a cultural renaissance? And why has this dynamic cultural movement been ignored so widely by Western and African scholars alike?

### *Debunking Myths*

In the course of this study, I also debunk a set of myths frequently associated with



**Figure 9. *Mziki Skuizi*, a scrap metal mask by Dennis Muraguri**

Kenyan contemporary art, the first one being that there is no such thing as contemporary Kenyan art, only a cottage industry of “airport art” (Barber 1997: 1) of the kind produced by Kamba and Kisii peasant carvers. The second one is as pernicious as the first, namely that the only art which does exist in Kenya is naïve, primitive and tribal, fulfilling the stereotype that Africans are

incapable of creating contemporary art, and those who try are “tainted” by Western cultural influences and therefore their art is “not really African” (Okeke-Agulu 2010: 81). And the final set of myths which are debunked and corrected in this study are those that claim contemporary Kenyan art came into being either in the 1980s with the arrival of the German-American art dealer Ruth Schaffner at Gallery Watatu, or the 1990s with the establishment of Kuona Trust by the British national Rob Burnet, or since 2000 when international donor funding contributed to the construction of art worlds controlled not by indigenous artists but by expatriates and their African surrogates to whom the funds were bestowed ostensibly to aid African artists. All of these myths are contested and deconstructed in this study with a view to

revealing the diversity of art networks actively operating all across Nairobi and the wide variety of *bricolage* currently being produced in those *jua kali* art networks.

In chapter three, I use Appadurai's concept of global flows to frame Kenya's contemporary art world within a broad historical context that connects the present with the past. I don't see globalization as a modern late 20<sup>th</sup> century phenomenon but rather as a process that got underway tens of thousands of years ago as the rock art found in Kenya and elsewhere in Africa testifies. I then fast forward to another global phenomenon, that of colonialism and Europe's late 19<sup>th</sup> century 'scramble for Africa' (from 1880-1914) after which Great Britain established Kenya as a "White Man's Country" according to official "territorial policy in Africa (meaning) the dispossession of Natives of their lands" (Malinowski 1961: 118). That dispossession led to the (Mau Mau) war of resistance in the 1950s, which is where I argue the roots of contemporary Kenyan art are to be found. Others theorize that the origins of a Kenyan contemporary art movement are actually to be found in Uganda, at Makerere University where East Africa's first fine art school for Africans was established in the 1930s. Either way, my intention is to situate Kenyan contemporary art within a broad historical context in order to clarify that East African art is not something that got started in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, let alone in the 1990s or even in the 1980s, as I read in one catalogue composed for a Kenyan art exhibition mounted in 2004 in Brooklyn, New York. In fact, East African artists such as Louis Mwaniki, Gregory Maloba, and Elimo Njau have been traveling, studying and exhibiting in Europe and the United States since the early 1960s. As such, they have been constructing art networks which are both transnational and local since that time. What this means is that even

before Kenyan Independence, contemporary art networks were in formation, contrary to the dominant view that art in Kenya was tribal, traditional and primitive at best.

In Chapter four, I try to explain how *jua kali* has played a critical role in the construction of Kenyan art networks and art worlds. I argue that *jua kali* and the informal sector have been recognized by everyone from the International Labor Organization (ILO) to the World Bank to the Kenya Government for their



**Figure 10. *Fasting and Feasting*, bricolage art by Kamal Shah**

employment and entrepreneurial potential as well as for the role that *jua kali* can play in national development. Nonetheless, for all of the studies done by national and international agencies, such as the government’s Sessional Paper on “Small Enterprise and *Jua Kali* Development in Kenya” (1992), none have identified *jua kali* artists or *jua kali* art networks as catalytic factors fueling a contemporary Kenyan art movement, leave alone a cultural renaissance. Nor do they recognize the economic potential latent in Kenya’s thriving *jua kali* art world. For all the funding that has been channeled through the Kenya government for the development of the *jua kali* sector, virtually none of it has gone to promote *jua kali* artists. In late 2009, UNESCO sponsored a symposium on Cultural Tourism in conjunction with Kenya’s Ministry of Tourism which began to talk about the untapped financial potential of what economist John Howkins calls “the creative economy” (2001) which theoretically would include *jua kali* artists. However, for the time being, it is the *jua kali* spirit of self-reliance and resilience as well as artists’

scrappy ability to “make do” when times are tough, that has enabled *jua kali* artists to sustain themselves and survive in the globalizing Kenyan economy.

### *Jua Kali Cultural Diamond*

In Chapters five and six, I develop what I call a *jua kali* “cultural diamond” in order to analyze how *jua kali* tactics are devised and employed by local artists to construct both works of art (or what Douglas Harper calls *bricolage*) and more robust and functional art worlds that can meet both their artistic and entrepreneurial needs. I also investigate interactions between indigenous and expatriate art networks and art worlds, in order to highlight the transformation from a Kenyan art world that was almost completely owned and controlled by expatriates at Independence up to today, when Nairobi’s art world is far more diverse and dynamic. However, the extent to which it is still controlled by expatriates is just one of the contested issues to be addressed in this study. In order to organize and examine data related to two sets of art networks, one established by indigenous artists, the other by expatriates, I devise an analytical tool that I call a “*jua kali* cultural diamond.” Each point of the cultural diamond signifies one of four fundamental problems or constraints that local artists must solve in order to create works of art. My study investigates how local artists, working within their respective networks employ *jua kali* tactics to address their specific needs. One need may be for a space in which to work; a second could be for art supplies; the third might be for specific skills training; and the fourth may be venues to exhibit and market their artworks. The artists’ success as cultural workers is determined by how effectively their art networks facilitate their use of *jua kali* tactics to solve their primary concern, which is the creation of

saleable works of art. What my *jua kali* cultural diamond enables me to understand is comparatively speaking, how each of the eight art networks meets *jua kali* artists' most basic needs to produce exhibit and sell their works of art.

In the process of exploring how local artists use *jua kali* tactics, I identify various ways that a number of Kenyans are struggling to establish art worlds which they control and which are both local and trans-national. The question of ownership and control of Kenyan art worlds is one that was raised frequently by local artists, leading me to see that 'art worlds' themselves can be contested sites. In or around them, one can find what one *jua kali* artist called "invisible barriers" set up consciously or unconsciously to curtail Kenyans' gaining control over Nairobi's art worlds.

#### *Invisible Barriers*

One invisible barrier is secrecy, practiced by the middle men – and women – who believe it is in their interests to keep the artist and the client separate so as to ensure a commission comes to them. But by keeping the artist in the dark in this way, it keeps artists dependent on middlemen and oblivious of both the local and transnational market value of their art. The best



**Figure 11. *An Elephant's Dream*, an oil painting by Jak Katarikawe**

illustration of this phenomenon is the relationship that evolved between East Africa's most renowned painter Jak Katarikawe and the art dealer Ruth Schaffner. Ruth bought up as many of Jak's painting as were available in her lifetime, sold them worldwide for six figures to patrons such as the Frankfurt Folk Art Museum, but never let Jak know how

much his paintings sold for. Instead, she paid his rent and gave him pocket money.

Unfortunately, when Schaffner died in 1996 this gifted but semi-literate Ugandan was at a loss financially since his paymaster was gone and his dependency on her had become his greatest vulnerability.

Another invisible barrier is a social practice described by the East African artist Elimo Njau as “the Ground Zero mentality.” It is the tendency of expatriates to come to Kenya and act as if they are ‘discovering’ the cultural landscape afresh, believing there was “nothing there” before they arrived. The ground zero mentality is essentially a derivation of the colonial mentality, which the British indulged in when they arrived in Kenya and claimed that African culture was a *tabula rasa* or blank slate which they would proceed to inscribe with their imperial policies and cultural practices. Examples of the ground zero mentality are numerous in the Nairobi art world. For instance, when Ruth Schaffner arrived in Kenya in 1984 and bought Gallery Watatu the following year, she quickly spread the word that there was nothing like contemporary Kenyan art before she got there. A decade later her former employee turned around and claimed the very same thing after launching a new art institution based largely on Schaffner’s ideas. Many other expatriates have come to Kenya and, after a year or two, claim to be experts and consultants in the field; yet they know little or nothing of the history of contemporary Kenyan art. They merely take advantage of public ignorance. One of the common practices in which these so called experts engage is the drafting of well-worded donor proposals to international development agencies, which they then get funding for. Often the proposal will look attractive to the donor because it has a local artist component, but

when the local artists are called in by the ‘expert’, it is either on a volunteer basis or on a less-than-minimum wage basis or merely to serve as “window dressing.” The lion’s share of the funding remains with the expert and little trickles down to the local artists.

Finally, the most insidious “invisible barrier” is epistemological, seeing Africans through what Samir Amin calls a Eurocentric lens. Amin claims *Eurocentrism* (1989) is an ideology that dates back all the way to the European Renaissance and maintains the preeminence of European culture. Dambisa Moyo, the Zambian economist and author of *Dead Aid* (2009) identifies the main “invisible barrier” that plagues the region as being epistemological, although she includes historical and economic factors as well. She traces Africa’s immediate problems back to the structural and cultural practices of colonialism which had a profound impact on indigenous African culture. Those structures and practices were not fundamentally altered at Independence, as African scholars ranging from Fanon (1963) and DuBois (1996) to Cabral (1973), Nkrumah (1965), and Rodney (1972) testify. As such, African artists have had to struggle against what Moyo describes as “the largely unspoken and insidious view that the problem with Africa is Africans – that culturally, mentally and physically Africans are innately different ... (and unable) to embrace development and improve their own lot in life without foreign guidance and help” (2009: 31). In essence, she describes what Edward Said in *Orientalism* (1978) referred to as the primitive “other,” meaning seeing Africans as alien and inferior. V.Y. Mudimbe, the West African philosopher, also cites epistemology as a major challenge facing the region. He identifies eighteenth and nineteenth century European writers as the ones who invented the proposition that “African people were considered as instances of a

frozen state in the evolution of humankind, defined as ‘archaic’ or ‘primitive’ human beings” (1988:107). Mudimbe explains that the ideology of the primitive African “other” is a tradition that was “invented” in the same sense as Hugh Trevor-Roper describes the invention of “the Highland Tradition of Scotland” (1983: 15-41) or as Terence Ranger explains in “the Invention of Tradition in Colonial Africa” (211-262), both of which are included in Ranger and Hobsbawm’s book *The Invention of Tradition* (1985). R.H. Lyons explains the tradition of the African “primitive other” came into being by way of consensus:

Western racial commentators generally agreed that Blacks were inferior to whites in moral fiber, cultural attainment, and mental ability; the African was, to many eyes, the child in the family of man, modern man in embryo (Lyons 1975: 86-87).

The tradition of classifying Blacks as inferior dates back centuries. And according to Ngugi, it includes Enlightenment thinkers, such as Hume, Kant, and Hegel whose “philosophy---developing as it did in the context of slavery, through explorer narratives of the dark continent and missionary accounts—embraced the darkness of otherness” (2009: 24). Nonetheless, the German ethnographer Leo Frobenius broke free from this tradition when he wrote: “The idea of the ‘barbarous Negro’ is a European invention which has consequently prevailed in Europe until the beginning of this century” (1936: 56). Frobenius like DuBois, Padmore, Rodney and Eric Williams all saw racism as an ideology invented to justify the highly profitable businesses of slavery and the slave trade. Frobenius was most succinct when he wrote:

America needed slaves, and Africa had them to offer, hundreds, thousands, whole cargoes of slaves. However, the slave trade was never an affair which meant a perfectly easy conscience, and it exacted a justification; hence one made



of the Negro a half-animal, an article of merchandise (Frobenius 1936: 56).

But Frobenius was optimistic in suggesting the legacy of racism would prevail only “until the beginning of this [20<sup>th</sup>] century.” Ironically, it was at the outset of that same century that DuBois wrote in *The Souls of Black Folk* that “the problem of the twentieth century is the problem color bar” (DuBois 1903: 1). Unfortunately, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the problem still plagues contemporary Kenyan artists at many levels, but it is one of the reasons that they devise their own *jua kali* tactics, not only to “make do” with the resources they have at hand, but also to resist and defy the racist stereotypes by producing *bricolage* or beautiful—and marketable—works of art.

#### *Transnational Connections*

One of the most effective ways that *jua kali* artists have found to circumvent these invisible barriers -- all of which basically aim to keep artists in the dark and disconnected from global as well as local art markets -- is to “go transnational,” meaning to get out of Kenya for a time, find out how global art markets operate, and then return with a more cosmopolitan perspective and with more transnational connections to global art worlds than before. It sounds easier said than done, but in recent years increasing numbers of local artists have traveled outside the country to attend artists’ workshops, exhibitions and residencies on every continent. Indeed, as Joy Mboya, the director of The GoDown Art Center put it, “Artists are among the most widely traveled Kenyans; they rival the politicians for trips abroad.” For instance, out of the more than 200 Kenyan artists I interviewed, almost half of them had traveled outside the country to attend art events overseas. In other words, they have become members of “the landscape of persons” that

Appadurai calls the ‘ethnoscape’ meaning “moving groups of people and individuals ... who constitute the shifting world in which we live: tourists, immigrants, refugees, exiles, guest workers [who] constitute an essential feature of the world,” (1996: 33) a world which Appadurai sees as “one large, interactive system, composed of many complex subsystems” (1996: 41). So from his point of view, the Kenya contemporary art world could be seen as one of those complex subsystems.

Table 2. Growth in Number of Transnational artists: 1960 - 2010

Artists who've traveled abroad	1960s	1970s	1980s	1990s	2000s	2010
	3	6	10	40	40	10

All of the ‘transnational’ Kenyan artists that I interviewed expressed appreciation for the beneficial effects of their travel, particularly as it broadened their perspective on the possibilities of interacting with both global as well as local art worlds. What is equally significant is that since the end of the era of President Daniel arap Moi in 2002, Kenyan artists have increasingly made the choice not to join the so called ‘brain drain’ that had previously plagued the country during the nearly two and half decades that Moi was in power. Instead, they may value being part of the global flows outside of Kenya, but now many prefer either to return to Kenya permanently, or to literally commute back and forth, or else to construct powerful transnational social networks via the Internet that keep both diasporan and indigenous Kenyans attuned to the cultural pulse of Nairobi’s dynamic art worlds. All three of these options suggest that exciting things are happening culturally on the home front that local artists do not want to miss and cannot find elsewhere.

In the 1980s BBC TV ran a series entitled “Shock of the New” which is a title that seems somehow applicable to what is currently happening in the Nairobi art world where something new is definitely going on, which I argue is not simply a new hybrid art form; it is a multi-genred hybrid art movement, including a wide cross section of elements, trends, dimensions, and designs. It has elements of everything from abstract expressionism, social realism, Afro-surrealism and naturalism to junk art, bar art, *matatu* art and graffiti to sculpture shaped in stone, cement, scrap metal, soda bottle tops, fiberglass, recycled stained glass, mud, steel wire and *papier mache*. The inventiveness of the artists is seemingly boundless, and while it is true that many *jua kali* artists have appropriated some ideas from Western sources, the art works produced are thoroughly indigenized. I call the creative process *jua kali* because it emerges from outside of formal systems and institutions in ways that are improvisational, innovative, entrepreneurial and highly imaginative. It derives from artists “making do” with whatever “odds and ends” are available locally (Harper 1987: 74) and coming up with *bricolage* (Levi-Strauss 1966: 21) that is indigenized.

Appadurai writes about “the dynamics of such indigenization” (1996: 32) which he claims are not well understood. He cites a number of social scientists who have begun to study of these dynamics (Barber 1987, Feld 1988, Hannerz 1987, 1989, Ivy 1988, Yoshimoto 1989), but notes that “much more [work] needs to be done” to understand the way that elements “from various metropolises are brought into new societies (and) tend to become indigenized in one way or other” (1996: 32). Hopefully, this study of *jua kali* networks and strategies for survival will advance others’ understanding of this earthy

process which Kenyan *jua kali* artists have taken to unusual heights. There is little doubt that Kenyans' transnational connections – to global markets, networks, artistic conventions and even to global garbage – all have contributed to the artists' creativity in countless ways. But this kind of poaching of ideas and cultural elements does not make their art any less original, according Susan Vogel, the founder-curator of New York's Museum of African Art. In "Digesting the West" she writes:

The widespread assumption that to be modern is to be Western insidiously denies the authenticity of contemporary African cultural expressions by regarding them *a priori* as imitations of the West. This (study) contradicts that assumption by showing that African assimilations of imported objects, materials and ideas are selective and meaningful; that they are interpretations grounded in pre-existing African cultural forms, and that they contribute to a continuous renovation of culture (Vogel 1991:30).

In a sense, Vogel is confirming the prophetic words of Paul Valery which feature as an epigraph to Walter Benjamin's famous essay, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction." It is a quote that I feel could easily have foreshadowed the coming of contemporary Kenyan art. Valery writes: "We must expect great innovations to transform the entire technique of the arts, thereby affecting artistic invention itself and perhaps even bringing about an amazing change in our very notion of art" (Benjamin 1968: 217). This study is meant to illustrate how Kenyan *jua kali* artists, working through their art networks are affecting "great innovations" leading to "amazing" artistic inventions that bear witness to the spirit of renaissance that African writers like Ngugi, Okumu, Warah and many others are writing about.

### *Outline of the Study*

In the following sections, chapter two explains my methodology; chapter three situates contemporary Kenyan art in a broader historical context; chapter four revisits the issue of epistemology and explores the issue of ‘the meaning of *jua kali*’. In chapters five and six, I construct my own “*jua kali* cultural diamond” as a means of classifying *jua kali* tactics and analyzing how they operate in eight Nairobi-based art networks; chapter seven hones in on one genre of contemporary Kenyan art which the creators themselves call ‘junk art’; and chapter seven examines the progressive role that Kenyan women are playing in advancing Kenya’s cultural renaissance. The concluding chapter summarizes the findings of this study and outlines future research and policy implications of the study with a view to improving the lot of *jua kali* artists in Kenya by rousing global appreciation for the Kenyan renaissance and the value of contemporary Kenyan art.

## CHAPTER TWO

### METHODOLOGY: MAPPING NAIROBI'S VISUAL ART WORLD

In this study of *jua kali* art networks and their role in the cultural transformation of Kenyan contemporary art world, the research methods that I employed for my data collection were primarily qualitative, ethnographic and visual. Using grounded theory, which is notable for its flexible, open-ended and inductive approach to data collection and analysis, my field work was largely based on participant observation, including both structured and unstructured interviews, in-depth interviews that again were both structured and unstructured, and archival work. In all, I managed to interview more than 250 visual artists, including mainly painters and sculptors, but also several photographers, installation artists, cartoonists, and filmmakers. I also interviewed nearly 100 supporters of Kenya's contemporary art world, including museum and gallery managers, curators, directors, and owners. I also interviewed the framers, accountants, gallery sales staff, mentors and middle men, as well as family members who often provide the glue that helps to hold Nairobi's dynamic art world intact. I interviewed media people, from the writers and editors to the online webmasters; I interviewed university and college lecturers in the visual arts, and I even interviewed government officials associated with Kenya's Ministry of Culture. Finally, I also interviewed a number of collectors and patrons of contemporary Kenyan art. In the process of the interviews, photography

played an important part in the data collection since the majority of interviewees are



**Figure 12. *Biashara Mamas*, a painting by Patrick Mukabi**

working *visual* artists who are actively involved in the process of producing works of art of the type that Harper calls *bricolage*. Virtually all of those interviewed willingly allowed me take photographs and document their art work, whether they were working *jua kali* - style at home, outside,

in a studio, or at one of the numerous exhibition sites that Kenyan artists have identified

as venues to show and sell their work. (See Appendix A and Maps 3 and 4). In every photo opportunity that I had, my main objective was to use these images to graphically illustrate the claim made in this study that the Kenyan art world and numerous art networks are part of a broader collective activity that has been called the African Renaissance.



**Figure 13. *Sun Queen*, a work in progress by Mary Ogembo**

One reason the artists were willing to let me take photographs of their work and engage in lengthy interviews is because I had established a track record over decades (1976-1999) by writing about the visual arts for the Kenyan media. That prolonged participation in the day to day activities of local artists not only gave me what Emerson calls a “deep familiarity” with Kenyan artists’ social worlds; it also meant that despite my absence for several years from the Nairobi art world, many artists remembered the role I had previously played by writing critically about the visual arts, particularly at a time

when other media outlets were paying scant attention to contemporary Kenyan art.

What's more, during my ten months of field work (between June 2009 and April 2010) I again wrote about the Nairobi art world for Kenyan media, including the most widely-read English language newspaper, *The Daily Nation* and a brand new publication, *The Nairobi Star*. In addition, my stories featured on the Pan African arts website, [www.africancolours.com](http://www.africancolours.com) as well as on the blog [www.kenyanpoet.blogspot.com](http://www.kenyanpoet.blogspot.com) where I wrote at the request of the blogger poet, Njeri Wangari. In this regard, I attained what Adler and Adler call an "active membership" role in my fieldwork:

Active membership occurs when fieldworkers 'take part in the core activities of the group' (1987: 50), performing some central, functional roles just as members do, but avoiding other roles and complete or permanent commitment to the group (Emerson 2001: 124).

I use the term "group" in relation to the local artists who make up Nairobi's multi-situated art world advisedly, since art networks are scattered all over Nairobi and its



**Figure 14.** *Kibera! USA's 53rd State*, a painting by M2 artist Kevin Irungu

environs. Part of my "active membership" involved my attempting to map out and touch base with as many local artists and art networks as possible during my fieldwork. This meant traveling by all means of public transportation to multiple corners of the capital city: all the way from Kitengela in Maasailand to Kawangware and Kibera in Nairobi slums and from Ngecha, Muchatha and Banana Hill in the peri-urban areas of Nairobi to Karen, Muthaiga and Roslyn in the more elite suburbs of the city. It meant not only linking up with local artists at public exhibitions that took place frequently,



either at foreign cultural centers such as the Alliance Francaise and the Goethe Institute or at commercial galleries such as the Rahimtulla Museum of Modern Art (RaMoMA) and the Paa ya Paa Art Center or at up-market restaurants such as The Talisman, Le Rustique and Café des Arts. It also entailed my traveling to artists' studios, many of which were located on the outskirts of the city and a few in artists - enclaves such as Ngecha, Kahawa West, and Kitengela. There were also a few sites where local artists could always be found working collectively, and those were the Ngecha Banana Hill Art Studio, Kuona Trust, the GoDown, and at Maasai Mbili deep in Nairobi's largest slum, Kibera. These were sites where the social character of art and what Becker calls "art as collective action" (1974: 767) were most accessible. These were also the venues where the term *jua kali*, which in Kiswahili means 'hot sun' is most literally in evidence since it is often outside in the open air and under the hot equatorial sun that artists will be found working as networks of people, sharing space and a common knowledge of artistic conventions.

#### *Who and How*

In order to make all of these connections I started out several months before I went to Kenya by going online and establishing contacts with representatives of Nairobi's leading Kenyan art venues, to inform them I was coming, and to ask if they would be part of my study. I was quickly put on e-mailing lists, invited to exhibitions, and welcomed to come to work with art organizations, including the Banana Hill Art Studio, the Kisii Soapstone Carvers Cooperative, RaMoMA Museum, African Colours Pan African Art Gallery, Paa ya Paa Art Center, and Kitengela Glass Works. This step also taught me my

first lesson about “global connectivity” and the transformative role that technology has played in globalizing the Kenyan art world, particularly in the last decade and especially in the area of communication. The online ease with which I was able to link up with local art networks showed me how quickly Kenya has become part of “the network society” (Castells 1996) and global community that is rapidly drawing Kenyan artists into a transnational information age, particularly onto social networking sites such as Facebook and MySpace.

#### Marginality/Banana Hill Art Studio

Among all my Kenyan informants, I was especially interested in working with the Banana Hill Art Studio since I knew from experience that their network of artists shared similar traits with other local free-lance or *jua kali* artists, namely “marginality” and the practice of “makeshift creativity” (De Certeau 1988: xiv) by



**Figure 16. Banana Hill artist John Ndungu**

means of which they construct works of art or *bricolage* out of the bits and scraps from

everyday life. But long before

De Certeau was writing about marginality and “making do,”

Robert E. Park and Everett C. Hughes had written

extensively about the marginal man that Park had seen “as a

function of the break-up and mixing of cultures attendant

upon migration and the great cultural revolutions.” Hughes claims he was inspired by



**Figure 15. Kota Otieno assembles his art using makeshift creativity**

Park's 1928 essay on "Human Migration and the Marginal Man," which seems to have foreshadowed many of the problems and the possibilities associated with rural-to-urban migration in Africa (Hughes 1971:220-221). Most Banana Hill artists experience the condition of marginality, but as *jua kali* artists, they are also men and some women who live by their wits, resourcefully and ingeniously. Or as Hughes put it, "Everybody (or every *jua kali* artist) gets exactly what he has coming to him by virtue of his own efforts." (1971: 222) What's more, the marginal man and the *jua kali* artist have much in common with Georg Simmel's "stranger" since his "specific character is *mobility*: ...he is, so to speak, the *potential* wanderer: although he has not moved on, he has not quite overcome the freedom of coming and going" (Simmel 1964: 402). What also makes Simmel's description of "the stranger" so relevant to the *jua kali* artist is that neither one is an "owner of soil" (1964: 403). The *jua kali* artist's condition of *landlessness* is precisely the consequence of colonialism, when the Europeans came to Kenya, claimed and settled on land that traditionally belonged to Africans. (Wa Kinyatti 2008, Kenyatta 1965, Cesaire 2000, Ngugi 1981). Kenya's colonial experience of land appropriation by European (primarily British) settlers goes a long way towards explaining why the vast majority of *jua kali* artists are second or third generation landless peasants from Central Province, home of the so-called "White Highlands."

One big advantage I obtained from contacting Banana Hill artists before I went to Kenya was that I was able to establish a bond of trust with them because I agreed to bring back to them more than 50 painted canvases which one American woman from New Jersey had promised to exhibit and sell for the artists but never did. Because I took the

trouble to hand-deliver those paintings to Banana Hill, I not only helped the artists out by retrieving their ‘lost’ artworks; I also was able to identify the leading artists still associated with The Studio and the status of the others there. I was also able to see how the Studio was structured, and how the apparent loss of their paintings had affected the social dynamics of the group. This was particularly significant because, the element of ‘trust’ is often the “governing principle” of network relationships (Grams 2004, Powell 1990, Schuler 1996). Trust was the emotional bond that was damaged in this network until I brought back the paintings, thus proving that the network’s leader, Shine Tani, was innocent of any alleged underhanded “winner-take-all” type dealings in a global art market transaction. But the process also demonstrated how fragile and new are Africans’ dealing in transnational art markets. It also illustrated how *jua kali* artists like Shine learn by trial and error how “fully developed art worlds” (Becker 1982: 93) are run. For no matter how hard it was to manage Banana Hill Art Studio after he temporarily lost the trust of some of his Studio artists, Shine would bounce back and emerge as Kenya’s first *jua kali* artist to become a gallery manager, curator and art dealer in his own right. In so doing, he consciously eliminated what he saw as “parasitic” middle men from the distribution process.

#### Online Pan African Networking

All the art networks that I contacted before landing in Nairobi were equally constructive in helping me organize my fieldwork schedule in advance. For instance, the online Pan African art gallery, [www.AfricanColours.com](http://www.AfricanColours.com) offered me my own *jua kali* space whereon to perch at their city center office strategically located right in the heart of

Nairobi's commercial sector. This generous offer, which I accepted, was fortuitous for several reasons: first because I was reliant on public transportation and the African Colours office was near a number of major transport circuits; second, the office itself was manned by young Kenyan women artists who were able to provide me with cell phone contacts for many of the most active Kenyan artists, a number of whom would drop by the African Colours office periodically; and third, because I was able to come back to the AC office almost every afternoon after each interview or arts event and transcribe my field notes from that day. I preferred not to use a tape recorder during interviews since the artists clearly felt freer to express themselves without a machine obviously recording their every word. I did take field notes and was careful to record memorable quotes, which I documented every day faithfully between 5pm and 9pm in an online ethnographic field notebook that I called my *Jua Kali Diary*. For the most part, I kept my *Jua Kali Diary* to myself; however occasionally, the ethnographic memos that I wrote about the artists I interviewed would get transformed into feature stories that would be published in the local media and then circulated within the Nairobi art world. For instance, one story I wrote which got published online at [www. African Colours.com](http://www.AfricanColours.com) was based on a memo that I drafted following from the preparatory contacts I had made with the Kisii Soapstone Carvers Cooperative Society and its founder Elkana Ong'esa, who I have known for as long as I had worked in the Kenyan media.

#### Glocalization and Kisii Stone

Just as I had contacted Banana Hill Art Studio because I knew it represented an art network frequented by a number of *jua kali* artists, so I contacted Kisii artist Elkana

Ong'esa because I knew his cooperative society produced *glocalized* works of art (Robertson 1992: 173) in the form of sculptures made by local sculptors with Kenyan Kisii soapstone but designed to be specifically marketed in a global locality outside of Kenya. *Glocalization* is a term popularized by the British sociologist Roland Robertson, but it first appeared in the late 1980s in articles by Japanese economists in the *Harvard Business Review*. I had contacted Ong'esa not only because I knew him to be one of Kenya's first transnational artists, who had gone to Paris in 1978 accompanying his multi-ton Kisii stone sculpture, *Bird of Peace*, which has stood at the front entrance of the UNESCO headquarters from that time up

until now. But I also contacted him because he is the mastermind who founded the Kisii Soapstone Carvers Cooperative Society and I wanted his help in understanding the complete Kisii stone cottage industry. Could we go step by step, I asked him, from the quarries in his homeland of



**Figure 17. *Bird of Peace*, a Kisii stone sculpture by Elkana Ong'esa at UNESCO Headquarters in Paris**

Tabaka constituency in Kisii district in southwestern Kenya, meet the miners, the designers, and actual carvers, and then also meet the marketers who ship the finished Kisii stone sculptures to both local and global markets in Europe, America and Japan? Ong'esa was happy to accommodate my request. Being the first Kisii stone carver among his people to go to university and get several advanced degrees in Uganda and Canada, Ong'esa was very conscious of the responsibility he had to his people, especially as a large portion of Kisii stone carvers are clansmen and women, descendent from one

grandfather Ong'esa who had several wives and many offspring, practically all of whom are in the network at some level. Elkana, like Shine, had a goal of eliminating the middleman from the marketing of Kisii stone works, which is why he created the cooperative, to ensure the Kisii people keep control of the marketing of their craft. He has been only partially successful however, since the Kisii stone cottage industry is much larger than any one person, network or clan can control. The free market economy has meant that the local cooperative currently has many competitors. Meanwhile, Ong'esa's big challenge is that he wears many hats at once. The cooperative members want him back home in Tabaka; however, he recently became president of a newly formed Pan-African art organization in September 2009, the Pan African Visual Artists Association (PAVA). And possibly most importantly for the *jua kali* artist Ong'esa, he and his team of Kisii stone sculptors were completing another multi-ton sculpture for the current American Ambassador to Kenya, Michael Ranneberger, which the artist calls *Dancing Birds*. Simultaneously, he was negotiating a major stone sculptures symposium which he hoped to hold in late 2010. He was also scheduling a return trip to China where he has already been several times. Evidence of the trans-nationality of this Kenyan artist is not only to be found in Paris, but also in China where his 12 foot tall granite stone sculpture now stands in the National Museum of Shenzhen. But as exceptional as Ong'esa's cosmopolitan career has been, I soon discovered that his transnational perspective was by no means unique, as I learned while meeting scores of *jua kali* artists who are also world travelers.

## High Art and Cultural Capital

Prior to traveling to Kenya in June 2009, I contacted Carol Lees, curator and co-founder of RaMoMA Museum, asking if I could work with the Museum and possibly interview local artists on site. RaMoMA had only been launched in 2000 with a substantial grant from the Ford Foundation; but the vision of establishing Kenya's first museum of modern art had been in the mind of RaMoMA's co-founder, the Kenya-born British artist Mary Collis for many years. Lees meanwhile had extensive curatorial experience at another gallery, One Off, which she personally started in 1993 and put on hold to work with Collis at RaMoMA. Collis and Lees both envisaged putting Kenyan contemporary art on the global art "map" and in the global art market, much as the late Ruth Schaffner, former owner of Gallery Watatu, had begun to do. Lees and Collis both welcomed me to RaMoMA, which had just recently moved from Rahimtulla Towers (Nairobi's first skyscraper) to a sprawling seven-galleried museum in a leafy suburb of Nairobi called Parklands. Unfortunately, their move coincided with the start of the global recession of 2008, which caused major complications for RaMoMA, since most of their foreign donors had to terminate grants that the Museum had relied on since its inception. Nonetheless, RaMoMA contributed a great deal to "transnationalizing" Kenyan art: first, by obtaining scholarships and art residencies for promising local artists overseas, then, by promoting Kenyan contemporary art through their substantial global connections and third, by publishing the first glossy Kenyan contemporary art magazine *Msanii* which was widely circulated and gave more symbolic and cultural capital (Bourdieu 2000) to local artists' works than practically anything else locally could do. Before I left Kenya in



April 2010 I spent the month of February working as a writer-in-residence at RaMoMA, profiling specific artists that the Museum identified as among the most important contemporary Kenyan artists whose work they endorse. This provided me an excellent opportunity to link up with several elusive local artists who had become so successful transnationally that they no longer gave interviews to local researchers like me. But once I acquired this change of status and became a professional writer for RaMoMA, I gained legitimacy and status sufficient to obtain my interviews and fulfill my contract with RaMoMA as well.

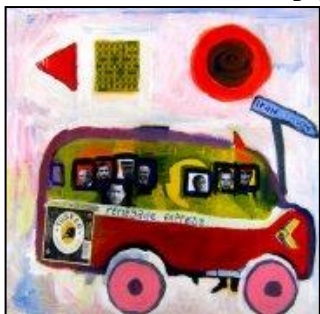
### Black Culture

Reconnecting with Paa ya Paa Art Center before launching my fieldwork was also important in so far as it inspired me to move my departure date forward in order to observe the partnering of Paa ya Paa artists with a group of 20 young African American artists, known as The Awakening, who were coming to Kenya in June 2009 specifically to help resurrect the Center after a fire had razed most of Paa ya Paa's gallery, library and archives and from which the Center had never fully recovered. As I wanted to study both local and global art networks in Kenya, this promised to be an excellent opportunity to interview both African and African American artists and observe the transnational networks being established, not only between Paa ya Paa and the Texas-based artists who were affiliated with several American galleries, but also between the Black Texans and other up-and-coming Kenyan art networks, such as Jimmy Ogonga's Nairobi Arts Trust based at The GoDown, another Nairobi art center. I wanted to observe the *global flow* of

African American culture in this instance, especially as I found it resurfacing in other Kenyan art networks.

### *Matatu* Culture

One such site is in *matatu* culture, so named for the public service mini-vans (PSV), the *matatu*, that ply the city streets of Nairobi covered in colorful signs and symbols, many of which come straight out of Black American hip hop culture. *Matatu* mini-vans have been providing relatively cheap public transport for working class Kenyans since the dawn of Independence in 1963. The cost



**Figure 18. *Matatu* Art, a painting by Michael Soi** was originally three (*tatu* in Kiswahili) shillings when these mini-vans initially took to the road; today the cost is more than 100 times that price on average.. Since the Eighties, African American R and B hits have been constantly played on makeshift (*jua kali*) *matatu* sound systems, except when the Kenya Government cracks down and periodically bans loud music in the mini-vans. Since the early 1990s, the chassis of *matatus* have served as popular sites for graffiti artists and sign writers to paint iconic images of mainly popular African American hip hop artists such as Lil Wayne, Snoop Dog, Jay-Z and Beyonce. The Government also clamps down periodically on *matatu* art, making the owners remove all the colorful images and insisting they be monochromatic. But invariably the ban holds for no more than a month or two, according to Ford Foundation's regional director Dr Joyce Nyairo. After that, the public demand for this unmediated popular art form returns *matatu* artists to work. Besides rap culture, *matatu* artists draw inspiration from various popular sources, such as global sports and

international politics. This means that everyone from Michael Jordan and Tiger Woods to Osama bin Laden, Adolph Hitler, Barack Obama and Che Guevara have at one time or other been painted on the side of a *matatu*. Among urban youth, *matatu* culture including the music, the art and even the “gangsta” style of fashion worn by the conductor/touts, is exceedingly popular. But among the older population, *matatu* culture is either avoided in favor of well managed buses or maligned for its loud music, reckless driving and garish designs plastered on both the interiors and exteriors of the mini-vans. But however much the older population complains and however much the government tries to suppress their business, *matatus* not only provide a valuable service to the public and meet a genuine need for convenient low cost transportation; they also reflect the *jua kali* or informal sector spirit of scrappy ingenuity and makeshift micro-enterprise that this study is focusing on.

The other element of *matatu* art that makes it most valuable to this study is its social organization, for out of all the art networks I investigated in Nairobi, it is only within *matatu* culture that I found what Becker calls a “fully developed art world” (1982: 93) wherein networks of people act cooperatively in more or less recurring or routine ways. There is a clear cut division of labor among the *matatu* artists and their support personnel. There are also clearly specified conventions by which constituent members of this art world coordinate their separate lines of action. And as a collective activity, *matatu* art is the best example of my unit of analysis for this study, which is an art world. It will not be the easiest arena to investigate, given that the various networks of people making up this multifaceted art world are spread all over Nairobi. And if one includes not only

production, but distribution and evaluation in an art world, the first challenge related to *matatu* art is finding the production sites. After that, *matatu* art circulates all over the city and the country in a fashion primarily dictated by several factors, including the market demand, government regulation and surveillance, and demographics. And as for evaluation, the public have strong opinions about their preferences in *matatus*, depending on the quality of not just the art but also the music, sophistication of the sound and light systems, and conduct and style of the *matatu* conductors. All of these factors affect the marketability of especially inner city *matatus*. The fact that *matatus* circulate daily all over the capital city as well as around the country means that *matatu* culture is decentralized. But this doesn't make *matatu* culture any less of an art world in Becker's sense of being one or more networks of people "whose cooperative activity, organized via their joint knowledge of conventional means of doing things, produce the kind of art works that art world is noted for" (1982: x). In fact, the dynamism, fluidity, diversity and improvisational style of *matatu* culture only serve to confirm that Kenya actually is witnessing a cultural resurgence also referred to as a renaissance (Ngugi 2009: 127).

#### The Art of Recycling Junk

Finally, I contacted the German artist Nani Croze of Kitengela Glass since her site is the one other art network that I believed came closest to operating as a "fully developed art world." But unlike *matatu* art, hers is an art world that is primarily situated in one place, (apart from its transnational distribution network that spans Europe and North America) on the outskirts of Nairobi on the Kitengela plains. It is a self contained world that has evolved over several decades (since 1979) and is governed by the vision and

values of Croze, who in addition to being a painter, sculptor, muralist and glass artist is also a fierce environmentalist, animal behaviorist and ambitious entrepreneur who successfully markets much of her art transnationally. Her local art world is filled with vibrant collective activity involved in everything from glass blowing to jewelry and mosaic making to constructing stained glass art made from recycled glass.



**Figure 19. One of 50 *Born Free* lions, painted by Nani Croze of Kitengela Glass**

There is a broad division of labor and constant training in artistic conventions during workshops that Croze

periodically runs for both Kenyan and expatriate artists. Most of these artists produce one off works of glass art. However, in the 1980s Croze spun off a section of Kitengela Glass which now devotes itself to more commercial sales, producing everything from glass dinner sets to glass chandeliers mostly for export. Nonetheless, even these cottage



**Figure 20. Kenyan glass blower Martin Maasai creates glass art by recycling broken bottles**

industries confirm Becker's concept of "art as collective action" in the sense that it is created by networks of people acting together according to agreed-upon conventions. Croze continues to work with other networks of glass blowers to design and produce original works of contemporary *bricolage*, all made from broken beer, wine and soda bottles that she, working together with others, collects and recycles. In this regard, her *bricolage* is one example of a genre of Kenyan art that I found everywhere in Nairobi and which other *jua kali* artists call "junk art."

*What and How*

Once I was on the ground in Nairobi, my biggest challenge was to find out as much about Nairobi's multi-situated art world in the least amount of time, and to that end, I came equipped with the tiniest computer I could find, a digital tape recorder (which I rarely used), a Sony 8 pixel digital camera (which I replaced with a 12.1 pixel camera once the other was stolen by a pick-pocket at one of Nairobi's busiest bus stops), spiral notebooks that could fit easily into a pocket, a backpack, solid walking shoes, a money belt that I wore around my waist with the bulge in the small of my back, and a calendar and address book filled with my Kenyan contacts. I also came equipped with my finely-tuned questionnaire, prepared to use it less as a sterile Q and A instrument and more as a guide to open-ended interviewing. In the course of ten months and in the process of snowball sampling of interviewees from every facet of Nairobi's diverse art world, that questionnaire would be transformed and sub-divided depending on whether I was interviewing a curator or a collector, a university-trained painter or a self-taught sculptor. But by far the most essential tool of my trade had to be bought in Kenya, and that was the pre-pay Nokia cell phone that I wore around my neck on a lasso so it would never get lost. The cell phone became the life line of my fieldwork, containing names and numbers of more than a hundred Kenyan artists. The cell phone explosion hit Kenya around 2001, according senior sociologist at University of Nairobi, Dr. Paul Mbatia, who works with "The Globalization of Science" project, a collaborative initiative of universities in Kenya, Ghana, South Africa, India, and the US which studies the impact of the Internet and mobile telephony on Third World countries like Kenya. By late 2009, according to a

BBC study, there were more than 15 million cell phones in Kenya (Greenwood 2009). In my experience, the cell phone facilitated my data-gathering as nothing else did. It was particularly useful because logistically speaking, getting around Nairobi is not easy. Being reliant on public transportation was not a problem in itself since *matatus* travel to almost every area of the city that I wanted to go. And where they didn't go, there were motor cycle 'taxis' called '*boda boda*' (the latest vehicular innovation that came in Kenya with the Chinese in 2006), which could take me the extra distance off the beaten path. The big issue related to getting around the town was the traffic jams that started before dawn and could clog the city's main traffic arteries literally for hours. Thus, if I didn't map out my day early, I could easily waste precious hours getting stuck in traffic. This reality is the main reason I learned to walk for miles without complaint, rather than wait for slow moving buses or private taxis. It is also why I learned to take faster-moving



**Figure 21.**  
**Traffic Jam by**  
**Samuel Githui**

*matatus*, which often ignored traffic rules as a means of circumventing the jams, but which were the only way to get around the city in relatively good time. Meanwhile, the other reason why the cell phone was my number one tool of the research "trade" is because artists and art networks are scattered all over Nairobi. To get to them I needed explicit directions so I could be sure to board the right vehicle (all of which are numbered and named) at the right *matatu* or bus stop. The other complication with public transportation is that these *matatu* stops can shift anytime, since the Kenya government is always trying to curtail *matatu* movements around the city center. Some sources said police harassment was due to

senior politicians owning shares in the bus companies and wanting to reduce competition from *matatus*; others claimed it was due to *matatus* genuinely posing a threat to pedestrians, particularly tourists, due to their manic speed and style of operating. Either way, one needed to monitor the status of *matatu* mobility on a day to day basis. Finally, the other reason my cell phone was so useful is because I not only needed to book appointments with prospective informants in advance; I also liked calling and reminding them of our impending interview since I knew my time in the country was limited and I didn't want to be forgotten. Not that the artists would necessarily forget me but because their *jua kali* lifestyles could be marginal and makeshift, there might be spur-of-the-moment issues that could take precedent over an interview with me.

Even before I set foot on Kenyan soil on June 22, 2009, I was aware that I had more open doors to walk through than I had time for, so I literally hit the ground running and hardly stopped until my three month visitors visa ran out and I went home briefly to consult with my dissertation committee, family and friends, returning quickly to watch six more months pass in the twinkling of an eye. What helped me to



**Figure 22. *Matatu Stage*, an oil painting by Joseph Bertiers Mbatia**

structure my time effectively was the fact that I was staying on the African side of town (in Kariobangi South) with a middle class Kenyan family that had young school children who had to get to school before 7am. That meant I could get a lift part way to Nairobi's city center if I shot out the door with the family at 6am, got dropped halfway to town, and



then jumped onto one of the big commuter buses that were reliable, relatively comfortable and popular among working class Kenyans who had formal sector jobs in town. During that hour-long trek, I would read newspapers and listen to radio DJs banter about local politics and popular culture. In the city center by 8am, I would spend the next hour of my day, sitting in a coffee shop or tea café confirming my day's program and scheduling my week. I would call up artists, museum curators, gallery managers and long-time observers of the Kenyan cultural scene, including journalists, foreign cultural center directors and collectors, to make appointments for interviews. After that I went straight to Chester House, the building renowned for its first floor Press Center, where most international media outlets were based, including the online Pan African art gallery, African Colours, where I would greet the four members of staff and check on the local arts activities of the week. African Colours was the closest thing to a contemporary Kenyan art information center, so it was a perfect place to perch. I was given a key to the office by the boss, former Reuters' photo-journalist Andrew Njoroge. This privilege meant I could work there around the clock, which is exactly what I did for many months. I would conduct interviews during the day, dash back to the office after AC staffers were gone, and then transcribe my notes and quotes until 9pm. After that, I would literally run across town to the central bus station to get the last commuter bus back to Kariobangi South where my Kenyan family was just going to bed. Ideally I would conduct just one interview a day, but as there was so much going on all around me (sometimes two or three exhibitions would be opening on the same day) that I had to be flexible. If something came up spontaneously, like the discovery of an exhibition opening in a few

hours or another artist of interest crossed my path unexpectedly, I would have to be ready to change my plans. More often than not, I would stick with the suggested practice of conducting one in-depth interview (for one to three or four hours) a day and then transcribing it as soon as I got the chance. That is why I carried my mini-HP computer around in my backpack, unconcerned that I might be mistaken for a tourist. And if by chance, I was not able to get into the Chester House office, I would transcribe my interviews either in the popular (American-owned) Java Coffee House which had ‘wi-fi’ or at one of the numerous ‘cyber cafes’ that were cropping up around the city center like weeds. I never could transcribe my interviews at the house where I stayed as there was too much going on and it would have been anti-social not to spend time with my hosts.

#### *Where and How*

The first order of business upon my arrival in Kenya was to touch base with all the art networks I had informed in advance of my coming. It seemed fitting that the first place to go was Paa ya Paa, not only because it was the first indigenous African-owned art gallery in Kenya and the owners were my good friends, but because I was just in time to observe Paa ya Paa’s hosting of a farewell dinner for the African American artists who had come to help reconstruct portions of the Art Center. The event attracted a wide cross section of Nairobi-based artists who had gotten to know the African Americans since a splinter group of them had gone to work at a different art center, The GoDown, with a different—apparently competing arts organization, The Nairobi Arts Trust. My spiral notebook got filled that first night as I had the opportunity to get contact numbers from more than 30 local artists most of whom were based either at The GoDown or at another

art center, Kuona Trust, or they worked in private studios on the outskirts of the city. This would serve as strategic information for me since it not only revealed a generational split between the more mature artists affiliated with Paa ya Paa and the younger, less established *jua kali* artists who, like Simmel's stranger, wander in today and stay indefinitely and who are "not tied down in [their] action by habit, piety, and precedent" (Hughes 405). It also introduced me to two more Nairobi art networks, one based at Kuona Trust, the other at The GoDown, where I eventually would spend a lot of time interviewing artists and observing the group dynamics of these complex social networks.

My next stop was African Colours where I again heard that Kuona Trust was a center where I would find thirty more *jua kali* artists renting studio space. But as my AC informants were mostly young women artists, I realized how important it would be for me to keep account of the women artists and to seek them out specifically. I had already begun establishing rapport with artists, selecting informants, conducting in-depth interviews with both women and men, and I quickly committed myself to the practice of transcribing interviews as well as coding and memoing the same day. Making memos filled with "thick description" (Geertz 1973: 6) came easily, particularly as I turned a number of my 'memos' into art stories that appeared either in the daily press, on the AC website or on Njeri's blog.

### Mapping the City's Art Networks

African Colours became the home-base of my own "art world," the site from which I launched out to gather data that enabled me to map Nairobi's numerous art networks. It also served as a makeshift archive where I could temporarily file the

documents I collected, including catalogues, invitation cards, biographical data, group constitutions, and any other documentation for future reference. Comparing notes on a daily basis with African Colours staff, I quickly caught up with exhibition calendars and popular venues where the artists met. They included Kuona Trust, The GoDown, and RaMoMA Museum—sites that several artists called “the cartel” since all three had been amply funded by the Ford Foundation in the name of “assisting Kenyan artists,” which the artists found questionable. Then there were the foreign cultural centers, particularly the Alliance Francaise and the Goethe Institute, both of which regularly mounted Kenyans’ art exhibitions as did the Banana Hill Art Studio. Other venues where local artists organized their own ad hoc group exhibitions were up-market malls like the Village Market, Yaya Center and The Junction, restaurants, such as The Talisman, Le Rustique, Cafe des Arts, Race Course Restaurant, the Karen Blixen Coffee Garden and Mamba Village, and annual fairs, such as the Bizarre Bazaar, the International School of Kenya Exhibition, and the Story Moja Hey Festival. Until mid-2010 when Lydia Galavu was made curator, the Nairobi National Museum only occasionally mounted exhibitions at its Creativity Gallery, but as the entire Museum had been in the process of renovation from 2006 with funds from the European Union, the Museum was in flux, the exhibitions were rarely publicized. Meanwhile, there are new artists’ networks being established all the time. Some of them get started in Nairobi slums, such as Maasai Mbili which got together in 2003 in Kibera, the city’s largest slum (with 1.5 million living in a two square miles of land), Kijiji Art Center, another self-help artists group launched in 2009 in Kayole, and Mukuru Art Center which trains slum children in painting and drawing.

Finally, many local artists for a wide range of reasons have shifted their studios and exhibition sites to their peri-urban homes, first to save money on urban rents, second to save on the exorbitant commissions that some galleries demand, and third to have the space they need to work as they like. I found a number of artists' enclaves—in Ngecha, Ruaka, Kahawa West, and Kitengela—where *jua kali* artists live and work at the same site, but their homes are nearby other artists, so they still get the benefit of neighborly networking.

#### Learning the Local Language

One thing I discovered in the course of my fieldwork is that the communication links among local artists in Nairobi are so strong that even when they don't seem to be networking, they still keep close track of one another's activities. Whether they are willing to share that information with the researcher is another matter altogether. But it isn't a matter simply of everyone speaking the national language, Kiswahili—which is a very smart thing to learn—or speaking English or any one of the forty-two Kenyan communities' mother tongues or even speaking Sheng, the streetwise slang version of Kiswahili. It has more to do with establishing rapport and trust with the local artists who are ever on the look out for new opportunities to move forward in their careers. One way that I established rapport with artists was by writing about their collective activities and getting their stories published in the local media, which rarely happened otherwise. For instance, I wrote and got published a critique of five Kuona – based artists who mounted an exhibition at the Goethe Institute entitled *Black Man's View/ White Man's Taboo*, which was inspired and informed by Frantz Fanon's classic text *The Wretched of the*

*Earth*. The curator Ato Malinda, a Kenyan woman who had been to university in the US, felt strongly about the black-on-black racism she had encountered from fellow Kenyans upon her return from the States, and so she worked collectively with four other *jua kali* artists to construct a conceptual art exhibition based on insights garnered from Fanon's writings. It was a sensitive topic and all five artists (Dennis Muraguri, Cyrus Ng'ang'a, Kepha Mosoti, Kota Otieno and Ato Malinda) were pleased with what I wrote. What's more, Kuona's manager Danda Jaroljmek pinned my story up on a strategically located glass encased bulletin board at the Trust for all to see and read. After that, no artist connected with Kuona Trust was in doubt that I was a trustworthy writer-researcher who empathized with their issues and understood nuances of local interaction that other field workers might not understand. Robert M. Emerson writes about "the advantages of insider fieldwork," which is a status I believe I accrued from my published writings among other things. Those advantages included "more facile entrée, a higher degree of trust, easier access to the nuances of local interaction and meaning" (2001: 122). It was based on trust that I believe I earned that I was invited to several artists' workshops organized by local art institutions (including African Colours and RaMoMA Museum) that wanted to hear what local artists had to say about what they wanted and needed from those institutions. Speaking in English, artists were frank and forthright in their expressions of displeasure with the *status quo* at established art worlds. Their grievances included the high commissions (including VAT or Value Added Tax) that a gallery like RaMoMA is demanding artists pay. They also felt that galleries were doing little to promote local artists' work either locally or trans-nationally. They were also unhappy that

art venues like Kuona Trust were no longer conducting skills training workshops as they previously had done. One venue that had a similar artists' brainstorming session refused to allow "outsiders" like me to attend; but I heard from the artists afterwards that the interactions between the expatriate manager and the artists was as frank and forthright as before, only the manager took the criticism badly, and the meeting was cut short. But what all of these interactions showed is that the creators of contemporary Kenyan art are clear about where they want to go with their art. They have had sufficient exposure in the past – through international workshops, artists' residencies and the Internet—to want their work to be exhibited, distributed and evaluated more consistently and more aggressively, on both the local and global art markets. The fact that the Nairobi based art institutions have not yet attained those "art world" standards is a frustration to local artists, who are busy nonetheless finding means to circumvent the established institutions and blaze their own creative trails into global art worlds.

#### Finding the Facilitators

Gaining a comprehensive understanding of the Nairobi art world, including all its myriad art networks, was never a matter solely of finding individual artists. It also had to do with learning the perspectives of those who cooperate with and network actively among the various groups and individuals that produce *bricolage* using whatever media that they can find. That meant I needed to seek out the museum curators, gallery managers, art collectors and patrons as well as the framers, art material suppliers, arts reporters and families of artists who have chosen to make creativity their life practice as well as their strategy for survival in Kenya's rapidly globalizing world. In the remainder

of this study I will map out Nairobi's art world in greater detail and also examine the ways that local artists use *jua kali* tactics as means of producing, distributing and even constructing art networks of their own. Seeing *jua kali* as an expression of entrepreneurial agency is a major issue I address, particularly as I see the strategy of *jua kali* self reliance enabling Kenyan artists to contribute effectively to the African Renaissance which is unfolding in the region currently.

### *The Interviewing Process*

In relation to the artists interviewed, I asked them a wide range of questions related to their work, their background, their art networks and the wider Nairobi art world, and countless other issues that cropped up in the course of our open-ended conversations. I was able to meet many of the interviewees on several occasions, including at exhibitions and workshops as well as in their studios and over coffee or lunch. I interviewed them one-on-one and occasionally in group contexts, as for instance when I was asked to lead a group discussion at Kuona Trust on Kenyan sculpture with a room full of local sculptors from whom I learned as much or more than I shared. Among the most obvious questions that I asked artists are the following:

What is your favorite art form? What media do you use? Where do you get it? Do you pay for it and if so, how much? Who taught you to create, starting from early years up to the present? Did you have formal training or was it mostly mentoring and apprenticeship? For how long have you studied and practiced your art? Where do you create, meaning in a private or home studio or in a communal studio space, and if the latter, with whom do you work? Do you now or have you ever worked *jua kali*-style, out



in the hot sun, in the open air? What art networks do you work with, if any? Where do you exhibit your art? Do you go to exhibitions at RaMoMA, Kuona Trust, Paa ya Paa, the National Museum or any other the other venues where your fellow artists exhibit? How often do you attend? Where else do you meet up with fellow artists? Have you exhibited outside of Kenya? Have you studied, visited, been awarded an artist residency outside of Kenya? If so, why did you decide to return to Kenya? Do you feel there is a lot or a little going on in the visual arts currently? What evidence do you have to confirm, a little or a lot? Have you seen a change in the way the Kenyan art world operates since you first started producing art yourself? Who are your best patrons? Do local Kenyans buy your work? Is it true that only tourists and foreigners buy contemporary Kenyan art? Who are the artists that you work most closely with? And which ones do you admire most? How would you like to see the Kenyan art world improve and do more for Kenyan artists?

Unfortunately, the richness of my conversations with the artists cannot be fully explored in this study. But what I do hope to reveal is just how ingenious, inventive and energetic are the current crop of Kenyan artists. Most of them would not claim to be “renaissance men and women;” however through this study of the role *jua kali* has played in developing art networks in Kenya over decades, I believe I can clearly show how vividly a spirit of renaissance can be seen in the *bricolage*, the works of contemporary art produced by Kenyans.

#### Talking to Supporters of Nairobi’s Art World

My interviews with other members of the Nairobi art world apart from the artists involved questions that directly referred to their relations with the artists, their artwork,

and the role they played in the artists' lives. In speaking to patrons, managers, curators, administrators and even dealers, I also asked about trends in contemporary Kenyan culture. Some, such as the new Kenyan communications director at Ford Foundation, Dr Joyce Nyairo, were very positive while others, like the Belgian development aid worker-turned cultural consultant, Gonda Geets, sounded negative and cynical about the future. To me, this dichotomy reflected a similar pattern breaking down between those aligned with the *jua kali* ingenuity, resilience and self reliance who affirm the Kenyan cultural renaissance in contrast to those who only saw Kenyan contemporary art as contingent upon foreign assistance for survival: I found those with an appreciation for *jua kali* tended to understand that 'making do' in difficult times was a survival strategy that *jua kali* artists had practiced for decades, making them resourceful and resilient enough to cope with the current economic downturn; meanwhile, those who had relied on foreign funding either for their salaries or their incentives to create were fearful and pessimistic as they saw a future devoid of donor funding for as long as the global economy was in recession. Whether they were artists or foreign "experts," those who complained loudest about diminished prospects for contemporary Kenyan art tended to be the ones whose livelihood had derived from the loans and grants that had dried up during the Recession. Yet not all the donors abandoned the Kenyan art world during these difficult financial times. Scandinavian donors in collaboration with The GoDown Art Center funded workshops in 2009 and 2010 on the topic *The Economy of Creativity*, to address potential survival strategies that Kenyan artists might employ during these tough economic times. The premise of the workshops was that since a good deal of foreign donor support has

dried up due to current global Recession, Kenyans needed to think about devising new art projects that would attract the attention of “investment bankers” and “venture capitalists” who would want to pour big money (in the form of loans presumably) into the Kenyan art world. Among the local artists attending the workshop, very few were what I would consider *jua kali*. Most of them had survived by living off of donor-funded projects and had acquired what Danda Jaroljmek called a “donor dependency.”

### The Epitome of *Jua Kali*

The day after that workshop, I went out to interview the award-winning *jua kali* artist, Sebastian Kiarie (who won Most Outstanding Young Painter of 1995 at the East



**Figure 23. *Working Men*,  
an oil painting by  
Sebastian Kiarie**

African Industries for East African Art exhibition), and I told him about events of the previous day. I told him I had asked one workshop organizer (the Swedish-speaking Ugandan Asian, Pratik Vithlani, whose family

had fled East Africa during the era of the Ugandan dictator Idi Amin in the 1970s) if he believed *jua kali* strategies could be useful in advancing what the workshop named “the economy of creativity.” Vithlani told me emphatically “no way.” To paraphrase his argument, he said *jua kali* was “too small scale” to go anywhere that could have a serious impact on the local economy, leave alone attract venture capitalists like Vithlani himself. The response from Kiarie was instructive. He was highly critical of the workshop organizer’s perspective which he felt was not only patronizing but myopic. Kiarie’s response also epitomized what I understand to be the logic of *jua kali* ingenuity. As he put it:

One has to start somewhere; and with limited resources, one has to begin by maximizing what few resources you have got. *Jua kali* is a way of starting something. ... Just look at Hewlett and Packard: they started out in a garage! Wasn't that comparable to *jua kali*?! And what about Henry Ford: He started out working at a foundry. Look at Michael Dell... These are my role models... To me, art is no different from any other field of business. It requires imagination and creativity, but you just can't just sit around and wait for hand-outs (Kiarie 2009).

Kiarie, who has been a member of the Ngecha Artists Association since its founding in 1995, also served briefly as acting chairman of the Banana Hill Art Studio. Having exhibited all over Kenya, Europe and the States, he is highly critical of the “donor dependent” mentality of some Kenyan artists who believe they can only create with foreign funding in their pockets. He says local artists who claim they deserve special treatment just because they are artists are misguided. In his view,

That attitude is crippling, because if I know the donor money is coming, I'm going to relax and I'm not going to pull up my socks... Look, some people are looking for hand-outs in the name of making art, but I think this mentality of looking for donor money makes people lazy (Kiarie 2009).

Claiming that *jua kali* artists are no different from any other type of workers, Kiarie shares Becker's non-elitist perspective on artists and works of art. Becker writes:

Works of art, from this point of view, are not the products of individual makers, 'artists' who possess a rare and special gift. They are, rather, joint products of all the people who cooperate via an art world's characteristic conventions to bring works like that into existence (Becker 1982: 35).

Seeing donor dependency as a trap and a neocolonial trick to kill Kenyans' initiative and quest for self sufficiency, Kiarie pointed to a fellow artist like King Dodge Kang'oroti as a man he admired. Dodge, who is one of the pioneers of the Ngecha art network, took the initiative in the 1990s to open his own Ngecha Art Center which

exhibits *bricolage* by *jua kali* artists from all over their village on the outskirts of Nairobi. And while Kiarie said the center might be struggling right now, it still set an example for young aspiring artists to see that they don't need to wait for handouts. Kiarie didn't. After picking basic skills and artistic insights from a "bar artist" named Mage, he worked for four days as a day laborer on a five acre farm digging up weeds for KSh.500. That money is what Marx might call his "primitive accumulation of capital." (Marx 1978: 431) It is also what the donor world calls "seed money" and what Vithlani might call "investment capital." With it Kiarie bought his first cans of house paint, brushes, and cotton (not canvas), and then he "hawked" his art works along the Nakuru Highway, "selling [his] paintings to Kenyans who were driving by." He said contrary to the dominant view that only tourists buy Kenyan art, he sold most of his early work to fellow Africans.

Since then, Kiarie has not only exhibited his work locally and gone to university to get degree in agronomy. He has also taken up artist residencies transnationally, in the US, Germany, and various countries in Africa. He credits *jua kali* as the key to his success. The art networks with which he has worked in the last twenty years have also given him the social capital he has needed to sustain him since he didn't grow up amidst wealth. On the contrary, he never knew his father and was raised by aging grandparents who apparently imbued him what Max Weber identified as a Protestant work ethic. (Weber 2002) In any case, Kiarie typifies the sort of *jua kali* artist that I frequently met in Kenya. He also seems to have much in common with Becker who describes "art as not so very different from other kinds of work" (Becker 1982: ix-x). For in a similar vein Kiarie refers to "creativity" as the basis of his own vocation. In his view:

Everyone is talking about creativity; and I say creativity should be seen as the mother of all invention and artistry; but the creativity employed in art should not be seen as something separate or different from the creativity utilized by other ingenious people....Art is no different from any other field of business. It is not special. It has a business dimension, and the sooner artists appreciate this, the sooner they will dispense with the donor-dependency syndrome. (Kiarie 2009)

It is with this notion of creativity and art in mind that this study investigates *jua kali*, Kenyan art networks and their role in the current cultural renaissance.

## CHAPTER THREE

### “MEMORY, RESTORATION AND [THE] RENAISSANCE” OF KENYAN ART

For the title of this chapter, I chose to paraphrase the title of Ngugi wa Thiong'o's third McMillan-Stewart Lecture, which he gave at Harvard University in early 2006. I did this because Ngugi appreciates the vital role of memory in reviving a people's sense of



**Figure 24.**  
**Kenyan writer**  
**Ngugi wa**  
**Thiong'o**

cultural identity and restoring what otherwise might be lost from their history, particularly when those people are emerging from a colonial condition and reside in a post-colonial world where there are still many residual effects from that colonial past. Frantz Fanon writes at length about those negative residual effects in his book *The Wretched of the Earth* as does Amilcar Cabral, the late anti-colonial leader from Guinea Bissau. In a speech Cabral gave in 1970 on “National Liberation and Culture,” he spoke about “the dilemma of cultural resistance,” and explained the importance of memory or a people's history. He claimed: “the foundation for national liberation [and I would add cultural renaissance] rests in the inalienable right of every people to have their own history” (1973:43). He went on to note that in a colonial or imperialist context, “The principal characteristic, common to every kind of imperialist domination, is the negation of the *historical process* of the dominated people

by means of violently usurping the free operation of the process of development of the productive forces” (1973: 41).

I include this chapter on Kenyan cultural history as an act of *cultural resistance*, since I have found very little written to retrieve a sense of cultural history related to the visual arts; and where I have seen it attempted I have often found misrepresentation, distortion, and/or partial representation of the facts. For instance, in 1990 Dr Johanna Agthe published *Signs: East African Art from 1974-1989*, but rather than cover the full scope of developments in Kenyan visual art, she primarily focuses on artists that she met through one Gallery Watatu and whose works she personally collected for her Folk Art Museum in Frankfurt, Germany. *Signs* includes significant East African painters such as Jak Katarikawe, Etale Sukuro, and Joel Oswaggo, as well as sculptors such as John Diang’a, Gakunju Kaigwa, and John Odoch-Ameny. But she was incapable of including several *jua kali* art networks that were just coming into being in Nairobi’s peri-urban areas, such as Banana Hill and Ngecha. Granted these art networks exploded on the contemporary art scene in the 1990s, but the unintended consequence of this omission is that her book leaves one with the perception that the field of production among Kenyan visual artists was much narrower than was actually the case at the time.



**Figure 25. Jazz Dancer, a sculpture by Gakunju Kaigwa**

In 2003, a controversial book entitled *TheIathini* (meaning thirty in Kiswahili) was published by Ford Foundation, with the promising observation made by the then manager of Kuona Trust, Judy Ogana, that:



...recent years have seen an exciting *renaissance* in Kenya's artistic circles, with a remarkable group of adventurous abstract artists, powerful painters and mind-bending sculptors emerging from the streets of the nation's capital, Nairobi and its environs (Ogana 2003: 11).

But Ogana accurately foresaw the book would cause controversy because it left the false perception that the thirty artists selected were either "the first generation" of Kenyan contemporary artists or "the best and the brightest" of the lot. A similar problem arose the following year when Ogana together with Carol Lee of OneOff Gallery wrote catalogue notes for a Kenyan Art Exhibition in Brooklyn, New York. Understandably, the works of only a few selected Kenyans could be included in the show, but by calling artists who had only appeared on the art scene in the 1990s "first generation Kenyan artists," the two curators not only ignored the rich history of contemporary Kenyan visual art that had preceded the establishment in the 1990s of art institutions like Kuona Trust and One Off Gallery. They as well as the book seemed to perpetuate the myth that no visual arts were practiced in Kenya prior to the new millennium, or until the launching of Kuona Trust in 1995, claims which reinforce the hegemonic view that "culture" came to Kenya with the arrival of British colonialism (or neocolonialism).

So to clear the air and offer a more comprehensive and counter-hegemonic perspective on what actually transpired in the visual art world of Kenya over the past decades, I have taken on the task of illustrating and explaining the transformation of contemporary Kenyan visual culture over the last half century. Cabral's definition of culture is relevant in this regard. He writes:

culture is always in the life of a society (open or closed), the more or less conscious result of the economic and political activities of that society, the more or less dynamic expression of the kinds of relationships which prevail in that

society, on the one hand between man (considered individually or collectively) and nature, and, on the other hand, among individuals, groups of individuals, social strata or classes (Cabral 1973: 41).

Cabral's concept of culture correlates well with Becker's notion of art worlds in so far as both are sociological approaches to art and culture; and both will enable me to explore "patterns of collective activity (that) we can call an art world" (Becker 1982: 1) using my sociological imagination to see Kenya's *avant garde* from a broader, more historical perspective.

In a sense, this entire dissertation is designed to affirm what has been negated (and neglected) in Kenya's visual cultural history as well as to restore a tangible sense of that culture. It seems to be a particularly timely exercise in light of the discourse currently underway both in Africa and in the Black Diaspora on the African Renaissance, which is manifest in journals such as Manthia Diawara's *Black Renaissance Noire* and books like Washington A.J. Okumu's *The African Renaissance*. It is also apparent when Ngugi writes:

Remembering Africa is the only way of ensuring Africa's own full rebirth from the dark ages into which it was plunged by the European Renaissance, Enlightenment, and modernity. The success of Africa's renaissance depends on its commitment and ability to remember itself, guided by the great remembering vision of Pan-Africanism. This idea has already served Africa well—inspiring as it has done Afro-modernity (Wa Thiong'o 2009: 88).

Putting a Kenyan spin on that last passage, I feel Ngugi's sentiment also applies to the significance of this chapter, which is a brief history of Kenyan contemporary art.

To paraphrase his words:

Remembering [Kenya] is the only way of ensuring [Kenya]'s own full rebirth from the dark ages into which it was plunged by the European Renaissance, Enlightenment, and modernity. The success of [Kenya]'s renaissance depends on

its commitment and ability to remember itself, guided by the great remembering vision of Pan-Africanism (Wa Thiong'o 2009: 88).

*From Rocks to Renaissance*

My remembering relates specifically to the history of contemporary Kenyan art, and it follows in seven sections. The first section grounds Kenyan art within the first phase of globalization, when the earliest evidence of human life and creative expression were found in East Africa as recent discoveries of rock art testify. It also examines the early days of a more recent phase of globalization, that of European colonialism which came to Kenya in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century (as part of the “Scramble for Africa”) and made an indelible mark on Nairobi by the 1920s. The next section focuses on the 1930s through the 1950s, highlighting the impact of Western education on African culture, including the establishment of East Africa’s first formal art school at Makerere University in contrast to *jua kali* training of indigenous artists during the Mau Mau anti-colonial war. The subsequent section examines the Sixties, from Kenya’s flag Independence, contrasting the establishment of several public art worlds with a small scale “cultural revolution” initiated at the University of Nairobi. The next section explores the Seventies, including the role of African Heritage and Joseph Murumbi’s passion for a National Art Gallery in contrast to the cultural repression of indigenous performance art forms by the Kenya Government. The Eighties are witness to further political and cultural repression after an attempted *coup d’etat*; meanwhile, the contemporary Kenyan art world circumvents the repression as on the one hand, local artists try taking “art to the people” in Nairobi’s urban slums, and on the other, one commercial gallery tries taking local art into the global art domain. In the Nineties, a second generation of post-Independent *jua kali*

artists is treated by expatriates as if they, and not their parents, are the pioneers in contemporary Kenyan art; meanwhile, the population of *jua kali* exploded as local artists increasingly devise *jua kali* tactics to survive in Kenya's increasingly globalized economy. And finally, in the last section, the new millennium starts off on a high note as donor funding enables several start-ups of new art networks; meanwhile, women artists come into their own as a dynamic force in what can now be justifiably called a cultural renaissance. However, before the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century comes to an end, the donor funding almost dries up entirely and who remains to continue cultivating that renaissance spirit are the *jua kali* artists who I see as the sinews, if not the backbone, of Kenya's cultural renaissance.

*From Pre-Historic to Colonial Kenya*

Western scholars love to claim that Africans knew nothing of visual art until the arrival of European colonialism in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. As Judith von D. Miller writes in *Art in East Africa*, "Legendary pronouncements have been made by well-known critics and artists: 'There is no art in East Africa' ... 'L'Art Negre, n'existe pas'" (1975:14). It had been part of the "white man's burden," as the colonial narrative went, to "civilize the native" by exposing him to Western culture and civilization (Ngugi 1972, Kenyatta, 1965, Achebe 1989, DuBois 1996). Debunking this hegemonic narrative of the primitive other has been the project of African writers for decades. Everyone from Cheikh Anta Diop (1974), Aime Cesaire (2001) and Okot p'Bitek (1986) to Ayi Kweh Armah (2008), V.Y. Mudimbe (1994), and Ifi Amadiume (1997) has challenged the myth of pre-colonial incivility. Yet a 2009 exhibition at the Nairobi National Museum on African rock art

entitled “The Dawn of Imagination” offered one of the most graphic and persuasive refutations of that colonial claim ([www.africanrockart.org](http://www.africanrockart.org)). With graffiti-like evidence including both paintings and engravings that have been radiocarbon dated as far back as 18,000 BC (Willett 2002:53), the African Rock Art exhibition served to confirm that East Africa is not only “the cradle of humanity” as Charles Darwin called the region in *Origin of Species* and paleontologists like Louis, Mary and Richard Leakey have consistently illustrated with their fantastic fossils and ancient bones found in the Great Rift Valley. It is also the arena where human creativity and imaginative expression was first conceived, according to David Coulson, the current chairman and co-founder in 1996 with the late Mary Leakey and Laurens van der Post of the Trust for Rock Art in Africa (TARA). African rock art was first spotted by Western explorers in 1721 in Mozambique (Willett 2002: 42), but the pace of its discovery throughout the region, including Kenya, has accelerated over the past two decades, says Coulson, who co-authored the definitive book on *African Rock Art: Paintings and Engravings on Stone* (2001) with Alec Campbell. The implications of these recent findings of rock art across Africa are only beginning to seep into Western scholarship, according to the *Library Journal*:

While the Paleolithic parietal art of Western Europe is better known, Africa may have more rock art that is more diverse chronologically, stylistically, geographically, and iconographically than anywhere else in the world. Long overlooked by African art scholars, this aspect of Africa's artistic heritage has recently garnered increased attention (Lane 1999).

I would underscore the last point, the idea that African rock art has recently gained more global attention and become part of what the cultural globalization scholar Arjun Appadurai calls the global *mediascape*. In any case, rock art serves as the clearest

evidence that visual art wasn't brought to Kenya by European colonizers. On the contrary, the visual arts have been a dynamic dimension of East African culture for centuries.

### Pre-Colonial Culture Commodified

Jumping forward by centuries, there is evidence in southwestern Kenya of a longstanding pre-colonial tradition of soap stone sculpting among the Abagusii or Kisii people (Ohloo: 1987). The Tabaka sub-location of Kisii District is strewn with scores of soap stone and granite stone quarries which have been mined for many decades, the stones carved into both utilitarian items and artistic ornaments, according to Kisii scholars whose forefathers passed down sculpting skills from father to son, and mother to daughter for generations. “This is why practically every child in Tabaka grows up learning some part of the production process of making soap stone art, be it extracting the stone from the quarries, carving, sanding or polishing the finished product,” says Elkana Ong’esa, who comes from a long line of Kisii stone carvers, but is the first to



**Figure 26. Meru Hunter, a drawing by Joy Adamson**

graduate from Makerere University with a masters degree in fine art. Nonetheless, like most pre-colonial art forms—from the leather skirts designed and worn by Kikuyu women, to the feather headdresses and leopard skin capes worn by Luo men (Adamson 1975), indigenous fashion and art forms were either destroyed under the pressure of Christian missionaries who claimed African culture was heathen, primitive, and satanic

(Kenyatta 1965), or they were commodified by traders and middlemen (Dick-Read 1964: 15). This was the case with Kisii soap stone sculpture as well as Kamba wood carving, both of which found markets among the British troops who came to Kenya after World War 1 (1964: 20-21). It was the height of British colonial rule (which began in 1895), when Africans were being pushed off their ancestral lands, forced into “taxation without representation” (grounds for an anti-colonial revolutionary war against the British in North America in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century) by the colonial regime, thus needing to find means to pay the colonizer’s taxes. Some Africans remained on the land and worked as squatters (Leys, 1975: 29) for the new landowners who quickly claimed Kenya to be a “White Man’s Country” (Huxley 1969); others went to work as sculptors and carvers.

By the mid-1920s more than half the able-bodied men in the two largest agricultural tribes (the Kikuyu and Luo) were estimated to be working for Europeans. Within the space of a generation they had effectively been converted from independent peasants, producing cash crops for new markets, into peasants dependent on agricultural wage-labor ... the wages they received were extremely low” (Leys 29 – 31).

Unfortunately, the prices paid for the stone and wood artistry of the Kisii and the Kamba were also “extremely low,” the excuse being that the carvings were mere “curios.” The craftsmanship has been treated dismissively ever since, even among expatriate Africanists who claim to be supportive of African art, such as Karin Barber (1997: 1) and Frank McEwen who Ulli Beier credits for coining the pejorative term “airport art.” Both Beier, who was based in Oshogbo, Nigeria, and McEwen, who was director of the Rhodesia National Gallery in Salisbury, came to Africa with a view to advancing contemporary African art (Beier 1966: 75). However, both men were highly critical of the phenomenon of tourist art which swept across eastern and southern Africa

in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century and which Beier described as “hideous because it is carried out without conviction or care and simply repeats the empty forms of tradition” (1966:12). Fortunately, Appadurai’s concept of “global flows,” which operate within the context of the new global cultural economy, allows one to re-examine the role and even rehabilitate the idea of “airport art” in light of *jua kali* Africans’ adaptive response to the new market forces presented to them under colonialism. So while McEwen and Beier may detest airport art or disdain the tourist art market, these can conversely be seen as elements of the *global flows*, which Appadurai explains can include everything from information, ideas and art forms to market forces, commodities, cash, and even people—be they tourists, soldiers, settlers or visiting scholars, like McEwen and Beier. So airport art may now be seen as part of the global *mediascape* that Appadurai explains transcends parochial definitions and patronizing colonial critiques. The tourist, soldier, scholar and curator are also reclassified by Appadurai as part of a more transient global *ethnoscape* and the marketplace that these *jua kali* artists serve can also be seen as part of a wider global *financescape*. The art itself was *glocalized* to use Robertson’s term since it was adapted by innovative *jua kali* artists and tailor made to meet the needs of the expatriate market. All of these concepts enable one to appreciate how Kenyan art, be it classified as “airport,” traditional, popular or *avant garde*, has already become an integral part of the globalization process. Its status will need to re-calibrate however during the decolonization process.



### The Colonial Framework: The Twenties

While indigenous art forms were rapidly disappearing under British colonial rule in Kenya, an early Swedish ethnographer, Gerald Lindblom managed to document at least one dimension of it. In 1923, he wrote and published a monograph of the Akamba people of Eastern Kenya, highlighting their calabash engraving work (Barnard 2006: 8). According to Maude Wahlman of the Field Museum of Natural History, the art form disappeared between the two world wars when British settlement accelerated in East Africa, impacting the Akamba people directly (Wahlman 1974). Calabash incising was revived in the 1970s by Peter Nzuki, a former National Museums of Kenya worker who would exhibit his hybrid art at African Heritage Pan African Gallery and be credited with contributing to this new genre of post-colonial Kenyan art.

### Kenya Art Society

Also in the 1920s, in the Kenyan capital city Nairobi, British settler wives who were members of the East African Women's League founded the Kenya Arts Society, which for decades offered art classes to expatriate housewives, offspring and other European hobbyists. (Robin Harragin, personal communication, July30, 2010.) Constituting Kenya's first formal "art world," KAS students produced the kind of art that is exemplified in sketches by the Danish novelist Karen Blixen (Hussein 2005: 24), the British colonial Ray Nestor (Nestor 1988), and the Austrian naturalist Joy Adamson (Adamson 1975). It wasn't until the early 1970s that the KAS art teacher, Dora Betts tutored her first indigenous African man, Francis Kahuri, who would subsequently become one of the founding fathers of contemporary visual art in Kenya.

*The Thirties through the Fifties: Makerere and the Aberdares*

According to Elimo Njau, a former professor of fine art at Makerere University in Uganda and University of Dar es Salaam in Tanzania, the origins of contemporary East African visual art are to be found in Uganda. “It all began at the Margaret Trowell School of Visual Art,” he claims. The British-born Margaret Trowell came from the Slade School of Art in London in the 1930s and started holding art classes in her home in 1936. But she was able to start teaching fine art at Makerere by 1939, and by the 1940s, the first Kenyan artists were graduating with university degrees in fine art. They included Gregory Maloba (1941-45), Rosemary Karuga (1952-55), Louis Mwaniki (1957-61) and Peter Kareithi (1959-63), along with Tanzanians Elimo Njau (1952-57), Sam Ntiro (1944-47) and Francis Msangi (1959-64). (Miller 1975: 88-101). Njau was teaching at Makerere in 1958 when he was first invited to Kenya by the Anglican Church to paint five monumental murals which have subsequently been called Kenya’s equivalent of the Sistine Chapel ceiling. So in one sense Njau’s Fort Hall Murals early embodied the renaissance spirit that is being expressed artistically by *jua kali* artists all across Nairobi today. But because they were conceived under a colonial shadow and with British patronage, the murals have only recently been recognized by Kenyans themselves as remarkable works of art, comparable to the murals of the great Mexican painter Diego Rivera as well as to those of Michelangelo.



**Figure 27. A Nativity mural at Fort Hall Church by Elimo Njau**

Meanwhile, a non-academic, counter-hegemonic strain of Kenyan visual art was being born in the Fifties, during the days after the British declared an Emergency in Kenya, detaining tens of thousands of mostly Kikuyu people and waging war against an anti-colonial movement they called the Mau Mau. Deep inside the Aberdare Forest range, one young sculptor Samwel Wanjau was carving wooden gun stocks for his fellow freedom fighters. “I had never actually held a gun in my hand, but I had seen many British ‘jonnies’ [Kikuyu slang for British troops] carrying them, and since we were making our own, I learned to carve the guns with precision and realism,” Wanjau had told me years after Independence when he was mounting a one-man exhibition at Gallery Watatu. The man considered by many to be Kenya’s finest sculptor, Wanjau got his start as an artist training *jua kali* style under a canopy of evergreen trees, a site very different from Makerere, but one that allowed him to create works that made a real difference in his people’s lives. Wanjau never picked up a weapon during the war apart from a carving knife, and his preference is expressed in one of the “Mau Mau Patriotic Songs” collected by the Kenyan historian Maina wa Kinyatti, called “The Need for Spears is Gone,” one verse of which reads:

The days of relying solely on spears are gone.  
 Now it is time to add the power of the pen to the spear  
 Because our enemies today  
 Also add the power of their pens to their arms.  
 This is the time to struggle:  
 Kenyans come forward  
 And build many revolutionary schools all over Kenya  
 We have suffered enough (Wa Kinyatti 1990:20).

At that time, the British had shut down schools attended by Kikuyu youth, the vast majority of whom were considered probable Mau Mau “terrorists.” But as Kinyatti

put it, “The Kenyan people organized their own [revolutionary] schools to combat imperial education,” and the Aberdare Forest became such a *jua kali* ‘school’ for Wanjau.

*The Sixties: “The Wind of Change” and Beyond*

The year 1960 is now acknowledged as a turning point for the African continent, primarily because so many countries obtained their Independence that year and also because the former UK Prime Minister Harold McMillan’s historic “Wind of Change” speech marked the moment when colonial powers acknowledged the decolonization process had to begin.

The Airlift

In Kenya, the Tom Mboya/John F. Kennedy Airlift of selected students to universities in the United States was launched that same year, including Barack Obama, Sr. the father of the US President, Dr. Wangari Maathai, the first African woman to win a Nobel Prize in 2004, and Hilary Ng’weno, Nairobi’s first African newspaper editor-in-chief and a man who would play a pivot role in advancing the visual arts in Kenya at several levels. As for the artists, 1960 was the year the Roman Catholic Church decided to sponsor Kenyan artist, Louis Mwaniki to study for two years in Rome, making Mwaniki Kenya’s first transnational artist. Before eventually becoming the head of Kenyatta University’s fine art department, Mwaniki would study and exhibit in Yugoslavia, UK, US, Germany, Italy and Canada. So when Rob Burnet writes in the Triangle Arts Trust catalogue of 2007 that the first Kenyans to travel abroad was in the 21<sup>st</sup> century with funding from the British High Commission, he is sorely mistaken.

Elimo Njau, *Chemchemi* and Paa ya Paa

The same year Elimo Njau became the first East African to mount a one-man exhibition in London and travel all over U.K., Germany and Sweden. Coming to Kenya in 1961, he worked first with Sir Merlyn Sorsbie at the Sorsbie Gallery in Nairobi, and then with the South African writer in exile Ezekiel Mphahlele to establish the first African cultural center in Kenya called *Chemchemi* (meaning “fountain” in Kiswahili) in 1963.

Around that same time, while he was still working at Sorsbie’s, Elimo launched the Njau



**Figure 28. Elimo Njau, co-founder and director, Paa ya Paa Art Center**

Art Studio, spurred on by two of Kenya’s most illustrious writers, Jonathan Kariara, an editor with the Oxford University Press and Hilary Ng’weno, who would soon author the constitution of Kenya’s first indigenous African-owned art gallery. This is to say that several years before Paa ya Paa came into being in 1966, Africans were already focused on cultivating a vibrant art world, including visual and performance artists as well as scholars and “organic intellectuals,” (meaning scholars like Okot p’ Bitek and Ngugi who would be intent on cultivating strongly rooted ties to indigenous African communities). And once Paa ya Paa was established in Nairobi’s City Center, it became the hub of that initial African art world for the remainder of the Sixties. The founder members of Paa ya Paa were Elimo Njau, Pheroze Nowrojee, Jonathan Kariara, Charles Lewis, Editor of Oxford University Press, Terry Hirst, and James Kangwana, who actually came up with the name *Paa ya Paa*, which means ‘the antelope is rising’ in Kiswahili, which suggests the founders were already seeing the Center and the East African arts in renaissance terms.

## Black Power and the Kenyan Renaissance

The Sixties were also a time when the Black Power movement was a powerful political and cultural force in the US, and many African Americans were inspired to come to Kenya and to Paa ya Paa specifically. The fact that artists such as Alvin Ailey, Dick Gregory, and Sidney Poitier found their way to Paa ya Paa confirmed the transnational character of the Arts Center early on. But it was East African artists and intellectuals like Jonathan Kariara, Hilary Ng'weno, Ngugi wa Thiong'o, Okot p'Bitek, Philip Ochieng, Rebecca Njau, Taban lo Liong, and Theresa Musoke who came regularly to the gallery and made it a vibrant African art world and center of an East African contemporary cultural movement. For instance, it was during this period that Ngugi, Okot and Taban got adamant about "decolonizing" the minds of university students. To that end, they brought a brand of Black Power or Negritude to bear upon Nairobi University by turning their former English Department upside down, replacing the once dominant European texts with a core curriculum of indigenous African oral literature. Calling the program simply the Literature Department, they vowed that world literature would still be studied only now it would be from an Afro-centric rather than a Eurocentric point of view. The transformation had a profound effect on the department and the university as a whole, and serves as a *marker* for the moment when the Kenyan Renaissance was officially launched.

## Formal Training Centers

Right around the same time 1966, on the outskirts of Nairobi, Kenyatta University was setting up a fine art education program headed by a “visiting” British graphic artist named Terry Hirst (a “stranger” in Simmel’s sense of being “the person who comes today and stays tomorrow”) who, in addition to training some of Kenya’s first visual art teachers, also established a tradition of poignant political cartooning, starting with his own satiric comic book together with Hilary Ng’weno called *Joe Magazine* (Simmel 1950: 402). Today, political cartoons constitute a genre that speaks to millions of Kenyans in a way that no other element of popular culture does. Popular cartoons have even become puppets that currently star on Sunday night prime time television. *The XYZ Show* is all about political satire, current events and lampooning Kenya government elites (Simmons 2010). It is a show that confirms Kenyans have a powerful appreciation of the visual arts. The vast majority may not go to the city center galleries, but cartoons translate social reality to Kenyans as



**Figure 29. XYZ Show Puppets, VP Kalonzo Musyoka and MP Martha Karua star in the popular TV satire**

visual messages in the media on a daily basis. In 1969 University of Nairobi also established a Fine Art Department, but by 1972 the department had merged its program with that of Kenyatta University’s. Since then, the department has trained hundreds of art instructors, many of whom, according to KU Professor Francis Kaguru, have gone either into teaching or into the private sector. His claim is that most of Kenya’s exhibiting

visual artists are *jua kali* not university-trained. My data contradicts that claim as I will discuss in a later chapter.

### Expatriate Art Institutions

Meanwhile, several expatriate art galleries came into being in Nairobi in the Sixties. In addition to the Sorsbie Gallery, there was the New Stanley (Hotel) Gallery and



**Figure 30.** *Athi Plains*, an oil painting by Gallery Watatu co-founder Jony Waite

Studio 68, run by an American woman Sherri Hunt.

And upstairs from Hunt's gallery in Nairobi's city

Center, three expatriate artists, Jony Waite, Robin

Anderson and David Hart, would launch Gallery

Watatu in 1969. Established primarily so they could

show their own art, the threesome (translated as *watatu*

in Kiswahili) were not adverse to exhibiting

contemporary Kenyan art, so in 1970, Watatu mounted

its first one man exhibition for Louis Mwaniki, who was

recently returned from study tours of Italy and

Yugoslavia. Subsequently, the Gallery would be

perceived to be primarily an expatriate art world up

until the mid-1980s. Nonetheless, occasionally it

mounted shows for so-called "self-taught" artists such as Ament Soi, who exhibited at

Watatu soon after his return from Europe. Soi like Mwaniki was an early trans-

national/Kenyan artist whose winning Olympic poster won him a trip to Munich and an

Olympic medal in 1972. Soi was also invited by the Olympic Chair to remain in Germany



**Figure 31.** *Elephant Migration*, an oil painting on silk by Watatu co-founder Robin Anderson



for a study tour; but since his first born son Michael had just been born, the former Nairobi City Market fruit vendor (who used to display his colorful paintings beside his fresh mangos and bananas) chose to return home to Kenya instead.



**Figure 32. Wildebeest Migration, an oil painting by Ancent Soi**

Gallery Watatu would change dramatically once its ownership shifted in the 1980s, but from the beginning Watatu represented what Gans would call “high culture” (Gans 1974: 75), a label that would also shift with the change of ownership and *jua kali* artists becoming the main attendants at the Gallery.

#### Foreign Cultural Centers

While expatriate art galleries couldn’t find space to exhibit the works of young African artists, foreign cultural Centers such as the Goethe Institute and the French Cultural Center filled the vacuum for several years. The German Cultural Center was the first to open its doors wide to African artists and intellectuals in 1963 at the dawn of Kenya’s Independence. For instance, the Goethe mounted a series of workshop-exhibitions jointly with Paa ya Paa from the mid-1960s through the 1990s. Alliance Francaise was equally enthusiastic about using culture as a creative means of making headway among local Kenyans, especially from 1977 when the French Cultural Center (FCC) was launched and its stage and exhibition galleries were opened wide to indigenous Africans, irrespective of whether they were self-taught or had degrees from Makerere or University of Nairobi. The first major group exhibition hosted at the FCC was a Wildlife Awareness Week, featuring the works of soon to be acclaimed indigenous

artists such as Jak Katarikawe, Ament Soi, Charles Sekano, Theresa Musoke and Joel Oswaggo among others. This was an historic exhibition because not only was it the first time so many *jua kali* artists had exhibited together on a transnational platform in Nairobi. It was also the first time local artists had been involved in a “social messaging” project, designed by two world renowned wildlife conservationists, Dr. Iain and Oria Douglass Hamilton, whose special interest is elephants. It was also an occasion that one could see clear cut evidence that Kenya definitely had a contemporary art movement in the making, only that it had not been well organized or funded before. The French Cultural Center would continue to play a cutting edge role in promoting contemporary Kenya art up to the present day.

#### Informal and Non-Academic Training Centers

It was also in the 1960s that non-academic arts workshops and training programs started taking shape in Nairobi. Paa ya Paa was the first center to hold series of workshops for both East African, Pan-African and transnational artists to come and participate in multicultural activities as well as mentoring events. And because Kenya was being seen as “a haven of peace” in a stormy region during the Sixties and Seventies, many African refugee artists landed in Kenya, ending up at Paa ya Paa. They came from Uganda, Tanzania, and South Africa as well as from Ethiopia, Sudan and Mozambique. Artists also came from Europe, US and the Caribbean, and they took part either artist residencies or workshops (Ragland-Njau 1990). So while a series of *Wasanii* International Workshops would start up 30 years later in 1997, claiming theirs were “the

first international workshops” ever to be held in Kenya, the record can now be set straight.

But Paa ya Paa is only one of several venues that came into being in the Sixties focused on non-academic art training; however, it is the only one started up by indigenous East Africans. Others were established by Americans, Germans and East



**Figure 33. Al Donovan with *Universal Family*, a Kisii stone sculpture by Expedito Mwebe**

Indians. For instance, Bombalulu was started by an American Peace Corps volunteer named Holland Millis who only hired and trained disabled Kenyans to make original jewelry designs out of recycled copper wire. Another nomadic American designer, Alan Donovan was inspired by Millis’s project, went off to one of Nairobi’s biggest slum suburbs, Mathare Valley, and opened a jewelry workshop of his own in the late Sixties (Donovan 2005). He also trained local Africans in *jua kali* jewelry making using organic materials such as seeds and animal bones as well as recycled scrap metals, especially aluminum. Having spent time in Northern Kenya among the Turkana people, Donovan had been inspired by their aluminum jewelry designs and since the Turkana obviously had no patents on their designs, he took them and quickly commodified them with the help of his Mathare Valley art network. Then, once he teamed up with Kenya’s former Vice President, Joseph Murumbi to open African Heritage Pan African Gallery, Donovan would take his hybrid designs along with his workshop to the city Center where they would be marketed both locally and globally. Donovan’s role in the construction of African hybrid art and the “commodification of

(all) things African” has been criticized by the American academic Sidney Kasfir (2007:70-72). But again, within Kenya’s globalizing economy, Donovan was not only generating jobs and training countless jewelry designers who would become some of his fiercest competitors in decades to come. He was also creating media spectacles that would translate Kenyan *jua kali* art into globalized *mediascapes* easily understood by Western audiences who grew up in what Guy Debord calls the “society of the spectacle.” In other words, Donovan did his part to break down the “othering” of Africans that had been such an integral part of colonialism.

Two other vocational training centers set up in the Sixties to enable local Africans to get jobs in commercial art-related fields were the Creative Arts Center established by V.J. Kalyan, a young Bombay trained Kenya-born Indian and the YMCA Craft Training Center started up by a visiting German artist named Albert Soars. Both focused mainly on non-academic skills training, they both opened up opportunities for Africans that would pay off in decades to come. Young women artists would gravitate to CAC, training some of Kenya’s most interesting women artists such as Tabitha wa Thuku, Maggie Otieno, Beth Kimwele and Mary Ogembo. Meanwhile, the YMCA can be credited for training Wanyu Brush, who is the first Kenyan to ever receive the National Head of State Commendation for painting from the Kenya Government in 2010. In addition to co-founding the Ngecha Artists Association and mentoring one of the country’s best known *jua kali* artists, Sane Wadu, Wanyu has shared his skills mentoring hundreds of children from his home village of Ngecha.

*The Seventies*

The Seventies illustrated the incredible contradictions in Kenyan contemporary culture since on the one hand, the most dynamic Pan African Art Gallery was established early on, with Joseph Murumbi, the country's second Vice President not only joining hands with the American Alan Donovan to establish African Heritage in 1971. He also launched a campaign for the establishment of a National Art Gallery that he almost achieved. But at the same time, early signs of State repression against the arts became apparent first, when the commissioned sculpture of a Mau Mau *Freedom Fighter* was rejected by the country's Attorney General. Samwel Wanjau had been appointed to produce the sculpture which was supposed to stand at the front entrance of the Kenya Parliament. This he did *jua kali* style, in the open air at Paa ya Paa's two acre Art Center, which had relocated to the outskirts of Nairobi at Ridgeways; and that is where Wanjau's awesome sculpture may be found today, as powerful a public art piece as one will find anywhere in Kenya. Whether it was the ferocity of the 12 foot tall *Mau Mau Freedom Fighter's* expression that put off the AG Charles Mugane Njonjo or the reminder to this Anglophied Kenyan that the Mau Mau had contributed significantly to Kenya's gaining Independence from Great Britain, Njonjo would never say publicly.



**Figure 34. *Mau Mau Freedom Fighter*, a sculpture by Samwel Wanjau (insert)**

Detained

But then, when the country's leading author and intellectual Ngugi wa Thiong'o was detained in 1977 without trial by the Kenya Government, his original Kikuyu

production, *Ngaahika Ndeenda: I'll Marry When I Want* (1991), shut down and his rural community's Kamiriithu Cultural Center razed to the ground, there was no denying that the State was at war with artists who challenged its authority and questioned the status quo. Amazingly, just one year before Kamiriithu was bulldozed and Ngugi detained—when Kenyatta was still alive, the Second Black Arts Festival in Lagos (FESTAC) saw dozens of Kenyans go to Nigeria to take part in two original English language productions, one by Ngugi and his Nairobi University colleague Dr Micere Mugo entitled *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi* (1976), the other *Betrayal in City* by Francis Imbuga, both of which foreshadowed the problems that artists and intellectuals would face in the coming days. But the originality and dynamism developing in the field of Kenyan theatre also illustrated one more dimension of the cultural renaissance that was taking hold of Kenyan artists across the country. Further evidence of the renaissance spirit came to light the following year when Hilary Ng'weno launched the first indigenous African-owned weekly newspaper, *The Nairobi Times*, which for years was the only publication in the country that would regularly cover topics related to contemporary Kenyan art and culture. Ngugi would be released the following year, shortly after the death of Jomo Kenyatta and the ascendance of Daniel arap Moi, but he would never again get a job in a Kenyan university and would eventually have to leave to get teaching jobs, first in the UK, and then in the United States, at Yale University, New York University and currently at the University of California, Irvine where he is Director of the International Center for Writing and Translation as well as Distinguished Professor in the Department of Comparative Literature and English.

Meanwhile, several more innovative training Centers opened in the Seventies, generating a range of new art networks. One was based out at Lamu on the Kenya Coast where Watatu artist Jony Waite founded the Wildebeeste Workshop and then worked with local women groups to create original wall hangings with indigenous materials and women's designs. Another got started on the outskirts of Nairobi in Maasai-land where the German artist Nani Croze would found the Kitengela Glass Trust and set up a *jua kali* glass blowing cottage industry where she trained and worked closely with local glass blowers to create stained glass art out of recycled beer and soda bottles; she also started up international Bush glass art workshops in the 1980s. And yet another Center was set up in Nairobi's Industrial Area where Donovan transferred, expanded and diversified his workshops to meet transnational consumer demands generated once he and Joe Murumbi established African Heritage in 1971.

Despite Sidney Kasfir's complaint that Donovan's primary achievement at African Heritage was the "commodification of things African" (Kasfir 2007: 70) the Pan African Art Center was not so much aculture industry as a flourishing cottage industry. Nonetheless, Donovan did hire the Ugandan sculptor John Odoch Ameny to head the production unit of his new workshops once he was successful in marketing handmade Kenyan crafts both locally and globally. His workshops replicated what Kisii and Kamba artists had been doing collectively since the 1920s, only his goal was now to more effectively commodify their art forms and supply much larger markets. "My problem came when I secured contracts with buyers like the Banana Republic and Bloomingdale's. The challenge was to meet the demand since everything we produced

was made by hand,” said Donovan, who was one of Kenya’s most effective marketers of crafts, fashion, music and fine art. For African Heritage was not just a showcase for hybrid forms of Kenyan crafts. It also provided an important platform for a number of East African and Pan-African artists, including Elkana Ong’esa, John Diang’a, Odoch Ameny, Expedito Mwebe, Jak Katarikawe and Joseph Olabode, from Oshogbo, Nigeria. Organizing an African Heritage Band also helped launch the music careers of a number of gifted Kenyan musicians. It also ensure the art network that made African Heritage its hub included a myriad of Kenyan youth, particularly young women who wanted a shot at modeling either in Donovan’s annual African Heritage Pan-African Fashion Show or in one of his European tours which he did for several years (Donovan 2004). Unfortunately, African Heritage went into receivership in 2003 due to the demise of the tourist industry which was largely the result of the Moi government’s mismanagement of the economy as well as its horrendous record of human rights violations.

#### Promise of a National Art Gallery

But back in the Seventies, Joseph Murumbi did more for contemporary Kenyan culture than any other single individual. For one, he sold his vast Pan-African art collection to the Kenya Government to provide the initial permanent collection for the National Art Gallery that President Moi had theoretically agreed to establish (Sukuro 2010). Number two, he persuaded the Government to buy the centrally located national bank building (across the street from the Nairobi Hilton squarely in the Center of the city) which it was to transform into the National Gallery. Number three, he was one of the country’s biggest patron of the contemporary East African art, so much so that he owned



a multi-ton slab of Kisii soapstone that he had commissioned Elkana Ong'esa to sculpt for his home. But upon meeting the UNESCO Secretary General Amadou-Mahtar M'Bow and hearing of his appreciation of Kisii stone sculpture, he gave the slab and the commission to M'Bow. As a consequence, Ong'esa's *Bird of Peace* resides permanently in Paris, France, at the front entrance of the UNESCO Headquarters.

### *The Eighties*

The Eighties proved to be an even more remarkable time for contemporary Kenyan artists as the dialectic of artistic repression and renaissance became even more visible after the attempted *coup d'état* against the Moi Government in 1982. A number of intellectuals left the country and not return until after Moi left office in late 2002. Others were detained, tortured, and/or disappeared. But just before the coup attempt, a number of visual artists mostly based at Kenyatta University decided they wanted to take their “art to the people” in a way similar to what Nairobi University thespians had done annually since 1974 when the Free Traveling Theater took popular theater in local languages all around the country annually for a one month period. The group calling itself *Sisi kwa Sisi* (meaning “We are us, the people” in Kiswahili) was also inspired by Ngugi who was rehearsing his second Kikuyu play entitled *Mother, Sing For Me* with an all-peasant cast. Unfortunately, their effort was ill-timed as they organized their traveling visual arts tour of several Nairobi slums shortly after the coup and the urban public wasn't inclined to get involved with strangers. “There was too much tension on the streets for people to care about what we were trying to do. We wanted to build a popular audience for our art, but people simply weren't interested,” said Etale Sukuro who was

disappointed by the poor response the group got after taking their social realist art to Nairobi suburbs such as Kawangware, Korogocho, Mathare Valley and Kibera.

Nonetheless, another group member, Kahare Miano, who is currently acting head of the Department of architecture at Nairobi University, was inspired by the experience and felt he, as well as his peers Gikonyo Maina and Kangara wa Njambi, had gained a much deeper understanding of what Gramsci meant by “organic intellectual.” As Miano recalled,

We organized *Sisi kwa Kisi* during one of the times when Moi had shut the university and sent all of us students home, so I took the experience as a learning opportunity when I had to question everything about what I was doing as an artist, who I was doing it for, and how creating ‘art for art’s sake’ didn’t make any sense to me anymore. I feel like I’m still living *Sisi kwa Sisi*; it made that deep of an impression on me (Miano 2010).

One of the reasons Sukuro was disillusioned at the time was not only because *Sisi kwa Sisi* didn’t make an impact on slum life in Nairobi. It was also because the attempted coup has thrown a monkey wrench in the President’s program to establish a National Art Gallery. As he put it:

I had been told by a top Moi advisor that he intended to allocate the national gallery a five acre piece of land, but that commitment was totally forgotten after the (attempted) coup. What happened instead was that the National Museum picked up to plan, only now it became their project and the Gallery of Contemporary East African Art was born; which was nothing like what we had wanted. We artists no longer had a say in the way the gallery would be run. (Sukuro 2010)

From its inception, the Museum art gallery was managed by expatriate volunteers, members of the Kenya Museum Society and the American Women’s Association.

## 8-4-4

Moi may have forgotten about a national art gallery, but the one thing he did that endeared him to some Kenyan artists, such as Dr. Elizabeth Orchardson-Mazrui, is that in 1985 he made Art and Music mandatory (or “examinable” as Mazrui put it) subjects in the new national “8-4-4” curriculum. (8-4-4 refers to the new educational system implemented in 1985 that included eight years of primary school, four years of secondary, and four years of university, which is very different from the British system that Kenya inherited from the British at Independence.) In Orchardson-Mazrui’s mind, one reason for Kenya’s current cultural renaissance is Moi’s decision to make Art a required subject in the national schools syllabus, for it meant that even when students did not get advanced training in fine art, they still had a basic grounding in the field. Indeed, I would find a great many *jua kali* artists that did not have academic training in fine art often had taken the subject in primary or secondary school.

Meanwhile, the Museum gallery wasn’t the only venue that opened up to African artists in the 1980s. By the early ‘80s, Gallery Watatu had changed hands as Robin Anderson and David Hart were replaced briefly by Rhodia Mann and Sherri Saitoti, both of whom were keen to exhibit works by African artists. Anderson had left Watatu to start up Tazama Gallery, which would subsequently be bought by Asians who run a string of galleries and sell wildlife art much as they previously sold souvenir curios to tourists. The string includes Sarang, Unik, Tazama, Rowland Ward, and a slew of other art markets that treated Kenyan art as marketable commodities. Meanwhile, Mann and Saitoti didn’t remain at Watatu for long, but their presence served as a transitional moment for what

was to come. For instance, by 1982, Rhodia, a Kenya-born child of Eastern European immigrants, organized what she claimed was the ‘first’ all-African group exhibition at Gallery Watatu, featuring Jak Katarikawe, Ancent Soi, Charles Sekano, Etale Sukuro and Joel Oswaggo, all names that became transnational before the decade ran out. It was “the first” group show of African artists at Watatu, but there had been group exhibitions at Paa ya Paa since the mid-Sixties (including several exhibitions by Samwel Wanjau) and at the French Cultural Center in the Seventies. Nonetheless, Rhodia’s exhibition would mark a significant moment of transition not only for Gallery Watatu but for the Nairobi art world as a whole.

#### Gallery Watatu II

The arrival of Ruth Schaffner in Kenya in 1984 marked a turning point in the contemporary Kenyan art world since the German-American, like her Asian counterparts, saw contemporary Kenyan art as a valuable commodity, only she understood it was far more valuable on the global art market than had yet been realized, either by the local public or by local art marketers, leave alone by the artists themselves. A trained economist and graduate of The New School in New York, Schaffner’s impact on Nairobi’s *jua kali* art world was incalculable, in part because she was a seasoned art dealer who already owned two art galleries in California, one in Santa Barbara the other in Los Angeles, and as such, she had a wealth of knowledge and experience in running lucrative art Centers. She also knew a great deal about the transnational art world and her skill as an ‘art-preneur’ was unsurpassed by anyone who had ever worked in the field in Kenya before. Not only that, Ruth was an heiress (her late husband number five, Mr.

Schaffner, was himself an heir to the Hart, Schaffner and Marx fortune) who had come to Kenya at the encouragement of husband number six, a savvy West African businessman, Adama Diawara from Ivory Coast who knew his wife wanted to retire (at age 71) in Africa and invest her family fortune in contemporary African art. And once Ruth arrived, she quietly made the rounds of the various local art Centers, particularly Paa ya Paa, where she bought up African artworks at what she knew were throw away prices by international standards. Then in 1985, she offered to buy Gallery Watatu from Jony Waite, who at the time was the sole owner of the gallery and who readily agreed, albeit, on one condition: that she could exhibit her art and that of the Wildebeest Workshop free of charge for the rest of her days.

#### The Reign of Ruth

The” reign” of Ruth at Gallery Watatu (1985-1996) was life-transforming for many so-called ‘self-taught’ and aspiring Kenyan artists, most of whom quickly heard that Ruth was ‘dishing out’ hundreds of shillings once a month on a Tuesday if she liked the paintings, drawings and carvings that local artists brought into the gallery. The word spread like wildfire all around Nairobi and its peri-urban estates and suburbs. Over a period of eleven years, from 1985 to her passing in 1996, Ruth paid more attention to the marketing of African artists in Kenya than had ever been seen before. And artists like Wanyu Brush claim they are unlikely to see anyone like Ruth ever again. “Ruth was so good! She helped so many young artists get a start,” Brush said, acknowledging that most of the artists she advised and often financed had far less training than he, a graduate of the YMCA Craft Training Center, had. They included Ngecha artists such as Sane Wadu,

Chain Muhandi, King Dodge and Meek Gichugu, Banana Hill artists like Shine Tani, Christopher Oywecha, and Joseph Cartoon; she also took in artists who had been associated with Paa ya Paa, such as Samwel Wanjau, Theresa Musoke, and Jak Katarikawe, and artists off the street such as Ancent Soi, Joel Oswaggo, Fred Oduya, John Diang'a and Patrick Kayako. "Ruth might not buy the work you brought in, but she could give you advice and even give you paints and papers to go away and try again," said Ruth Nyakundi, one of the first women artists to bring her paintings to Ruth at Watatu. "Ruth gave me my first KSh200 for a painting, and I'll never forget that!" said Shine Tani whose art can sell for over KSh200,000 today. "That 200 bob was a great incentive to me at the time," said Shine who first heard about Ruth while he, a seventh grade school dropout, was still doing acrobatics on the streets of Nairobi.

But not all Kenyan artists were enthusiastic about Ruth. Those with any level of formal training were shunned by Ruth and informed outright that she was not interested in their work, which in her mind was 'tainted' by Western influences. "She rejected our work, claiming it had been corrupted by Western techniques, but we knew she didn't want us around since she couldn't manipulate or control us the way she could the unschooled artists," said Etale Sukuro. "Ruth reinforced the dominant view of African art as primitive and naïve," said Kahare Miano. "She wanted nothing to do with university-trained artists," said Dr. Elizabeth Orchardson-Mazrui. "There were some university graduates who actually lied to Ruth about their academic background just so they could get support from her. For instance, Kioko Mwitiki refused for years to tell people he was a Kenyatta University graduate just because of the experience he had with Ruth," added

Orchardson-Mazrui who exhibited at Gallery Watatu years before Ruth arrived on the Nairobi scene. “For years, I never understood why Ruth rejected my art,” confessed Zachariah Mbutha, a former secondary school teacher whose work was too refined for Ruth’s taste. “It was only after the Belgian man Marc van Rampelberg went to work with her that Watatu offered me a one-man show at the gallery,” Mbutha said. Shortly after that exhibition, he went to Paris on an Alliance Francaise arts scholarship.

Ruth was and continues to be the most controversial character on the Kenyan art scene. To many *jua kali* artists, she created an art world at Watatu that provided them with funding, mentoring and art materials as well as a site where they could display and sell their work. For quite a few, it didn’t even matter when they learned later on that she had paid them “peanuts” for their art, after which she would sell it for substantially higher prices on the global art market. “Ruth was a very shrewd business woman, far more sophisticated about transacting on the global art market than anyone who had preceded her,” observed Robin Harragin, a former employee of Ruth who had previously managed Gallery Watatu during the days of the original Watatu trio. The problem that Liza MacKay, a British-born art teacher at the International School of Kenya, had with Ruth was more ideological than artistic:

Ruth promoted the ‘primitive other’ in African art. She knew what the global art market expected in African art and she advised local Kenyans to meet those expectations. Unfortunately, they only wanted primitive and naïve paintings of the sort produced by unschooled artists like Sane Wadu and Kivuthi Mbuno (MacKay 2009).

Nonetheless, many local artists were fiercely loyal to Ruth. What mattered to them were the short-term gains that she gave in the form of employment and income-

generating opportunities that involved *jua kali* creativity. What's more, she would occasionally hand out loans to artists and she often supplied them with art materials if she saw they had potential and a passion for art. One of her biggest advocates is Morris Amboso, Watatu's current general manager who is one of the few workers who remains at the gallery from the time of Watatu's heyday when Ruth was selling Kenyan art all over the world, especially in Europe and the States.

Ruth did more to *globalize* the Kenyan art scene than anyone before or since. And face the facts: there were very few Kenyan artists on the scene before Ruth came to town. You can count them on one hand. You might not want to admit it, but she did ground-breaking work for contemporary Kenyan art (Amboso 2009).

But to artists who had university degrees or college diplomas, she did far more damage to contemporary Kenyan culture than good, according to Sukuro and others.

"Ruth set back Kenyan art decades by her insistence on marketing only art that pandered to the view of African art being 'primitive' and unschooled," Sukuro said. "Ruth was a ruthless business woman who was also terribly unfair to African professionals like me," said Morris Keyongo, a graduate of the School of Photography at University of London. "I did photography for her and would be paid KSh2000 for working whole weekends for her. But if the resident British photographer, Chris Whiteman, had done the same job, he would have asked for more like KSh20,000, which is why she used me, but never even credited my work," added Keyongo who knew Ruth solely as a cut-throat entrepreneur.

What is most remarkable about Ruth Schaffner however is that fifteen years after her passing, people still talk about her as if she only left the scene the other day. There have been attempts to erase her name from contemporary Kenyan art history. For instance, the art book *TheIathini* features mainly artists that Schaffner promoted in one



way or other; yet there is practically no reference to her in the text at all. Nonetheless, even her critics admit she played a monumental role in advancing Nairobi's *jua kali* art world. For instance, Nani Croze and Dr Eric Krystall, who in 1986 organized the first set of what would become annual "social messaging" calendars, credit Ruth with linking them up with a dozen local artists (including Sukuro, Sekano, Soi, Katarikawe, Ndlovu, among others) who got paid to produce poster art related to topics that over the years would cover everything from family planning and female genital mutilation to good governance and HIV/AIDS awareness. And the late Dr. Johanna Agthe couldn't have produced her book *Signs: Art from East Africa 1974-1989* without drawing extensively upon the resources availed her by Schaffner at Gallery Watatu.

At the same time, there were many other contemporary Kenyan arts activities that took off in the 1980s that Ruth Schaffner had nothing to do with. For instance, she did not work with the Ministry of Culture in organizing annual *Utamaduni* visual art exhibitions from the mid-1980s at Nairobi's City Hall. Nor did she participate with Paa ya Paa in organizing the *Sanaa: Contemporary Art from East Africa* exhibition in 1984 in London at the Commonwealth Institute. A number of East African artists took part in that exhibition including Elimo Njau, Louis Mwaniki and Mordecai Buluma. Nor did she take part in the women's exhibition that Goethe Institute organized jointly with Paa ya Paa in 1987. She was right in the middle of taking over Watatu in 1985 during the United Nations Women's Decade Conference when African Heritage hosted an international women's art exhibition featuring Kenyans Orchardson-Mazrui and Magdalene Odundo as well as the American-Australian team of photographers Carol Beckwith and Angela

Fisher, co-authors of *Africa Adorned* (1984). And most definitely, Ruth also did not have anything to do with the historical paintings of Rigii wa Karanja which were inspired by the unpublished book *The Soil is Ours* researched and written by Kenyan *jua kali* historian Gatimu Maina. The one other thing that Ruth didn't do for Kenyan artists, which they figured out for themselves, was to organize sojourns overseas. Thus, Ament Soi's trip to Paris to participate in an "African Native Art" in 1984 exhibition was Soi's initiative in collaboration with the French Cultural Center. Samwel Wanjau found his way to Sweden when his sculpture was on show; Elimo Njau and Louis Mwaniki made it to the UK for *Sanaa 84*; and Gakunju Kaigwa's study tour of Carrara, Italy was a program he organized with assistance from the Italian Institute of Culture. Kaigwa subsequently won a Commonwealth Fellowship to study in Scotland where he received a Masters degree in Public Art before heading off to the United States where he studied bronze casting on both coasts. But there is little doubt that Gallery Watatu played a catalytic role in contemporary Kenyan culture in the 1980s through the early 1990s.

### *The Nineties*

Ruth Schaffner was also instrumental in generating the explosion of *jua kali* art activities in the 1990s, including the establishment of two very different art networks which were born in the wake of her work: one at the Banana Hill Art Studio from 1991, the other at Kuona Trust in 1995, the first initiated by indigenous Africans, the latter launched by a British former employee of the Watatu Foundation, and both drawing upon things they had learned while doing business with Ruth. In fact, I would say the most significant story of the 1990s was the establishment of so many new art networks,

starting with Banana Hill Arts Studio, which would subsequently be associated with the short-lived Nuru Arts Center. Then came the arrival of another commercial art gallery called One Off in 1993 after which Gallery Watatu formed a not-for-profit foundation out of which emerged the Ngecha Artists Association. With *jua kali* training becoming a strategic focus at both Banana Hill and the new Watatu Foundation, it was stunning to see another art educational institution established, but in 1994, the Buru Buru Institute of Fine Art (BIFA) was born, to be followed a year later by the formation of Kuona Trust at the Nairobi National Museum just a few months before the demise of Ruth Schaffner in 1996. The darkest moment of the decade was a devastating fire at Paa ya Paa that destroyed practically all the art and Pan-African archival material that Elimo Njau had collected over decades. Fortunately, artists and institutions all over Nairobi rallied to help resurrect Paa ya Paa by holding *harambee* fundraisers for the Njau's. Meanwhile, as all of these art networks were being activated, a brand new *jua kali* art movement was gripping Nairobi as *matatu* art was being born on the streets of the capital city from the early 1990s, dramatizing the colorful and dynamic character of Kenya's contemporary visual culture.

Elizabeth Orchardson-Mazrui, in an excellent essay that she had been commissioned to write for *TheIathini* on Kenyan contemporary art history, but which was published instead in the first issue of the Kenyan cultural magazine *Jahazi*, writes, "The ... 1990s-2006 has been a period of experimentation and exploration of themes, materials and forms." (2006: 50) I agree but I would add that *jua kali* would also play a more counter-hegemonic role in the 1990s than ever before, since local artists would

increasingly look for ways and means to take control of the contemporary art scene, which historically had been mainly managed by Europeans. *Jua kali* artists now sought to reverse the trend whereby expatriates were the dominant cultural force in Kenya, and were notable for opening up “few opportunities ... for Africans to express themselves culturally and artistically.” In Orchardson-Mazrui’s mind, theirs had essentially been “a “closed door” policy as far as art for and by Africans was concerned.” (2006 46)

#### Banana Hill Art Studio

In contrast, the Banana Hill experience opened up a myriad of doors to *jua kali* artists such as Martin Kamuyu, Lucki Mutebi, Shade Kamau, Rahab Njambi, John ‘Silver’ Kimani and Joseph ‘Cartoon’ Njuguna Kamau, as well as to the founder of the Banana Hill Art Studio, Shine Tani (a.k.a. Simon Njenga Mwangi). It was Shine who, while working as a street entertainer in Nairobi’s city center in the late 1980s, first was introduced to contemporary African art while “window shopping” (De Certeau 1984: 97) at the Hilton Hotel and seeing the vibrant paintings by the Ugandan artist Katongole Wasswa in the storefront window. From there, he found his way to Gallery Watatu where he discovered Ruth Schaffner was welcoming would-be artists who she encouraged with paints and new perspectives on what he could do as a painter. Suddenly, Shine had a calling. He left his street acrobatics, and began painting with support of his two older brothers. But his father was opposed, so Shine went to stay with an uncle nearer Nairobi. That is when he began sharing his new-found talent with cousins and neighbors including a school girl who also loved to paint. Rahab Njambi and Shine Tani took off for Banana Hill together in 1991, and it is from then on that the Banana Hill Art Studio was born.

Shine and Rahab literally opened their home 24/7 to relatives and friends who were keen to learn to paint, especially because they heard about this woman in Nairobi who was paying for what they produced if she liked their work. Overnight, Shine the seventh grade graduate became a *jua kali* art workshop instructor, advising everyone from James Mbutia (who now runs the Healing through Art project launched originally from the RaMoMA Museum),



**Figure 35. Banana Hill Art Studio's *jua kali* artists trained, painted and exhibited their art together**

Andrew Kamundia, and Chris Gitau to Anthony Muya, Joseph Cartoon, Joe Friday and Rahab Njambi. “We also mounted our paintings on the outside of our (mud and wattle) home and people from Nairobi came to see our *jua kali* exhibitions,” recalled Shine, who in 1994 met Ngugi wa Thiong’o in Kampala at a Commonwealth Heads of State Conference. Ngugi advised Shine to organize the Studio and register it officially so Kenyan artists could claim their rightful place in the Nairobi art world and have a voice in developing a national cultural policy. That same year, a Mennonite couple, Bob and Betty Baumann sponsored the Studio’s first international art exhibition to the US. They financed a Studio workshop where more than a dozen Banana Hill artists produced works that then went to Philadelphia to be part of a “New Art from Nairobi” exhibition. It wasn’t long thereafter that Shine won the German *Missio* award which sent him in 1996 to five European countries (Germany, France, Belgium, Switzerland and the Netherlands), where he visited galleries and museums, and obtained the priceless insights and an advanced *jua kali* fine art education from world class curators, art professors and

galleries. Upon his return, Shine had an even larger and more cosmopolitan commitment to advance contemporary Kenyan art through the Banana Hill Art Studio.

#### Watatu Foundation

Meanwhile, around the same time as Shine was starting up his *jua kali* art workshop at Banana Hill, Ruth Schaffner was setting up the Watatu Foundation with a view to developing an art world for up-and-coming Kenyan artists, complete with free studio space, ongoing skills training and art materials as well as exhibition space meant to showcase artists' work both locally and globally. Initially, she worked with Etale Sukuro and ran artists workshops at Dagoretti Corner, but as her vision crystallized, she hired a young British man to help her fundraise and run the training workshops, one of which took place in Western Kenya at the studio of John Diang'a whose sculptures Ruth would collect from Diang'a home in Maseno and bring back to Nairobi to exhibit at Gallery Watatu. Meanwhile, Ruth, who was approaching 80, was in search of a place where she could establish a permanent art world for Kenyan artists. Having held several training workshops at the Ngecha YMCA and having met so many *jua kali* artists from Ngecha village in the process, starting with Sane Wadu and Wanyu Brush, her vision became a plan that was drafted by Brush and another Ngecha painter and playwright, King Dodge Kang'oroti, who explained how the plan became a project proposal:

At the same time as we were establishing the Ngecha Artists Association, [whose founder members were Sane and Eunice Wadu, Sebastian Kiarie, Meek Gichugu, Wanyu Brush, Chain Muhandi and myself], we were talking to Ruth about the idea of an art Center in Ngecha where artists could have a permanent base for training, exhibiting and working fulltime. Ruth was all for it, and after we gave her our draft she called in Rob Burnet and asked him to draft a similar proposal using our ideas. Then she planned to choose either his or ours to take with her to

the States where she wanted to fundraise for an art center at Ngecha. As it turned out, she chose ours (Kang'oroti 2009).

Dodge's understanding was that when Ruth went off to the US to fundraise, Burnet was also meant to use the Ngecha proposal that they had drafted together to fund raise for the Watatu Foundation locally. But according to Adama Diawara, Ruth's Ivorian spouse, Burnet spent his time while she was away fund raising for himself and using her donor proposal to do so.

### Kuona Trust

Kuona Trust has often been hailed as an exciting and innovative cultural “incubator” from which many talented young Kenyan artists have been “hatched.” However, very rarely, if ever, are the roles of Ruth Schaffner, Wanyu Brush and King Dodge Kang'oroti acknowledged as being central to the conception of Kuona Trust. Nonetheless, Adama Diawara is very clear that Rob Burnet was still employed by the Watatu Foundation when he found the site at the National Museums of Kenya and claimed it for a Center he would subsequently call Kuona Trust. As Adama saw it:

Instead of fundraising for Ruth, he was setting up his own arts program modeled on Ruth's ideas and drawing in all the artists he had met through working for her at Gallery Watatu. Ruth felt devastated and betrayed when she found out what he was doing. She was still in the States when she sent him a fax and fired him on the spot (Diawara 2006).

Burnet tells a completely different story of the way Kuona Trust began. He admits he was looking for a site for Ruth's project while she was away in the States, and that he found the free building at the Nairobi National Museum with the help of the curator of the Gallery of Contemporary East African Art, Wendy Karmali. But he claims he called Ruth and told her about the Museum site and “she turned it down. She said she wasn't

interested in it, but I felt the site was too perfect for the project to be rejected,” he told me March 31, 2010. Rob claims he called one member of the Watatu Foundation’s board, the lawyer Kapila, and explained the situation: that he had found the perfect site for implementing the Watatu Foundation proposal, but as Ruth had turned it down, even though the site was free of charge, he was stuck. He claimed he didn’t know what to do, but Mr. Kapila told him to hold onto it. And that, Burnet claims, is how Kuona Trust came into being. It is difficult to know if, when he was in London attending the “Africa 95” celebrations, he had anticipated starting his own cultural center separate from the Watatu Foundation, but certainly he was quick to find the site, the funding, and even the artists soon after his return from the UK that year.

Initially in our interview, Burnet didn’t say that Ruth Schaffner fired him while he was inside the Museum building, the future site of Kuona Trust. But I had already been informed by local artists Simon Muriithi and Theresa Musoke who were both at the Museum at the time that Ruth sent her fax with no explanation attached. Other artists loyal to Ruth claim they believe she fired Burnet because he took all of her trans-national donor and client contacts when she had asked him to transfer her Rolodex addresses onto the new computer she bought in 1994. Burnet who had come to Kenya in 1992, not long after graduating from University of Edinburgh, was more conversant with computer technology than Ruth, and at the time, she had no idea she might be handing over one of her most precious assets, her global network contacts, to someone intent on competing with her in the future. The other thing that stunned Ruth, Diawara claimed, was the way that many Kenyan artists, including ones she had helped a great deal, left her to go to



work with Burnet once he called them to Kuona Trust. Even a few artists from Ngecha, such as Chain Muhandi, left the Gallery Watatu fold and went to work at Kuona Trust.

Muhandi explained his behavior not as betrayal of Ruth but as based on naiveté:

I went to work at Kuona Trust because I thought Rob was representing Ruth. He never told us otherwise, and as he had represented her in various capacities in the past, I thought Kuona Trust was hers not his. Ruth had done so much for me, I would never have hurt her intentionally (Muhandi 2009).

Muhandi was correct in thinking that the concept behind Kuona Trust was actually Ruth's. But according to Marc van Rampelberg, the Belgian custom furniture maker who worked closely with Ruth in the last five or six years of her life, Ruth had her doubts about Rob almost from the beginning, but she let her guard down and chose to trust him.

Ruth had a reputation for being a hard-nosed business woman, but in Rob's case, it was almost as if she was grooming him to take over from her, which is why it hurt her so deeply when he went off and started Kuona Trust. She could never have imagined he would turn on her in this way (Van Rampelberg 2009).

Van Rampelberg had a run-in with Burnet in 2003 after the Briton had gotten a job at Ford Foundation based on his work with Kenyan *jua kali* artists at Kuona Trust. The Belgian claims that many of the photographs in the Ford-funded book *TheIathini* are of paintings and sculptures that belong to the Ruth Schaffner collection, yet Burnet would not allow an acknowledgment of Ruth to appear in the book.

We fought over the issue, and I no longer speak to Rob Burnet, but I felt Ruth's legacy should be represented in the book and it was not. Since Burnet controlled the money, he had the last word on what went into the book. The battle was so fierce the book almost didn't go to press (Van Rampelberg 2009).

Diawara is convinced that Burnet literally broke Ruth's heart. "She died of a heart attack, although the doctors said there was nothing wrong with her physically when she

passed,” her husband said. Burnet told me he was the last person to talk to Ruth before she died in 1996.

She and I were on speaking terms. I called her a few hours before she passed on and told her the good news: I had just received word from Ford Foundation that they were going to fund Kuona Trust. She seemed pleased at the news, but she died a few hours later (Burnet 2010).

Burnet expressed no remorse over the peculiar timing of Ruth’s passing. Instead, he said he believed he was the last person to speak to her before she died. Ruth’s husband however took note of the coincidence in timing: “Rob had been hired by Ruth to fundraise for Watatu. Instead, he went fundraising for himself” said Diawara. “I also believe Rob’s behavior broke Ruth’s heart,” added Watatu manager Morris Amboso. In point of fact, Burnet managed to raise hundreds of thousands of dollars for Kuona Trust from international donors such as the British High Commission, Ford Foundation, and the Hivos and Duon foundations of the Netherlands among others. In 1997, Kuona teamed up with the British-based Triangle Arts Trust to start up a series of *Wasanii* International Artists Workshops, which raised the public profile of the Trust and opened doors not only for Kenyan artists to work collaborative with artists from around the world but also for Burnet to start moving into international donor circles where he ultimately would go to work.

#### Kenyan “Stepping Stones”

Ruth’s husband isn’t the only person to feel Rob Burnet exploited the situation in Nairobi’s contemporary art world for personal gain. The first person to publicly rebuke Burnet for taking advantage of his position at the Watatu Foundation was Elimo Njau. The man known as “the elder statesman of East African art” (Mann 2010) challenged

Burnet at a public forum at the Goethe Institute for his purporting to be ‘an expert’ on contemporary Kenyan art after working a matter of months for Ruth Schaffner in Kenya. But then after he went ahead and set up Kuona Trust using Ruth’s ideas and transnational art world connections, it wasn’t long before he left the Trust to sign on with the Ford Foundation as Regional Manager in charge of Media, Communications and Culture. Burnet remained closely connected with Kuona Trust even after making his relatively rapid rise from donor recipient to donor boss. But what soured a number of Kenyan artists to Burnet was not so much his change of status as their belief that they had been used to pave the way for Burnet to climb up the social ladder, using the cultural capital he accrued working with local African artists, into what Graham Hancock cynically calls the realm of the *Lords of Poverty* (1992), also known as “the aristocracy of mercy.” Several *jua kali* artists believe Burnet’s goal was getting into this international donor aid world where Hancock says men find power and prestige by engaging in corrupting practices that purportedly help the poor, a claim that Burnet made, pointing to his work for *jua kali* artists at Kuona Trust. What incensed Kenyan artists about Burnet was their discovery that he was portraying them – in Ford Foundation brochures -- as homeless street boys that Kuona Trust had saved by taking them off the street and rehabilitating them through art, which was not the case for 99 per cent of the artists who passed through Kuona Trust. I know of one example of a street boy who found his way to Kuona Trust, Charles Ngatia, but he is the exception, not the rule at the Trust. Wanjohi Nyamu, Peter Mburu, James Omondi and Patricia Njeri are just a few of the artists who were deeply offended by their portrayal in Ford brochures, which Wanjohi and Mburu found by accident when

they went to visit Burnet after he had officially left Kuona at his Ford Foundation office.

As Mburu put it,

It was a shock to see ourselves on the cover of that Ford booklet with a caption underneath calling us rehabilitated street boys. But what was even more stunning was to read on the Ford website that Ford had given Kuona Trust hundreds of thousands of dollars that year, yet we artists saw next to none of it. We wanted to know where the money went (Mburu 2009).

James Omondi was also concerned about accountability of Kuona funding: “If they were raising money in our names, then we should have been informed what the funds were being used for.” Wanjohi Nyamu felt

especially aggrieved by Burnet. In his view, he said there was “little doubt that Rob used Kenyan artists as stepping stones to get to where he wanted to go. He

wanted to go where he could get fame and fortune. And he used us to get there.” Simon Muriithi, another Kuona artist, said he had been

observing Burnet’s behavior ever since he was fired by Ruth Schaffner and went on to open the doors of Kuona Trust. It gave him special insight into Rob’s style of strategic thinking, Muriithi said.

Rob used to make every one that walked through the door at Kuona Trust sign a membership form, which he kept as evidence that Kuona was helping us a lot. That guy who signed might never come back to Kuona, but the signed form gave Rob ‘evidence’ to show prospective donors that he was helping Kenyan artists (Muriithi 2009).

Muriithi claimed Burnet wept when he received the faxed ‘pink slip’ from Ruth.

“But those must have been crocodile tears,” said Peter Mburu, who is among those who



**Figure 36. Afro-Surreal Circus, a painting by Simon Muriithi**

believes Rob knew exactly what he was doing all along. Mburu also knew Burnet when he was new at Watatu. As he put it:

He looked so humble when he first arrived at Gallery Watatu. He used to bum cigarettes off of us and even borrowed money from us. But now he drives a four-wheel drive SUV, lives in Karen [Nairobi's elite, largely expatriate suburb], and just got through being a boss [for six years] at the Ford Foundation. None of that was accidental (Mburu 2009).

Like Ruth Schaffner, Rob Burnet is one of the most controversial characters in the contemporary Kenyan art world; however among the African artists that I interviewed his detractors far outnumbered his supporters, unlike Ruth who is fondly remembered by many a *jua kali* artist.

#### Passing of an Era

Following Ruth's demise in 1996, there were months of speculation over who would take charge of Ruth's art collection and gallery. Marc van Rampelberg told me he had hoped to succeed Ruth in running the gallery but he didn't get on with her husband Adama. According to the gallery's general manager Morris Amboso, a Ghanaian art collector Osei Kofi had tried to buy into the gallery, but Adama refused to relinquish control. (In December 2010, Adama finally agreed to sell Watatu to Kofi.) Unfortunately, he never had the enthusiasm or commitment to cultivate contemporary Kenyan art in the same way Ruth did; thus, the gallery went into decline following her demise. At the same time, Kuona Trust was quick to pick up on the best and the worst policies and practices of Ruth. Burnet implemented most of the ideas she had endorsed, apart from supporting the Ngecha Artists Association, which Ruth had planned to focus her attention on before she passed. "Ruth had gone to America to raise funds for us Ngecha artists," recalled Wanyu

Brush. “If it hadn’t been for Kuona starting up, she would probably be here today and all of the Ngecha artists who’d been committed to working with her wouldn’t have run to Rob,” said Brush who claims he is one of the few artists from his village who did not gravitate to Kuona Trust. “And I never will,” he added.

#### Wasanii International Workshops

The one good thing that Kuona Trust did in its first two years, which again had been part of Ruth’s vision, was to set up skills training workshops for unschooled Kenyan *jua kali* artists. The initial workshops were conducted by Kenyan artists formerly associated with Ruth, such as Elijah Ogira, Morris Foit, and Francis Kahuri. The workshops that they conducted had a profound impact on a wide range of aspiring sculptors and painters such as Maggie Otieno, Irene Wanjiru, and Patrick Mukabi, all three of whom credit their current success to the training they received from the likes of Ogira, Kahuri and Foit. By 1997, Burnet had also linked up with the UK-based Triangle Arts Trust and Ford Foundation to get a score of international and local artists to Lake Naivasha, Kenya, to participate in the first of what would be a series of *Wasanii* international artists’ workshops. Contrary to their promotional material, however, the *Wasanii* workshops were not the “first international artists’ workshops” to be held in Kenya. That status goes to Paa ya Paa which had run comparable “international workshops” for artists exactly 25 years before *Wasanii* took off. Not only that, Kitengela Trust also ran international ‘bush glass’ workshops since the Eighties. So however valuable may be the exposure to and experience of working with artists from other parts of the world, *Wasanii* was not the first to avail Kenyan artists this opportunity. But

*Wasanii* did turn out to be was a source of contention among Kenyans, a number of whom felt that Kuona had structured a sort of “divide and rule” elitist strategy into its operating system.

### Divide and Rule

Those few artists at Kuona Trust who got the opportunities to participate in international workshops or to travel to artist residency programs in other parts of the region and the world, were increasingly seen as the privileged few or the so-called ‘golden children’ of Burnet, comparable to W.E.B. DuBois’ “Talented Ten”. One of favored few, Mbuthia Maina, claimed Rob Burnet had indeed “produced” a talented team of at least ten contemporary Kenyan artists at Kuona who were of ‘transnational caliber’, including Richard Kimani, Jimnah Kimathi, Michael Soi, Peter Elungat, Peterson Kamwathi, Simon Muriithi, Maggie Otieno, Justus Kyalo, Beatrice Njoroge, and himself. Yet this elitist perspective rubbed many local artists the wrong way, including some who are still based at Kuona Trust, such as sculptor David Mwaniki, who spoke frankly:

The handful of artists that Rob favored were always the ones sent to workshops or art residencies when chances like those arose. The rest of us got tired of applying for opportunities we knew we would never get, but we never felt this approach was fair (Mwaniki 2009).

Nonetheless, there is little doubt that Kuona opened doors for a number of Kenyan artists, including several second—generation Kenyan artists whose elders had virtually nothing to do with the Trust. For instance, Michael Soi was the son of Ancent Soi, Anthony Wanjau and Jackson Wanjau were both sons of Samwel Wanjau, and John Kamicha and Lionel Mbutha are both sons of Zachariah Mbutha. All three first generation Kenyan artists have had virtually no association with Kuona Trust, which is

significant to note simply because some of the younger Kuona staff members make the claim that “all” contemporary Kenyan artists have been associated, at one time or other, with Kuona Trust, privileging the Trust in a way that is inaccurate. Indeed, as the former Kuona artist, Michael Wafula told me, “There are many independent artists in Kenya who have no association with Kuona Trust at all.” Wafula made this point shortly before he resigned from Kuona Trust to start up his own Kijiji Art Studio in Kayole, another Nairobi suburban “slum.” Other art networks that came into being out of disenchantment with Kuona Trust include Kilele Art Studio, Chemi Chemi Women, Hawa Women, and Ya-Africa, among others. At the same time, other *jua kali* artists chose to stick with Kuona Trust irrespective of the internal politics. For instance, a transnational artist like Gakunju Kaigwa, who has studied and exhibited in many parts of the world (namely Holland, Italy, Scotland, and the US) shares the view of several Kuona-based artists who are just grateful for a *jua kali* space wherein to work. Kaigwa feels that irrespective of the problems at the Trust, it is worth being part of the Kuona network since it partially fulfills its avowed “mission...to advance the skills and opportunities of artists and make art a valued and integral part of (Kenyan) society.”

#### Disaster Hits Paa ya Paa

While a new generation of Kenyan artists was being groomed and given opportunities that previous generations didn't have, the devastating fire of 1998 at Paa ya Paa looked like it destroyed nearly all of the evidence of what earlier East African artists had created and left behind at the Ridgeways home and gallery. Most of the paintings, wooden sculptures, rare books, catalogs, and other archival materials were lost in the



blaze and Elimo Njau, in struggling to save his five precious “sketches” for his Fort Hall Murals, was nearly asphyxiated. Fortunately, Samwel Wanjau’s *Freedom Fighter* survived, but the remains of the old colonial home that once belonged to Oxford University Press, that Elimo was able to buy with assistance of his former English teacher, Maurice Wolfe and that became Paa ya Paa from the early 1970s, was a burnt out shell. But any doubts that a dynamic Nairobi art world exists were dismissed in light of the response by many local artists and foreign cultural centers in support of Paa ya Paa. The French Cultural Center became the venue where people rallied to the Njau’s side and conducted several *harambees* (“let’s pull together” in Kiswahili) fundraisers to help reconstruct Paa ya Paa from the ground up. The resurrection of Paa ya Paa was evidence that a renaissance spirit was already alive and being nurtured by a number of artists and patrons of the arts, including Mary Collis, the soon-to-be-founder of RaMoMA Museum Shine Tani, manager of Banana Hill Art Studio, and Harsita Waters, senior Kenyan arts consultant at Alliance Francaise.

*The New Millennium: The Donors Decade and the Jua Kali Generation*

The Kenyan art scene was dramatically transformed at the dawn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, particularly after the civilian dictator Daniel arap Moi was forced to retire at the end of 2002 after 24 long years and Mwai Kibaki was democratically elected to the presidency. Unfortunately, the Moi era had done so much damage both to the Kenyan economy and to the country’s global reputation as a tourist destination that in 2003, African Heritage went into receivership and Alan Donovan, rather than despair over the loss of his life work, refocused his energies and strove to build an artistic memorial to his

former partner Joseph Murumbi. With Kenya Government endorsement he set to work creating a permanent exhibition at the National Archives comprised of Murumbi's substantial collections of Pan-African, European and specifically Kenyan art. It was not a national gallery but it was the closest thing that Donovan could construct for his friend, who died in 1990. "I wanted to ensure that Joe's collection didn't get lost or mysteriously misplaced. I also wanted to ensure it would be available to the public. Entrance into the Archives is free," said Donovan, whose home, which he built on the edge of Nairobi National Park and decorated with fine art from all over Africa, is not free of charge. He has made his African Heritage House into an elegant, elite destination that is the embodiment of African hybridity, mixing architectural designs from West and North Africa with interiors that could rival any African Art Museum on the planet.

But even before Moi had left office, the donor community was repositioning itself in anticipation of a bright new day for Kenya. Whether it was because they felt the renaissance spirit coming alive across the land as people looked forward to the departure of Moi, donors definitely were looking favorably on working with Kenyans in the post-Moi era.. After more than 20 years with Moi, Kenyans and the international community were keen for change, and many simply wanted to keep their foothold in what had once been "the model of African capitalism" (Russell 1982). With respect to one American non-governmental organization, Rob Burnet left Kuona Trust for the greener pasture called the Ford Foundation in 2000, and within no time he was funding more than a dozen local projects. Ford led the way in what some observers have called "the donors' decade," given that everyone from the Swedes, Swiss, French, German, Danish and

Dutch to the Chinese, American, British, UNESCO, and World Bank were all stepping in to offer loans and grants to Kenya's cultural sector in the post-Moi period. Ford alone not only funded Kuona Trust, but other contemporary art institutions, including the new Rahimtulla Museum of Modern Art (RaMoMA) which was the brainchild of Mary Collis and Carol Lees and the GoDown Art Center which Burnet designed and modeled after the London home base of Triangle Arts Trust. RaMoMA women aimed not only to replace Gallery Watatu as Nairobi's leading commercial art gallery. Mary Collis' plan was to create an equivalent of MOMA, the New York City-based Museum of Modern Art, in Nairobi, filled with the art works of contemporary Kenyan art. And as from 2000 up to 2009 when the global economic crisis hit its donors, RaMoMA was well on its way to doing just that. Practically every month, Lees and Collis were putting on new exhibitions of mostly Kenyan artists. Meanwhile, Burnet assembled a board to establish The GoDown, including leading locals such as Joy Mboya, Eric Krystall, Harsita Waters and several others. The multipurpose cultural site, modeled after the Gasworks in London and the Bag Factory in Johannesburg, was originally an abandoned warehouse that Burnet, following the lead of his mentor, Triangle co-founder Sir Robert Loder, transformed into an art network that would include visual artists' studios and exhibition halls as well as performance and rehearsal spaces for actors, dancers, musicians and even political puppets like those that regularly perform on the popular Kenyan cable station, Citizen TV, in *The XYZ Show*. But as promising as the plan sounded to some, particularly to Ford's outgoing president, Susan Banisford, who Burnet persuaded to purchase the warehouse with a Ford Legacy Grant, quite a few local artists looked beyond the apparent

generosity of Ford and questioned the motivation for its funding of the three art institutions, Kuona Trust, RaMoMA Museum and the GoDown Art Center. According to the *East African Standard* newspaper editor Peter Kimani:

These artists were raising the fundamental question of who controls Kenyan culture. They saw the three as constituting a neocolonial ‘cartel’ controlled not by Kenyans but by Rob Burnet and those behind him at Ford and British Council (Kimani 2010).

Whether their complaint was based merely on a conspiracy theory or it constituted a counter-hegemonic perspective aimed at challenging the dominant expatriate, bourgeois influence on Kenya’s contemporary art world, artists like Peter Mburu, Patricia Njeri, James Omondi and Wanjohi Nyamu were and still are convinced that however benevolent the funding might appear, it had more to do with outside forces holding onto control of Kenya’s cultural scene, and they wanted to be free of it. Wanjohi was most pro-active and vocal about the issue. He explained:

Actually, we tried to take our case against Rob Burnet to Kenya’s Anti-Corruption Commission once we found that Ford was giving Kuona Trust millions of shillings in the name of helping Kenyan artists, but none of it was reaching the artists. But we found our path was blocked because the KACC is funded by Ford. We then tried to take him to court and went to the Public Law Institute to get help; but there we also found Ford Foundation backing the Institute as well. But we finally got a story in the press about corruption at Kuona Trust, and we have been called trouble makers ever since (Nyamu 2009).

Meanwhile, under Burnet’s management, Ford also administered funds to a wide range of indigenous cultural institutions, including publishing houses such as Kwani!, StoryMoja, and Twaweza Communications. He channeled Ford funding to other cultural groups ranging from the Nairobi Arts Trust, TARA, and The Theater Company to the Center for Contemporary Art of East Africa, Sarakasi Trust and Changamoto, an

“alternative creativity fund” for innovative artistic project ideas. It seemed as if donors like Ford, in the first half of the decade, had unlimited funds to give to art projects they endorsed, including everything from puppets and modern dancers to local musicians and acrobats. Other foreign agencies that came forward to fund Kenyan cultural activities at this time included Dutch donor agencies like Hivos and Duon Foundation, British groups such as Oxfam, the Born Free Foundation, Wild in Art and the British High Commission, and German groups like GTZ and the Heinrich Boll Foundation, among others. (See table 6.4). But Burnet’s critics never relinquished the cynical view that for every project he helped support there was a chunk of funding that came his way. “Rob may have funded a number of local groups, but you go around to every single one of them today and ask how they feel about the deal they got from Rob. They will tell you they aren’t happy,” said Lydia Galavu, the newly appointed curator at the Nairobi National Museum and founder of the Hawa Women group, Hawa meaning Eve in Kiswahili.

#### Creative Accounting

Problems only arose at Ford Foundation after Burnet got involved in “creative accounting” (Amat et al 1999) by insisting that two artists groups which had been awarded Ford funding, receive their checks through a third party. For reasons best known to Burnet, he didn’t want either group to receive their funds directly, so he arranged in 2002 for the Hawa Women Group and the Banana Hill Arts Studio to receive Ford checks from the newly formed RaMoMA Museum. Both groups found the arrangement paternalistic and disconcerting. For Banana Hill’s *jua kali* artists who had been surviving as an autonomous art network for more than a decade, the situation was tolerable only

because the funds enabled the group to pay rent on gallery space in the heart of Banana Hill village, which they previously could not afford. Hawa women, on the other hand, found this arrangement particularly perturbing because the group itself included a qualified accountant and several university graduates, unlike the Banana Hill Studio which arguably could have had a less sophisticated accounting system than RaMoMA's. But what Hawa women also found disconcerting was the fact that their funding proposal had been approved by Ford's New York office for \$800,000 to construct a fully-equipped women's art studio on the outskirts of Nairobi. Hawa founder Lydia Galavu explained the hardship that Hawa women endured:

We were told by Rob that it wouldn't be possible for us to build our studio. Instead, he wanted us to run a series of workshops for rural women groups, which was not our intention at all. Eventually, we agreed to hold those workshops, but we believe the reason Rob refused to release funds for us to build our women's studio is because he feared we would compete with and surpass the success of his baby, Kuona Trust, which everyone knew he was running behind the scenes (Galavu 2010).

The Ford funding issue came to a head in 2004 after artists at Kuona began to dig into the discrepancies between the amount of funds that Ford officially gave to Kuona Trust and the miniscule amount that Kuona artists actually saw of those funds. "After all, Kuona didn't pay rent at the Museum, and we artists didn't receive art materials, so where does the money go?" asked Peter Mburu, one of the Kuona artists who called on the Kenyan press to conduct its own investigation of Kuona's accounts after the Kenya Government's Anti-Corruption Commission gave him no help. "We knew that although Rob Burnet was officially gone from Kuona, he had left behind his 'shadow,' Judy Ogana, who had been trained by Rob [who got her a scholarship to study Art World

Administration in Sweden], and she reported directly back to him,” Wanjohi Nyamu added. The investigative report that came out in the Kenyan press in early 2004 was “fair and balanced” as far as the artists were concerned. The story included references to complaints lodged both by Kuona artists and by Hawa women about their lack of access to funds promised them by Ford’s head office but blocked by Burnet. “Unfortunately, after the story appeared in February, and we refused to retract statements in Peter Kimani’s story [in *The Daily Nation*, Kenya’s leading and most authoritative daily newspaper], we never saw any more funding from Ford,” Lydia said. The local artists who had been critical of Kuona’s administration were also ‘punished’ for making their complaints public. Ostensibly, everyone working at Kuona was asked to get off the Museum grounds since renovation work on the institution was just about to begin. In fact, those renovations didn’t begin until a year later, and the non-controversial artists were invited to sign up for studio space at The GoDown right away, The rest, including the so-called “troublemakers,” were only told to vacate the Museum grounds as quickly as they could. Their grievances were never addressed, and while they were all forced to scatter to various new sites, that move served to spawn a whole new generation of Kenyan art networks, one at Mamba Village, others at Ngecha Art Gallery and Kijiji Art Studio. Several more sites would grow out of artists moving back to peri-urban areas on the outskirts of Nairobi where innovative new art networks would take form. So from a dialectical perspective, the pain of going public with complaints against Kuona Trust and Ford had a positive dimension as well.

## Blowback

In the mind of Kuona's critics, Kimani's news story effectively confirmed that a neocolonial 'cartel' indeed operates in Kenya, its aim being to dominate and control the Kenyan cultural scene. Even Kimani, the reporter, experienced blowback from his story, since Ford also pumps funding into The Nation Newspaper Group on occasion. As the journalist put it:

It's true that one editor wanted me fired for getting the story printed while he was away on leave, but another more senior editor [Wangethi Mwangi] insisted that I stay and even receive a promotion. In any case, I'm confident I wrote the truth. Vast sums of money were earmarked for local artists, which were never accounted for. How does one explain that unless there was theft involved somewhere? (Kimani 2010)

Kimani never wrote another story on the arts for *The Daily Nation*. Instead, he was moved out of Nairobi to a different town. It wasn't long thereafter that he left the *Nation* and transferred over to the rival newspaper *The East African Standard*, but he insists he wasn't pressed to leave. Several *jua kali* artists believe otherwise, but to them, Kimani will always be a hero because he told their story when others would not. Nonetheless, nothing would be the same after *The Nation* story was released. The Kuona artists who had pushed for the story to be published had already been told to vacate the Museum premises, and those who didn't make waves or ask probing questions about donor money were invited to move over to The GoDown where Joy Mboya had many vacant studios spaces available. Among those who made the shift were Jimnah Kimani, Gakunju Kaigwa and Patrick Mukabi as well as the four women who founded another women artists group: Maggie Otieno, Mary Ogembo, Beatrice Njoroge, and Caroline Mbirua formed the Chemi Chemi Women in the late 1990s, several years before Hawa



was formed. Maggie Otieno, who is still with Kuona but is also Project Manager at the online gallery African Colours, recalls how important the women group was in her artistic development:

We started Chemi Chemi because we felt women artists at Kuona were consistently being excluded from consideration for international workshops and residencies. We didn't want to break away from Kuona but we did start running workshops for rural women groups without help from Kuona. The only problem was that right when the workshops began, two of our members (including Maggie) got pregnant and had to drop out of the program. The group never quite got together after that, but one thing I carried away with me from the group was the incentive to build my CV and apply for opportunities (Otieno 2009).

The situation at The GoDown was strained after Kuona artists went to the GoDown not only because they were both arts organizations bent on doing the same things for Kenyan artists; both were started up by Burnet, and both sought donor funding from the same sources. But also, the heads of each group had no intention of merging with the other. One complication was that Judy Ogana who had replaced Burnet at Kuona Trust when he went to Ford, had generated sufficient friction among the artists as to contribute to the explosive outcomes of 2004. Ogana was relieved of her post that same year to be replaced by a Triangle Arts Trust person from the UK, Danda Jaroljmek. Ogana's explanation for her departure was that she went to have a baby, but Burnet quickly brought her back to manage The GoDown, side by side of Joy Mboya, which meant there were too many bosses at the one site. So it was in everyone's interest for a "new and improved" Kuona Trust to move out of The GoDown early in 2009 to a spacious (two acre) leafy green location closer to the city center in the suburb called Hurlingham. "Danda is an artist herself so she has far more empathy with the artists, and she is much easier to work with," Gakunju Kaigwa said. She has also been an excellent

fund raiser for the “new” Kuona Trust, obtaining everything from large portable shipping “containers” (which get transformed into artists’ studios) to several used computers equipped with Internet and 1500 art books straight from the Victoria and Albert Museum which are shelved in Kuona’s second story library.

Among the artists that happily left the GoDown for the Hurlingham site, even though they would all have to experience a rent hike, were Peterson Kamwathi, Michael Soi, Thom Ogonga, Eric Omondi a.k.a. Omosh Kindeh, Maggie Otieno, Michael Wafula, John ‘Silver’ Kimani, Salah Ammar , and Gakunju Kaigwa. And by the time I arrived in mid 2009, several more artists had settled in at the new Hurlingham location. They included Peter Oendo Kenyanya, Fred Abuga, Thom Ogonga, Meshack Oiro, Yassir Ali Mohammed, Sylvia Gichia, Ato Malindi, Dennis Muraguri, Cyrus Ng’ang’a, Kepha Mosoti, Michael Wafula, Kevin Oduor, Sam Hopkins, ‘Beth Kimwele, Maryanne Muthoni, Dan Chiselhands, Kota Otieno, Jackson Wanjau, Anthony Wanjau, David Mwaniki and Wanjiru Naisinya Kimani. At the same time, there were a number of artists who still identify with Kuona Trust, despite moving off the premises. These included Samuel Githui, Morris Foit, Elijah Ogira, Anthony Okello, Peter Walala, John Kamicha, Jimnah Kimani, Kyalo Justus, Richard Kimathi, Mbuthia Maina, Simon Muriithi, Peter Elungat, Beatrice Njoroge, Tabitha wa Thuku, Irene Wanjiru Zaidi, Harrison Mburu, Sane Wadu and Eunice Wadu.

#### Transnational Exhibitions

The idea of Kuona, GoDown and RaMoMA being a ‘cartel’ that worked closely together isn’t far from the truth. Since 2000 the troika had developed into a dynamic art

world that reflected Kenya's renaissance spirit. The three organizations kept close tabs on one another, developed some sort of division of labor among themselves, and up until 2009 were all funded by Ford Foundation. For instance, in 2004, when Judy Ogana was still head of Kuona Trust and Carol Lees was curator at RaMoMA Museum, they selected works by almost 50 local artists for an exhibition of *Kenya Art* that featured in five New York galleries simultaneously. The exhibition was a landmark moment for Kenyan contemporary art in the sense that many of the country's most innovative and creative *jua kali* artists were on show, including Peterson Kamwathi, James Mbuthia, Ancent Soi, and Simon Muriithi as well as painters from both Banana Hill and Ngecha art networks. The five-sided exhibition received a critical review from the Pulitzer Prize winning *New York Times* art critic, Holland Cotter (2004) who had kind words for the works of Michael Soi, Meek Gichugu and Alan Githuka among others. My only problem with the exhibition was the catalogue which misrepresented Kenyan artists, calling both Annabelle Wanjiku and Sane Wadu "first generation" Kenyan artists rather than second or third generation. Such a notion goes out into the *mediascape* and implicitly negates half a century of Kenyan creative expression (e.g. Rosemary Karuga was entering Makerere University's fine art school in 1952). So while the 'mistake' might seem small, it falsely suggests contemporary art only came into being in Kenya in the Nineties or in the 21<sup>st</sup> century not the half century before.

The 2004 group exhibition wasn't the first time Kenyan artists showed their art trans-nationally. Recall that in 1994 the Banana Hill Art Studio was given a group show in Philadelphia entitled "*New Art from Nairobi*" in 1984, East African artists were

represented at London's Commonwealth Institute in an exhibition organized by Elimo Njau entitled *Sanaa: Contemporary Art from East Africa*; and going back even further, in 1969 Kenyan artists including Rosemary Karuga, Samwel Wanjau and Jak Katarikawe exhibited in New York City at the Union Carbide Building. But even earlier, in 1949 the Kenyan painter Gregory Maloba was exhibiting at the Imperial Institute in London (Miller 1975: 93). More than a half century later in 2003, Kenyan artist Camille Wekesa was also in London curating a four floor Kenyan art exhibition at the UK headquarters of Coca Cola Africa. Drawing mainly from the artworks that she found at Kuona, RaMoMA and the GoDown, Wekesa's exhibition got virtually no coverage in Kenya, but it was successful enough that she curated a second London exhibition in 2005, collaborating with Kenyan venture capitalist Tony Wainaina again drawing from many of the same 'cartel' of artists that worked so well two years earlier. Admitting that she could be missing out on seeing some of the *jua kali* art that doesn't find its way to the cartel, Camille went on the board of RaMoMA Museum in 2009 in order to ensure that as many of the ad hoc *jua kali* art networks in Kenya are linked into RaMoMA. However, she went on the board just before the economic meltdown hit the Nairobi art world head on, and before the RaMoMA's curator Carol Lees resigned with all the Museum's transnational contacts conveniently lodged in her head. Lees has since reactivated her OneOff Gallery where she has been actively marketing contemporary Kenyan art online ever since. A self-effacing, understated, qualified interior decorator who doesn't fit the stereotype of a high powered art dealer, Lees nonetheless is doing something that only Ruth Schaffner managed to achieve before her, which is to bring Kenyan art to the

attention of the global community. Indeed, it is her acquaintance with the Virgin Airline co-founder Robert Devereux that brought him to Kenya initially in 2009 when he donated studio space to the new Kuona Trust at Hurlingham. And it was Lees together with Danda Jaroljmek who encouraged Devereux to come back to Kenya in 2010 and start up a well-endowed African Arts Trust, which may do more to help energize Kenyans' renaissance spirit in the arts than any other single donation.

#### Ya-Africa

In the meantime, one group that is not directly linked to the cartel, but nonetheless organized a surprisingly successful four-sided exhibition *jua kali*-style in the United Kingdom in 2005 is Ya-Africa, a group that splintered off from Kuona Trust in 2004 and got identified as “trouble-makers” by Judy Ogana after its members demanded financial accountability from the Trust. Basically put together by Wanjohi Nyamu and Peter Mburu, it was Nyamu who while in the UK teaching a course on creating ‘junk art’ (meaning welding scrap metal into forms of fine art) met up with Catmose Gallery curator, Valerie Bishop who was keen to mount a group exhibition of Kenyan art. Mburu claims he was the footman, doing all the leg work on the ground in Kenya to pull the exhibition together:

Wanjohi remained in the UK while my job was to persuade local artists to take part in our exhibition. Many of them didn't believe we could succeed; others took a chance and gave me art work which I had to figure out how to get to the UK. The Hawa women came on board, and it was Lydia who hooked me up with her boss, Kip Lagat from the National Museum who was on his way to a conference in London and kindly carried the canvases in his luggage. Without him there would have been no exhibition (Mburu 2009).

All together there were thirty Kenyan artists in the show, which was on tour for two months in the UK. The exhibition was tremendously well received, with the curator for the British Museum's East African Art wing, Chris Spring, writing an introduction in the show's catalogue. Mburu admits he was disappointed for not being acknowledged in that catalogue, after all the toil and trouble he went through in order to make the exhibition take place at all. But for him the larger reward was actually getting Kenyan art out into the global art arena for a wider public to see and appreciate. Since the Ya-Africa-Hawa Women exhibition in the UK, Mburu who is both a painter and sculptor in his own right, has gotten more involved in helping Kenyan artists to mount group exhibitions comparable to the UK one, only at home in Kenya. "The biggest challenge that Kenyan artists face is selling their art, especially as many of them rely on those sales for their daily bread," Mburu said. Playing his part as a connecting agent working among a wide range of art networks, Mburu doesn't identify with any one network. Instead, his *jua kali* style of operating means that he cooperates with everyone who is keen to market Kenyan art trans-nationally as well as locally.

#### Division of Labor at the Cartel

One last point about the so-called Kuona – RaMoMA – GoDown cartel is that the cooperation of the three was definitely part of a larger plan for constructing a complete donor-funded art world "The original idea was that Kuona [and ideally GoDown] artists would produce artworks which in turn would be exhibited and sold at RaMoMA," said Danda Jaroljmek who had worked closely with Carol Lees, curator at RaMoMA until December 2009 when Lees left the Museum. The division of labor idea between Kuona

and RaMoMA worked out relatively well all the while that RaMoMA was located at Rahimtulla Towers where the rent was free and the museum was a few minutes walk from the Center of town. But banking on its years of overwhelming success and dominance in dealing with contemporary Kenyan art both locally and globally, the RaMoMA founders got into something of an “overstretch” mentality (Burbach and Tarbell 2004: 21), decided to move out of Rahimtulla and get backers to buy a mansion where they could operate not just one, but *seven* galleries all at once. It was a risky move, but none of the backers could have foreseen the financial meltdown of 2008, which would impact the Museum’s major benefactor, Ford Foundation, to such an extent that Ford terminated its support for RaMoMA by 2009. The meltdown combined with the departure of Lees led to the slashing of staff in mid-2010 as an air of uncertainty hung over RaMoMA until November. At that time, the support staff and the local artists were given notice by the Museum’s board who announced RaMoMA was closing December 1, 2010. To date, the future of RaMoMA is in limbo and speculation about its fate is rife.

#### *Jua Kali Making Do*

By the end of the first decade of the new millennium, almost all the foreign donors have cut their funding of local art institutions, including RaMoMA, Kuona, and the GoDown. Institutions that have learned not to rely on donor funding are doing decidedly better, relatively speaking, than the ‘cartel’ of cultural institutions that came to depend on foreign handouts for their survival. For instance, Gallery Watatu, though not as illustrious as in the days when Ruth Schaffner was in charge, keeps its doors open and its gallery walls filled with art mostly from the Schaffner collection. And in January

2011, Watatu was infused with new life when Osei Kofi finally took over the management of the gallery. Paa ya Paa Art Center has been resurrected to a degree, and Elimo Njau is finally being recognized, both locally and globally as the Grand Old Man of contemporary East African art (Mann 2010). Unfortunately, the Banana Hill Art Studio, which had started off in *jua kali* style and operated relatively well for more than a decade, made a nearly fatal decision in 2002 to succumb to the dominant trend of asking for donor funding from Ford. It was a choice that cost them dearly and after getting badly burned by former *jua kali* artists such as Joseph Cartoon, Shine and Rahab Tani have learned their lesson and returned in 2006 to living by their *jua kali* ingenuity without a shred of donor funding. Today, the Banana Hill Art Gallery is thriving; Shine is mounting exhibitions of African *jua kali* artists regularly. In late 2009 a German TV crew made a documentary film on the Gallery's success. Occasionally, Shine hosts exhibitions for artists from overseas, such as the French couple who showed their work at the Gallery in August 2010. Meanwhile, Banana Hill remains one of the few art institutions in the country that cooperates with the Kenya government's Ministry of Culture. "Every year the Ministry mounts competitive art exhibitions in all eight provinces, and the one for Central Province is held at Banana Hill Studio," said Calestus Musiomi, assistant director of visual art at the Culture Ministry. Unlike Shine, most local artists haven't given the ministry of culture the time of day, since they are more inclined to see the government as insensitive to the artists and unappreciative of the arts, especially now that one of the first deeds of the 2008 Coalition government was to remove Art from the national schools' curriculum.



### *Jua Kali* Marketing

Today, many *jua kali* artists have come to realize they cannot rely either on the Government or on the commercial gallery system which for decades was either dominated by expatriate art or controlled by foreign interests. For instance, Ruth Schaffner may have marketed African art abroad but she was only interested in promoting work that projected the image of “the primitive other.” And Rob Burnet who purported to be helping African artists may have assisted a few, but he too seemed to have other agendas besides seeing a wide range of Kenyan artists succeed. RaMoMA was raising the cultural capital of any Kenyan artist who had a chance to exhibit in its elegant, up-market venue, but at the same time, the commission fee that it expected artists to pay was higher than any other arts venue in Kenya. Plus the prices that they placed on artists’ works made their purchase by local art lovers practically impossible.

As for the foreign cultural centers, such as Alliance Francaise, the Goethe Institute, and Italian Institute of Culture, none of them ask artists for commissions, but then to get a booking in any of these sites can take a year or more. So for artists who have taken up art as a full time occupation and who rely on art as their main means of earning a living—meaning it has become a strategy for economic survival—marketing their own art works has become an integral part of the creative *jua kali* process. Now a critical portion of “making do” for Kenyan artists means having to look for new ways to market their art. And in the process of looking, many have found a wide range of new venues

where they can display their art in public. Some favor elite restaurants, five-star hotels and globalized shopping malls of which there are many in Nairobi. Other artists don't rule out showing their work in local bars, hotels and tea-rooms. Some have taken to creating *matatu* art, which is sure to have the widest circulation and visibility among the Kenyan public. The big challenge however is always the bottom line for Kenyan artists, and this is why they eventually come back, as did Shine Tani, to relying on their *jua kali* ingenuity to innovate as a means of survival. Fortunately, the renaissance spirit is alive and well in Nairobi, as local artists were reassured when a long-time patron, a co-founder of Virgin Airlines, came back to Kenya in August 2010 and promised to open a four million pound African Arts Trust to provide them with whatever assistance they might need. Nonetheless, most *jua kali* artists in Kenya that I contacted via Facebook and by email said they are not going to get their hopes up too high or wait for a brand new donor like Robert Devereux to fulfill his promises. Instead, they will resort to 'makeshift marketing' of whatever sort seems to work. The one that currently seems to make the most sense and assure them of the greatest autonomy, according to a wide range of Kenyan artists is online via the Internet.

#### The Internet, Facebook and the Future of Kenyan Art

The alternative art world that countless Kenyan *jua kali* artists are currently jumping into as a way of elevating their public profile and finding new markets for their art is online, where many have put their art, either on Facebook or other social networking sites, which is the way Michael Soi publicized a major exhibition he had in Nairobi in early 2009. Artists have also piggy-backed onto other people's websites, as

when artists like Shine Tani, Martin Muhoro and Martin Kamuyu have their art appear on www. Nzuri art com. But then, they have no control over that website and very little visibility as well. What local artists are increasingly recognizing is that the best way to make use of the internet is to launch their own websites. “That way when people *google* your name, they are more likely to find you,” said Peterson Kamwathi whose site is the first to pop up when you google his name and who had his first one-man exhibition in London in October 2010. Currently, a number of artists’ websites are under construction. Meanwhile, others claim they cannot yet afford buying a domain of their own, while others like Njeri Wangari don’t want to wait until they can afford a website of their own, so they start a blog. Njeri simply went to a blogging site and created www. Kenyan poet.blogspot.com, and now she is renowned in Kenya and trans-nationally for being best informed blogger on the Kenyan arts scene. In mid-2010, her success earned her a round trip ticket to Chile where she was invited to participate in a transnational bloggers conference.

Increasingly, Kenyans are refusing to be constrained by issues of finance, age, gender, race, ethnicity and class. Particularly among artists under 30, one is seeing the emergence of a new generation of Kenyan artists who feel uninhibited about the issues that their parents and even their older brothers and sisters were inhibited by. The internet is definitely playing a major role in this process of creating a new generation of cosmopolitan Kenyans. Many of the young African artists are among those who are quickly seeing the internet’s capabilities for communicating as well as marketing their art. So while the donor community has largely pulled the rug out from under art

institutions like Kuona, RaMoMA, and the GoDown, those *jua kali* artists who have been schooled in the art of *bricolage*, the strategy of making do and practicing makeshift creativity, are surviving even when the global economy looks bleak. The Nairobi art world is changing rapidly as we speak, and the new developments will be fascinating to watch.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### THE MEANING OF *JUA KALI*

The imagination is today a staging ground for action, and not only for escape.  
Appaduria (1996: 7)

In this chapter, I examine the various ways the term *jua kali* is used, both by Kenyans and in this study. Kenneth King in his definitive book on *Jua Kali Kenya* explains how *jua kali* is a concept that has evolved and changed rapidly since the early 1970s when it was initially used in relation to free lance, informal sector auto mechanics and metal workers. Since then the term has taken on multiple meanings invariably related to the informal sector economy, which is another term that only came into being in the early 1970s. Because of the flexibility and applicability of the term (e.g. motor cycle mechanics were recently identified as *jua kali* in a February 2010 article of Kenya's leading newspaper *The Daily Nation*), which is used both as a noun and an adjective, I take the liberty to identify Kenyan artists as *jua kali*, despite the fact that the term is more commonly used to refer to artisans. I also specify several genres of *jua kali* art in order to ensure that contemporary Kenyan art isn't mistaken for ethnographic works so often classified as merely "primitive," "tribal" or "airport art."

I identify two types of *jua kali* artists, the main difference between them being the kind of education each has had access to. Class is a key factor in this regard since the majority of *jua kali* artists had no funds for school fees to cover the cost of an art college

or university education. It is often the strength of the *jua kali* art network that enables aspiring artists to obtain the training they require. The remaining minority of *jua kali* artists tend to be middle class as their families could afford the cost of advanced art education. In other cases, it is sheer alacrity and determination that compels the would-be or what Kenyans call ‘wannabe’ artist to seek out means of obtaining the skills he or she requires. Also, it is significant to note that the expression *jua kali* tends to be a gendered term since the majority of *jua kali* artists coming from low income backgrounds tend to be male. Most *jua kali* women come from the middle class and their situation will be examined in chapter eight. Finally, the last section of this chapter examines how these nuances in *jua kali* conditions are rarely discussed by expatriates dealing in the Kenyan art world since they tend to make claims about the preeminence of their role in shaping the Kenyan art world. One reason for bringing this subject to light is to debunk the myth of the paramount importance of the expatriate in the Kenyan art scene. The chapter closes confirming that the expatriate’s role in the contemporary Kenyan art world is contested at best.

#### *An Emergent Cultural Practice*

In his ethnographic study *The Meaning of Macho: Being a Man in Mexico City* (2006), Matthew C. Gutmann writes about the concept of ‘cultural creativity’ and how he found “one factor determining the course of events in Santo Domingo, (that being) the conscious and unconscious agency of the men and women there;” a factor that Raymond Williams calls an ‘emergent cultural practice’” (1996:22). Similarly, based on my ethnographic study of men and women artists working in Nairobi, I found one critical

factor contributing to the rapid transformation of the contemporary Kenyan art world, which I identify as *jua kali*. Literally translated, *jua kali* means “hot sun” in Kiswahili, and it normally refers to informal sector workers who post-colonial writers like the late Edward Said might classify as “subaltern” since they work outside the shelter of formal employment and unprotected by social safety nets. In relation to the arts, I found *jua kali* to be the ingenious survival strategy that informal sector artists, often living on a shoestring, employ to create art works that display their originality, adaptability, resourcefulness and improvisational style of “makeshift creativity,” to use a term coined by Michel de Certeau.

#### *Public Art*

Perhaps the best evidence of this *jua kali* makeshift creativity, and the most long standing evidence of Kenya’s cultural renaissance, can be seen in the emergence of a public art movement that had its beginnings in the 1920s with Kisii stone and Kamba wood carvers working cooperatively in their respective art networks. It has evolved since then, especially among *jua kali* sculptors working since the Sixties in multimedia ranging from Wanjau working in wood, cement and steel wire to Kioko, Bertiers and Mwingi working since the 1990s in scrap metals, to Gakunju, Okello, Ng’ang’a and Muraguri working in the 21<sup>st</sup> century in fiberglass, bronze, glass, stone and even soda bottle tops.

One of the most political illustrations of *jua kali* public art was conceived by the art network, Maasai *Mbili* (M2), based in Nairobi’s biggest slum, Kibera, right after the post-presidential election violence of late 2007 through early 2008. M2 used the burnt out remains of sites ravaged by fire and enflamed emotions during local riots to create a kind

of public art installation that they entitled “The Museum of Ruins.” The artists covered the burnt metal and charred wood in colorful peace signs and graffiti symbols that captured nationwide attention after the local media picked up on how art was used to defy and defuse the “negative ethnicity” (Wa Wamere 2003) that had fueled the riots and rocked the country to the core.

Yet another example of public art with a political edge is the 12 foot tall scrap metal sculpture by Bertiers Mbatia that stands in the backyard performance space of Nairobi’s Alliance Francaise, a parody of Kenyan politicians, each standing atop one another like acrobatic monkeys. Mbatia, whose satiric sculpture earned him a trip to France and Germany in 2006, told me his work was his interpretation of Kenyan politicians playing



**Figure 37. Political Acrobats, a scrap metal sculpture by Joseph Bertiers Mbatia**



**Figure 38. Dedan Kimathi, a statue by Kevin Oduor**

politics in 2005 with regard to a national referendum to change the constitution which they failed to do, to the disappointment of the people.

And still another example of public art is Kevin Oduor’s bronze sculpture of the Mau Mau freedom fighter Dedan Kimathi which has stood squarely in the heart of Nairobi’s commercial

sector since 2008. Oduor is a *jua kali* artist who was recruited by an art network originating out of Kenyatta University’s Fine Art Department that pushed for government support of the ‘hero’s monument’ which the



public had been demanding for several years. In fact, public art in Kenya has been practiced since the 1950s when Elimo Njau first created his five Fort Hall Murals in the Anglican Church in Murang'a. But as far as sculpture is concerned, it was in the Sixties that artists like Francis Nnaggenda created monumental sculpture to stand in the courtyard of Nairobi University. In the 1970s after Paa ya Paa moved to the outskirts of Nairobi and had sufficient land, Njau, Wanjau Karuga and others created an outdoor sculpture garden which was simulated decades later at RaMoMA Museum, which featured works by Bertiers, Mburu and Nani Croze among others. *Jua kali* artists jumped into the public sphere in a major way following the departure of Daniel arap Moi in 2002. For 24 years he had stifled free expression of the Kenyan spirit in the public sphere, and the Kimathi sculpture is the proudest expression of that shift in the collective consciousness of the Kenyan people.

In fact, Moi himself was not strictly against public art. He at one time planned to erect a 30 foot sculpture of himself at the entrance of Uhuru Park, Kenya's equivalent to New York City's Central Park. But the plan was opposed vociferously by the Nobel laureate Professor Wangari Maathai who protested the land grab by the president on environmental grounds, and saved the public sphere almost single-handedly. Maathai enlisted



**Figure 39. Wangari Maathai, a drawing by Patrick Gathara**

transnational support from the donor community international financial institutions to put pressure on Moi to desist from his public art plan. It was an effective strategy since Moi's government relied heavily on World Bank and IMF support for its day to day survival.

Since Moi's departure public art has flourished, symbolized by the Kimathi sculpture but also manifest in the open air art venues, such as the Nairobi National Museum, the RaMoMA Museum, the German, French, and American Cultural Centers, and the Pimbi Gallery where Kioko Mwitiki's scrap metal menagerie of life-size gorillas, wildebeests, warthogs, and peculiar scarecrow-like creatures reside, that is when he is not packing them up in containers and shipping them to the San Diego Zoo, which he has done for the last three years (between 2008-10) when he has taken up three month artist residencies at the Zoo. Public art has also taken the form of murals painted on walls of buildings and often steeped in social messages ranging from HIV/AIDS awareness to water conservation. For instance, Etale Sukuro's Sanaa Art Promotions has been working with youth groups at the grassroots level to produce more than 2000 public murals countrywide, all of which have a social message.

But it is in the realm of sculpture that the work of *jua kali* artists is most manifest. The Table 3 below includes *jua kali* artists whose sculpture has primarily become public art; meanwhile, some of their work has gone into private collections.

Table 3: Public Art by *Jua Kali* Sculptors

<b><i>Jua Kali</i> Sculptor Name</b>	<b>Art Network</b>
Bwire, Charles	Nairobi National Museum
Chiselhands, Dan	Kuona Trust
Croze, Nani	Kitengela Glass
Dianga, John	Maseno / Watatu
Foit, Morris	Watatu / Kuona
Galavu, Lydia	Hawa women / National Museum
Hopkins, Sam	Kuona Trust
Kaigwa, Gakunju	Kuona Trust
Kamba, Carvers	Gikomba
Kariuki, Kaafiri	Kahawa West

Karuga, Rosemary	Paa Ya Paa Art Center
Kisii Carvers	Kisii Cooperative Society
Mbatia, Joseph Bertiers	RaMoMA / Independent
Mburu, Harrison	RaMoMA / One Off
Muraguri, Dennis	Kuona Trust
Mwaniki, David	Kuona Trust
Mwaniki, Louis	Kenyatta University
Mwebe, Expedito	African Heritage
Mwingi, Ken	Woodman's Workshop
Mwitiki, Kioko	Pimbi Gallery
Nganga, Cyrus	Kuona Trust
Njau, Elimo	Paa Ya Paa/Ft. Hall Murals
Njenga, Edward	Goethe Institute
Njenga, Johnson	African Heritage
Njeri, Patricia	Kilele Art Society
Nnaggenda, Francis	Makerere University
Odoch Ameny, John	African Heritage
Oduor, Kevin	Kuona Trust
Kenyanaya, Peter Oendo	Kuona Trust
Ogira, Elijah	Kuona Trust
Omondi, 'Omosh Kindeh' Eric	Kuona Trust
Ong'esa, Elkana	Kisii Cooperative Society
Otieno, Maggie	Kuona Trust
Van Rampelberg, Chelenge	RaMoMA / Independent
Wainaina, Alex	Kilele Art Studio
Walala, Peter	RaMoMA / Kuona
Wanjau, Samwel	Paa Ya Paa / Watatu
Wanjau, Jackson	RaMoMA / Independent
Wanjau, Anthony	Kuona Trust
Wanjiru, Irene	Kilele Art Studio

### *Afro-Surreal Hybridity*

“Making do” (De Certeau) is another term that correlates with *jua kali* tactics for creating artwork using ad hoc materials or what Levi-Strauss called *bricoles* meaning “the odds and ends, the left over bits” and scraps of society. These *jua kali* (subaltern) artists use everything from ragged rubber shoes and ripped up magazines to broken beer



**Figure 40. John Silver has been described as a Kenyan Hieronymus Bosch**

bottles recycled to create an art form that anthropologist James Clifford might call “ethnographic surreal” (1988: 119), sociologist Jan Nederveen Pieterse describes as “hybrid,” and Harper and De Certeau call *bricolage*. But as far as Clifford’s idea of ethnographic surrealism is concerned, art work by any

number of Kenyan painters fits into Clifford’s concept of surrealism which he defines as “an esthete that values fragments, curious collections and unexpected juxtapositions (and) drawn from the domains of the erotic, the exotic and the unconscious.” (1981: 540) Among them are John Silver



**Figure 41. Jak Katarikawe is often called an East African Marc Chagall**

Kimani, who is often discussed as an African Hieronymus Bosch; Meek Gichugu whose work is reminiscent of Salvador Dali; Kivuthi Mbuno whose art resembles a Kenyan Paul Klee; Beatrice Njoroge, whose elongated imagery resembles a graphic Alberto Giacometti; Rosemary Karuga, whose collage work is reminiscent of the Cubist period of Georges Braque and Pablo Picasso; Francis Kahuri, whose images of women echo Picasso’s fractured faced women, such as *Dora Maar au Chat*. And the Nairobi-based Ugandan painter Jak Katarikawe has long been lauded as East Africa’s version of Marc Chagall. Classifying these *jua kali* artists as Afro-surrealist, rather than ethnographic surrealist, seems fitting in light of a problem raised by the Kenyan art critic Wakonyote Njuguna who believes one reason Kenyan contemporary art is largely ignored by art

historians is because it is either mis-classified as ethnographic or not classified at all. As he put it:

One reason contemporary Kenyan art isn't appreciated is because it is always misclassified. Western critics can only class African art as either tribal, traditional or primitive, and much of the art coming out of Kenya today transcends those categories, so since it's 'invisible' and thus, it's ignored (Njuguna 2009).

Irrespective of what classification sticks, these painters remain *jua kali* artists because most of them initially had to resort to affordable materials to create their hybrid art. For instance, the only materials Rosemary Karuga had to create her collage art were second hand magazines, paper soap wrappers, and household glue. The only material on which Francis Kahuri could afford to paint was cheap cotton. The first canvas on which he painted was given him by Ruth Schaffner of Gallery Watatu. And Bea Njoroge who combines painting with collage often collects postage stamps from friends as part of the *bricoles* that she uses to create her *bricolage*. Harper refers to a similar strategy of cultural production in his ethnographic study *Working Knowledge* as “an ongoing process of problem solving...forming one's survival by adapting the *bricoles* bits of everyday life” (1987: 74). Seeing *jua kali* as a kind of problem-solving survival strategy that employs what Appadurai calls the “power of imagination” is a useful way to understand the processes Kenyan artists devise to create art works out of various and sundry materials. At the same time, *jua kali* can also be seen as a style of small scale entrepreneurship that combines creativity and cashable-common sense, resulting in a strategy for economic survival in this age of globalization.

*The Art of Recycling*

The other dimension of *jua kali* artistry that can never be ignored is the inclination of *jua kali* artists to recycle what the rest of the world sees as garbage. For example, *jua kali* artists can transform everything from ratty old woolen sweaters to rusty auto spare parts into original works of art. Indeed, Irene Wanjiru Zaidi got her start artistically by unraveling an old woolen sweater and using the yarn to design and stitch colorful semi-abstract wall hangings. She had been a housewife with three children who now works full time sculpting, using tree roots, branches and stumps she finds in wooded areas around her home. Eclectic artist Dennis Muraguri is one of many *jua kali* artists who construct sculptures using old spare parts from cars, computers, musical instruments and even old clothes. Fellow recyclers Alex Wainaina and Ken Mwingi have no problem calling their genre ‘junk art.’ Elaboration on this theme will be discussed in chapter seven.

*Jua Kali Habitus #1*

Getting to the crux of the meaning of *jua kali*, Pierre Bourdieu’s concept of *habitus* is useful since more than half of the 260 some odd artists that I interviewed were



**Figure 42. Cyrus Ng'ang'a in his *Stunner Shades* personifies the *Jua Kali Habitus #1* man**

from a similar habitus: they came from peasant or lumpen proletariat backgrounds, were either first, second or third generation urbanite, had a high school education or less, were unemployed or working day labor (as a *kibarua* in Kiswahili) jobs before trying their hand in the arts, and acquired their artistic skills outside of a formal academic setting. Coming mainly from peasant or working class backgrounds and having

such a *habitus*, most *jua kali* artists needed to employ *jua kali* or makeshift tactics to obtain either a working site or art materials or skills training or marketing support or all of the above in order to produce and distribute their works of art. Elaboration on these four points will follow in chapter five and six as I construct a *jua kali* cultural diamond to examine the various ways that *jua kali* artists address these problem areas working within their respective fields, and often overlapping art networks.

Table 4 *Jua Kali* Artists Interviewed

Total artists interviewed	Informal training	Formal Training
268	182	86

The biggest challenge that these *jua kali* artists told me they first faced in getting started in the visual arts was obtaining the skills training they knew they needed. That may seem like an obvious point, but coming from working class backgrounds into the informal sector, the vast majority of unemployed Kenyans don't come equipped with a skilled artistic background. Some of them may have learned basic techniques in primary school; but most of the so-called 'self-taught' artists in Kenya today obtained their training in a *jua kali* makeshift style. In fact, much has been written about the place of "untrained" artists in the Western art, such as Charles Russell's *Self Taught Art*. Nonetheless, the Paa ya Paa founder-artist Elimo Njau claims "there is no such thing as a self-taught artist." Instead, he says creativity is a skill that is socially obtained and learned in relation to others sharing what they know. This is certainly the case for the *jua kali* artist. He or she invariably learns from someone somewhere, even if they haven't been to the university or to an art college. For instance, one of Kenya's leading painters, Sebastian Kiarie, studied agronomy at the university. But before he went off to college,

he was intrigued by the popular local genre of art known as ‘bar art’ that filled all the tea rooms, butcheries and local hotels in his home village. He traced one local bar artist down and asked him to teach him all he knew. The middle aged man named Mage gladly showed Kiarie where he got his paints and brushes and advised him on basic artistic techniques. Kiarie has been painting and winning awards ever since.

Another term sometimes used to describe *jua kali* artists is “autodidactic” which is synonymous with self-taught. And yet, it is a term that tends to have even more pejorative connotations since it again ignores the social processes by which these *jua kali* artists learn their craft, which often involve either mentoring or apprenticing or both. Understanding how *jua kali* artists assist one another in developing their respective art



**Figure 43. Mothers, an oil painting by the Banana Hill-mentored Joseph Cartoon**

networks is one of the most fascinating features of Kenya’s cultural renaissance, since it tends to be informal as well as interactive. It is also a style of *jua kali* skills training that is improvisational and innovative. Essentially, aspiring artists pick up skills and insights wherever they can find them; they look for mentors willing to share what they know; and they must be prepared to acquire knowledge on the fly. For instance, Willie Ndegwa wanted to learn how to become a *matatu* artist, to have a chance to paint portraits, signs and designs on Nairobi’s multi-colored public service mini-vans; so he attached himself to one of the established painters of *matatu* art as an apprentice. Joseph “Cartoon” Njuguna wanted to learn how to paint with oils on canvas, and so, he arrived at Shine Tani’s door step in the early 1990s and



asked to be taught. And when Ruth Schaffner was still running Gallery Watatu, she used to hold an Artists Day once a month, when she would appraise the artworks that *jua kali* artists brought in, and offered critical comments which were invariably constructive as well as instructive. Quite a few so-called self-taught Kenyan artists were first schooled in the basic techniques of painting during those off the cuff sessions with Ruth. Indeed, some of Kenya's best known artists, such as Chain Muhandi, Allan Githuka, Harrison Mburu, Francis Kahuri and Shine Tani all were given wise advice by Ruth within the context of those monthly Artists Days. In Shine's case, he would take her advice straight home to Banana Hill and share his newly-acquired knowledge with family and friends who also wanted to learn how to paint and create saleable works of art like Shine's. That is how the early Banana Hill workshops came into being, and how the Banana Hill Art Studio grew out of the extended workshop sessions that transpired in Shine's humble home. Other examples of *jua kali* artists mentoring one another include Samwel Wanjau showing his two sons how to hold wood carving tools, resulting in Jackson and Anthony Wanjau becoming two of Kenya's finest sculptors in their own right. Then there is James Mbuthia who has mentored scores of young *jua kali* artists who in turn teach art to children in the cancer ward at Kenyatta Hospital. Meanwhile, Etale Sukuro trains hundreds of youth all over Kenya to help him paint instructive wall murals containing graphic images meant to convey social messages about everything from testing for HIV/AIDS to the virtues of water conservation and reforestation. The number of *jua kali* ad hoc apprenticeship programs underway in Kenya today is difficult to calculate, because such projects are springing up all the time. For instance, Michael Wafula who,

until early 2010 was based at Kuona Trust, recently opened up the Kijiji Art Studio in Kayole, another one of Nairobi's slums and has already begun training and mentoring unemployed youth who have started selling their jewelry, fashion lines and visual art to fellow Kenyans.

It was the dynamics of *jua kali* artists “doing things together” (Becker 1986) and mentoring one another that initially attracted my attention as I sought to understand the nature of Kenya's cultural renaissance in the visual arts. Seeing informally-trained *jua kali* art mentors like Shine Tani share their minimal skills with rural friends and relations, was for me, a revelation. Reminiscent of the way Dr. Norman Bethune trained barefoot doctors in rural China in basic medical skills during that country's Cultural Revolution (MacLean 2000: 1746), I found Shine's method of training not only grassroots, communal and non-elitist, in that he shared his skills with whoever showed up at his rural home and wanted to learn about the process of painting. It also reflected the spirit of *harambee* that Wangari Maathai describes in *The Greenbelt Movement* (2004: 20), meaning the spirit of self-help and mutual cooperation. Literally translated, *harambee* means “Let us all pull together” in Kiswahili, and historically, it has been a counter-hegemonic force in Kenyan culture from the time British colonizers first arrived in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. As a basis of resistance, it compelled Kenyans to build *harambee* schools and independent churches. It has even been cited as one of the factors inspiring the Mau Mau civil war against British colonialism (Wa Kinyatti 2008). And it inspired the American demographer Andrew Hake to describe Nairobi as a “self-help city” (1977: 93). But at least in relation to the arts, the *harambee* spirit has inspired a number of non-

formal training activities where aspiring artists get together with a few *jua kali* artists who may know more artistic conventions than the rest, and then they share with one another. The chart below reflects a number of informal training situations.

Table 5: Informal-Training: *Jua Kali* Mentors and Beneficiaries

<b><i>Jua Kali</i> Mentors</b>	<b>Beneficiaries</b>
Shine Tani	Banana Hill Artists
Gomba Otieno	Maasai Mbili Artists
Gikomba Metalists	Harrison Mburu
Gikomba Carvers	Wakamba Carvers
Kisii stone Carvers	Kisii Stone Carvers
Morris Foit	Street Boys
Thika Artists	Thika Artists
Larisa Sjoerds	Students at Nairobi Art Society
Mage	Sebastian Kiarie
Ruth Schaffner	Joseph Cartoon
	Chain Muhandi
	Otieno K. Rabala
	Allan Githuka
	Shine Tani
Samwel Wanjau	Harrison Mburu
Elimo Njau	Dedan Kimani

### *Jua Kali Habitus #2*

Meanwhile, at least a third of the artists that I interviewed did not share the *habitus* described above. This is not to say that they too didn't need to find studio space, art materials and exhibition sites to enhance their prospects for marketing their art both locally and globally. The biggest difference between this third and the rest is the opportunity that these 80 some odd artists had for formal art education, either at an art college or a university art



Figure 44. Kamal Shah, a *Jua Kali Habitus #2* man

department or a liberal arts university. In the previous chapter, I discussed the construction of most of these training institutions, such as Makerere University's Margaret Trowell School of Fine Art, Kenyatta University's Department of Fine Art, Buru Buru Institute of Fine Art and the Creative Art Center, all of which have provided formal training to Kenyan artists from the 1940s onwards. What is also significant is the number of Kenyans who studied overseas and then returned to share their knowledge, skills and cosmopolitan perspective with fellow Kenyans. It is the contribution of these formally trained artists to the informal and *jua kali* training of less fortunate *jua kali* artists that needs to be factored into the present day renaissance of the visual arts in Kenya. For instance, the number of *jua kali* artists trained in non-formal apprenticeship or mentoring programs by formally trained Kenyan artists is incalculable. The process itself is going on all the time and the informality of the training is what makes it *jua kali*. However, what is also noteworthy is seeing the extent to which both formally trained and informally trained Kenyan artists take part in those informal programs and have done ever since Paa ya Paa first began running international and East African artists' workshops back in the 1960s. The time factor is significant since there are expatriates associated with Kuona Trust who claim the 'first' international artists workshops that Kenyans took part in only started in 1997 when Kuona teamed up with the UK-based Triangle Arts Trust to bring international artists to workshop in Kenya. Clearly, the Kuona spokesman had missed out on over a quarter century of Kenyan art history, but this is why it is necessary to set the record straight. Indeed, a number of artists who attended those initial Paa ya Paa workshops, such as Theresa Musoke, Jak Katarikawe,

Samwel Wanjau, John Diang'a, Terry Hirst and Elimo Njau are all still around to confirm their participation in those early gatherings. The artists listed below in are formally trained mentors who have been involved, some for decades, in sharing their knowledge, skills, and wide-ranging experience with fellow Kenyans, either in *jua kali* workshops or apprenticeship or mentoring programs.

Table 6: Formally-Trained Local Artist-Mentors

<b>Formally Trained Artist-Mentors</b>	<b>School</b>	<b>When</b>	<b>What</b>
Patrick Adoyo	U.NBI	2000s	Painting
Margaretta Akinyi	U.NBI	2000s	Painting
Wanyu Brush	YMCA	1970s	Painting
Alan Donovan	UCLA	1970s	Jewelry
Lydia Galavu	U.NBI	2000s	Jewelry
Samuel Githui	CAC	2000s	Painting
Terry Hirst	UK	1960s	Art Ed
Francis Kaguru	U.NBI	2000s	Art Biz
Francis Kahuri	KAS	1990s	Painting
Gakunja Kaigwa	KU.UK.US	2000s	Bronze
Rosemary Karuga	Makerere	1960s	Painting
Mbuthia Maina	Egerton	2000s	Painting
Elizabeth Orchardson Mazrui	KU, UK	1990s	Textiles
Zacharia Mbutha	KTTC	1980s	Mixed Media
Kahuri Miano	KU	1980s	Design
Chalo Muia	BIFA	2000s	Matatu Art
Moses Muigai	BIFA	2000s	Painting
Patrick Mukabi	CAC	1990s	Painting
Theresa Musoke	Makerere,UK	1970s	Art Ed
Expedito Mwebe	Makerere	2000s	Sculpture
Kioko Mwitiki	KU	1990s	Junk Art
Mwaura Ndekere	U.NBI	2000s	Art Biz
Elimo Njau	Makerere	1960s	Textiles
Beatrice Njoroge	BIFA	2000s	Painting
Sam Ntiro	Makerere	1960s	Painting
Mary Ogembo	CAC	2000s	Painting
Elkana Ong'esa	Makerere	1990s	Sculpture
Maggie Otieno	CAC	1990s	Sculpture

Martin Otieno	YMCA	1980s	Batik
Etale Sukuro	U.Dar, TZ	1990s	Murals
Michael Wafula	CAC	2000s	Silkscreen
Jony Waite	UCLA	1980s	Textiles
Jackson Wanjau	KTTC	2000s	Sculpture
Tabitha Wa Thuku	Polytechnic	1980s	Jewelry
John Odoch Ameny	Makerere	1980s	Sculpture

#### Formally-Trained Local Mentors

Out of the approximately 86 formally trained local artists that I interviewed, I found that almost half of them (38) were involved in mentoring young Kenyans or running apprenticeship programs or conducting workshops for them. Several other formally-trained artists are not included in the list above because they are involved exclusively in formal rather than *jua kali* training courses. For instance, Louis Mwaniki lectures at Kenyatta University although his current role is that of emeritus professor. Nonetheless, it is impressive to see how many who are skilled and formally trained in the conventions of fine art are willing and ready to participate in training aspiring *jua kali* artists. Ironically, this perspective is antithetical to that of George Vikiri, acting chair of Kenyatta University's Fine Art Department, who claims: "These two groups of artists...do not complement each other in their practice. The groups are disunited, lack a common voice, and are suspicious of each other." Vikiri was writing in 2006 and his views may have changed since then; nonetheless, from my investigations on the ground clearly reveal that a good number of formally trained local artists are actively contributing to Kenya's cultural renaissance in tangible terms, contrary to Vikiri's verdict. What is more, the number of those involved in mentoring has grown exponentially as the figures below indicate. (See Table 7)

Table 7: Formally-Trained Mentors by the Decade

Qualified by Decade	1960s	1970s	1980s	1990s	2000s
Mentors	5	2	5	7	16

For instance, I found more than twice as many formally trained artists in new mentoring programs in the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century than had existed in the previous decade, and three times as many as in the decade before. In addition, training programs that began, for instance, in the 1980s had not necessarily stopped. A case in point is Wanyu Brush who began mentoring ‘wannabe’ artists like Sane Wadu in the 1970s, and in 2009 he was still conducting *jua kali* art workshops for the children of Ngecha village with support from the Kenya Ministry of Culture. As for an elder like Elimo Njau, he began conducting artists’ workshops in the 1960s and has continued running *jua kali* workshops and/or mentoring programs almost every year since.

So while my interviews were largely based on snowball sampling, meaning there could be more Kenyans formally trained between 1955 when the first Kenyan female artist, Rosemary Karuga, graduated from Makerere University and the present-day, the figures serve to confirm that a contemporary art movement in Kenya has been developing since before Independence. For instance, Louis Mwaniki who graduated with Elimo Njau in the late 1950s from Makerere was already exhibiting his art in Rome by 1961. Meanwhile, Njau was exhibiting in the UK, Germany and Sweden in 1960. And Gregory Maloba had been studying in England since the 1940s. Nonetheless, these facts haven’t stopped neocolonial forces from claiming in effect that the contemporary Kenyan art scene was a construction of European influences exclusively.

### Neo-Colonial Claims

Claims have included either that Kenyan art “didn’t exist” until the German-American art dealer Ruth Schaffner arrived and bought Gallery Watatu in 1985; or that “East Africa had been regarded as a cultural desert” (Burnet, 2007: 106) until the British expatriate Rob Burnet set up Kuona Trust in 1995 and then linked up with the London-based Triangle Arts Trust in 1997 to launch Wasanii International Artists Workshops in Kenya. In Triangle’s 2007 catalogue featuring a “variety of experience around artists’ workshops and residencies,” Burnet also claims that “Before this connection [between Triangle Arts Trust, British Council and Kuona Trust], virtually no practicing Kenyan artist had traveled and worked abroad.” Such a claim is clearly fictitious, and it has been challenged by Kenyan artists, but as they are up against the dominant narrative about Kenyan contemporary art, it has been difficult for them to successfully debunk and correct such false claims.

### *Jua Kali* Artists Are Not Street Boys

The dominant narrative of Kenya being a “cultural desert” until the Europeans arrived is normally disseminated to foreign audiences, often for fund-raising purposes, so that rarely do the local artists see what is being written about them. One exception to local artists not seeing what neocolonial forces are narrating about them transpired in 2004 when *jua kali* artists affiliated with Kuona Trust found Ford Foundation literature claiming that Kuona Trust had helped “rehabilitate” former street urchins, known locally as “parking boys” or *chokora* as they are called in Kiswahili. This was patently not the case, although there is one former “parking boy” named Charles Ngatia who found his



way to Kuona Trust through his participation in the street children's project called *Shangilia Mtoto wa Afrika*, which periodically visited the National Museum and found Kuona artists working there. But one is not many, so this discovery of the Ford narrative by local artists set in motion a critical campaign to get to the bottom of the relationship between Kuona Trust and Ford. What compounded the insult was that the local artists read on the Ford Foundation website ([www. Ford foundation .org](http://www.FordFoundation.org)) that Ford had given hundreds of thousands of dollars to Kuona Trust, ostensibly to "help Kenyan artists." But the artists claimed they had seen none of those funds. As such, they demanded an explanation and an accounting of Ford funds from the Kuona management. But rather than address the artists' complaint, Kuona management evicted its critics, closed the space at the Nairobi National Museum where they had resided for free for nearly a decade, and shifted their uncomplaining artists to a new site, The GoDown Art Center, that had also been set up with funding from Ford and from other foreign donors as well.

The most recent claim made about the Nairobi art world which seemed to discount the dynamic role played by *jua kali* artists transpired at the end of 2009 and it is related to the current Kenyan cultural renaissance. Joy Mboya, the executive director of The GoDown Art Center claimed, during a symposium organized by the Kenya Government's Ministry of Tourism, that a cultural renaissance was indeed underway in Kenya, and it had been unfolding "ever since 2000" when her center was established along with four other art networks which she said got started around the same time, namely RaMoMA Museum, Kuona Trust, National Museum Gallery and Banana Hill Art Studio. In fact, the one thing that all five had in common was not their start up date but the fact that they had

all received funding from Ford Foundation between 2000 and 2009. Otherwise, Banana Hill Art Studio began in the early 1990s without any foreign donor support and only obtained Ford funding briefly, between 2002 and 2004. The Museum Gallery was established even earlier, in 1986, not post 2000. And the other three, Kuona Trust, RaMoMA Museum and the GoDown constituted what *jua kali* artists called the “cartel” controlled by foreigners intent on dominating and overseeing the whole contemporary Kenyan art scene. Irrespective of her erroneous timeline, Joy Mboya made a cogent argument when she described three causal factors affecting the current cultural renaissance as the infusion of foreign donor money into local groups, enthusiastic youth keen to establish careers in the arts and the five art networks she claimed had been active since 2000. The problem with Mboya’s revisionist version of Kenyan art history is that it sounded like one more variation on the “ground zero” scenario that Elimo Njau identified in an interview online at [www. African Colours.com](http://www.AfricanColours.com) in late 2009. The only difference is that she was not talking about 1985 (when Schaffner took over Gallery Watatu) or even 1995 (when Burnet started up Kuona Trust). Her “ground zero” began in 2000 when her organization was born.

Njau is so familiar with the way this Eurocentric ‘ground zero’ scenario works, he says he has seen countless sightseers, settlers, art dealers and foreign scholars, together with their Kenyan conduits, arrive on the local scene without a shred of what C.W. Mills called a “sociological imagination.” They have no sense of history and no desire to learn about what came before their arrival. They simply look around and claim whatever they like because they do not expect to be challenged or contradicted by “the natives.” For

instance, Ruth Schaffner gave an interview to *African Arts* in the 1980s, claiming “nothing” in the way of contemporary art existed in Kenya before she arrived. That interview was sent by post to Njau, who has spent years refuting wild claims made by expatriates such as Schaffner and Burnet.

### Contested Kenyan Art History

On one occasion in 1994, Njau interrupted a talk being given by Burnet at the Goethe Institute just a year after the Scotsman had come to Kenya and found favor with Ruth Schaffner. Still an employee of the Watatu Foundation at the time, Burnet was speaking on the topic of contemporary East African art. Njau publicly challenged the Briton for his acting as if he were an expert when he only lived in the region a matter of months. It was an explosive event, but it did not stop Burnet from continuing on his quest to quietly “take charge of contemporary Kenyan art scene,” according to local artists like Lydia Galavu, artist-curator of the Nairobi National Museum. Galavu, Peter Mburu, and Wanjohi Nyamu, among other Kenyan artists have expressed strong opinions about Burnet’s activities, particularly since he joined the Ford Foundation. For instance, once he established Kuona Trust, based on an art world design outlined by Schaffner with input from Kenyan artists King Dodge Kang’oroti and Wanyu Brush, Burnet began revising Kenyan art history by claiming the idea of running artists workshops in Kenya came from Zimbabwe, not directly from Ruth or Dodge or Elimo or even Shine Tani who had started running grassroots workshops in 1991 (Burnet 2007: 106). Ruth herself had begun organizing artists’ workshops years before Burnet appeared on the scene. The East African artist Etale Sukuro helped run one of them for her at Dagoretti Corner, a suburb

of Nairobi; German artists through the Goethe Institute came to Watatu and ran others. What is more, a myriad of skills training workshops and apprenticeship programs were organized by Africans long before Burnet arrived in Kenya. So for him to claim that he somehow initiated the first artists' workshops in Kenya in 1993 is as revisionist as various other claims he has made related to Kenyan art history.

What Burnet and other "strangers" (Simmel 1950: 402) who come to Kenya do not necessarily understand is that *jua kali* artists have been globe trotting since the 1950s and have seen all sorts of characters come and go in the name of being "good Samaritans." Yet their impact locally can be more accurately identified with what economist Ha-Joon Chang calls "bad Samaritans." What's more, Kenyan artists' work has been placed in countless public and private collections all over the world since Independence. For instance, Elkana Ong'esa's sculptures are in Paris at UNESCO Headquarters and at Shenzhen University in China; Gakunju Kaigwa's public art pieces are on display in Scotland, Italy, South Africa, and the US. Louis Mwaniki's wood and metal sculptures are on permanent display in Yugoslavia, Canada and Italy. And a whole wing of the Frankfurt Folk Art Museum is devoted to Nairobi-based East African artists, such as Jak Katarikawe, John Diang'a and Etale Sukuro among others. Fortunately, Kenya has retained Samwel Wanjau's 12 foot steel wire and cement *Mau Mau Freedom Fighter* which is permanently ensconced at Paa ya Paa where Wanjau created the work some 40 years ago. The point is, contemporary Kenyan art hasn't been received with heaps of fanfare or recognition. Nonetheless, the artists and their work are making headway in both the local and global art worlds. As the British art dealer Anthony

Athaide put it: “It may take ten years for Europeans to wake up to what is going on among Kenyan artists, but once they do, there will be a major shift and a clamoring for contemporary Kenyan art.”

In the following chapters, I break down the specific ways in which I have seen *jua kali* artists work together to create the incredible works that are shaping up into what I am calling a cultural renaissance. Using what I call a *jua kali* cultural diamond, I will identify and analyze what I have seen to be ingenious strategies for overcoming tremendous obstacles in the way of artists creating both works of art and art worlds that are extending around the world.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### CONSTRUCTING A *JUA KALI* CULTURAL DIAMOND

Writing about the African Renaissance and its correlation with the European Renaissance of the 14th through 16th century may rouse skepticism among those who might ask “the rebirth” of what? There has certainly been a flourishing of research and writing in the field of African historiography since Independence which addresses that question among many others. Kenyan scholars such as Bethwell Ogot (1981), Atieno Odhiambo and Ali A. Mazrui have all contributed to enriching public understanding (ideascapes) with regard to what came before colonialism as well as the devastating impact that colonialism had, especially on Kenyan societies. As George Padmore put it, Africans were reduced to “economic enslavement” by European settlers in Kenya who

applied the well tried techniques of Imperialism in operation in South Africa and the Rhodesias. Having secured the best parts of the Highlands as their exclusive possessions, they got the local Government to impose direct poll and hut taxation upon the Africans” (1949: 63).

Stated in slightly more euphemistic terms by Terence Ranger in *The Invention of Tradition*,

...conditions in Rhodesia and Kenya developed towards a more securely gentlemanly society. (Meanwhile,) political action deliberately undercut African peasant production and put labor at the disposal of the (white) gentleman farmer” (1985:219).

But apart from robbing Africans of their land, it was their cultural legacy that came under the most direct assault by colonizers, initially in the form of Christian missionaries, both Protestants and Catholics. In fact, when the Consolata Missionaries arrived in central Kenya from Turin in 1902, they found Presbyterians from Scotland had preceded them by several years, having landed in the country in 1898. Nonetheless, one Catholic priest could write sociologically about what transpired between the indigenous occupants of the land, the Kikuyu and the colonizing missionaries. Francesco Bernardi wrote:

The Kikuyu preserved intact their cultural model over a long period of time, centered on the unity of action and thought. But the arrival of Europeans, at the end of the 1800s, upset the harmony of their *Weltanschauung*. While British colonization overturned the socio-economic aspects of their system, Christian missionaries aimed at converting their cultural-religious heritage to the Gospel (2002:19).

Conversion invariably required Africans giving up their indigenous religious beliefs as well as their cultural practices, which missionaries deemed heathen, primitive, “depraved” or just plain “evil” (Kenyatta 1965: 259). Much of early post-colonial African literature dwells on the theme of cultural conflict (Achebe 1994, Ngugi 1977, Mphahlele 1988) and the struggle over identity that many Africans have had to go through in light of the excruciating experience of colonialism, particularly the land-lustful form that it took in Kenya. In the words of Padmore, whose book *Africa* clearly contrasts the various faces and forms that colonialism took -- some benign, others malignant -- as it adapted and encroached on local conditions in Africa, “In no part of the [British] Empire [was] social snobbery and racial arrogance quite so blatantly manifested as by the ‘Lords of the Kenya

Highlands” (1949: 58). The white supremacy only got more aggressive and deadly once Africans chose to rebel against the colonizer and fight in Africa’s first guerrilla army to retrieve their “land and freedom” (Wa Kinyatti 2008). The magnitude of British colonial over-kill and over-reaction to the Mau Mau rebellion is painfully well documented in Caroline Elkins’ *Imperial Reckoning: The Untold Story of Britain’s Gulag in Kenya*. Describing it as “genocide.” Elkins claims the British settlers were adamant about what Anthony Sampson termed the “dehumanization of the enemy.” Young and old Africans were called everything from “vermin”, “animals” and “barbarians” to “vicious,” “cunning,” and “bloodthirsty” (Elkins 2005: 48-49). In all, based on her extensive field and archival research, she determined “that the number of Africans detained was at least two times and more likely four times the official figure, or somewhere between 160,000 and 320,000” (Elkins 2005: xiii). Meanwhile, tens of thousands were killed or died of disease, starvation or what one *Guardian* newspaper reporter called “routine and brutal” torture. (Rice) And according to British historian David Anderson, who wrote *Histories of the Hanged* (2005), which further exposed British brutality during the colonial era in Kenya, the number of European civilians killed during the entire course of the Emergency declared in 1952 was 32, a minute fraction of the losses the locals incurred.

Kenyans still have not fully recovered from those repressive days prior to Independence as was evident in 2009 when five elderly Kenyan ex-Mau Mau freedom fighters tried unsuccessfully to sue the British government for unlawful detention and torture (Pflanz 2009). Nonetheless, remarkable changes have taken place in Kenyan culture in the last fifty years, resulting in the emergence of a dynamic contemporary

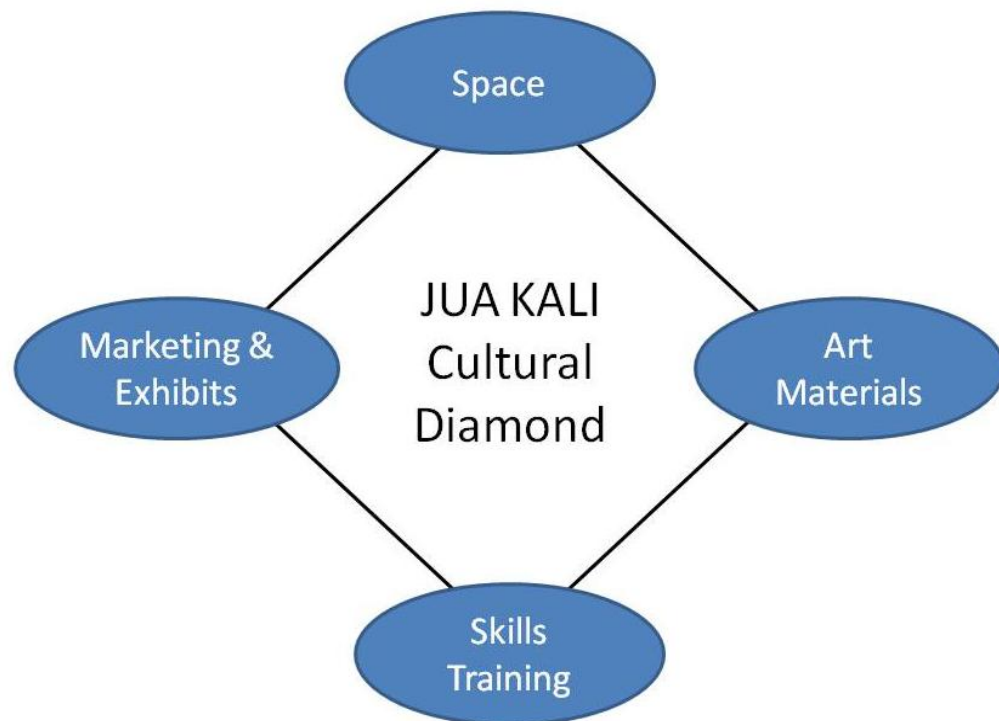


Kenyan visual culture that draws from both indigenous and global sources. Ulli Beier's description of what happened to West African art in the 1960s is relevant to East Africa today. He wrote:

The African artist has refused to be fossilized. New types of artists give expression to new ideas, work for different clients, fulfill new functions. Accepting the challenge of Europe, the African artist does not hesitate to adopt new materials, be inspired by foreign art, look for a different role in society. New forms, new styles and new personalities are emerging everywhere and this contemporary African art is rapidly becoming as rich and as varied as were the most rigid artistic conventions of several generations ago" (Beier 1968: 14).

This study aims to examine and analyze the "new forms" and styles emerging from Kenyan art networks that I claim are contributing to the country's cultural renaissance. In order to carry out the study more systematically, I have constructed my own four-pointed *jua kali* cultural diamond,' each point representing one of the four ways in which I find *jua kali* an instrumental tactic and "emergent cultural practice" used by the majority of Kenyan artists in one way or other to produce works of art,. At the same time, their *jua kali* tactics tend to advance the construction of fully functioning art worlds. The points have been cited above as items essential to artists solving the problem of *jua kali* production of works of art, namely working space, art supplies, skills training, and marketing. (See Figure 45: *Jua Kali* Cultural Diamond)

Obtaining those four items is a struggle for *jua kali* men and women living on the margins whose only hope for producing works of art is by "making do" and devising ingenious strategies to create and also survive. It is a struggle on a daily basis, but as the African American statesman and former slave Frederick Douglas put it, "If there is no struggle, there is no progress."



**Figure 45. A *Jua Kali* Cultural Diamond**

*Point One: Space*

The first point of the diamond relates to space and the way *jua kali* artists “make do” by struggling to find appropriate sites whereon to work, be it in the open air on communal grounds like Gikomba Market or Kuona Trust, in a rented flat, a mud and wattle hut or a portable roadside stand. The point is that working space is not a given for the *jua kali* artist. It is a challenge to find affordable space to accommodate his or her creative activity, and as such, it is a problem that requires what I call *jua kali* ingenuity to solve.

Paa ya Paa was the first indigenous African art world to recognize this need, providing a space for one of Kenya’s first *jua kali* artists, Samwel Wanjau to work and

develop his carving into a fine art. Now considered one, if not *the* finest contemporary Kenyan sculptor, Wanjau literally worked under the ‘hot sun’ at Paa ya Paa, outside the row of studios that Elimo Njau built on the center’s three acres of land in the early Seventies. Throughout that decade, the studios would serve both local and transnational artists, including those who took part in Paa ya Paa’s first international artists’ workshop which was held in 1973. And even after the devastating 1998 fire that destroyed most of the center’s gallery, archive and library, among the first structures that Njau re-constructed, after putting up a *mabati* (corrugated iron sheet) shack for himself and his wife Phillda, were studio spaces for visiting artists.

Independent of Paa ya Paa, another group of *jua kali* artists from Banana Hill, another suburb of Nairobi, moved in and transformed Shine and Rahab Tani’s living room into a guild-like learning center/studio from 1991. But even before Shine and Rahab moved to Banana Hill, he was staying with an uncle and sharing skills, materials and space with his cousins and wife-to-be. Following these examples (though claiming the idea came from abroad), foreign donors have funded sites at Kuona Trust and The GoDown Art Center for local artists to work, initially for free and subsequently for a monthly fee. But because the need for work space is so great, other *jua kali* artists have either teamed up to establish their own communal sites, such as Maasai Mbili in Kibera slum (2002), Kilele Art Studio in Ruaka near the UNEP Headquarters (2010) and Kijiji Art Studio (2009) in another Nairobi slum, Kayole; or they have simply gone home to rural or peri-urban areas where they can afford to produce their *bricolage* and subsequently bring it to town for show and ideally for sale. Despite their being scattered

all across the city, there are several enclaves where individual artists still find a feeling of community (Ogonga 2010) since fellow artists reside in the same estate or peri-urban ‘suburb’. Those enclaves include Kahawa West, Banana Hill, Ngecha, Mukuru, Thika and Mathare Valley.

*Point Two: Art Supplies*

The second point of the diamond has to do with art materials, which can either be costly if bought from a local art supply shop or simply found *jua kali*-style and recycled from a Nairobi junk yard or garbage dump. Either one can be used by a *jua kali* artist.

The challenge for him or her is finding affordable materials that can be transformed creatively into works of art. *Jua kali* ingenuity is again required when an artist has no funds, but lots of energy, imagination, and incentive to produce *bricolage*. As stated in

Chapter 4, I found *jua kali* artists creating *bricolage* by using everything from scrap metals, cell phones and broken soda bottles to spark plugs, stick shifts and windshield wipers to bits of broken mirrors, musical instruments and wall clocks. Others recycle old shoes, shirts, zippers, and plastic bags

while others picked up tree stumps, roots, bark, twigs, and even logs sold by the roadside and then transformed into remarkable wooden sculptures, panels, frames, and inlaid doors. Rusty nails, tin cans, coat hangers and cancelled postage stamps are all used by *jua kali* artists in

ways that tempt one to claim Kenya’s most prominent genre of contemporary art, apart from painting is the one local artists call “junk art.” I will elaborate further on the construction of junk art by contemporary Kenyan artists in Chapter Seven. Suffice it here



**Figure 46. Spiky Style, a wooden bust by David Mwaiki is made with rusty nails and hammered tin cans**

to say that practically every *jua kali* artist at some point has had to be resourceful using whatever materials are at hand to create the works of art that he or she feels inspired to produce. Why this is a significant point is because it illustrates a major shift in Kenyans' thinking, from at one time believing they could only create by relying on conventional art materials which were normally imported to appreciating the value and utility of local materials fashioned imaginatively to fulfill their need to produce original *bricolage*.

One notable exception to the *jua kali* artist "making do" by using local "odds and ends" is Hosea 'Giko' Muchugu who started out struggling like other *jua kali* artists to make do using local materials. But as a painter and former school teacher-turned-entrepreneur, he found the cost of oil paints and imported canvases exceedingly expensive. So in classic *jua kali* style, he devised an ingenious means of obtaining cheap art materials, only his strategy was far more global and entrepreneurial than most other *jua kali* artists. He chose to go straight to the source of cheap art supplies, namely to China. Today, Giko combines his painting with the practice of importing whole shipping containers filled with inexpensive art supplies, which he sells at a minimal mark-up to his fellow *jua kali* artists at his chain of hardware and art supply stores situated all around Nairobi and in Uganda and Tanzania as well. Giko is a classic case of a transnational *jua kali* Kenyan artist who is contributing to making the African Renaissance a reality.

On the other hand, Kioko Mwitiki, one of Kenya's first sculptors to work in scrap metal, has a very different view of China and its relationship to the *jua kali* artist. To him, the Chinese came to Kenya as scavengers, grabbing all the scrap metal they could lay their hands on and transporting it back to China. In Kioko's view:

You can't talk about Kenya and the impact of globalization on us without focusing on the role the Chinese have played. They wrecked havoc on our work up until 2009, when the Minister of Finance [Uhuru Kenyatta] finally slapped a ban on the export of scrap metals from Kenya. Otherwise, we had been losing all the scrap that I and other junk artists had been relying on to do our work (Mwitiki 2009).

Kioko says he had never expected to be at a loss for junk metal, but one unintended consequence of globalization was that the Chinese arrived on the scene and almost finished his supply of junk.

### *Point Three: Training*

The third point of my *jua kali* diamond relates to skills training which I also discussed in some detail in the previous chapter. It may be formal or informal, academic or apprenticeship, but for the majority of *jua kali* artists, art training tends to be informal and makeshift. Nonetheless, as I explained in Chapter four, the claim that most Kenyan artists are “self-taught” or ‘autodidactic’ is inaccurate, given that every artist I interviewed had a mentor, tutor or art network where skills and ideas are exchanged. What's more, *jua kali* artists, be they university trained or informally trained, tend to share skills with one another. For instance, when an artist returns home from a workshop or artist's residency overseas, he or she often shares what they learned with members of their art network. It is a practice I witnessed at Kuona Trust, first when Gakunju Kaigwa returned from a three-month residency in South Africa, then when Ato Malinda came back from Cameroon and Denmark, Thom Ogongo returned from Nigeria, and Sam Githui came back from a residency in Italy. This sort of sharing is especially important for artists who are keen to expand their horizons and also gain the status of transnational artist. The important point here, however, is that the skills training of Kenyan

contemporary artists hasn't been dependent solely on expatriate input, since art networks have enabled *jua kali* artists to learn from one another in mutually beneficial and cooperative ways.

*Point Four: Marketing*

Finally, the fourth point of the diamond relates to marketing, exhibiting and promoting the artist's work, which *jua kali* artists have increasingly tended to take upon themselves, given what Kuona-based artists like David Mwaniki and Dennis Muragori claim are "unfulfilled promises" made by expatriate-managed art institutions. For instance, Kuona Trust claims on its website "to serve visual artists ... giving them skills and opportunities to advance themselves..." But artists based there consistently expressed frustration that those so-called opportunities have not materialized in relation the kind of marketing and promoting they hoped to obtain from the institution. The alternative tactic that a number of Kuona artists have devised involves their developing their own *jua kali* marketing strategies. This has meant their finding exhibition sites and marketing venues, both local and transnational, by themselves. Artists team up in spontaneous networks to share the expense of renting exhibition halls in shopping malls like the Village Market; others go solo to commercial sites, such as restaurants, souvenir shops and stores specializing in interior design in order to improve their prospects for sales. In this regard, *jua kali* is synonymous with self-help and self-reliance.

In 2005, Chris Spring, curator of the East African wing of the British Museum conveyed the dominant narrative about contemporary Kenyan art when he wrote (in the catalogue for the Ya-Africa UK exhibition) that basically, the main art venues of

significance included only Paa ya Paa, Gallery Watatu, Kuona Trust, and RaMoMA Museum, plus several foreign cultural centers such as those of the French, German, British and Italian. However, if one includes all the art venues and art networks that *jua kali* artists have used to exhibit and market their art works since the late Fifties, my count comes to more than 60. The table below includes the majority of Nairobi-based venues that *jua kali* artists have used as exhibition space since pre-Independence days. But increasingly, Kenyan artists have also begun to exhibit and market their work using transnational and online sites as well.

Table 8: Kenyan Art Marketing Venues Set Up Since 1958

<b>Art Networking Venues</b>	<b>Launched</b>
African Colours	2002
African Heritage	1971
Banana Hill Art Studio/Gallery	1991
British Council	1963
Buru Buru Institute of Fine Art	1993
Cafe des Art	2009-on
Chemchemi Art Center	1963-65
Creative Art Center	1965
Family Plan Private Sector Calendars	1985
Firmin Gallery	1970s
French Cultural Center	1977
Fort Hall Murals	1958
Gallery Watatu	1969
Gallery of Contemporary East African Art	1986
Gikomba Market	1950s
GoDown Art Center	2000
Goethe Institute	1963
Hawa Women Artists	2000-on
Heritage House	2003
Hilton Hotel Art Gallery	1970
Italian Institute of Culture	1990s
Karen Blixen Coffee Garden	2008



Kilele Art Studio, Ruaka	2010
Kenya National Theatre	1952
Kenyatta University Dept of Fine Art	1972
Kijiji Art Studio. Kayole	2009
Kinyozi Barber Shops	1963
Kisii Soapstone Carvers Cooperative	1990s
Kitengela Glass	1979
Kuona Trust	1995
Le Rustique	2008-on
Nairobi Province Art Exhibit, <i>Manjano</i>	2010
Matatu Art	1991-on
Mau Mau Freedom Fighter at Paa ya Paa	1970s
Monument to Dedan Kimathi	2006
Monument to Louis Leakey	1978
Monuments to Jomo Kenyatta	1975
Museum Creativity Gallery	2007
Mzizi Arts Center	1990s
Nairobi Gallery	2005
Nairobi National Museum	1963
Nairobi University Dept of Architecture/Design	1969-72
Nakumatt	2007
National Archives and Murumbi Collection	1979
Ngecha Art Center	1996
Ngecha Art Gallery	2006
Ngecha Art 4 Development Murals	2006
No Limits Graphics at MM, Komorock	1992
One Off Gallery	1993
Paa Ya Paa Art Center	1966
Pimbi Gallery	1990s
RaMoMA Museum	2000
SafariCom Gallery	2010
Sanaa Art Promotions Murals (2k)	1993
Sarakasi Trust	1999
Sarang Gallery	1970s
Serena Hotel Nairobi	1990s
Sisi Kwa Sisi	1983
Sorsbie Gallery Muthaiga	1961-5

Story Moja Hay Festival	2009-on
Studio 68	1968
Talisman Restaurant	2008-on
Tazama Gallery x 3	1980
Unik Framers x 2	1990s
Victoria Furniture	2000s
Village Market	2000s
WAPI at British Council	2006-9
Yakini Gallery at Yaya Mall	1993

Not all of the art networks and venues cited above still exist. For instance, the Sorsbie Gallery started up before Independence and was gone by the mid-1960s. The Gallery of Contemporary East African Art, launched in 1986 at the Nairobi National Museum, was renamed the Creativity Gallery in 2008. And *Sisi kwa Sisi* (“We are the People” in Kiswahili) was a short-lived experiment organized in 1983 by mainly university art students aimed at bringing art to the people in Nairobi’s urban slums; however the timing wasn’t right for such an ambitious experiment given a *coup d’etat* had been attempted just months before the traveling exhibition took off, cutting short any possibility of its success. Nonetheless, the proliferation of venues where *jua kali* artists exhibit their art further illustrates the ingenuity and entrepreneurial acumen of these cultural workers whose *jua kali* tactics serve as survival strategies in these difficult economic times. Further evidence of the cultural dynamism currently fueling Kenya’s renaissance in the visual arts can be seen in the quantum leap in numbers of art markets established since the Sixties up to the present day. The fact that the decade of most rapid growth in the number of art marketing venues and networks is the current one makes another strong statement about the level of cultural productivity on the ground,

particularly among *jua kali* artists who are keen not only to show and sell their art to a wider audience, but also to cooperate with each other in order to take greater control of Nairobi's visual art world as a whole.

Table 9: Start Ups of Local Art Marketing Sites

By Decade	1950s	1960s	1970s	1980s	1990s	2000s
Art Market site	2	8	9	5	14	21

#### *Art Marketing and the Technoscape*

One of the more positive impacts of globalization on the contemporary Kenyan art world is that *jua kali* artists have joined what Appadurai calls the *technoscape* by starting to promote their own art on the Internet. Unfortunately, not all the websites featuring Kenyan contemporary art send royalties back to featured artists. In some cases, the artists do not even know that their artwork is on sale on line at prices far in excess of what they originally sold their work for. The discrepancy between wholesale and retail prices can be explained with reference to market forces and the fact that a number of local artists are aware that outsiders come to buy their art in bulk and then sell it for a higher price outside of Kenya. Shine Tani says he receives royalties from a Danish website that sells his art and artworks by other Banana Hill artists. He does not receive any sort of percentage from the American-based website [www.insideAfrica.com](http://www.insideAfrica.com), but at least he says he has sold his work in his own gallery for prices he dictates. What's more, the American, Todd Schaffer, clearly credits the artist who created the work, so there can be direct follow-up between the client and the buyer without the need of a middle man in future interventions. In the case of at least one online art dealer however, he places images of Kenyan art online for sale, but he doesn't identify the artist straight away.

Instead, his name is on the website next to the work, so the identity of the artist is obscured, and the dealer not the artist is the one associated with the work.

Fortunately, Kenyan artists are increasingly counteracting this practice by taking the initiative: They are increasingly joining the *technoscape*, either by setting up their own individual or art network websites, such as those established by Kuona Trust, The GoDown and Kitengela Glass. Or they are joining social networking sites, such as Facebook and MySpace where they feature their art. For instance, this is being done by artists such as Gakunju Kaigwa, Andrew Njoroge, Michael Soi and Beatrice Njoroge. Alternatively, they set up their own blogs, which is what Willie Ndegwa and Njeri Wangari have done; or they negotiate with a transnational art dealer who wants to promote their art online, which is what Rahab Njambi has done. When a sale comes through, Njambi says she receives a percentage from the sale. The ideal that increasing numbers of Kenyan artists are trying to do is to set up their own website over which they have total control. This is what Peterson Kamwathi has successfully done at [www.kamwathi.com](http://www.kamwathi.com) and what other *jua kali* artists are in the process of doing. However, it is a costly exercise, which puts many *jua kali* artists at a disadvantage.

One of the most impressive website set up in Kenya in 2002 was originally launched in Amsterdam to promote Pan African art across the continent. [www.AfricanColours.com](http://www.AfricanColours.com) was started by a Dutch woman in 1998 who handed it over to a Kenyan, former Reuters photo-journalist Andrew Njoroge who was living in Holland at the time. Njoroge, who had been a war correspondent now weary of war, was eager for a change and returned to Kenya specifically to build up as complete an online Pan-African

arts data base as possible, ideally to eventually include all the living artists in Africa in his art network. But like every other *jua kali* artist, Njoroge has struggled to devise a business plan that will enable him to generate enough revenue from the website to become self-sustaining. That frankly is the goal of every Kenyan *jua kali* artist I met. Quite a few have achieved that goal, although every one of them has admitted it is an ongoing struggle to stay solvent. Among the Internet sites that feature contemporary Kenyan art are the following. The list is by no means complete since new African art-related websites are emerging all the time (Hinshaw 2010).

Table 10: Internet Sites Marketing Contemporary Kenyan Art

Kenyan Art Online	Webmaster
<a href="http://www.24Nairobi.com">www.24Nairobi.com</a>	Senburg, Nicky
<a href="http://www.afkenya.or.ke">www.afkenya.or.ke</a>	Alliance Francaise
<a href="http://www.africanstreetsart.blogspot.com">www.africanstreetsart.blogspot.com</a>	Ndegwa, William
<a href="http://www.africanworks.blogspot.com">www.africanworks.blogspot.com</a>	Cross, Ed
<a href="http://www.africarho.co.kr">www.africarho.co.kr</a>	Kwang, J.H.
<a href="http://www.a-gallery.de">www.a-gallery.de</a>	
<a href="http://www.artmatters.info">www.artmatters.info</a>	Ondego, Ogova
<a href="http://www.artsceneafrica.com">www.artsceneafrica.com</a>	Wanjiku, Evelyne
<a href="http://www.awaazmagazine.com">www.awaazmagazine.com</a>	Patel, Zarina
<a href="http://www.bifa.ac.ke">www.bifa.ac.ke</a>	Buru BuruInstituteof Art
<a href="http://www.britishmuseum.org">www.britishmuseum.org</a>	Spring, Chris
<a href="http://www.creativeafricanetwork.com">www.creativeafricanetwork.com</a>	
<a href="http://www.eltayeb.com">www.eltayeb.com</a>	Dawelbeit.Eltayeb
<a href="http://www.fordfound.org">www.fordfound.org</a>	Ford Foundation
<a href="http://www.goethe.de/nairobi">www.goethe.de/nairobi</a>	Goethe Institute
<a href="http://www.idea.co.ke">www.idea.co.ke</a>	Kaigwa, Jacquie.
<a href="http://www.insideafricanart.com">www.insideafricanart.com</a>	Schaffer, Todd
<a href="http://www.itsamaddworld.com">www.itsamaddworld.com</a>	Kelemba, P. Madd
<a href="http://www.kamwathi.com">www.kamwathi.com</a>	Kamwathi, Peterson
<a href="http://www.kenya.africancolours.com">www.kenya.africancolours.com</a>	Njoroge, Andrew
<a href="http://www.kenyanpoet.blogspot.com">www.kenyanpoet.blogspot.com</a>	Wangari, Njeri
<a href="http://www.kenyanpundit.com">www.kenyanpundit.com</a>	
<a href="http://www.ketebulmusic.org">www.ketebulmusic.org</a>	Oyugi, Sali

<a href="http://www.kitengela-glass.com">www.kitengela-glass.com</a>	Croze, Nani
<a href="http://www.kuonatrust.org">www.kuonatrust.org</a>	Jaroljmek, Danda
<a href="http://www.kwani.org">www.kwani.org</a>	Kahora, Billy
<a href="http://www.magadistone.yahoo.com">www.magadistone.yahoo.com</a>	Mwitiki, Kioko
<a href="http://www.masai-eco-farms.com">www.masai-eco-farms.com</a>	Sukuro, Etale
<a href="http://www.mutisyaarts.com">www.mutisyaarts.com</a>	Mutisya, James
<a href="http://www.nairobi-arts.org">www.nairobi-arts.org</a>	Ogonga, Jimmy
<a href="http://www.nzuriart.com">www.nzuriart.com</a>	Van Helsdingen, M
<a href="http://www.postart.dk">www.postart.dk</a>	Vandvaerksvej
<a href="http://www.sarakasi.org">www.sarakasi.org</a>	Van Dijck, Rudy
<a href="http://www.sylviaphotos.com">www.sylviaphotos.com</a>	Njenga, Sylvia Gichia
<a href="http://www.thegodownartsCenter.com">www.thegodownartsCenter.com</a>	Ogana, Judy
<a href="http://www.trianglearts.org">www.trianglearts.org</a>	Loder, Robert
<a href="http://www.twaweza.org">www.twaweza.org</a>	Githongo, John
<a href="http://www.zawandi.blogspot.com">www.zawandi.blogspot.com</a>	Muigai, Moses

#### *Transnational Art Marketing*

Even better than going online, many Kenyans believe that the best way to get into the global art scene and market their artwork on a wider transnational platform is to get out of Kenya, at least for a brief period of time, and study, show and then market their own *bricolage* abroad. The clearest evidence of Kenyans' success once they get out of the country is two Kenyan women artists, one living in New York, the other in London, who have both received world acclaim for their art. Wangechi Mutu has a Masters degree of Fine Art from Yale University and just received the Deutsche Bank's 2010 Artist of the Year award for her collage art and Magdelene Odundo, who studied at the Royal College of Art in the UK, is said to be the highest paid ceramicist on the planet. In the 1980s and early 1990s, the late Ruth Schaffner was Nairobi's first transnational art dealer to take contemporary Kenyan art seriously enough to promote it overseas. The only problem with her approach was that she reinforced the stereotypic view of African art as

‘primitive’ and ‘naïve’. She wanted nothing to do with formally trained Kenyan artists whose art she complained looked ‘too *mzungu*’ (*mzungu*, meaning Caucasian in Kiswahili). Nonetheless, she did a great deal to cultivate those unschooled artists who she saw had potential, including Shine Tani, Meek Gichugu, Joseph Cartoon, Kivuthi Mbuno and many others. “Ruth did more to internationalize Kenyan art than anyone before or since,” said Watatu Gallery’s sales manager Morris Amboso. But contrary to the urban legend that Ruth and her successor Rob Burnet claimed, that no Kenyan traveled abroad before they came on the scene, a number of Kenyans had traveled and exhibited overseas before Kuona Trust was born in 1995. They include Makerere graduates such as Louis Mwaniki, Gregory Maloba, Elimo Njau, Theresa Musoke, and Elkana Ong’esa. Others include Hilary Ng’weno, Kamal Shah, Camille Wekesa, Wakonyote Njuguna, Hezbon Owiti, Gakunju Kaigwa, Liza MacKay, Eustace Gitonga, Shine Tani, Geraldine Robarts, and of course, the founders of Gallery Watatu, Joni Waite, Robin Anderson, and David Hart, and the founders of RaMoMA, Mary Collis and Carol Lees, both Kenya-born advocates of contemporary African art. What is true is that the number of Kenyans who have traveled, exhibited and sold their work overseas since the mid-1990s has grown exponentially, reaching more than 100, and they offer further evidence of a cultural renaissance, particularly because the vast majority of artists who have gone out have not become part of that proverbial “brain drain.” Instead they have returned to Kenya to contribute to the renaissance spirit that is burgeoning back home. The majority of them are listed below in Table 11.

Table 11: Transnational *Jua Kali* Artists

<b>Artists</b>	<b>Decade First Traveled</b>	<b>Destination</b>
Patrick Adoyo	1980s	UK, US
Margaretta Akinyi	2000s	US
Yassir Ali	2000s	Sudan
Salaah Amman	1990s	Sudan
Robin Anderson	1920s	South Africa, UK
Timothy Brooke	1960s	UK, US
Joseph Cartoon	2000s	UK
Mary Collis	1960s	US, UK, South Africa
Anselm Croze	1990s	US, UK., Finland
Nani Croze	1970s	Germany, US, South Africa
El Tayeb Dawelbeit	1990s	Sudan
Peter Elungat	2000s	UK
Morris Foit	1990s	US
Godfrey Mwampmbwa Gado	1990s	Italy, Tanzania
Kibachia Gatu	1970s	UK, US
Meek Gichugu	1990s	France
Samuel Githui	2000s	Italy
Allan Githuka	2000s	Denmark
Eustace Gitonga	1970s	US Smithsonian
Sam Hopkins	1980s	Italy, US, UK, Germany
Mumbi Kaigwa	1990s	US, UK, Holland
Gakunju Kaigwa	1980s	US, UK, Italy, Holland, S.Africa
Anthony Kamenju	1990s	South Africa
Peterson Kamwathi	2000s	Holland, US, UK
Kaafiri Kariuki	1990s	France
Jak Katarikawe	1970s	Uganda
Maddo Kelemba Paul	2000s	Monaco
Morris Keyongo	1980s	UK
Sebastian Kiarie	1990s	Germany, US, Zambia
Jimnah Kimani	2000s	India, Holland, US. UK
Ciru Kimani	2000s	UK
Peter Kimani	1980s	UK



Richard Kimathi	2000s	France
Wanjiru Kinyanjui	1990s	US, Germany
Osei Kofi	1980s	Ghana, Switzerland
Justus Kyalo	1990s	Cameroon
Miriam Kyambi	2000s	Mexico, US
Liza MacKay	1990s	UK
Mbuthia Maina	2000s	UK, Italy
Ashif Malamba George	2000s	Austria
Ato Malinda	2000s	US, Denmark, Cameroon
Gregory Maloba	1940s	UK, US
Rhodia Mann	1950s	UK, US, Iran, Afghanistan
Mwashigadi Mazola	2000s	Jamaica
Elizabeth Mazrui- Orchardson	1980s	UK, US
Bertiers Mbatia. Joseph	2000s	Germany, , France
Caroline Mbirua	2000s	Tanzania, Egypt
Mutheu Mbondo	1990s	US, UK
Joy Mboya	1980s	Australia, US, UK, Egypt
Harrison Mburu	2000s	US, VT
Peter Salim Mburu	2000s	UK
Zachariah Mbutha	1990s	France
James Mbuthia	2000s	UK
Lawi Moshi	1970s	Tanzania
Giko Hosea Muchugu	2000s	China
Chain Muhandi	1990s	Germany
Patrick Mukabi	2010	Denmark
Esther Mukuhi	2000s	South Africa
Anne Mungai	1990s	US, NY
James Muriuki	2000s	UK, Denmark
Callistus Musiomi	1990s	South Korea, Iran.
Theresa Musoke	1970s	UK, US
Solo 7 Muyuno Sol	2000s	Sweden
Wilson Mwangi	2000s	Germany, US, Australia, Canada
Eunice Mwangi	2000s	Germany
Louis Mwaniki	1960s	Italy, UK

Expedito Mwebe	1970s	Uganda
Kioko Mwitiki	1980s	Italy, US
Mwaura Ndekere	2000s	China
Eric Ndlovu	1980s	South Africa
Peter Ngugi	2000s	US, VT
Hilary Ng'weno	1960s	US
Elimo Njau	1960s	UK, Germany, Sweden
Rebeka Njau	1970s	USA
Philda Njau Ragland	1970s	USA, Tanzania
Andrew Njoroge	1980s	Holland, UK, War Zones
Beatrice Njoroge	2000s	Zambia
Sam Ntiro	1950s	UK, Tanzania
Wanjohi Nyamu	2000s	UK
John Odoch Ameny	1970s	US, Uganda
Magdalene Odundo	1980s	UK, US
Judy Ogana	1990s	Brazil, US, Sweden
Mary Ogembo	2000s	Ghana
Elijah Ogira	1990s	Holland, US
Jimmy Ogongo	1990s	Belgium
Thom Ogongo	2000s	Nigeria
Elkana Ong'esa	1970s	Paris, Canada, US
Richard Onyango	1980s	Italy
Maggie Otieno	2000s	Nigeria, UK, Algeria, South Africa
Gomba Otieno	2000s	Austria, UK, Sweden, US
Martin Otieno	2000s	Italy
Hezbon Owiti	1960s	Nigeria, Oshogbo
Geraldine Robarts	1950s	South Africa, UK, Canada
Pelkingin Saskia	2000s	Holland, US
Charles Sekano	1970s	Holland, US, South Africa
Kamal Shah	1970s	UK, India
Larisa Sjoerds	2000s	Holland
Ancent Soi	1970s	Germany
Michael Soi	1990s	South Africa, UK
Etale Sukuro	1980s	Germany, US, Tanzania,

		UK
Shine Tani	1990s	Germany, France, Netherlands, Switzerland, Belgium
Tabitha Wa Thuku	2000s	Italy, Greece, Hong Kong, UK
Sane Wadu	1980s	US, Germany
Jony Waite	1950s	Japan, US, Somalia, UK
Njuguna Wakonyote	1980s	NZ, Germany, France
Njeri Wangari	2000s	Chile
Samwel Wanjau	1980s	US, Sweden, UK
Camille Wekesa	1990s	Italy, UK, Indonesia
Fitsum Woldelibanos	2000s	Eritrea, Ethiopia, Europe

Once again, if we look at the time line of Kenyans traveling abroad, either to study, participate in art residencies or workshops, or exhibit and sell their art, we can see that their numbers have risen dramatically since the new millennium, supporting our position that Kenya has been enlivened by a renaissance spirit in the past decade or so. What makes the numbers even more significant is that all the artists identified above have gone abroad and returned to work at home in Kenya. Not listed in Table 11 are Kenyan artists living in the Diaspora, such as Wangechi Mutu, Magdelene Odundo and Ingrid Mwangi. Those also not included are African visual artists who lived in exile in Kenya for some time but returned home, such as Nuwa Nnyanzi who returned to Uganda after the fall of Idi Amin. But I have included non-Kenyan artists in the list who have come to Kenya and settled in Nairobi, including Sudanese, Ugandans, Eritreans and South Africans, among others. Below is a reckoning of Kenyan artists who have gone transnational including which decade they began their globe trotting.

Table 12: Transnational *Jua Kali* Artists on the Move

By Decade	Pre-1963	1970s	1980s	1990s	2000s
Transnational <i>Jua Kali</i> Artists	11	14	16	25	40

What is clear is that Kenyan *jua kali* artists joined the ethnoscape of globe-trotting travelers decades ago. And contrary to the urban myth that Kenyans only excel as runners in metropolitan marathons, Kenyan artists are contributing substantially to the global art scene only that their contribution has been largely unacknowledged until recently.

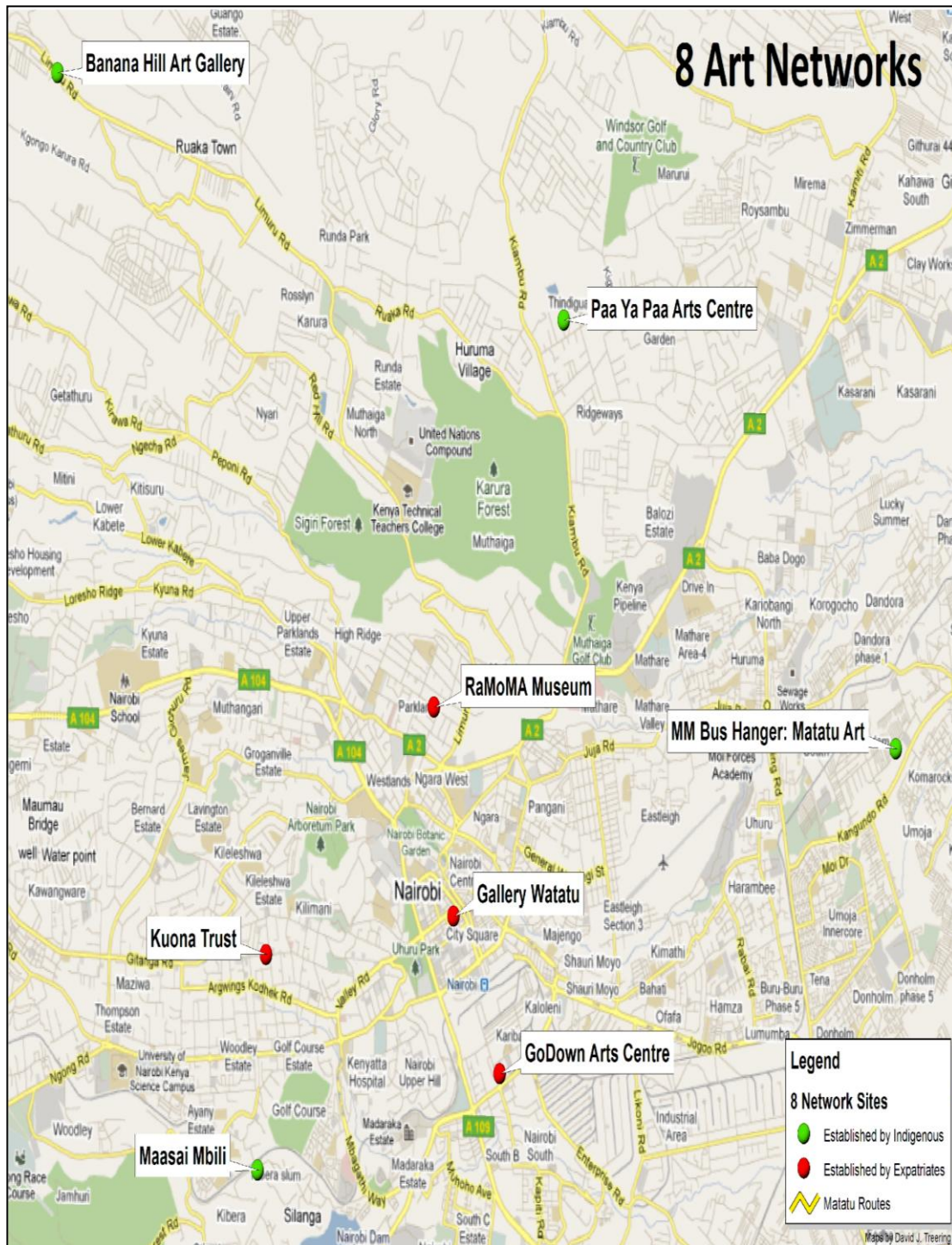


Figure 47. Map 1: 8 Art Networks in Nairobi

## CHAPTER SIX

### THE *JUA KALI* DIAMOND AND EIGHT ART NETWORKS

In my study of contemporary Kenyan art and art networks, I traveled all across Nairobi from Kitengela to Kibera, Ruaka to Ridgeways, Hurlingham to Huruma, Mathare and Muthaiga, Gikomba to Githurai, Karen to Kahawa West, and Parklands to Kariobangi South. And wherever I went, I found *jua kali* artists “making do” with the materials on hand, including art networks that allowed them to obtain some or all of the essentials they required –items included in what I call my four-pointed *jua kali* cultural diamond--to create works of art or *bricolage*. And for the most part, they felt free to work through a particular network for as long as it fulfilled their need; and then, like Simmel’s “stranger” if and when further opportunities opened up elsewhere, they would take them without hesitation, since they are “not tied down in (their) action by habit, piety and precedent” (Simmel 1964: 405). But rarely will the *jua kali* artist sever ties completely with the art network he or she has shifted from, particularly as he knows he could easily be coming back soon to his first network once some short term “project” was done. Most *jua kali* artists seem to understand this style of social mobility as it mirrors what Simmel says about “the person who ... has not quite overcome the freedom of coming and going” (1964: 402). It is the sort of social fluidity that may be seen as the micro-version of

Appadurai's global flows. For in a sense, the artists are part of a *jua kali* ethnoscape that he describes in *Modernity at Large* as being filled with:

persons who constitute the shifting world in which they live... This is not to say that there are no relatively stable communities and networks of kinship, friendship, work, and leisure, as well as of birth, residence, and other filial forms, but it is to say that the warp of these stabilities is everywhere shot through with the woof of human motion, as more people and groups deal with the realities of having to move ... (Appadurai 1996: 33-34).

In this section, I examine several "relatively stable ... networks" using my *jua kali* cultural diamond to assess how useful these networks are to the *jua kali* artists who interact with them. I will also trace how artists shift between indigenous African art networks and those that have been organized and managed by expatriates and funded largely by foreign donors, be they American, British, Dutch or Scandinavian. The indigenous art networks that I will focus on are Paa ya Paa Art Center, Banana Hill Art Studio, Maasai *Mbili* and the ad hoc *matatu* art world. The expatriate-organized art networks that I examine are Gallery Watatu, Kuona Trust, The GoDown Art Center and Rahimtulla Museum of Modern Art or RaMoMA. The binary of indigenous and expatriate may seem problematic, since the line between the two is not sharply drawn; but for convenience sake, I distinguish the two groups on the basis of who initiated the networks.

There are many other *jua kali* sites and shifting art networks in Nairobi besides these eight, but my goal in this chapter is to use my *jua kali* cultural diamond as a tool to examine how these networks operate and how they advance or waylay the progress of contemporary art in Kenya. For instance, what are the dynamics and the relationship

between the artists, the network managers, the patrons, donors, and the public? The fact that there is so much overlap and interaction between the indigenous and the expatriate art networks serves to confirm Becker's assertion that "art worlds do not have clear boundaries in any sense" (1982: 35). Nonetheless, De Certeau's analogy between making do and guerrilla warfare is also relevant to the lifestyle of *jua kali* artists since Kenya's colonial background seriously shaped and structured the local art scene due to the early exclusion of Africans and the absolute dominance of expatriates. That is to say, that at Independence, all the leading cultural institutions -- from the National Museums of Kenya to the Kenya National Theater to the annual Kenya Schools Drama Festival were controlled by former British colonial subjects. (They may have been residents, but most had British passports.) So in order for African artists to construct their own art networks and cultivate their own conventions, they had to use what De Certeau calls "guerrilla tactics" and what I call *jua kali* strategies and tactics. My *jua kali* diamond works from the premise that all four points are required to both produce *bricolage* and construct a proper 'art world' in Becker's sense of term, meaning a "network of people whose cooperative activity, organized via their joint knowledge of conventional means of doing things, produces the kind of art works that art world I noted for" (1982: x).

Briefly, what I hope to show is that neither set of art networks does a perfect job fulfilling all the needs of the *jua kali* artists. The indigenous African art networks respond to the problems of obtaining space, art supplies, and training relatively well, but they each have their strengths and weaknesses, and they all fall short on marketing. Yet marketing is a challenge that *jua kali* artists are tackling (discussed in Chapter five), for



while they may have limited material means at their disposal, they have lots of energy, imagination and entrepreneurial acumen. The expatriate-funded art networks provide limited space, limited materials, and some skills training; but when it comes to marketing, the general consensus among most *jua kali* artists is that these networks also fall short, which artists find disillusioning since they have been led to believe that these networks are specially designed to exhibit, market and sell contemporary Kenyan art on their behalf. Part of the discontent that I found among local artists who interact with expatriate-constructed sites relates to foreign donor funding. What the artists have discovered is that large sums of money get raised in their name; fund-raising proposals get drafted citing the authors' goal as "serving visual artists" in Kenya by providing them with whatever they require to advance artistically (Items that the artists themselves have identified as working space, art supplies, skills training and marketing). Yet the artists claim that little or none of those funds "trickle down" to "serve" them.

In brief, the eight art networks fit into the *jua kali* cultural diamond as follows:

Table 13: *Jua Kali* Diamond and Eight Art Networks

<b><i>Jua Kali</i> Cultural Diamond</b>	<b><i>Jua Kali</i> Site</b>	<b>Materials</b>	<b>Training</b>	<b>Marketing</b>
Paa Ya Paa Art Center	Yes	No	Yes	No
Banana Hill Art Studio	Yes	Yes*	Yes	Yes
Maasai Mbili at Kibera	Yes	Yes*	Yes	Yes
Matatu Art	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Gallery Watatu	No	Yes*	Yes*	Yes*
Kuona Trust	Yes*	No	Yes*	Yes*
The GoDown Art Center	Yes*	No	Yes*	No
RaMoMA Museum	No	No	Yes*	Yes*
* means a limited yes				

*The Diamond and Indigenous Art Networks*

Paa ya Paa Art Center

*Point One: Space*

Even before Paa ya Paa opened its doors in the heart of Nairobi's commercial



**Figure 48. Paa ya Paa is also called a *Temple of Culture*. The mural by Elimo Njau says, "DO NOT COPY. Copying puts God to Sleep."**

Center in 1966, when Elimo Njau was still presiding over the Njau Art Studio, having walked away from being assistant curator at Sir Merlyn Sorsbie's Gallery, the former art professor at Makerere University's Margaret Trowell School of Fine Art left his door wide open for *jua kali*

artists to come into his space and paint, sculpt, or make tie 'n dye tee-shirts. From the beginning Paa ya Paa was a

collaborative effort started by a mix of East African and British artists and intellectuals, including James Kangwana, Jonathan Kariara, Pheroze Nowrojee, Terry Hirst, Charles Lewis and Njau. And as such, it attracted all kinds of artists to come regularly either to paint, recite poetry, show photographs or simply debate the hot topics of the day. Paa ya Paa generated a thriving indigenous African art world up until 1973 when city center rents shot sky high and the Center had to move to the outskirts of Nairobi, to a house cum gallery situated on three acres of land owned by Oxford University Press. Paying rent was a struggle with PYP members, including the African American photographer Phillda Ragland, contributing the most. The Center was close to folding in 1973 when Njau's former teacher, an American named Maurice Wolff, upon hearing of his former star student's plight bought the OUP house for Njau and handed it over to him outright.

But even when PYP was running on a shoestring, no longer the center of cultural debate and cosmopolitan discourse in Nairobi, Njau was mindful of the plight of many *jua kali* artists. With other members of the PYP network, he managed to construct a half dozen studio-bed sitters where either local or global visiting artists could come, stay and work for weeks at a time. And even after a major fire burned much of Paa ya Paa's art and book collection to ash in 1998, Njau and a wide network of friends in the Nairobi art community helped resurrect Paa ya Paa, conducting a series of *harambee* self help fundraisers with that goal in mind. Evidence of the global good will that Paa ya Paa retains up to the present came in June 2009 when a group of 30 young African American Christians from Texas came to Kenya with the specific plan cooperating with Paa ya Paa to rehabilitate one exhibition hall from floor to ceiling, which they did in a few weeks time.

Further evidence of Paa ya Paa's value as a *jua kali* artists' work site is the 12 foot tall Mau Mau Freedom Fighter sculpture which was unscathed by the '98 fire and has stood behind the main gallery since the early 1970s. The monument to the Mau Mau anti-colonial spirit of resistance was constructed out of cement and reinforced steel wire at PYP by Samwel Wanjau, one of Kenya's finest sculptors. Wanjau, who was the first *jua kali* artist to work at PYP literally in the open air, created the *Freedom Fighter* on the understanding that it would be transported at Kenya Government expense to the front entrance of the Kenya Parliament once completed. However, that plan was abandoned by the powerful Kenyan Attorney General at the time, Charles Njonjo, who as an apologist for the British rejected such a powerful representation of anti-colonial resistance. So the

sculpture remains at Paa ya Paa confirming the Center's historic status as Nairobi's first indigenous African art world to spawn contemporary Kenyan art.

*Point Two: Art Supplies*

Like most *jua kali* sites, when art supplies are available at Paa ya Paa, they are shared freely among those in need; but from the beginning, Paa ya Paa has never been a well-to-do art world. It has never received regular foreign funding, although over the years occasional exhibitions would be financed by the Ford or Rockefeller Foundations, and workshops would receive support from the Goethe Institute. But for the most part, PYP has largely relied on local *harambee* self-help fund raising efforts to keep the gallery alive. This was true even before the 1998 fire, when the whole Nairobi art community rallied in unity to fund raise for a humble resurrection of Njau's home and gallery. But whenever PYP has run artists workshops, as it did from the late 1960s up to the present, art materials were subsidized and shared freely among workshop participants.

*Point Three: Skills Training*

Elimo Njau had been a teacher of art teachers at Makerere University and the University of Dar es Salaam before he first came to Kenya in 1958, commissioned by the Anglican church, to paint five monumental Christian murals in the heart of what was then known under British colonialism as the White Highlands at Fort Hall (now Murang'a). And even after he came to live in Nairobi, initially to work at the Sorsbie Gallery and then with Ezekiel Mphahlele's *Chemchemi* Art Center, he never gave up teaching and mentoring. In Kenya it started when he set up the Njau Art Studio with Jonathan Kariara and Ely Kyeyune, his former student from Makerere, and it continued once he and others

set up Paa ya Paa (meaning “the antelope is rising”). He would run skills training workshops periodically for East African and international artists from the late Sixties through the Seventies. From the beginning, Paa ya Paa was run somewhat like a medieval guild wherein young artists from within Kenya and abroad would come and apprentice with Njau. There he would share the conventions of painting, sculpture, print making and even tie and dye textile design with both locals like the late Mike Bugara and visiting artists, many of whom came from the African Diaspora. Njau also invited professional artists like the Swiss printmaker Eugen Banzinger to come and run workshops where they would share the conventions of their specific area of expertise, be it collage, charcoal drawing, print making or water color.

*Point Four: Marketing*

This is the area where Paa ya Paa fell down from the time the gallery had to move out of the city center to the outskirts at Ridgeways where few PYP fans would regularly come, see and buy art as they had done previously when the gallery was in the center of Nairobi’s commercial sector. Nonetheless, between that move in 1973 and the fire of 1998, PYP cultivated a strong Pan African network of artists, and mounted more exhibitions for African artists than any other venue in Nairobi, featuring artists from Ethiopia, Eritrea, Mozambique, Sudan, South Africa, Tanzanian, Uganda, and the Caribbean. Even so, Njau has always been more of a philosopher – poet than a marketing magnet or Pan African publicist. Often, refugee artists would find a temporary haven at Paa ya Paa, but then they would move on, primarily to find better marketing prospects. They went either to Gallery Watatu, as did the Ugandan artist Jak Katarikawe and the

South African painter Eric Ndlovu, or to RaMoMA Museum, as did the Sudanese painter El Tayeb, or to The GoDown, as did another Sudanese artist Salaah) or even to Kuona Trust, where the Sudanese painter Yassir Ali has staked out a studio. A number of local *jua kali* artists have done the same thing over the years, looking for more strategic sites than PYP to exhibit and market their art. For instance, Samwel Wanjau and Francis Kahuri shifted to Gallery Watatu; Justus Kyalo went to Kuona Trust, and Francis Mbugua moved back to Ngecha and over to Kitengela Glass. In this regard, one must give credit to Paa ya Paa as a spawning ground for many indigenous African artists. Evidence of Paa ya Paa's being one of Nairobi's most strategic art networks came as a result of the tragic fire of 1998, which nearly killed Njau who was almost asphyxiated after running back to collect some of his most precious paintings. A wide range of Nairobi's local and global art worlds rallied to conduct several *harambee* self-help fund raisers for Paa ya Paa which enabled Njau to reconstruct the Center. Those events also confirmed Njau's status as one of East Africa's most cosmopolitan artists. He also deserves credit for being among the first 'transnational' East Africans (after the Airlift students who left to study in the USA from 1960) to travel and exhibit widely in the UK, Sweden and Germany in the early 1960s. His pioneering role has been downplayed, particularly among expatriate art dealers who like to claim they launched a contemporary Kenyan art movement rather than Njau and the art network of Paa ya Paa. As for Njau, he attributes the origins of contemporary East African and specifically Kenyan art, to Margaret Trowell, the British artist who came from the Slade School of Fine Art in

London and started the Margaret Trowell School of Fine Art in Kampala at Makerere University in the late 1930s.

### Banana Hill Art Studio

#### *Point One: Space*

Shine Tani (alias Simon Njenga) was a street performer and acrobat before he discovered paintings with hefty price tags in the Nairobi Hilton storefront gallery in the



**Figure 49. Banana Hill Art Studio sign stands with its founder Shine Tani at the gallery's entrance**

late 1980s. Tutored in the fundamentals of painting by his two older brothers as well as by the German-American art dealer-owner of Gallery Watatu Ruth Schaffner, Shine started sharing his own tiny studio space

with family members and friends in the early 1990s

immediately after he settled down at Banana Hill with

another aspiring artist, his wife Rahab Njambi. With the

money he made from the sale to Ruth Schaffner of his first paintings, Shine and Rahab then shifted to a bigger space, making room for him to mentor more friends and family who wanted to become painters like him. By 1992 they jointly started up the Banana Hill Art Studio and continued mutually sharing their space and skills with young art apprentices like Joseph Cartoon, Martin Kamuyu, Meek Gichugu, Shade Kamau, Andrew Kamundia, and John 'Silver' Kimani among others. By 1994 when Shine was advised by Kenya's most esteemed author Ngugi wa Thiong'o to register BHAS, Banana Hill's art network was vibrant and well connected with a wide range of expatriate art institutions, including Gallery Watatu, French Cultural Center, Goethe Institute, and British Council.

In 1996, despite having only a Standard Seven education, Shine became the Studio's first 'transnational' artist after winning the German *Missio* award, which took him to five European countries and on tour to all the leading galleries and museums in Germany, Belgium, Luxemburg, Switzerland and Austria. In 2002, with a view to expanding the Studio's base of operation, Shine together with members of his network applied for the first time for funding from Ford Foundation. The plan was to get more space so they could exhibit and market their own art. But receipt of foreign funding proved to be mixed blessing. Previously the *jua kali* style of mutual support among artists had been a source of strength and self-reliance; but if the donor money was meant to strengthen the Studio, it had the exact opposite effect, an outcome that the Zambian economist Dambisa Moyo analyzes brilliantly in her 2009 book *Dead Aid: Why Aid is no working and how there is a better way for Africa*. Njambi Shine, who watched the effect of foreign aid on the Studio's art network and day-to-day operations, also understood its negative impact. "It seemed to weaken the artists' resolve and passion for self reliance. In fact, the Ford (Foundation) money practically destroyed us," claimed Njambi who said the money acted like a poison that seemed to transform artists who had previously been their friends into greedy foes. "Artists who Shine had taught how to use a paint brush and mix colors--the most basic conventions of painting—got envious of him and wanted to take the Studio away from him." This they did for a time. Led by Shine's main critic, Joseph Cartoon Njuguna and his splinter group managed to get the Ford funding transferred from Shine to them. But the new group lacked discipline and managerial skills. The Studio almost folded, but once the donor funding ran out, the original Banana Hill crew called Shine



back to manage and reconstitute the Studio as a gallery, again on a *jua kali* basis, ‘making do’ with only the resources at hand. Fortunately, the *jua kali* spirit of resilience endured and the discovery that foreign donors can be what Graham Hancock in *Lords of Poverty* calls “masters of disaster” has spurred on the *jua kali* spirit at Banana Hill. (1989: 18).

But Shine admits the experience changed his outlook quite a bit:

I used to think of myself primarily as an artist, but now I see myself as a business man out to promote Kenyan artists by all means. I don’t ever want to depend on a donor again; I’d rather become a donor... What I definitely don’t want to do is die poor, so our main focus now is exhibiting and marketing Kenyan art (Tani 2009).

His perseverance has paid off to the point where not only Kenyan artists want to be exhibited at Banana Hill, but even foreign artists are joining the Gallery’s transnational art network. In early 2010 a team of German filmmakers came and made a documentary on the Studio, and in the middle of 2010, two French artists came to Kenya and mounted an exhibition, not at the French Cultural Center which is still a popular venue in the center of Nairobi, but Banana Hill Art Gallery, so the Studio/Gallery is gaining cultural capital both locally and transnationally; it is also coming closer to becoming a complete art world in its own right.

#### *Point Two: Art Supplies*

Shine bought his first brush and can of house paint from the pittance he had saved after doing somersaults in the downtown streets of Nairobi in the mid-1980s. “It was with savings from my work in the streets that I bought art supplies,” said Shine. “Ruth Schaffner didn’t buy my first paintings, but she handed me KSh200, and that was a great incentive to get to work.” From then on, Shine shared whatever art materials he had with other *jua kali* artists who showed up at his Banana Hill home. As he recalled:

It was when we didn't have much that life was easier. Once we got foreign funding, suddenly people changed, and I almost wished I had never got that cash ... We had to go to court: the first time I lost everything including the name of the studio; the second time, in the local Chief's court, I won. But it was painful, because the ringleader who mobilized others to bring me down was formerly a runaway and school dropout that Rahab and I took into our home, after he asked me to teach him to paint (Tani 2010).

Today, Shine is more of a *jua kali* entrepreneur than full-time artist (although his art work was included in a 2009 Kenyan Art exhibition mounted in Italy, and sponsored by the Ministry of Culture). Rather than simply give away art materials outright, he sells them inexpensively at the gallery, which he buys from another *jua kali* artist Hosea "Giko" Muchugu who imports them directly from China. Giko's art is exhibited at Banana Hill, but like a number of other *jua kali* artists, he supplements his income from his art with other business ventures. Joe Friday, the Studio's full time framer, is another member of the Banana Hill art network. "I changed my name from Mwangi to Friday because I picked my first paint brush on a Friday, and that experience changed my life," said Joe Friday, who also supplements the income from his art and his framing for Shine with weekday work as a carpenter.

### *Point Three: Skills Training*

Training in everything from painting to mixing colors to stretching canvas to the proper usage of brushes and palette knives were just a few of the conventions that aspiring *jua kali* artists learned once they came to Banana Hill Art Studio. "This type of apprenticeship went on practically around the clock and for many years," said Njambi who was both a trainee and hostess to the *jua kali* artists who arrived at her front door at all hours of the day or night from the early 1990s. Njambi explained that what killed the

training program was when Joseph Cartoon came back from studies in the UK and started claiming Shine was misusing the Ford Foundation money. He managed to persuade the donor to transfer the funds to him, but they soon discovered that was a big mistake.

According to Kenyan art critic Wakonyote Njuguna, who briefly served as Chairman of the Studio, it was painful to see the way fellow Kenyans savaged one another over money.

The fact is, it wasn't that much money in the first place, but it was enough to make almost all the artists [in the Banana Hill art network] turn on Shine. But honestly, if Shine had a fraction of the cash Ford Foundation gave to other expatriate art organizations, he could have done wonders with it. As it was, his budget didn't even include his getting a living wage for running the Studio. It didn't even pay his bus fare to go collect the checks from Ford at RaMoMA (Njuguna 2009).

Wakonyote further noted that Ford's using RaMoMA Museum as a conduit where Shine had to go to collect monthly checks was humiliating for the Kenyan on several levels: first because the Banana Hill Studio was almost a decade older than RaMoMA which was only launched in 2000 with funding from Ford; second because it looked as if the African was being infantilized by Ford, treated as if the African gallery couldn't handle the funds while the European-run RaMoMA could; and third because RaMoMA like BHAS was a commercial art gallery, Africans wondered why the Museum should be put in a position to have a competitive edge over the Studio when they were both in the same business. These were some of the questions that made taking donor funding from Ford a painful process, according to Wakonyote as well as Shine. But in Wakonyote's mind, only Shine could have succeeded in dealing with these difficult circumstances. Anyone else would have thrown in the towel, to paraphrase his sentiment. But because of

his *jua kali* spirit of resilience and perseverance, Shine was able to endure and ultimately win back the studio/gallery he almost lost.

*Point Four: Marketing*

The great success story of the Banana Hill Art Gallery is that ever since Shine was handed the management of the Studio by the remaining members of the network following the Ford funding fiasco, he has been putting all his energy into marketing. The studio became a ‘gallery’ which currently holds monthly exhibitions featuring Kenyans and expatriate artists which Shine promotes with the focus on sales. “I have an online mailing list of over 2000 addresses, plus I’m in the process of putting up our own website in addition to selling our artists’ works on line through other websites,” said Shine who has gotten more aggressive about marketing Kenyan *jua kali* artists since mid-2009. “I was deeply depressed by the post-election violence in Kenya (that resulted in the deaths of more than 1000, and the displacement of more than 650,000 Kenyans), but now that I’ve had a chance to paint out my feelings about that horrible time, I’m working to revive the careers of aging Kenyan artists like Francis Kahuri and Jak Katarikawe and others whose careers might otherwise fade into oblivion unless we retrieve them and give them exhibitions,” said Shine who is committed to going toe to toe in competition with the expatriate-controlled galleries, such as RaMoMA, Kuona Trust and the GoDown.

Maasai Mbili

*Point one: Space*

Maasai Mbili (*mbili* is Kiswahili for ‘two’) got its start when *jua kali* sign writer Gomba Otieno staked out a claim for himself on the roadside next to the bridge leading

into Nairobi's largest slum, Kibera, which was made famous from being featured in the 2005 award-winning film *The Constant Gardener*. Daily Gomba would go to his staked out spot carrying his paint brush, a can of house paint, a few wooden planks and a plastic sheet big enough to drape over the upright planks which leaned precariously against the cement bridge.

I scavenged the polythene paper from the Korogocho garbage dump; did the same thing with the wooden planks which had been a big old shipping box that came from South Africa. But I had saved some money from a small job I had in secondary school. That's what I used to buy my first paint brush and can of wall paint (Otieno 2009).

Almost immediately, Gomba was getting local shopkeepers from Kibera coming to his sign writing kiosk and asking him to beautify and do signage for their small businesses. It wasn't long after that another sign writer, Kota Otieno, arrived at his spot and asked if he needed a partner. Gomba explained how their dyad evolved:

We hit it off straight away and got to thinking how we could make our sign writing business unique, since the market had gotten flooded with ordinary sign writers. We wanted to be extra-ordinary, so we decided to dress up like Maasai warriors. We got the rubber tire sandals and the red checkered cotton blankets that all Maasai wear. And most importantly we wore long ochre-colored braids down our backs. Instead of spears, we carried paint brushes, and we started parading around Kibera. Other people gave us the name 'Maasai Mbili' and we got a lot of business that way. Nobody knew we weren't Maasai! (Otieno 2009)

Saving enough from their sign writing work to rent a small rickety two-story wooden house behind a bar, Gomba and Kota immediately attracted aspiring artists from the slums who wanted to come work and learn from them. Both Gomba and Kota were glad to share their new space first with Solomon "Solo 7" Muyundo and then George 'Ashif' Malamba. In total, there are a dozen artists based at Maasai Mbili today. The name itself no longer refers to just two make-believe Maasai "warriors." Instead, it refers

to a space where *jua kali* artists share almost everything from paints, wooden planks, cigarettes, and even money. “When one of us makes a sale, we put it a percentage of the sale in a communal fund that helps pay the rent,” said Otieno Kennedy Rabala, M2’s treasurer and a former security guard at Gallery Watatu who claims he learned all he knows about painting from listening to Ruth Schaffner advise local artists how to improve their art. “Otherwise, if one of us isn’t selling we chip in and give ‘tips’ to that one,” Rabala added.

### *Point Two: Art Supplies*

As just stated, the *jua kali* artists at Maasai Mbili mostly share their art materials.

“The system works because we like each other and we all don’t have much,” said Solo 7 who went with Gomba in early 2010 to Austria to an international art festival and constructed a “slum installation” similar to one that Gomba and Ashif created during a German art festival in 2008. “Sometimes we go in together to buy cans of paint, as we just did since we are working together for a group show entitled *Afropolis* that’s going to be at the Goethe



**Figure 50. Maasai Mbili founder Gomba Otieno with his son Barry**

Institute in mid-2010,” said Mbuthia Maina. To raise money for Maasai Mbili, Mbuthia, who is the only university graduate in the group, just split the cost of a 100 tee-shirts with Gomba. He explained why:

We’re going to paint the tee-shirts with symbols and signs associated with Kibera. You’ll see them repeated in many of the collages we are creating for the *Afropolis* show, like the number 8, since we all take *matatu* number 8 to get from the city center back to Kibera. We also bought a special paint, called ‘puffy paint’ that literally puffs up after you apply it to the t-shirt to get a 3D effect. A percentage of

the funds we raise selling these t-shirts will go to the specific artists who made them, and the rest will go to keep the group solvent (Maina 2010).

On occasion, one Maasai Mbili artist will get a commission that comes with the canvas and paints, as when Wycliffe ‘Wiki’ Opondo was asked by a Peace Corps volunteer to paint a cityscape of Kisumu, the capital of Nyanza Province in Western Kenya. But other members of M2 seem genuinely pleased at the success of any one of their members. “There is enough of a family feeling among us that we take pride in each other’s success,” said Solo 7. To illustrate the overriding attitude of the group, one of their members had a family matter to attend to at his rural home in Western Kenya. Edcat Mukeshi had been out of Nairobi and out of telephone contact for more than a month. But in the interim, several prospective patrons had seen his work at the annual International School of Kenya (ISK) Art Show, and wanted to buy more of his work. So Gomba and Solo 7 took it upon themselves to board a bus for Edcat’s home 24 hours away in order to get him back to the business at hand. “I didn’t want him to lose these sales. At the same time, he has been gone longer than expected so we wanted to make sure he was okay,” Gomba said.

*Point three: Skills Training*

None of the Maasai Mbili artists were trained in art schools, but they have “made do’ by picking up skills in painting and drawing and even sign writing along the way. As Gomba put it:

Sign writing may look easy, which is why there is so much competition in that field today. But that is why we [Gomba and Kota] decided we had to be different, not only in our style of dress, but also in the creativity we put into our signs. That is what got us most of our business (Otieno 2009).

Neither Kota nor Gomba had been to school to study sign writing, but both had taken basic art classes in primary school and were spotted and identified as the ‘class artist’ early on in their lives. Gomba was the more experienced of the two from the outset, but once they moved into their rickety studio space behind the bar, both of their unconventional styles attracted eccentric followers who were keen to stand out from the crowd just as much as Gomba and Kota did. “We turned nobody away if they wanted to come work with us,” said Gomba who welcomed the first female to join the group in 2009. “Caroline’s a student so we don’t see her much but we consider her one of us,” said Ashif.

Maasai Mbili has almost a guild-like atmosphere to it. Painting is a full time passion and preoccupation for practically all the members of M2. “We may not all be painting at the same time, but painting goes on practically 24 hours a day here,” said Mbuthia, who only joined M2 in early 2008, after the post-election violence rocked the country following the controversial re-election on December 27, 2007, of the incumbent President Mwai Kibaki. As he explained to me:

I came here after I read the [*Daily Nation*] newspaper article about ‘The Museum of Ruin’ that Maasai Mbili artists created out of the remains left after the riots in Kibera that brought Kenya to the brink of civil war. I had given up on ‘art for art’s sake,’ and almost had given up on art altogether, when I saw the way they were using art constructively, and I realized I wanted to join them (Maina 2010).

But if Mbuthia claims M2 has renewed his faith in the power of the imagination and art to play a constructive role in society, according to Kota, it was Mbuthia who played an important role in his own artistic career.



Mbuthia was still an active member of the Kuona Trust at the time (2002), and somehow we got hooked into having a (skills training) workshop conducted by him. It was from that workshop that I learned about ‘mixed media’ for the first time and discovered that I could use all kinds of things to make my art, which I have done ever since! Not only that, he told us to stop thinking we could only paint what we could see with our eyes. We had to start seeing with our minds and imagining all kinds of things; it could be fantasy, it would be a dream, it could be a wish for the future, but he said none of those things are off limits. He told us to open our minds, and paint from that perspective.

It wasn’t long after that workshop that Kota shifted from M2 to Kuona Trust. “It wasn’t that I was unhappy with Maasai Mbili,” Kota said. “It was just that Gomba had been roommates but then he got married, and I had to move. So that’s when I left. But we are still on good terms.”

#### *Point Four: Marketing*

The best marketing moment for Maasai Mbili came soon after the horrific post-election violence that hit Kenya right after the contested re-election on December 27, 2007 of President Mwai Kibaki. Allegations of vote rigging on both sides sent the country into a violent tailspin and brought Kenya to the brink of civil war. Kibera saw some of the most damaging violence, and Maasai Mbili artists went to one of the burnt-out sites where only ashes and blackened bits of *mabati* (corrugated iron) remained. There the artists went to work painting the remains in bright colors, calling the site “The Museum of Ruin.” The press came out in droves as people were hungry for a positive

interpretation of the violence. One M2 artist, Solomon Muyundo, alias Solo 7, branded the site with his trademark: “Peace No War Here” and Maasai Mbili have been visited by both local and global press ever since.

One other important marketing moment for M2 is when they discovered they were about to be thrown out of their present site unless they came up with KSh.160,000 (approximately \$2,300) to buy the place. Otherwise, the owner wanted to tear the site down. For the first time, M2 artists went out of their way to consciously and dramatically expand their local art world by asking for exhibition space at places where up-market clientele were conspicuous. This would mainly be high priced restaurants, such as *Le Rustique*, The Talisman, The Race Course Restaurant, Café des Arts and even the Karen Coffee Garden. This has been the strategy of increasing numbers of *jua kali* artists who have become disillusioned by the commercial galleries which rarely seem interested in exhibiting all of their art. According to Gomba:

We were successful in raising KSh100,000 but we were still short KSh60,000, when we got to exhibit our art at Le Rustique in Westlands. At the opening of the exhibition, I told our story and how we were still short. A man came up and handed me KSh60,000 on the spot! I was amazed, but now Anthony Athaide is our friend for life.(Otieno 2009)

As for Athaide, a Kenyan—Indian art collector who made his fortune doing business in Kenya’s sugar industry and spends half his time in the Channel Islands, the other half in Kenya, he is happy to be supportive of *jua kali* artists like those at Maasai Mbili. As he told me:

My feeling is that contemporary Kenyan art is in the middle of a renaissance. It may take the global art world a few more years to figure this out, but when they do, the price of Kenyan art will skyrocket, and I’m banking on it. (Athaide 2009)

Several *jua kali* artists have told me Athaide is quietly collecting hundreds of paintings and sculptures by Kenyan artists with a view to opening a new art gallery that ideally will replicate the success that Ruth Schaffner achieved in the 1980s and 1990s when she owned Gallery Watatu. Athaide did not confirm or deny this rumor. However, in March 2010 he gave a talk at RaMoMA Museum on the topic of “Collecting Kenyan Art”. The audience had been specifically selected locals, both local and expatriate, who are known collectors of contemporary African art.

### *Matatu* Art

#### *Point One: Space*

Compared to the other indigenous *jua kali* art networks discussed above, *matatu* art is a very different phenomenon. For one thing, *matatu* art isn't situated at any one site. Granted there are several different spaces where it is created by guilds of *jua kali* apprentices working under one master *matatu* artist, such as Chalo Muia who is based at the Double M (MM) Bus Terminal in Komorock on the far East side of Nairobi. But *matatu* art streams and flows all over the streets of Nairobi, starting around 5am running up until midnight, and in some areas of the city, up until the wee hours of the morning. Described by some as a ‘mobile art museum’ or an ‘art gallery on wheels’, the *matatu* itself has been a fixture of urban African life since Kenyan Independence when the Nissan mini-vans (also known as PSVs or public service vehicles) acquired the name *matatu* from the fact that fares cost three (*tatu* in Kiswahili)



**Figure 51. Every *matatu* is named and painted differently. *Mischief* was spray painted by Chalo Muia**

shillings. They cost quite a bit more today, although they operate on a sliding fare scale depending on which route one travels because from the beginning, *matatus* have served low- and middle income Kenyans. Unfortunately, today the fares have shot up to KSh50 on average, due to a number of factors besides inflation and the price of gas (such as extortion by both police and the local gang known as *Mungiki*), so that many poor Kenyans find *matatus* unaffordable. Nonetheless, among young people especially, *matatus* are extremely popular. Partly it is due to the art which covers the interiors as well as the exteriors with a wide variety of signs, symbols, stickers and portraits of popular figures ranging from politicians such as Barack Obama to Che Guevara to Osama bin Laden and Saddam Hussein to sports stars such as Tiger Woods and in the 90s Michael Jordan to African American hip hop stars such as Ludacris, 50 Cent, Usher, Beyonce and Lil Wayne. According to Gacheru Karanja, Deputy Principal at the Buru Buru Institute of Fine Art (BIFA), the aesthetics of *matatu* art make a difference to the profit margins that *matatu* owners enjoy:

And this is something that they have discovered over time: Teenagers especially will wait at a *matatu* stop until their favorite *matatu* shows up. They will even pay more to ride in a well-decorated *matatu*. This is one reason why *matatu* owners are constantly taking their vehicles in for makeovers and touch-ups. It's also why some of my graduates [from BIFA] are becoming *matatu* artists. (Karanja 2009)

One of the busiest *matatu* “makeover artists” in Kenya is Chalo Muia, who after working almost 20 years in the field won “*Matatu* Artist of the Year” for 2010, awarded by the Ministry of Transportation. According to Chalo, the art form didn't exist before the 1991 Gulf War when the “founding father” of *matatu* art Hassan Mohammed painted a portrait of Saddam Hussein on the side of one PSV mini-van. The design proved to be

so popular among the public that Chalo, who was working as a *jua kali* sign writer at the time, followed in Hassan's footsteps. And since then, hundreds, if not thousands of young Kenyan men (mostly school leavers with few other job prospects in sight) have tried the same path with varying degrees of success.

The space where Chalo creates most of his *matatu* art is an airplane hanger-like building, where he works with his team on mostly second-hand vehicles, either *matatus* (14 seater Nissans) or *manyangas* (25 seaters). Chalo works there rent-free since his paint jobs attract customers to the MM Bus Company. Sometimes he has as many as 15 young apprentices working with him at a time. Some are learning how to decorate *matatu* interiors which are filled with elaborate iconography, featuring laminated, adhesive—backed 'sticker' portraits. Other apprentices are learning how to use spray paint and construct popular designs that are not only professional looking but attractive to young, urban popular taste. Bourdieu writes at length about 'taste' in his classic text, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*, particularly about the way "taste always trickles down from the ruling classes to the masses." But he doesn't have much to say about 'street fashion', which is what *matatu* art could be called. Street fashion in Nairobi, according to *matatu* scholar Mbugua wa Mungai, very much influenced by what he calls '*matatu* culture', which he claimed is steeped in hip hop culture, mixed in hybridic style local street culture including signs spelt out in *Sheng*, or Kiswahili slang. Chalo says his designs are drawn from the world of sports and politics as well as African American hip hop. But when I went to see him, he was making over a *manyanga* to look like a space ship from Star Trek that might be traveling in outer space. He says his *matatu* designs

mainly travel on the most popular bus route. The *matatu* business itself is highly competitive, he says, so his art work is equally sought after since it has been proven to improve *matatu* revenues. Chalo admits his *matatu* art is rarely seen in elite suburbs of Nairobi, such as Muthaiga or Karen, since most people have private vehicles and the hired help who need public means of transport offer a less lucrative market to *matatu* owners. But apart from places where public transport is not needed, *matatu* art is everywhere in Nairobi.

During the Moi era (from 1978-2002), the *matatu* business was one sector in which small businessmen and women struggled to get into because it was quick cash and less subject to the constraints that the Moi government placed on most local entrepreneurs. But since Moi left power, a new crop of politicians have sought to interfere with the *matatu* business. Politicians like the former Minister of Transportation John Muchuki were admired by some Kenyans for compelling *matatus* to be law abiding, to obtain seat belts, follow speed limits and reduce the sound volume on vehicles. The public appreciated this aspect of what are now called “Michuki’s rules.” However, Michuki tried to quash *matatu* art by passing a rule that *matatus* only use two colors: white with a yellow ribbon around the van to indicate it was for public transportation.

“There was no way he was going to succeed in curtailing *matatu* art for long,” said Dr. Joyce Nyairo, the Ford Foundation Regional Manager in charge of Communications, Media and Culture who succeeded Rob Burnet.

For a few months, *matatus* obeyed Michuki’s rule, but you just get on a *matatu* heading to Eastleigh [a thriving Somali suburb of Nairobi visited by relatively few

Kenya police] and you will see *matatus* that are highly decorated. Michuki didn't hold that position for long, and once he was moved to another ministry, *matatu* art came back on the streets in full force. (Nyairo 2009)

But today *matatus* are in competition with city buses that are owned by local politicians who get rules implemented to keep *matatus* out of the city center, according a leading local journalist, Peter Kimani, Assistant Managing Editor at *The East African Standard*,

The politicians claim they want to reduce traffic congestion by letting the buses into the city center and keeping the *matatus* out. But the traffic jams are as bad as ever, and it is the public that is inconvenienced by *matatus* being kept outside the heart of town. (Kimani 2010)

So while the city streets of Nairobi are contested terrain, the locations where *matatu* art is actually made is less so since MM is not the only bus company where *matatu* art is produced. According to Willie Ndegwa, a *jua kali* artist currently based at The GoDown but previously apprenticed with another *matatu* artist, *matatu* art is being created inside all the bus companies. "It just happens that Chalo is the best."

#### *Point Two: Art Supplies*

Art supplies, especially spray paint, stencils, and iconic stickers, are plentiful at the sites where *matatu* art is conceived, such as at the MM warehouse and several other vehicle assembly plants in the city's Industrial Area. And since the 1990s, there is no shortage of vehicles needing a new paint job, a make over or just a touch up. But because the materials are relatively costly and the work itself requires a good deal of technical as well as artistic skill, apprentices tend not to get their hands on most of the materials until they spend time proving themselves and doing what William Wambugu calls "grunt work." A former apprentice himself, Wambugu said he got tired of just watching and not

getting to paint himself. Nonetheless, *matatu* art masters like Chalo Muia are willing to work with multiple apprentices at a time. “The point is—I run a business here called No Limits, Inc. so apprentices can learn a lot by watching, but only artists who have been with me for some time are free to use the more costly materials like the spray paints,” Chalo said.

### *Point Three: Skills Training*

Students come from all over Kenya to apprentice with Chalo and other master *matatu* artists, such as Hassan and Muyuri, who Chalo claims are the co-founders of the genre. “The unemployment rate in Kenya is so high, I am never at a loss for apprentices and helpers,” says Chalo who doesn’t turn anyone away, and because the bulk of his work is touching up and making over second hand vehicles, he is never without work to do. One trick that Chalo finds hard to convey to his apprentices is explaining how he comes up with the topical themes that he covers his *matatus* with. “Sometimes I get ideas from local and global sports events; sometimes pop culture and often I pick up (African American) hip hop magazines, like *XXL*. That’s how you’ll see portraits of Lil Wayne and Beyonce on certain *matatus*.”

Chalo’s designs have particular appeal among urban youth who are partial to African American hip hop culture, which may partially explain why he won the first “Matatu Artist” prize ever awarded by a government ministry.

“I’m really proud of the award but now I have apprentices coming to me who are graduates of BIFA and even a few from Kenyatta University,” said Chalo, whose life work was made into a documentary film by a German television company early in 2010



following several stories on *matatu* art that featured in the local media. Recognizing that he is training mostly young men to become competitors in the field, Chalo said he has no problem with that prospect. However, he has put a patent on his art and incorporated as No Limits, Inc. “Anyone who is interested can tell the difference between my work and anyone else’s,” said Chalo confidently.

#### *Point Four: Marketing*

Being a form of public art, *matatu* art essentially markets itself. And since he began designing *matatu* art in the early 1990s, Chalo has never been without work. He admits that since the Recession of late 2008, his business has slowed down dramatically. He is doing many more ‘makeovers’ of second-hand *matatus* and *manyangas* than painting brand new vehicles for the first time. But actually, from the beginning the majority of Chalo’s jobs have been makeovers, helping owners recycle their older vehicles. “Frankly, passengers don’t want to travel in a shabby bus. They are much more likely to jump into a newly painted *matatu*, even if it’s a few years older, than a *matatu* with a paint job that’s peeling and doesn’t have images that are striking and relevant to the times,” Chalo said.

“Young people especially have gotten very fussy about the *matatus* they take. They have to have the coolest music as well as the most striking, shiny and preferably hip hop art,” said Peter Koge, a reporter with *Autozine*, a popular online magazine.

Ultimately, says *matatu* scholar Mbugua wa Mungai, it is the youth that constitute the biggest market for *matatu* art, but in their case, what’s important is that the *matatus*

they board have a “trendy” and “cosmopolitan look” as well as a good sound system and music to match the art.

Trendy looks are meant to attract young customers to board *matatu* as much as they mark one’s being ‘compliant’ with the times. As Samper (2002), following Bourdieu (1984) observes, the investment in ‘cosmopolitan looks’ by these youth usually translates handsomely into cultural capital, particularly if it is combined with (the conductors having) a good command of Sheng. (Wa Mungai 2007: 38)

So in a sense, *matatu* art reflects the epitome of *jua kali* ingenuity in so far as it takes the medium at hand, which is the mini-van and transforms the vehicle itself into mobile *bricolage* that not only illustrates the hybridic power of imagination among the artists; it also confirms that taste is not only a quality reserved for the upper class. *Matatu* art is consumed by ordinary Kenyans from all social sectors, except for the ruling elite who have no time or inclination to rub shoulders with local *wananchi*, meaning the public at large.

#### *The Diamond and Four Other Art Networks*

In the following section I examine four other art networks applying my *jua kali* cultural diamond to appraise the kinds of relationships that exist between *jua kali* artists and the four, namely Gallery Watatu, Kuona Trust, RaMoMA Museum and the GoDown Art Center. The main distinction between the two sets of art networks is that these four were originally established by expatriates. A number of *jua kali* artists argue that the more important distinction between them is economic, noting that the vast majority of foreign donor funding funneled into Kenya is controlled by expatriate-established institutions, leading *jua kali* artists to ask: who really controls Kenyan culture? Because

the question itself arouses such strong emotions, the issue of donor funding is the most contested topic of all in the Nairobi art world and is discussed at the end of this chapter.

### Gallery Watatu

#### *Point One: Space*

From its beginnings in 1969 Gallery Watatu was never designed to offer studio space to any artist, not even to one of the gallery's three founder artists, Robin Anderson, David Hart or Jony Waite. "Our aim from the outset was to create a space for each of us to exhibit and sell our art work," said Jony Waite who at 70 is still creating massive murals for Five Star hotels all over East Africa. Interviewed in Nairobi where she is based when she is not making murals in other parts of East Africa, the Guam—born American said,

Both Robin and I were dissatisfied with the [expatriate] gallery scene after Independence. The New Stanley [Hotel] Gallery was a bore and the Sorsbie Gallery was in Muthaiga, whereas we wanted to be in town; so we decided to open our own space in the city center, upstairs from Sherri Hunt's Studio 68. (Waite 2010)

Over the years, Watatu would occasionally feature the art work of other expatriate artists such as Thelma Sanders, Timothy Brooke, Heidi Lang and Keith Money. But for the most part, it stayed true to its initial aim of exhibiting the art work of Anderson and Waite. The exceptions included exhibiting the art works of Makerere University-trained artists Louis Mwaniki in 1970 and Theresa Musoke in 1977 as well as the Olympic award winning *jua kali* artist Ancent Soi in 1976.

The situation changed dramatically in 1980 after Anderson and Hart sold their shares, and Waite had to find new partners. She initially teamed up with an American

Sherry Saitoti and the Kenya-born Briton Rhodia Mann, who claims she “Africanized the gallery” in 1982” when she organized a group exhibition featuring five African artists, namely Jak Katarikawe, Charles Sekano, Etale Sukuro, Ancent Soi, and Joel Oswaggo. But the troika of owners didn’t work out well, so Waite was again left with all three sets of shares in 1985 when the German-American art gallery owner and art dealer from California Ruth Schaffner showed up and offered to buy the gallery outright, which she did.

The era of Ruth Schaffner’s ownership of Gallery Watatu (1985-1996) is a contested period of contemporary Kenyan art history. On the one hand, Ruth was fully attuned to the global art market, including the dominant view of “tribal” or “primitive” African art, which was the only kind of art that she aggressively promoted during her tenure at Watatu. It was on this basis that she actively encouraged unschooled or so-called self-taught Kenyan artists and was even nicknamed “Mama Ruth” for the way she cared for and cultivated certain fledgling talents, such as Sane Wadu, Meek Gichugu, Kivuthi Mbuno and Jak Katarikawe. On the other hand, Ruth was just as fiercely disliked by African artists with formal training, since she was quick to dismiss them for being “too Westernized” and tainted by European traditions. One of Ruth’s fiercest critics was Etale Sukuro, a *jua kali* artist who has a literature degree from University of Dar es Salaam, and who was one of the few Africans who exhibited at Gallery Watatu in the early 1980s before Schaffner took over and effectively banned all African artists with a shred of academic background.

We detested Ruth for her advocacy of such a narrow interpretation of African art. By her promoting ‘the primitive other’, she held back the cause of contemporary

Kenyan art; contrary to what all her supporters claim, she did us a major disservice by only promoting the unschooled artists who she claimed were the only representatives of Kenyan art which they were not. (Sukuro 2010)

Ironically, it was towards the end of her life that Ruth began promoting educated Kenyans such as Zachariah Mbutha and Jackson Wanjau, the first born son of Samwel. She also came to recognize the overwhelming need that many *jua kali* artists had for a space wherein to work. She had already picked out the piece of land she intended to buy to build a workshop for local artists, according to Ngecha-based artist Wanyu Brush. She had even gone fundraising in California for the Ngecha Artists Association when she learned that her employee and former protégé had taken her project proposal, found a work site at the Nairobi National Museum and was about to launch his own art organization while she was away. Ruth fired Rob Burnet via Fax according to several eye-witnesses, including artists Theresa Musoke and Simon Muriithi. But that didn't stop him from launching Kuona Trust, using her innovative ideas. Ruth passed on from a heart attack less than a year later, but it was not before she came to see the pressing need that *jua kali* artists had for a communal space where they could create works of art as well as their own art world. Her vision and plan was to build that space in Ngecha for the scores of artists who came regularly to Watatu from that one village. "Ruth realized there was something very special about Ngecha, which is sort of like the Hollywood of Kenya: so many talented artists come from there," said Wanyu Brush, who in 2009 was awarded a commendation from the Kenya Government for his role promoting Kenyan visual art. It was the first of its kind. Among the most well known Ngecha artists are the original six members of the Ngecha Artists Association: Sane Wadu, King Dodge Kang'oroti, Chain

Muhandi, Sebastian Kiarie, Wanyu Brush, and Meek Gichugu as well as many more.

Wanyu Brush believes there would have many more artists from Ngecha if Ruth had fulfilled her plan, but Brush felt the same way as Ruth's husband Adama Diawara does.

He told me:

Ruth died of a broken heart. She was devastated by Rob's betrayal, which she never expected. She had hired him to help her fundraise for the Watatu Foundation and for Ngecha; but instead he went and fundraised for himself. Some of us wondered if she wasn't grooming him to take over Watatu so she could retire. (Diawara 2006)

Diawara is especially bitter about Burnet, because he believes the only way the Briton got a foothold in Kenya was by Ruth's insistence that her husband use his diplomatic connections, as the Deputy Counsel with the Embassy of the Ivory Coast, to get him a hard-to-get work permit, which Diawara did. But it was not only Brush and Diawara who were devastated by the demise of Ruth Schaffner. According to the Thika-based artist Peter Ngugi, several Kenyan artists stopped painting altogether after her death.

Ruth was "Mama Ruth" to many local artists, and a few of them disappeared from the art scene altogether after she died. She had provided a space where (*jua kali*) artists could come and be assured that they'd be welcomed; they'd also be able to go back home with a bit of cash in their pockets. So when they no longer had her to count on, some artists just gave up, and went to do something else, who knows what? Rumor has it, one [Thika-based artist] went mad and another drank himself to death after Ruth passed on. (Ngugi 2009)

The other person who seriously resented the way he believed that Ruth had been cheated by Burnet is Marc van Rampelberg, a Belgian custom cabinet maker who had worked closely with Ruth for the last five years of her life from around 1991 to 1996.

Ruth had her doubts about Rob from the beginning but she thought he could be useful to her since he could write very well and he was fast in preparing things

like press releases, which she thought she needed. But Ruth got a computer in 1994 and asked Rob to help her transfer all her (transnational) contacts off her Rolodex onto the computer. Those are the contacts he used to build Kuona Trust. (Van Rampelberg 2009)

Van Rampelberg admits he had hoped to carry on Ruth's life work after she died.

“However, that wasn't possible since Adama didn't want to work with me; nor did he want to sell Gallery Watatu to anyone.” So today, the Gallery's future is up in the air.

Most local artists, be they *jua kali* or expatriate, see it as a shell of what it once was. Its doors are still open, but up until the end of 2010 when Osei Kofi took over the Gallery, there were no monthly Artists Days, no regular public exhibitions, and very little traffic from either tourists or locals, despite its strategic location, squarely in the center of Nairobi's commercial sector, in between the city's three leading five star hotels: the Nairobi Hilton, the Stanley (formerly The New Stanley) and the 680 Hotel.

#### *Point Two: Art Supplies*

In the Triangle Arts Trust catalogue (2007: 106), Burnet writes that Ruth Schaffner always had “a sharp eye” for making a profit. That may have been true, but Ruth was also a wise investor in human resources as was apparent in the way she started up and conducted her monthly Artists' Days. For Ruth didn't just invite local artists to bring in their work for her to view. She often bought it (usually for a pittance), and when she spotted a shred of talent, she would offer artistic advice as well as hand out basic art materials or vouchers for artists to go and collect art supplies for themselves. Many *jua kali* artists that I interviewed had stories to share about the generosity of Schaffner. She gave Shine Tani his first 200 shillings and some good advice despite not buying his first works of art. She bought the first scrap metal crocodile Harrison Mburu ever sold. She

also gave him metal cutters to make his work easier. She also gave Peter Mburu several tubes of paint when he arrived at Watatu with his collage made from porcupine needles, the only art materials he could afford. Stories of Schaffner's handouts spread like wildfire throughout the home villages of Sane Wadu and Shine Tani, leading to a stampede of would-be painters, particularly from Ngecha where the number was nearly a hundred at last count by the British art collector Anthony Athaide

*Point Three: Skills Training*

Ruth Schaffner didn't start organizing formal workshops for local *jua kali* artists until 1991 when she first asked Etale Sukuro to lead a painting workshop for two dozen Kenyans, which he did. Among them was Shine Tani who was shown the basics of stretching canvas and mixing paints and other painterly conventions, which he immediately took back home to Banana Hill and shared them with the friends and relations who became the backbone of Banana Hill Art Studio. But even before Ruth began organizing workshops, she was mentoring practically every *jua kali* artist who walked into Gallery Watatu. Rather than dismiss them outright, she mostly gave them ideas, recommendations and materials to go home and experiment with. She also encouraged them to come back after one month's time to attend the next Artists' Day. Granted she preferred working with unschooled artists who would invariably produce paintings predictably cast as 'primitive' as per Sane Wadu's and Wanyu Brush, but they produced what she wanted, and Ruth proceeded to promote and sell their art abroad on the global art market.



*Point Four: Marketing*

However much local artists disliked the way Ruth Schaffner marketed Kenyan art as being “primitive” as per the paintings of Sane Wadu “naïve,” the best example being the art of Jak Katarikawe it is debatable whether she can be blamed for shutting out possibilities for polished Kenyan artists to break new ground on the global art scene. Certainly, Schaffner had an agenda and she knew what she was doing and how to market Kenyan art both locally and globally, something which frankly had never been done so aggressively before or since. “There will never be another Ruth, not in 200 years,” moaned Wanyu Brush, who still believes that if Burnet hadn’t started up Kuona Trust behind Ruth’s back, the Ngecha Artists Association would be alive and well today, an artists’ studio would have been built in Ngecha village where Ruth was convinced the painterly talent was indigenous to that little town. Ruth definitely put two Kenyan-based artists on the global art market ‘map’, namely Wadu and Katarikawe, both of whom are among the few featured in recent coffee table-top sized glossy collections, one by the British Museum curator Chris Spring entitled *‘Angaza Afrika: African Art Now (2008)*, another by Nigerian curators Okwui Enwezor and Chika Okeke-Agulu entitled *Contemporary African Art since 1980 (2009)*. The one book that exposed many more of the *jua kali* artists that Ruth worked with is by a fellow German, the curator of the Frankfurt Folk Art Museum, Johanna Agthe. Her *Wegzeichen/Signs: Art from East Africa 1974-1989 (1990)* does a far better job than either Spring or Enwezor in capturing the renaissance spirit that Ruth Schaffner helped to fuel.

The one thing Ruth did not do was collect donor money. In the spirit of *jua kali*, she financed her promotion of *jua kali* artists with her own capital. And while it is understood that she came into a substantial inheritance with the demise of husband number five, Mr. Schaffner, she chose to plow a significant percentage of those funds into the development of *jua kali* artists and art networks between 1985 and 1996. In this regard, she contributed significantly to the transformation of contemporary Kenyan art, not just financially, but socially and politically as well. As Morris Amboso put it, “Ruth did more to ‘internationalize’ (or transnationalize) Kenyan art than anybody, before or since.” It is a contested perspective but one that will be debated for some time to come.

#### Kuona Trust

##### *Point One: Space*

Established in 1995 in a big old colonial house at the back of Nairobi National Museum, Kuona Trust was the brainchild, neither of Rob Burnet nor of Ruth Schaffner, according to Wendy Karmali, the curator of the Gallery of Contemporary East African Art at the Museum.

Karmali claims she deserves the credit for discovering the old unused building, cleaning it up and then inviting

Burnet to come start up Watatu Foundation artists workshops using the building for free. “I envisioned

working together with Rob, since the artists could create the art during workshops at Kuona and then bring it straight up to the Gallery for exhibitions and sales, but it didn’t work out that way,” said Karmali who was apparently sidelined by Burnet once he got



**Figure 52. *Jua Kali* sign for Kuona Trust at Hurlingham**

her help in negotiating with Museum administrators to secure usage of the building for free. After that, Kuona Trust was his “baby” and neither Ruth nor Wendy was going to get in the way of his program.

“We believe strongly that Rob used us Kenyan artists as stepping stones to get where he wanted to go,” said Wanjohi Nyamu who is one of several local *jua kali* artists that spent time at Kuona Trust and is highly critical of what he saw as Rob’s self-serving pseudo-philanthropy. Nyamu claims he saw firsthand how Rob used Ruth’s ideas, Wendy’s free Museum space and Kenyan artists who Rob claimed Kuona literally “took off the streets” and “rehabilitated” through art. “None of us were street boys (‘chokora’ in Kiswahili), so when we discovered that this was one of the claims Rob made to obtain money for Kuona Trust, we were not happy,” said Peter Mburu, another ex-Kuona artist. Simon Muriithi who was at Kuona from day one witnessed what he felt was one of Rob’s most sophisticated tactics for raising funds ostensibly to develop the talents of up-and-coming Kenyan artists. He noted that:

Every person that stepped foot in the building had to fill a form signing up with Kuona. Most of them never came back, but Rob kept those forms. That is how he could claim, when he went to Ford Foundation (and other donors), that he had helped something like 1000 artists (Mburu 2009)

The website actually reads Kuona has “worked with over 1500 artists giving them skills and opportunities to advance themselves whilst increasing the profile and role of the visual arts in Kenya.” “Out of all the people that walked through Kuona’s door, I’d say he helped maybe ten, fifteen at the most,” Muriithi added. That is approximately the same number I heard from other artists who associated with Kuona Trust, including Mbuthia Maina, who speaks highly of Rob.

Rob helped ten people become great contemporary Kenyan artists, including me. I'd say they include Peterson Kamwathi, Peter Elungat, Michael Soi, Richard Kimathi, Jimnah Kimani, Patrick Mukabi, Justus Kyalo, Simon Muriithi, Anthony Okello and me. (Maina 2010)

When W.E.B. Du Bois wrote his controversial essay “The Talented Tenth” in 1903, he antagonized white liberals as well as Blacks who thought he was being elitist by advocating that African American education should be grounded in the classics and not be merely technical or vocational. When Kenyan *jua kali* artists criticized Rob Burnet for cultivating a “talented ten,” they didn’t see it as elitist so much as being exploitative. Kuona artists like David Mwaniki and Michael Wafula claim Rob focused on upgrading the few – what Mbuthia Maina called a “talented ten”—in order to use them to showcase the success of Kuona Trust and to raise more money in the process. As Mwaniki put it:

Many artists who were based at Kuona frankly resented the fact that Rob had his favorites — call them loyalists if you like [the name given to Africans loyal to the British colonizer during the Mau Mau war]. They were the ones he always sent whenever he heard about an international artists’ residency or a workshop overseas. (Mwaniki 2010)

Mwaniki concedes that he is grateful for *jua kali* space at Kuona. He literally works, not inside a studio or in one of metal containers donated by Oxfam or friends from Triangle Trust, but rather outside literally under the hot sun, (*jua kali*) along side several other sculptors, such as Anthony Wanjau, son of Samwel, Dennis Muraguri, Cyrus Ng’ang’a, Kepha Mosoti, Gakunju Kaigwa, and one-armed Kevin Oduor who worked on the Dedan Kimathi sculpture with faculty from Kenyatta University’s Fine Art Department. But Mwaniki is also among those who believe Rob should have run Kuona more democratically if he really cared “to advance the skills and opportunities of artists” as he claimed in black and white on Kuona’s website. Artists like Nyamu and Mburu

question whether helping Kenyan artists was ever Rob's motive at any time. "It looked good on paper and online, but we learned pretty fast that Rob was only out to advance himself," Nyamu said.

Clearly, 1500 people didn't find space at the Kuona house to develop their artistic skills. But certainly, when Kuona started up in 1995, it was the *free* studio space that attracted scores of aspiring artists to come to work there. It is also true that shortage of interior space at the museum house is what compelled a few of the sculptors to shift from inside to out doors to start working *jua kali* style from the front lawn.

"Rob had already moved on to Ford Foundation by the time we moved outside. He had hand picked his successor Judy Ogana before he left, but we knew he was still running the show behind the scenes as chairman of the Kuona Board," claimed Wanjohi Nyamu. To analyze what transpired at Kuona Trust from the artists' point of view, Erving Goffman's dramaturgical theory may be useful. What are particularly relevant are Goffman's concepts of front stage and back stage performances, since the bright university-educated Kenyan woman Judy Ogana performed front stage at Kuona, from 2000 to 2004, projecting the image that the Trust was truly a Kenyan-run art network. Meanwhile, to the *jua kali* artists working on the ground at Kuona Trust, she was a useful front woman who was beholden to Burnet for not just giving her a job; he also got her a scholarship to study art institutional management in Sweden before she took up the position he left to her when he joined Ford Foundation. It was from his seat as Ford's Regional Director for Communication, Media and Culture that Burnet would now work backstage to assist Ogana in managing Kuona Trust. In an interview I had with him in

April 2010, Burnet voluntarily said, “People claim that I ran Kuona Trust after I left, but that just wasn’t true.” What does seem clear from his deliberately training Ogana more than a year before he left Kuona is that he might have already had the job at Ford in his sights long before the public would know. But his style of behind the scenes strategic planning could also serve to confirm the point that Nyamu makes, which is that Rob Burnet was always a man on the move, using Kenyan artists as his means to get where he wanted to go. Nyamu was living upcountry in Nyeri when he first read about Kuona Trust in *The Daily Nation* and decided he wanted to become an artist with the help the Trust claimed in print it offered to young Kenyans aspiring to learn to sculpt and/or paint.

I was very idealistic when I arrived in Nairobi, and took advantage of all the workshops Kuona ran, including a welding one, which I got really excited about. But there wasn’t room inside the building to make the kind of sculptures I wanted to, so I and others went outside. Judy didn’t like it for some reason. I think she was jealous because we attracted so many tourists who then bought a lot of our work. She tried to shut us down by switching off the electricity so our welding machines wouldn’t work. That’s when Rob called us to his Ford office and claimed he wanted to help us sort out the problem. That’s when all hell broke loose. (Nyamu 2009)

It was 2004 and Nyamu went to the Ford offices with Peter “Salim” Mburu. It was while they were waiting to speak to Rob that they started reading Ford brochures, including one in which Mburu saw himself on the cover working outside Kuona Trust. “Inside (the brochure) we were described as rehabilitated ‘*chokora*’ or parking boys (street urchins) that Kuona Trust had ‘saved’. That did not sit well with us.” Not only did they find the description humiliating; they said they felt their misrepresentation was duplicitous and exploitative. After that, the artists went onto the Ford website and found

that Ford had given Kuona Trust hundreds of thousands of dollars in that year alone. But where did it go, they wanted to know.

“We demanded an accounting of these funds, but rather than get it, we were told to get off the premises,” said Patricia Njeri, who chose to protest the artists’ eviction by chaining herself to a tree at the front of the Museum. The protest didn’t work; Kuona at the Museum was shut down and all the so-called “trouble makers” (Judy Ogana’s term) had to find new spaces to work, including Mamba Village and Kilele Art Studio. In an interview with Ogana in mid-2009, she said Kuona was shut down because the Museum was about to start its European Union—funded renovations. Meanwhile, Burnet had set up a second Ford—funded Kenyan arts center called The GoDown Art Center. It was there that Ogana offered space to all the non-“troublemaker” artists, such as Jimnah Kimani, Maggie Otieno, and the so-called “talented ten.” Ogana, who was pregnant at the time, went on maternity leave, and was quietly replaced by a staff member of Triangle



**Figure 53. Kuona resident artists at Hurlingham**

those who have a lockable self-contained studio which often serves as both a work site and showcase for visitors who come to see and potentially buy from the artists. Included in this latter group are Peterson Kamwathi, Yassir Ali, and Sam Hopkins among others.

Arts Trust, Danda Jaroljmek. By early 2009, Kuona moved out of The GoDown to a suburban site in Hurlingham where between 20 to 25 *jua kali* artists work on a two-acre plot, only now, nothing is free. Artists like Mwaniki, who shares an open yard *jua*

*kali*-style with other artists, pay much less for rent than

*Point Two: Art Supplies*

Kuona Trust claimed at the outset that it would supply aspiring artists with not only space but art supplies, but according to artists like Sam Githui and Simon Muriithi who were there from the early days, artists were initially supplied with materials for a period of possibly two weeks. “After that, we were told that nothing would be provided, apart from space, except when there are training workshops. Otherwise, we had to bring our own materials, which made it difficult,” said Githui who was sign writing during that time. Despite his being a student at the Creative Arts Center in Nairobi, Githui had run out of school fees and had to work as a sign writer to make ends meet. “I had to decide what to do with the little money that I made -- whether to use it for bus fare and art supplies or to pay my tuition at CAC.” Githui chose the latter. Another *jua kali* artist, Henry ‘Boni’ Muhui had an uncle that helped him buy art supplies to paint at Kuona, “but I had to walk for two and a half hours one way every day to get to Kuona from where I stayed, and once my legs got swollen, I had to stop the walk.” The shortage of art supplies is one of the main reasons why Kenyan artists have resorted to creating *bricolage* using everything from tree stumps and building stones to scrap metals and debris from the myriad garbage dumps that are strewn around Nairobi. One brand of *bricolage* that I will write about in chapter 7 is the genre *jua kali* artists call “junk art”.

Ever since those first early workshops given by former Watatu artists, the only art materials provided to Kuona artists came to those few who were invited to attend the Wasanii International Artist Workshop that Kuona organized jointly with the UK-Triangle Arts Trust. But even then, only half of the twenty artists participating in the



workshops were Kenyans. The value of the Wasanii workshops were that they enabled several Kenyans every year to travel abroad, usually with funding from either the British High Commission or Ford Foundation, to pick up transnational experience and exposure to new ideas. The one problem that Kenyan artists identified with the Wasanii workshops is that while Kenyans might have an opportunity to travel outside the country to attend a workshop, once the time came to return home, workshop organizers rarely provided the means by which the artists could get their paintings and sculptures transported with them. Kuona artists who had gone on some of these Wasanii workshops said they discovered they either had to create small works of art, so they could carry them home in their bags, or else if they made something monumental, they were unlikely to ever see it again. One Kuona artist who preferred anonymity said he believed this neglect in providing transportation of artists' works home was intentional:

It is one reason the founder of Triangle Arts Trust has such a large contemporary African art collection. He lends a lot of his collection to the African wing of the British Museum, but I wonder how many of those works he actually bought. (Anonymous 2009)

Not all Kuona artists are so cynical about Sir Robert Loder, co-founder of the Triangle Arts Trust. On the contrary, another Kenyan artist said he actually witnessed Loder paying Africans for their art works at the end of one workshop he attended. But the fact that *jua kali* artists expressed that sort of cynicism seems to reflect a deeper disillusionment with Kuona Trust, which publicly claims that it provides all sorts of services to Kenyan artists, but few services they claim are visible on the ground, apart from the space and camaraderie that they share with their fellow Kenyans.

*Point Three: Skills Training*

The one area in which Kuona Trust has excelled is in training *jua kali* artists in everything from painting and print-making to photography and sculpture in wood or stone. Some of the best workshops that Kenyan artists speak about are the first ones that were held in the late-1990s, which were run when Rob Burnet invited older former Watatu-based artists to share what they knew. All *jua kali* artists who had come to Kuona Trust believing it was a project organized by Ruth Schaffner before she died, the sculptors who conducted workshops were Elijah Ogira and Morris Foit, and the painters were Patrick Mukabi and Francis Kahuri. Out of those workshops came a number of outstanding *jua kali* artists who had never received formal art training before they had attended these workshops. Among the finest are Mbuthia Maina and Peterson Kamwathi, both of whom had only taken an art class in primary school, but who have gone from strength to strength since then. Maina, who has a university degree in Philosophy and Sociology, became a workshop leader himself for a time; meanwhile, Kamwathi has studied and exhibited in Europe and the US since he first joined Kuona in 2000. Both have been to Biennales, Maina in Liverpool, Kamwathi to Dakar, with airfare paid for by the Germans. (Subsequently, Kamwathi's first one-man exhibition in London entitled "A Matter of Record" opened October 2010.) And both artists have been identified among Burnet's "talented ten," meaning Kenyan artists who gotten special privileges from Burnet. But at the same time, the opportunities availed to artists like these has paid off many times over as one can see from a look at their work.

*Point Four: Marketing*

The area where local artists believe that Kuona Trust has let them down most is in marketing, since neither Burnet nor Ogana nor Jaroljmek has had the aptitude that the late Ruth Schaffner had, which was to take Kenyan art abroad and personally put it on the global art market. To this day, both Western and African art critics only write about either Kenyan artists living in the Diaspora, such as Magdelene Odundo and Wangechi Mutu, or artists Schaffner promoted such as Sane Wadu and Jak Katarikawe. Otherwise, *jua kali* artists are quick to complain (as they did during an Art'n'Marketing workshop organized by African Colours in December 2009 as well as at an in-house Artists Only session at Kuona and at two Artists Days held at RaMoMA all held in early 2010) about the dearth of dynamic marketing support coming from the various donor-funded art networks. Several artists specifically target the three Ford-funded art networks, namely Kuona, GoDown and RaMoMA, which they call 'the cartel' and which they claim do virtually nothing to promote their art abroad. Locally, Kuona occasionally mounts an exhibition of artists. In 2010, the Royal Dutch Embassy funded six "conceptual art" exhibitions by Kenyan artists featuring political themes. But again, the organization of these exhibitions was considered by some Kuona-based artists (such as Ciru Kimani) to be undemocratically-organized and favoring the usual few over the majority of Kuona artists who claim they would have liked to contribute artwork to the show curated by Michael Soi on the theme "Art and Graft" which focused on corruption in Kenya.

In fact, Kuona Trust became something of a launching pad in 2010 for *jua kali* artists to network and organize group exhibitions outside the Trust, booking restaurants, hotels and up-market shopping malls like Village Market by themselves. And by their eliminating any middle man, or rather becoming their own middle men and women, they strengthened their own Kuona art network. Interestingly, the master mind behind Kuona artists' marketing their own artwork is Peter Oendo Kenyanya, a Kisii stone sculptor who apprenticed with his uncle Elkana Ong'esa, founder of the Kisii Soapstone Carvers Cooperative Society, a group Ong'esa set up in the 1990s to ensure that Kisii stone art not only reach the global market, but also that the local *jua kali* Kisii sculptors be remunerated equitably and that the bulk of the profits not be lost to the middle men. So however disgruntled *jua kali* artists may be at Kuona, they still find working there to be advantageous.

#### *Artists Surveyed*

In 2010, the Dutch foundation Hivos which has been funding Kuona Trust since 1997 conducted a survey of artists' opinions to elicit feedback on the value of Kuona Trust. Several artists, including Beth Kimwele, Dennis Muraguri and Kepha Mosoti were critical of the questionnaire's design since it didn't include one question about marketing, which they said was their chief complaint about the Trust. But according to Gonda Geets, the Belgian social scientist who designed and administered the questionnaire, the overall consensus was that artists valued two features of the Trust: one, the space itself, which enables them to work comfortably, albeit in *jua kali* style since many of the artists worked outdoors, and two, the sense of community that they find among fellow artists on

the site. Two other major assets that Kuona Trust has are an extensive fine art library featuring 1500 books donated from the Victoria and Albert Museum in London and an internet connection that may be doing more “to advance the skills and opportunities of the artists” than anything else. For while Kuona no longer has funds to run international workshops, according to Danda Jaroljmek, the internet is allowing Kuona artists like Gakunju Kaigwa to search out their own transnational opportunities, such as Kaigwa’s three month artist residency in South Africa, and global marketing prospects of their own.

### *Born Free Lions*

One of the most extraordinary cultural events of 2009 that Kuona Trust helped to organize was the promotion of wildlife awareness and lion conservation engineered by two British-based non-governmental organizations, the Born Free Foundation founded by the two celebrities that played Joy and George Adamson in the original television series, and Wild in Art, a group of innovative artists who came to Kenya to raise millions of dollars in the name of lion conservation. The trick was involving the Kenyan visual artists community as well as the Kenyan corporate community in a project that would produce beautiful works of public art as well as inspire rich mostly Asian Kenyan businessmen to sponsor the art works. How the two British-based NGOs managed to strike up interests among the Kenyan corporate community, which has never before been seen sponsoring African, Asian and European artists all at a go, is still a mystery to me. But it was done with Kuona



**Figure 54. *Born Free* lions were sculpted in fiber glass by Gakunju Kaigwa, then painted by other artists**

providing the launching pad for the whole project, thus ensuring that at least a score of local artists would get involved in the process. More than KSh15 million was raised initially in getting the corporations listed below to sponsor one of fifty fiberglass lions (half of which were fashioned by Gakunju Kaigwa and his team of Kuona-based sculptors); and then, after the lions were decorated by a wide variety of Kenyan artists, the fifty lions were auctioned off in a single night in November 2009. Before the auction, all the lions were put on display as public art in various commercial centers scattered all across Nairobi. Raising awareness about the endangered status of Kenya's lion population was the ostensible motivation for contributing the millions. But as Kenyan artists have never seen this kind of support for indigenous African art before, one can only hope that the support will continue. Both expatriate and indigenous artists got involved; so did school children, kids from the slums, and one London-based professional wildlife artist, David Shepherd, were among those that decorated the fiberglass lions. The only sore point in the entire project came when the Born Free Foundation organizers grew impatient with the Kaigwa team's fiberglass casting efforts, which ran slightly behind schedule. The impatience led to Kaigwa, who had planned on casting all fifty lions, was told to stop at twenty-five. The remaining twenty-five were made by a local Asian businessman who hired commercial artisans to complete the job Kaigwa began. They too delayed and the quality of the work was inferior by comparison, but given that nearly all the Kenyan captains of industry who spent millions supporting the project were fellow Asians, the project left a bittersweet sense among the Africans who felt they had been unjustly treated both artistically and financially. But otherwise, the production of the

fifty fully decorated lions for conservation was an awesome event. The artists involved were each paid KSh20,000, which some considered too little; but most of the artists who produced the work were pleased simply to be associated with the project. Certainly, it was the best marketing exercise that Kuona Trust activated for its artists in 2009. Full details about the so-called “Pride of Kenya” project may be found at [www.prideofkenya.co.ke](http://www.prideofkenya.co.ke).

Members of the Kenyan corporate community who contributed financially to the Born Free Foundation’s “Pride of Africa” project to preserve the life of endangered lions include the following in Table 14:

Table 14: Kenyan Corporate Support of Born Free Foundation Lions

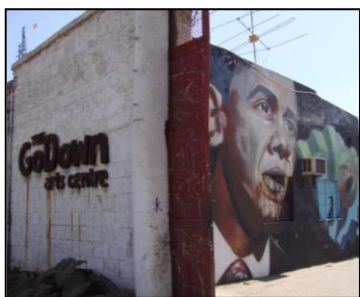
<b>"Pride of Africa" Corporate Sponsors</b>	
Athi River Mining Co.	Manji Foods Industries
Australian Education Consultants	Nation Media Group
Bamburi Cement	Ol Seki Mara Camp
Bidco Oil Refineries Ltd.	Prestige Plaza
Breakfast Cereals Co.	Prime Brands Ltd.
Brookhouse Internat'l Schools	Radar Securities Ltd.
Chandaria Industries Ltd.	Rhino Special Products.
CMC Land Rover Kenya	Rift Valley Railways
East African Breweries	Sai Raj Fiberglass
Equity Bank	Sarit Center
Eveready EA Ltd.	Serena Hotels
Fruit Paradise	Sierra Premier Beer
International School of Kenya	Simba Pamoja Group
Jakarna Wildlife Trust	Spinners and Spinners Ltd.
Kenstra Group	Standard Chartered Bank
Kenton College	Superbrands
Kenya Wildlife Services	Synresins Ltd.
Kenya Commercial Bank	Tononoka Rolling Mills
Kenya Airways	Tusker Mattresses Tuskys
Kenya Association of Manufacturers	Vita Foam
Kenya Data Networks	Wildlife Direct

Kuona Trust	X and R Technologies Ltd.
Mabati Rolling Mills	

### GoDown Art Center

#### *Point One: Space*

Shortly after Rob Burnet shifted from Kuona Trust to the Ford Foundation in 2000, he set out to establish a multi-media cultural center modeled after those he had seen



**Figure 55.** *Obama mural at the GoDown was spray painted by Kevin “Bankslave” Esendi*

through his association with Triangle Arts Trust’s global network of cultural centers. To do it, he brought together a team of Nairobi-based cultural activists including Harsita Waters, Alliance Francaise, Dr. Eric Krystal, Family

Planning Private Sector, who uses puppets to talk to Kenyans about HIV/AIDS, and Joy Mboya, CEO of Fame Kenya, who would eventually become director of The GoDown Art Center, which is also called the Performing and Visual Arts Center Ltd. Responding to Kenyan artists’ overwhelming need for space in which to work, the team found a run-down warehouse in Nairobi’s Industrial Area which with Ford funds they proceeded to renovate and open up to visual artists, dancers, thespians, musicians, puppeteers, and professional middle men like Jimmy Ogonga, former Kuona sculptor who as Nairobi Arts Trust attends global fora on behalf of Kenyan contemporary art. The GoDown took several years to put together but Burnet managed to get the outgoing Ford Foundation president Susan Banisford to buy the GoDown property, something Ford rarely does, so that rent will never be a problem for The GoDown again. Working backstage as board chairman, Burnet managed to get Judy Ogana, the former Kuona director, hired to run the Center, much to the



dismay of many local artists who had struggled with her at Kuona Trust. At the time of her return to work for Rob, Kuona artists were still based at the GoDown, having moved out of the Museum in 2004. Artists like Gakunju Kaigwa explained it was an uncomfortable time when Kuona and The GoDown artists and staffers were both based at the former industrial warehouse, “which is why we were happy to move out in early 2009 to relocate in Hurlingham,” Kaigwa said. It was especially uncomfortable for him because his wife, Jacquie Munene, an interior designer, had been deputy director to Joy Mboya for several years and expected to be picked for the new position. “But Judy waltzed in at the eleventh hour, the night before the application deadline and instantly got the job,” Kaigwa said, citing a kind of nepotism and backstage orchestration by Burnet to get Ogana back into place. “It was one more reason we were glad to get out of that space.” For the *jua kali* artist who never expects to reside in one place permanently, it was no problem to leave The Godown, particularly because relatively little space – just five studios --were dedicated to visual artists. But those artists that remained at The GoDown have maximized the little space they have. For instance, one studio was turned into a communal space in which no less than six artists work on a daily basis. “It’s much cheaper working in this studio. I couldn’t afford having one on my own,” said Willie Ndegwa who, like most of the GoDown artists can be found at the site practically everyday. “We are here everyday, including Christmas and New Years, because we want to work,” said Mary Ogembo, one of the few GoDown artists who has a studio of her own. Meanwhile, Patrick Mukabi has effectively set up an artists guild at his studio since he has several apprentices on hand round the clock who he not only trains; he also has

them keep track of his property while he is away completing commissions or filming the Citizen TV show “Makutano Junction” in which he plays Uncle Supuu and teaches children’s art on the segment, The Know Zone. “There is a waiting list of artists who want to get into The GoDown,” explained Judy Ogana. In other words, however much the artists may complain, it is still the case that The GoDown meets a need, which is one reason why Joy Mboya, the Center’s chief fundraiser is so effective with raising donor support. For instance, The GoDown conducted a week-long set of workshops in 2009 called ‘The Economy of Creativity’ which addressed the question of how artists can more effectively promote themselves and raise investor support globally. The workshops themselves were funded by several Scandinavian organizations, including The Swedish Institute, the Stromme Foundation, and the Swedish Embassy as well as Natverkstan Kultur I Vast, Mangowalla Ventures, and Mimeta of Norway. This time there were no ‘troublesome’ *jua kali* artists around to demand an accounting of the funding. There was also no local media representation invited to the workshops, which may be why there is relevance in the term ‘cartel’, used by Nyamu and Mburu to describe foreign funded art centers like The GoDown, which raise millions of shillings in the name of Kenyan artists, but which the two argue rarely trickles down to the artists themselves.

*Point Two: Art Supplies*

Despite the Managing Director’s success in fundraising in Europe, the US and the Middle East where Joy Mboya went in early 2010, The GoDown does not provide its visual artists with art materials of any sort. Rarely does it run artists workshops; however, batik artist Martin Otieno complains that when he occasionally has run a batik workshop

at The GoDown, he was paid a fraction of what imported artists are given in the way of per diem allowances, accommodation and transportation. It is the kind of inequity that upsets many *jua kali* artists. At the same time, there are a few, like Kepha Mosoti who are philosophical about the situation. “The problem is only about money, but frankly the money doesn’t belong to us Africans, so I don’t know why we feel entitled to have it. I am happy to get on with my work and not trouble my head,” Mosoti said.

*Point Three: Skills Training*

As stated above, The GoDown rarely runs artists workshops, but when it does, as per ‘The Economy of Creativity’ workshop, they know how to procure major funding to run such a show. In the past when Kuona Trust was still at The GoDown, most of the artists’ workshops were coordinated by Kuona staff. These included several Wasanii Workshops, one which was held in Lamu at the home of Gallery Watatu founder, artist Jony Waite (who also calls herself Yoni as of 2000), another which was a women’s workshop exclusively. Otherwise, The GoDown serves more as an umbrella organization under which operates the Nairobi Conservatory of Music which trains music teachers and *Kuruka Maisah*, a program started by Danish students which employs Kenyan artists like Jesse Ng’ang’a to teach art to inner city Kenyan youth. The main training that goes on at The GoDown is done among the artists themselves as for instance, when Patrick Mubaki hosts apprentice artists in his studio and artists share skills at the communal studio. Otherwise, the main asset that The GoDown has as far as training is concerned is the same as Kuona: artists sharing skills and information among themselves, which is what they do on a daily basis.

*Point Four: Marketing*

The paradox of marketing at the GoDown is that Joy Mboya, the Center's managing director does an outstanding job of marketing the Center to foreign donors and at national conferences organized by the Kenya government. For instance, at a symposium on cultural tourism organized by Kenya's Ministry of Tourism in late 2009, Mboya spoke about Kenya's *cultural renaissance* and the fact that the GoDown was one of several cultural institutions that had come up in the last decade which reflect that dynamic renaissance spirit. That said, the *jua kali* artists based at the GoDown believe the Center does far less marketing for the artists themselves. "We artists are mostly left to ourselves. Most of us work here 365 days a week; we pay rent and we hardly see a fraction of those donor funds trickle down to us the artists," said Willie Ndegwa who in 2010 organized a group exhibition with four other GoDown artists at The Talisman restaurant in the elite expatriate suburb of Karen. "We organized the exhibition without any assistance from The GoDown. We had to find our own means to get our art work to and from the restaurant. We had to do our own publicity, and none of the GoDown staff came to the exhibition," added Tom Mboyo Odhiambo, one of the *jua kali* artists who shares communal space with Ndegwa at the GoDown and who also participated in the group show. Odhiambo was trained in hotel management but when the tourism business collapsed during the latter days of the Moi era, he asked an artist friend Patrick Kayako to mentor him and he has been painting ever since.

Given marketing is such an important part of the production of art for Kenyan *jua kali* artists, many of them have literally sought out “greener pastures” in nearby countries.

*Regional “Greener Pastures”*

“You would be surprised to learn how many Kenyan artists have taken their work to Arusha [Tanzania] to the new four-story Cultural Heritage art gallery,” said Mary Ogembo who with fellow female artists Caroline Mbirua and Esther Kahiu, has made several trips across the border, bringing their work with them. “The owner, a Tanzanian, came looking for us at The GoDown and invited us to bring our work and exhibit there. We were amazed when we arrived and found monumental sculptures by Kioko Mwitiki and many other Kenyans on display,” Ogembo said. The other place that Kenyan artists are taking their work is to Uganda to a place called Tulifanya in Kampala. “As long as the local art institutions aren’t helping us to market our art, we have to find our own means of ‘making do’ and making ‘it’ because for us, it’s a matter of survival,” said El Tayeb, a Sudanese artist who’s been living in Kenya for more than a decade and says he’s found someone to help him mount a one-man show in Monaco late in 2010.

*Nairobi Province Visual Arts Exhibition 2010*

One high profile exhibition that GoDown artists were able to participate in was one organized jointly with the Department of Culture and representatives from nine other art networks in Nairobi including the National Museum, BIFA, RaMoMA, Kuona Trust, African Colours, Kenyatta University, Banana Hill Art Studio, the Pan-African Visual Artists Association (PAVA), and the GoDown. I was also invited by Joy Mboya to take part in the organizing process. The Department of Culture’s Director for Nairobi

Province, Agatha Ndambuki had never organized an art exhibition before, but as it is an annual requirement for every province to conduct some sort of cultural event, Ndambuki took advice from the *jua kali* artist Martin Otieno who guided her to Joy Mboya at the GoDown. “Agatha asked me not to mention the fact that her department of culture has no Internet access, no computers and not even information on how previous art exhibitions were held,” Otieno said. Ndambuki admitted to me that she was embarrassed that her government department was so poorly equipped. She was actually fearful that word would get out that she was exposing the Ministry’s dirty linen in public. “I could even lose my job,” she confessed, but she also admitted that her ministry was one of the lowest on the totem pole as far as government funding went. But given the fact that she was new on the job and had a task to complete, Ndumbuki readily accepted assistance from Joy Mboya who used her internet access to invite representatives from as many art networks as she thought were relevant to the project. From then on, meetings were held every fortnight (apart from the December holiday season) either at the GoDown or at the Department of Culture in Nairobi’s city center. In addition to the network represented, several *jua kali* artists such as Martin Otieno came regularly to meetings, since this was the first time the Kenya government had coordinated with so many *jua kali* and private sector art networks. Ndambuki was open to ideas from all the ad hoc members of the group who came to organizing meetings dutifully. She claimed the group should operate democratically, however when the majority of members said they wanted the venue of the exhibition to be the Nairobi National Museum, Ndambuki vetoed that idea for reasons apparently related to internal politics at the Ministry of Culture. Her unilateral decision

stunned some of the artists who said her action confirmed what most *jua kali* artists believe about the Ministry of Culture, that it has its own agenda and doesn't really exist to serve the interests of the artists. "That is why we don't register with the Ministry of Culture. We haven't seen anything that it has been able to do for us," said Dennis Muraguri, a *jua kali* sculptor based at Kuona Trust. Not all the artists share that view of the Ministry. For instance, Martin Otieno checks in regularly with the Ministry of Culture and keeps up with opportunities that come up for artists which rarely get publicized. "That is how I heard about the 2010 Nairobi art exhibition and realized I could help Agatha out," Otieno said. Shine Tani says he registered the Banana Hill Art Studio with the government back in 1994 at the advice of Ngugi wa Thiong'o. "He told us we artists needed to organize, and so we took him seriously," Shine said. Since then, Banana Hill Art Studio has benefited by becoming the venue for the annual Central Province visual art exhibition, which Shine says is great publicity for the Studio.

As it turned out the venue for the 2010 Nairobi Province Visual Art Exhibition was fixed *de facto* at the GoDown, which turned out to be an efficient move since in contrast to the government facilities, the GoDown is fully equipped and staffed. The committee got the local media mobilized, and all nine art networks informed their artists that they ought to bring two pieces of art work a piece to the GoDown by mid-January. Some committee members felt the time was too short to get all the artists involved, but given the constraints of the government timetable, the organizing process went ahead. Money was a problem, despite the fact that committee members volunteered and the GoDown was donating its exhibition hall free of charge. Ironically, it was Mboya who

proposed a tentative budget for the exhibition that was over KSh100,000, including costs the GoDown would accrue if it mounted a costly opening event, paid for buses to bring in school children and pay for glossy catalogues, posters and invitation cards. All the art networks were asked to donate money towards the exhibition; meanwhile, the Department of Culture had budgeted only KSh35,000 for the program. In the end, the Department was able to obtain interns to document the hundreds of art works that came into the GoDown; the committee members became the first adjudicators selecting around 250 works of art made exclusively by Nairobi-based Kenyan artists. In the end, the exhibition that ran through February 2010 was considered the best one ever organized by the Nairobi Province. There were critics of the exhibition who complained that some of Nairobi's finest artists did not participate; but at the same time painters such as Samuel Githui, Peterson Kamwathi, Michael Soi, Gomba Otieno and Kamal Shah and sculptors such as Morris Foit, Dennis Muraguri, David Mwaniki and Anthony Wanjau all submitted winning works. So while the exhibition may not be totally representative of the finest works of Nairobi artists, the show revealed how effective art networking could be once representatives worked together to confirm that a cultural renaissance in the visual arts is actually taking place in Kenya right now.

#### RaMoMA Museum

##### *Point One: Space*

The idea of starting a museum of modern art in Kenya started *jua kali* style in the mind of Kenya-born painter Mary Collis. She had no money for such a project but high hopes, tremendous enthusiasm and a vision fueled by years of travel with her good friend



and wife of a leading Nairobi hotel magnate, Dora Block. “It was with Dora that I



**Figure 56. RaMoMA co-founders, artist Mary Collis and curator Carol Lees**

traveled across the United States visiting as many modern art museums as we could find. Our ambition was always to construct a Kenyan equivalent of MOMA in Nairobi.” Collis’ dream came true in 2000 after she secured free space on the ground floor of the brand new Rahimtulla Towers, Nairobi’s tallest skyscraper. Then came the grant from Ford Foundation, and RaMoMA was on its way. But the third element that ensured the Museum would get off the ground was the Kenya-born British curator Carol Lees who had agreed to leave aside her blossoming OneOff Contemporary Art Gallery to collaborate with Collis. With Mary’s fund raising skills and Lees’ contact list of local artists that she had developed since 1993 when she first opened OneOff, RaMoMA started off with a bang and sustained its momentum until 2008 when, coincidentally, the global economic meltdown began right as RaMoMA was making a move from The Towers, which was just up the hill from the city center, to a sprawling mansion made over into a seven-galleried museum in Parklands, on the Asian side of town. At no time has RaMoMA provided local *jua kali* artists with space to create. Artists have never been under any illusion about that fact, but the Museum itself had to address the issue of space and as long as they stayed at Rahimtulla, local artists were happy just to have their art exhibited at RaMoMA. The problems began once they moved to a house with a huge overhead, which for the first time the Museum had to pay. Compounding the problem was the fact that donor funding dried up by mid-2009. Ford Foundation had not only sustained RaMoMA,

including the costs of its glossy quarterly publication, *Msanii*; it had also used RaMoMA as a conduit for funding of new donor recipients such as Hawa Women and Banana Hill Art Studio. In December 2009, Carol Lees left RaMoMA and returned to her old job as CEO of One Off. Taking with her a transnational network of contacts including both local artists and international patrons of contemporary Kenyan art, Lees' departure from RaMoMA may mean that the Museum as a space for exhibiting and selling Kenyan art may close down before the end of 2010. If it doesn't, it will be due to the tenacity of Mary Collis and the curatorial capacity of Camille Wekesa, a Kenyan artist training in Italy and UK. Wekesa is also one of the few Kenyan curators with the knowledge and experience of coordinating successful transnational exhibitions of Kenyan art. Kenyan *jua kali* artists like Kamal Shah and Bertiers Mbatia rallied to lend support to RaMoMA as they would like Nairobi to have at least one 'high art' gallery in the city. At the same time, RaMoMA charges the highest commission on sales of artists' work compared to any other public or private space, more than 50% per sale, which is even more than Ruth Schaffner charged towards the end of her life career. So the future of RaMoMA is uncertain. As of December 1, 2010, RaMoMA officially shut down, so one phase of the Museum is at an end, but there is widespread speculation that RaMoMA may reopen in the coming months under new management.

*Point Two: Art Supplies*

Again, RaMoMA has never promised art materials to the artists, although when there is an occasional print-making workshop, when either the British artist Mandy Bonnell or her apprentice Peterson Kamwathi conducts a print making workshop, usually

the Museum provides the tools and the media. Otherwise, RaMoMA's focus has been almost exclusively on exhibiting contemporary Kenyan art.

*Point Three: Skills Training*

One of the most valuable services that RaMoMA has provided to Kenyan *jua kali* artists is the opportunity to apply for the Helen Wood Hunt fellowship to study at the University of Kentucky. A number of *jua kali* artists have won this award, including Patrick Mukabi, Peter Ngugi, Harrison Mburu, and Peterson Kamwathi among others. Otherwise, RaMoMA has organized a number of children's art programs, many of which involved busing in children (including orphans) to the Museum whose schools were in low income areas of Nairobi. Then they would be shown the current art exhibition as well as various collections that RaMoMA has. Alternatively, RaMoMA's James Mbuthia would assign local artists to go to slum schools and help establish art programs, such as the Mukuru Art Center which Mary Ogembo and other *jua kali* artists have taught basic skills in painting, drawing and sculpting. The other outstanding training program that RaMoMA organized was call Healing through Art and it involved *jua kali* artists working through RaMoMA to go to the children's cancer ward at Kenyatta National Hospital and teaching basic skills in the arts. All of these programs were launched shortly after RaMoMA was launched in 2000 and were largely foreign-donor funded; so the future of the programs looked precarious after the recession hit donor countries from 2008. But Mbuthia says especially the Healing through Art project will be the last one to go, since it has attracted global attention for the positive impact it has had on children with cancer. It has also illustrated the versatility of *jua kali* artists, many of whom are teaching art for

the first time in their lives, but offering further evidence of the sort of renaissance spirit that imbues many local artists today, all of whom get paid ‘bus fare’ each time they participate in the project.

*Point Four: Marketing*

Prior to the departure of Carol Lees, marketing of Kenyan contemporary art was the biggest contribution that RaMoMA Museum was making to the local art scene. RaMoMA was meant to stand as the next best thing to a National Art Gallery, something that was almost established in the 1980s, according to Etale Sukuro, but following the 1982 *coup d’etat* attempt against President Daniel arap Moi, that plan fell apart. RaMoMA aimed to fill that vacuum, and had even begun establishing a permanent collection of contemporary Kenyan art. With substantial funding from Ford Foundation, the Museum also established its own art magazine *Msanii*, which served as an excellent promotional device. International patrons were coming to RaMoMA, in part because of the global art market networks that Carol Lees had connected with during her days working directly with local artists at OneOff Gallery. Among the global and local patrons and art collectors that have supported contemporary Kenyan art through RaMoMA or through other Kenyan art networks are the following in Table 15:

Table 15: Some Patrons of Kenyan Contemporary Art

<b>Collector/Patrons</b>	<b>Nationality</b>
Johanna Agthe	German
Todd Schaffer	American
Anthony Athaide	British
Bob Baumann	American
Born Free Foundation sponsors	Kenyan
Rob Burnet	British
Mary Collis	British

Commercial Bank of Africa	American
Elsbeth Court	American
Ed Cross	British
Nani Croze	German
Sien Daniels-Joseph	British
Robert Devereux	British
Adama Diawara	Ivory Coast
Alan Donovan	American
Kuki Gallmann	Italian
Muthoni Garland	Kenyan
Don/Iris Hunt, Mt Kenya Club	American
Mumbi Kaigwa	Kenyan
Rose Kimotho	Kenyan
Osei Kofi	Ghanaian
Anders Kohler	Swedish
Jeff Koinange	Kenyan
Dr. Kwang	Korean
Sir Robert Loder	British
Jan Lundum	Danish
Liza MacKay	British
Antonio Manfredi	Italian
Fred Mann	British
Joy Mboya	Kenyan
Harold and Anetta Miller	American
Village Market Mohammed	Iranian
Giko Hosea Muchugu	Kenyan
Joseph Murumbi	Kenyan
Mamba Village's Harlon Muturi	Kenyan
Nation Media Group	Kenya
Natl Museums of Kenya	Kenyan
Elimo Njau	Tanzanian
Gad Okello	Kenyan
Elkana Ong'esa	Kenyan
Cooper Price WaterHouse	British
RaMoMA	Kenyan
Raj Ranganath	Kenyan
US Ambassador M. Rannenberger	American
Barbara Reich	German
David Rockefeller	American

Leo Roozendaal	Dutch
Sarang Gallery	Kenyan
Ruth Schaffner	American
Njambi Shine Rahab	Kenyan
Dana Gacheru Seidenberg	American
Nick Stock	Irish
Shine Tani	Kenyan
Eric Jarl Troetsen, CARE Int.	Swedish
Michael Van Helsdigen	Dutch
Tony Wainaina	Kenyan
Njuguna Wakonyote	Kenyan
Harold Walkman	American
Camille Wekesa	Kenyan
Frank Whalley	British
Joslin Wildenstein	American
World Bank	American

*Collectors, Cosmopolitans and Decolonizing Kenyans' Minds*

Kenyan contemporary art has many more supporters than those listed above, which I assembled based on snowball sampling. However, one point I wished to make with this listing was to illustrate the fact that collectors of Kenyan art are not only expatriates. Kenyans are increasingly coming to appreciate the value of their own indigenous culture as well as the hybridic styles of contemporary art that many Kenyan artists are producing today. And while Table 15 cannot be considered 'scientific' beyond the value of a snowball sample, the breakdown of patrons by nationality is of interest, especially as I found almost twice as many Kenyan collectors of African and Kenyan art as I did British and more than twice as many Kenyans as Americans.

Table 16: Collector-Patrons by Nationality

Collectors	African/Kenyan	British	American	European Union
Numbers	23	12	10	15

As my research was based on a snowball sampling, I have no way of knowing whether these numbers accurately reflect a decolonization of Kenyans' minds, meaning a growing appreciation among Kenyans of the value of their own people's creative expression. However, what is clear in my mind after spending almost a year in Kenya between 2009 and 2010 is that Kenyans generally are taking greater pride in the cultural productivity of their artists, be they the graffiti artists or the local musicians, thespians, filmmakers or cartoonists. It has been a long time coming, given the way Kenya has been inundated since Independence with Western media, including radio, TV, movies, DVDs, music, books, and magazines all of which have been readily imbibed by Kenyans and which have served to re-colonize Kenyans' consciousness. Indeed, all the claims of 'cultural imperialism' are applicable to Kenya, especially to Nairobi where the most current trends in Western popular culture are present for mass consumption at relatively low costs. Street vendors in the city center do a lively business selling everything from pulp fiction, including Sidney Sheldon, Robert Ludlum and Jackie Collins, to back issues of *Reader's Digest*, *Time*, *Newsweek* and *The Economist*, all for a few shillings. And especially now that Chinese piracy has surpassed the local East Indian version of copyright theft, Kenyans are able to buy every kind of North and South American sit-com or soap opera as well as all the latest films from Hollywood, Bollywood and Nollywood for less than a dollar a DVD. Many urban Kenyans have watched more HBO series than I, they know more about Hollywood icons and 'insider' gossip than I, and are especially conversant with the politics and life experience of the current US President Barack Obama, as they claim him as their own. But even as Kenyans have increasingly cultivated

a cosmopolitanism that correlates with the kind that Kwame Anthony Appiah writes about in his book *Cosmopolitanism* (2006), they are increasingly embracing more of their Kenyan identity, something for many years they disavowed as they watched *Dallas*, *Fresh Prince of Belair* and Disney and wished they could go and live in America. That view has changed dramatically since 9.11.2001, right around the time that I have identified the clear-cut emergence of a Kenyan cultural renaissance. Manifest in everything from *matatu* art to the Kenyan-owned and operated Citizen TV to the most popular TV anchor man, Jeff Koinange informing the public about “all things Kenyan ...all the time,” there are many factors contributing to the cultural renaissance, and one of them contemporary Kenyan art.

#### *Art Networks and the Financescape*

The biggest difference between indigenous *jua kali* art networks and those established by expatriates is first and foremost economic. At least that is the view of one of Nairobi’s leading African art critic, Wakonyote Njuguna who is an award-winning artist himself. Wakonyote, formerly known as Sese Njugu when writing for *The East African Standard*, believes that if an African gallery owner like Shine Tani had a fraction of the funding that has gone to the expatriate-established galleries cited in this section, he would have taken Kenyan contemporary art much farther than these well-funded galleries have done. The point is debatable, particularly now that donor funding in 2010 is rapidly drying up for the arts, such that all the donor-dependent art centers are said to be “suffering”. “We were notified sometime back that the grants being given were terminal. In fact, most of them have already been terminated,” said Kuona artist Michael Soi, who



lost his job as Kuona Trust's international workshops coordinator in 2009. "I had to let him go because we had no money to run international workshops right now, so he had nothing to do," said Kuona Trust's Director Danda Jaroljmek who is also the Kenya coordinator for the London-based Triangle Arts Trust, a transnational network of regional art workshops. Nonetheless, while a number of donors, such as the Ford Foundation, have dropped out of funding organizations like Kuona Trust and RaMoMA Museum, a number of other foreign agencies have stepped up to fill in the financial gaps for several cultural networks, most of which are expatriate.

For instance, TARA, the Trust for African Rock Art recently landed funding from the Arcadia Fund, which according to TARA co-founder David Coulson, is backed by the heiress to the Tetrapak fortune and will serve as the Trust's core donor replacing Ford Foundation. The Well Told Story 'non-profit' organization launched in 2008 by the same Briton who established Kuona Trust, Rob Burnet, secured a 50,000 pound grant from the British High Commission in 2010 to publish a comic strip, called *Shujaaz* (meaning 'heroes' in Kiswahili slang or Sheng), geared to promote good governance among Kenyan youth (McConnell 2009). And even RaMoMA Museum, despite losing its Ford funding, received a grant from the Gallman Foundation in 2010. Below please find a number of transnational and domestic donors that have provided funding in the name of supporting Kenyan culture and contemporary art. The list by no means includes all the donors who have contributed to contemporary Kenyan arts. But what it does suggest is that the majority of donor funding funnels into expatriate-established art networks.

Further research would be required to get the exact financial breakdown of which networks obtain how much from whom.

Table 17. Transnational and Domestic Donor/Patrons of Kenyan Art

<b>Donors</b>	<b>Beneficiaries</b>	<b>Projects</b>
Access Kenya (US)	GoDown Center	Miscellaneous Projects
African InternatlCouncilMuseum	Lake Basin Artists	Exhibits
Aluka (US)	TARA	Research
American Cultural Attaché	Paa Ya Paa Center	Afro-American Month
Andrew Mellon Foundation	TARA	Research
Arcadia Fund (Tetrapak, UK)	TARA	Research
CARE International	Maasai Mbili	Kuona Workshop
Catholic Relief Service	Hawa Women	Women Workshops
Changamoto (Ford and KCDA)	Kenyan Art projects	Experimental art
Coca Cola Africa (US)	Kenyan Art exhibits	C.Wekesa, Curator
Commercial Bank of Africa (US)	Art Collection	Exhibits
Commonwealth Fdn Fund (UK)	Scholarships	Kaigwa, G, Ogembo, M
DFID (British)	Sanaa Arts Promotion	HIV/AIDS Testing
Doen Foundation (Dutch)	Kuona Trust	Studios
Embassy of France	TARA	Kenyan Art Exhibitions
Embassy of Germany	TARA	Kenyan Art Exhibitions
Embassy of USA	TARA, Paa Ya Paa	Exhibitions
European Union	National Museums K.	Renovations
Ford Foundation (US)	Kuona, GoDown, etc	RaMoMA, Sarakasi
Gallman Foundation (Italian)	RaMoMA	Performance
Global Environmental Fund	Sanaa Arts Promotion	Murals
Global Fund for HIV-AIDS	Sanaa Arts Promotion	Murals
Goethe Institute (German)	Maasai 2, Paa Ya Paa	Nairobi Arts Trust, Kalasha Film
GTZ (German)	Body Art	HIV/AIDS Project
Heinrich Boll Foundation	Hawa Women	Women Workshops
Hivos Foundation (Dutch)	Kuona Trust, AfricanColours	Projects
Kenya Airways	Born Free Foundation	Lions
Kenya Tourism Trust Fund	TARA	Site support
Maryknoll Fr. Hans Bergman	Mwangaza Art Institute	Launch
Mimeta (Norwegian)	GoDown	Workshop

Mondriian Foundation (Dutch)	Kuona Trust	Projects
National Geographic	TARA	Research
Norwegian Agency for Cultural Development	GoDown	Workshop
Oxfam British	Kuona Trust	Studios
Research Into Use (British)	Well Told Story	Comic book
Robert and Ann Lurie Foundation	TARA	Research
Rockefeller Foundation (US)	PaaYaPaa	Madd Art, Kelemba, Paul
Royal Dutch Embassy	Kuona Trust	Exhibits
Ruth Wood Hunt Fellowship	RaMoMA artists	Art Residencies
Safaricom Foundation (British)	SafariCom Gallery	TARA
ScanAd (Kenya/British)	GoDown	Advertising
Swedish Institute	GoDown	Workshop
Tides Foundation (US)	GoDown	Development
Triangle Arts Trust (British)	Kuona Trust	Workshops
Twa Weza Inc.(Kenya/UK)	Well Told Story	Comic book
UNESCO	GoDown, TARA	Miscellaneous
UNEP	Sarakasi Trust	Youth Related
USAID	Sanaa Arts Promotion	Murals
Victoria and Albert Museum	Kuona Trust	1500 Art Books
Virgin Air (British)	Kuona Trust	Studios
Wild in Art (British)	Born Free Foundation	Lion Project
World Bank	Africa Now!	2008 Exhibit
World Monuments Fund	TARA	Research
Wolfe, Maurice (US)	Paa Ya Paa	Ridgeway House
British High Commission	Well Told Story	Comic book
Prince Claus Fund for Culture	Kuona Trust	Triangle Trust

*Dialectics of Development Aid*

Out of the more than 50 foreign funding agencies listed above, there is relatively even breakdown of donors originating from the UK, the US and the EU. In addition, there are approximately a dozen global institutions, including UN and church-related agencies. A few of the donors listed have Kenyan affiliates, but as the major funding comes from overseas, I have counted the non-Kenyan contributors. The table frankly reveals very

little about the money figures involved in the donor funding of Kenyan visual art, since I did not have access to them. I also do not claim to present an inclusive listing of donor agencies. But my point is best summed up by Mary Collis, co-founder of RaMoMA Museum, who expressed the ambivalence felt by many in the Kenyan art world who may need assistance, but question the cost. She said: “Sometimes donor aid does more harm than good.” The table above mainly offers insight into the wide range of foreign donor funding that has poured into cultural institutions in Kenya since Independence. The majority of those funds are given to expatriate-established institutions, so the question remains to what extent does this funding trickle down to positively affect the lives and productive output of Kenyan contemporary artists? I don’t believe I can answer that question conclusively. What I can observe is the point made by Graham Hancock in *Lords of Poverty* (1989), which is that

...aid’s main function in the past half-century has been to create and then entrench a powerful new class of rich and privileged people. In that notorious club of parasites and hangers-on made up of the United Nations, the World Bank, and the bilateral agencies, it is aid--and nothing else—that has provided hundreds of thousands of ‘jobs for the boys’ and that has permitted record-breaking standards to be set in self-serving behavior, arrogance, paternalism, moral cowardice, and mendacity (Hancock 1989: 192-193).

A number of Kenyans whom I interviewed share Hancock’s point of view, particularly as it raises the question, according to John Kariuki, a music critic at *The Daily Nation*, of “who controls Kenyan culture?” But at the same time, some recipients of development aid, such as Dr. Kimani Njogu of Twa Weza Communications, believe that donor funding is empowering. “I see donor aid, not as a trap but as ‘seed money’ that has allowed us to achieve our goals. We’ve produced books and cultural journals like *Jahazi*

with donor funds. Without support from Ford, we could not have done so.” And even one of the harshest African critics of cultural imperialism, Ngugi wa Thiong’o accepted Ford funding when he returned to Kenya in 2004 to give a lecture on *Re-membering Africa* at the University of Nairobi. Ironically, the first expatriate-supported art institution that I examine through the lens of my *jua kali* cultural diamond, Gallery Watatu, was not a recipient of donor funding. In this respect, it was established with something of a *jua kali* spirit of entrepreneurship and ingenuity; which brings me back to a point made by Sebastian Kiarie. He observed that donor money does not necessarily strengthen or advance contemporary Kenyan art. On the contrary, donor money may weaken artists’ resolve to become locally supported and self-sufficient. The role of donor money will continue to be contested terrain as long as there is a dynamic art world in Kenya and as long as the government doesn’t support or even see the value of Kenya’s *jua kali* artists in expanding Kenya’s creative economy.

*Looking Through a Jua Kali Cultural Diamond Brightly*

My *jua kali* cultural diamond cannot tell everything about art networks operating in Kenya today, but it has enabled me to organize a substantial body of information on contemporary Kenyan art, particularly *jua kali* and the way it is contributing to the strengthening of the Kenyan cultural renaissance. Perhaps the one quality that the diamond was not able to convey is the *jua kali* energy of informal sector artists on the move and eager to be upwardly mobile, preferably transnationally. For while Kenyans are increasingly appreciative of their homeland, building monuments to their Mau Mau heroes and making *matatu* art and music that is less African American hip hop and more

East African, they still want to master what De Certeau calls ‘the art of being in between’, to defy the top-down power structure of the dominant society and to take advantage of transnational opportunities. And as I hope to show in the following chapter, *jua kali* artists’ production of the genre they call ‘junk art’ is one of the more ingenious ways they are striving to do just that.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

### JUNK ART: A KENYAN *JUA KALI* GENRE

One of the most dynamic and diverse genres of contemporary Kenyan art, and the



**Figure 57. *Junk Art* is what Ken Mwingi and his crew construct in his Kawangware workshop**

best illustration of what I mean by *jua kali* ingenuity, is something *jua kali* artists like Alex Wainaina and Ken Mwingi call “junk art.” It is art derives in large part from the abundance of global debris, garbage and throw-away “stuff” that gets dumped in the Third

World, mostly from global cities (Sasson 2006), only to get recycled and transformed into objects having

aesthetic value and increasingly recognized as a contemporary Kenyan art. In his classic text, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*, Arjun Appadurai writes about global flows, referring to the way, in our new transnational global culture, that everything from cash, people and ideas to commodities, credit default swaps, and garbage have become *de-territorialized* to such an extent that their movements tend to transcend national borders. This is certainly true of the materials used by many Kenyan *jua kali* artists who create works of art out of everything from plastic bags and Mercedes spare parts to Firestone tires and Heineken beer bottle tops to computer chips and monitors made in China.

Claude Levi Strauss has a name for the type of problem-solving that *jua kali* artists do when they have few material means or art materials but a lot of imagination and capacity to create. He calls it the “science of the concrete” or forming one’s survival by adapting the *bricoles* of the everyday life (1966: 21). Doug Harper translates *bricoles* from the French to mean “the odds and ends, the bits left over, the set of unrelated or oddly related objects” (1987: 74), all of which can come from the garbage dumps and junk yards of Nairobi where many *jua kali* artists find the materials they need to create their works of art, or what Levi-Strauss calls *bricolage*.

For instance, discarded cell phones, which otherwise could be contaminating soil or drinking water because they contain mercury or other hazardous waste (Milmo 2009), get transformed by the Ugandan artist John Odoch Ameny into sculpture that ‘speaks’ volumes about the revolutionary role of cell phone technology empowering Africans to participate in both local and global connectivity, particularly now that Internet cell phones are all the rage in Nairobi. And even before the era of cell phone technology Odoch, like many other East African *jua kali* artists used scrap metal and other “odds and ends” to create sculptures that had popular appeal. In Odoch’s case, he created political parodies of Idi Amin, the Ugandan dictator he had fled from his country in the 1970s. Another Kenyan *jua kali* artist, Joseph Bertiers Mbatia used scrap metal to fashion a satiric 12 foot tall showcase of Kenyan politicians balanced atop one another like circus acrobats before the



**Figure 58. Cell Phone Family was sculpted by John Odoch Ameny**



2005 national referendum. And another Kenyan artist Fred Abuga grabbed debris from the 1998 bombing of the American Embassy in Nairobi to create a sculpture that earned him an award for being one of the most innovative, gutsy and promising local artists in the new millennium.

One of Kenya's first junk artists is Kioko Mwitiki who told the Italian social scientist Annelise Della Rosa that he found no shame in searching through garbage dumps "in the hope of creating something that can represent the spirit of African art" (2008: 58). Kioko who dropped out of Kenyatta University in the 1980s during the difficult days of the Kenya President Daniel arap Moi, said that especially when he had limited art materials, he found the garbage dump at Gikomba "a constant source of energy and strength"



**Figure 59. *Spare Parts Man* was sculpted by Kioko Mwitiki**

and rubbish heaps generally "sources of inspiration". The point is, Kioko told her:

Anything that is available, anything that is within reach [of the *jua kali* artist], can be turned into something else, and this gives one a feeling of great freedom and endless opportunities for innovation ... [Kioko] believes that artists should draw their inspiration from the environment they live in. And it is often precisely in the rubbish, at the dump, in industrial areas where the waste from our contemporary civilization piles up, that the energy to produce something new can be found (Della Rosa 2008: 60).

But scrap metal is just one of the bits of debris that *jua kali* artists use to create works of art. Michel de Certeau, as well as Levi-Strauss, both write about the way workers "make do" with "whatever is at hand" -- be it non-biodegradable plastic bottles, used to create everything from wall hangings and bird feeders to theatrical backdrops, or

glossy magazines, cut out to create imaginative collage art as well as jewelry, earrings and necklaces, or spare parts from cars and trucks.

One of Kenya's most renowned *jua kali* artist, Jimnah Kimani, whose colorful paintings

currently cover the walls in all nine of

Nairobi's most popular Java Coffee Houses started out as a pre-teen collecting discarded wires, rods and Coke bottle tops in order to create his own miniature cars, buses and trucks. "Lots of us used to make our own toys and then race them around the estates," recalled Kimani, who never thought of himself as "poor" despite growing up in areas of Nairobi considered "slums."

Many *jua kali* artists share Kiiki's sentiment, finding inspiration in local junk yards and garbage dumps. One particular artist, Cyrus Ng'ang'a, grew up right next to Nairobi's largest dump at Korogocho. But rather than regard his upbringing as a liability, Ng'ang'a claims it was advantageous to grow up fearless when it came to dirt and debris because it meant he was always able to find materials or *bricoles* to work with in places where other people preferred not to go.

In high school I was assigned to collect garbage and burn it as trash, but before I did, I would first sift through it to find pencils that I could use to draw with. I also had friends who used to bring me what they'd collected from the garbage dump. They'd bring me everything from airplane wheels and tires to hammers, pliers, and parts of TVs and radios. I would recycle them into toys and give them back to my friends just for fun. (Ng'ang'a 2010)

Writing about this kind of "makeshift creativity" De Certeau might say that Ng'ang'a was utilizing "everyday rituals," operating within "a network of relations," his



**Figure 60.** *Trekking*, a painting by Jimnah Kimani is in Nairobi's Java Coffee House

fellow garbage collectors from Korogocho, and “making do” while producing *bricolage* (1984: xv). Observing that there are “innumerable ... ways of operating” and making do, De Certeau also notes that philosophers and social scientists as far back as the Greeks on up to Durkheim have been fascinated with the question:

“What is an *art* or ‘way of making?’” (1984: xiv-xv).

For me, the art of *jua kali* is the art of “making do,” appropriating resources -- everything from space, to art supplies to skills training—in order to produce works of art, whatever it is called, be it junk art or *bricolage* or even ‘poor art’ as Della Rosa names the works derived from recyclable materials and refashioned into “an imaginative and somewhat magical art” (2008 68).

Some of the most magical *bricolage* that I found in Nairobi was scrap metal sculpture scattered all over the RaMoMA Museum, commissioned by the co-founder of the Museum Carol Lees and devised by Harrison Mburu, a *jua kali* artist who started literally with nothing but a Standard 7 education and a knowledge of where scrap metal could be found. The son of a single mother and landless peasant, Mburu assisted a small scale businessman locate the scrap, after which he went to work for the man in Gikomba Market learning artisanal skills until he was taken to Gallery Watatu. There he saw sculptures created by two of Kenya’s most outstanding *jua kali* artists, Samwel Wanjau and Gakunju Kaigwa. Mburu thought he could top their art and set that challenge for himself. “Discovered,” he said, by Carol Lees, Mburu’s whimsical scrap metal sculptures have been sold globally by Lees who also helped him obtain a fellowship to study and



**Figure 61. Bottle Top Elephant, a scrap metal sculpture by Cyrus Ng’ang’a**

show his work in the United States. One reason I find Mburu’s story of sociological interest is because it reveals how much one man can achieve using art networks and *jua kali* tactics, including ingenuity, resourcefulness, and determination.

### Kitengela Bush Glass

The environmental implications of recycling junk into *jua kali* art are not lost to Nani Croze, a Nairobi-based German artist who works with a network of local artists and



**Figure 62. Stained Glass Windows by Kitengela Bush Glass**

artisans to both collect broken beer, soda and wine bottles and recycle them into hand-blown glass art. Since 1979 she and her team create everything from stained glass windows and glass beads to more utilitarian items such as pitchers, platters, plates, and goblets. Like the majority of *jua kali* artists working in Nairobi, Croze had no formal art training when she first came to Kenya in the mid-1970s, although both are parents are well known artists in Germany. But she established herself as a painter who aspired to work in stained glass. With assistance from a Finnish friend, she managed to set up a home grown *jua kali* furnace—fashioned out of scrap metal -- for blowing molten glass. She then proceeded to train a team of Kenyan glass blowers who help her convert broken glass bottles into beautiful works of art. Today she runs transnational “bush glass” art workshops where both Kenyans, like Gakunju Kaigwa, and non-Kenyans train to create their own glass art. In 2007 she ran a *bush glass* workshop for Kenyan women artists such as Maggie Otieno, Tabitha wa Thuku, Irene Wanjiru and Lydia Galavu, which led to their constructing an eleven foot tall “Mother Africa” out of

glass, cement and scrap metal. Croze's penchant for recycling garbage into imaginative art forms does not stop with broken glass. She also collects soda and beer bottle tops and uses them like mosaic tiles to cover everything from walk ways to walls to sculptures like the ten foot tall dinosaur that she and members of her network constructed at the front entrance of her workshop cum home. The home itself is fashioned after a Maasai *manyatta* or homestead since she lives on the outskirts of Nairobi which originally was Maasailand. It is made *jua kali* style out of recycled "odds and ends" such as plastic bags blended with mud, wattle and a bit of cement. Recently having branched out from broken bottles and bottle tops to plastic bottles, which are also major pollutants on the planet, Croze now recycles plastics into bird feeders that hang as aviaries all over her garden, ensuring she has a myriad of multicolored birds at her home all the time.

A number of other local *jua kali* artists work with recycled plastics, including James Mbutia who has been based at RaMoMA Museum, running its Healing Through Art project for children with cancer at Kenyatta Hospital, and Kyalo Justus who responded to the 2007-8 post election violence (in which more than 1000 Kenyans were killed and more than 650,000 people internally displaced, IDPs) by burning plastic bottles on large colored canvas and using the canvas and burnt plastic as a backdrop for a fundraiser fashion show in aid of the IDPs.

#### *Collage Art by Karuga*

One of the most heart-wrenching stories of a woman artist who used the only materials she had at her disposal to create wonderful works of art is the one of Rosemary Karuga (1928-), Kenya's first female university graduate of the Margaret Trowell School

of Fine Art (1952-55). Disappeared for decades from the Nairobi art scene due to a



**Figure 63. Camel Collage made out of paper scraps by Rosemary Karuga**

difficult marriage to a drunkard she chose not to leave, Rosemary resurfaced briefly in 1990 with imaginative collage art that she created using pieces of green and white *Rexona* paper soap wrappers and yellow, beige and orange paper packaging of Kenyans' basic staple food, *Unga* flour, a corn meal cooks up

into *ugali*. Her color palette grew after she went to the US with

support from Paa ya Paa to exhibit her work at the Studio

Museum of Harlem. Nonetheless, Karuga's struggle typifies the challenges that many Kenyan *jua kali* artists, and especially many Kenyan women artists, have faced. Her creative genius was unacknowledged until quite late in her life, when she should have been included in a book like *Women Making Art: Women in the Visual, Literary, and Performing Arts since 1960*, (edited by Deborah Johnson and Wendy Oliver) that featured women artists from all over the world. But appreciation often has to start at home, and unfortunately, Kenyans themselves have been slow in appreciating the work of even junk artists. Bourdieu would say it was a matter of "taste" as well as class, formal education and "home background" (1984:1) that determined whether Kenyans valued their own painters, sculptors and musicians or not. He also points out that:

appreciation or "consumption" of a people's art is, in this case, a stage in a process of communication, that is, an act of deciphering, decoding, which presupposes practical or explicit mastery of a cipher or code. In a sense, one can say that the capacity to see (*voir*) is a function of the knowledge (*savoir*) or concepts, that is, the words that are available to name visible things, and which are, as it were, programs for perception. A work of art has meaning and interest only for someone who possesses the cultural competence, that is, the code, into which it is encoded (Bourdieu 1984: 2).

Among the most disappointing expressions of Kenyans' inability to decode even junk art comes from one of Kenya's most acclaimed new writers, Binyavanga Wainaina. In his award winning short story *Discovering home* (2003) he expresses glowing appreciation of *matatu* art, but he also exposes his lack of taste for other aspects of Kenyan visual art which he seems to disdain and dismiss summarily in the following passage:

Those brash, garish public transport vehicles, so irritating to every Kenyan except those who own one, or work for one; I can see them as the best example of contemporary Kenyan art. The best of them get new paint jobs every few months ... The colored lights, and fancy horn, the purple interior lighting, the Hip Hop blaring out of speakers I will never afford. Art galleries in Kenya buy only the expression (sic) for which there is demand in Europe and America—the real artists, the guys who are turning their lives into vivid color, are the guys who decorate *matatu*. (Wainaina 2003: 9).

I don't dispute Kenyans' capacity for deciphering and decoding the *jua kali* messages and energy found in *matatu* art. On the contrary, I fully agree that one of the most exciting genres of contemporary Kenyan art today is to be found on these mobile art galleries or "galleries on wheels", and I am grateful the Kenyan government's Ministry of Transport reversed its previous anti-*matatu* attitude, reflected in the so-called 'Michuki's Rules' which effectively banned *matatu* art during the period when Hon. John Michuki was Minister of Transport (2003-2005). The reversal was apparent when the Ministry held a competition late in 2009 to determine the best *matatu* artists and the most handsomely colored and designed matatus, and Chalo Muia (see Chapter Six) won first prize. Nonetheless, to assume that the art galleries in Nairobi only cater to expatriates and tourists and foreign markets is to expose not only lack of appreciation for the struggles

that *jua kali* artists go through in life and to produce their art, but also an ignorance of what Appaduria calls the “new role of the imagination in social life” (1996: 32, 53).

“New Role of the Imagination in (Kenyan) Social Life”

Appadurai describes imagination and even fantasy as “antidotes to the finitude of social experience” (1996:53). He acknowledges that in the past “social life was largely inertial, and that traditions provided a relatively finite set of possible lives” (1996:53). So perhaps in the past, the tradition of seeing art galleries as inert or static outposts for expatriate entertainment may have applied. But over the past two decades, Appadurai claims, the media has generated a new global cultural order whereby even *jua kali* artists can be presented as “de-territorializ(ed) persons, images and ideas” either through social networking services such as Facebook or MySpace, on YouTube, or even via Google.

What Appadurai is arguing is that as a consequence of globalization, “more persons in more parts of the world consider a wider set of possible lives than they ever did before” (Appadurai 1996: 53). He observes that the mass media has played a strategic role in affecting social change whereby people in other parts of the world are learning about contemporary Kenyan art and simultaneously, Kenyans are considering “a wider set of possible lives” that they might lead. It is the mass media, Appadurai claims that have “unleashed the imagination” so that even *jua kali* art networks can be seen as manifestations of agency and producers of “the key component of the new global order.” (1996: 31). So powerful is the imagination in social life today, says Appadurai that he most likely would concur that *jua kali* art networks deserve to be seen as “no more and



no less real than the collective representations of Emile Durkheim, now mediated through the complex prism of modern media” (Appadurai 1996: 31).

So while *jua kali* artists still seem to be practicing what De Certeau calls the “art of being in between,” making do with the odds and ends of whatever resources they can muster to create works of art and imagination, Appadurai is ahead of the game in appreciating indigenized forms of artistic expression, which in the Kenyan context includes the genre that I call *jua kali* art, including junk art. The pity is that more Kenyans do not yet fully appreciate or understand these innovative and imaginative new forms of contemporary Kenyan art, a number of whose creators I have listed below in Table 18. Local appreciation is growing exponentially however as *jua kali* art increasingly becomes part of what Appadurai calls mediascapes and ideascapes. For instance, Kenyan art exhibition openings can now be seen on YouTube and the Internet as well as local television channels, such as Citizen TV.

Table 18: Jua Kali *Junk Artists*

<b>Junk Artists</b>	<b>Art Materials</b>
Fred Abuga	US Embassy Bomb Blast Debris
Freddie Anzeze	Scrap Metal, Welding with Mwingi
Anton Chambugu	Scrap Metal, Welding with Mwingi
Nani Croze	Recycled Broken Bottles, Grass
Gakunju Kaigwa	Kisii Stone, Scrap Metal
Kaafiri Kariuki	Local Stone
Rosemary Karuga	Soap Covers, Paper Bags, Magazines
Jimnah Kimani	Coat Hangers, Bottle Tops
Richard Kimathi	Magazines, Collage
Justus Kyalo	Plastic Fire, Canvas
Elimo Njau	Banana Fiber
Bertiers Mbatia	Scrap Metal
Harrison Mburu	Scrap Metal
Peter Mburu	Porcupine Quills

James Mbutia	Plastic Bottles
Kepha Mosoti	Scrap Metal, Nails
Chain Muhandi	Mushrooms
Dennis Muraguri	Broken Clocks and Instruments
Anthony Muyu	Gunny Sack
Solo 7 Muyuno	Wood Planks and Crates
David Mwaniki	Tin Can, Wood, Nails
Ken Mwingi	Spare Parts, Computer Parts
Kioko Mwitiki	Scrap Metal, Spare Parts
Cyrus Ng'ang'a	Soda Bottle, Tops/Glasses
Peter Ng'ang'a	Scrap Metal, Welding with Mwingi
Patricia Njeri	Tin Can, Wood, Nails
Beatrice Njoroge	Stamps, Collage
Francis Nnaggenda	Scrap Metal
Wanjohi Nyamu	Scrap Metal
John Odoch Ameny	Scrap Metal, Cell phones
Chakara Ogollah	Coat Hangers
Anthony Okello	Twigs, Secondhand Clothes
Bob Paul Omtiti	Scrap Metal, Welding with Mwingi
Kota Otieno	Old Clothes, Old Shoes
Kamal Shah	Shells, Bead, Broken Mirror
Alex Wainaina	Scrap Metal
Peter Walala	Magazines, Papier Mâché
Samwel Wanjau	Tree Stumps, Branches, Cement
Anthony Wanjau	Tree Stumps, Roots/Branches
Jackson Wanjau	Tree Stumps, Roots/Branches
Irene Wanjiru	Old Sweaters, Tree Stumps

### *Kenyan Patrons*

What I think is important to note is that Binyavanga Wainaina's dismissive comment on the Nairobi visual art world is just one voice. He does not express the opinion, sentiment or even the taste of all Kenyans, increasing numbers of whom have become collectors of contemporary Kenyan art. As I observe in a previous chapter, Kenyans are increasingly coming to appreciate the value of their own indigenous culture

as well as the hybridic styles of contemporary art that many Kenyan artists are producing today. By my snowball sampling, I was by no means able to collect data on all the Kenyans who appreciate and collect art works by their own *avant garde* artists. But I can see from the local media's coverage of the arts that the tide is turning and Kenyans are progressively gaining greater confidence in their own cultural identity. In the past, according to Elizabeth Orchardson-Mazrui, Kenyans' consciousness had been colonized, first by the British and then, by the Americans and African Americans. But one dimension of the African Renaissance is the decolonization of Kenyans' consciousness, to the point where the youth especially may still thirst for all things cosmopolitan; they still take pride in being conversant about Hollywood, Bollywood, and especially Nollywood movies from Nigeria. They still love to watch sit-coms and soap operas from North and South America. But especially as they are seeing fellow Kenyans winning international awards, such as Wangechi Mutu from Deutsche Bank, Wanuri Kahiu at Cannes and Yvonne Owuor from the UK, they are gaining awareness of their own participation in transnational and global culture. Particularly as they are tuning to cyberspace and global culture via social networking sites such as Facebook and My Space, Kenyans are gaining greater affection for what they have got at home, including *jua kali* artists like Kioko Mwitiki, Meek Gichugu, Jak Katarikawe and others.

The one irony associated with increasing numbers of Kenyan journalists writing thoughtfully and critically about the country's visual artists is that they seem to feel compelled to make comparisons with renowned Western artists, rather than appraise each Kenyan artist in his or her own right. For instance, Jak is often referred to as Africa's

Marc Chagall, Kioko was recently written about as “Kenya’s Michelangelo,” Expedito and Charles Sekano have both been identified with Picasso, John Silver Kimani’s work is said to correlate with that of Hieronymus Bosch, Elkana Ong’esa is identified with Henry Moore, Kivuthi Mbuno is the Kenyan counterpart to Paul Klee and Meek Gichugu often gets mixed up with Salvador Dali. But Kenyan cultural critics, such as Lydia Galavu, are increasingly airing their complaints about this type of comparisons, calling it patronizing and questioning why the artists cannot be appraised on their own merit; why should they be validated by being associated with established Western names? Others complain because they believe the comparisons suggest Kenyan artists’ work is derivative rather than original. As far as I can see, what is noteworthy is that debates about contemporary Kenyan visual art are beginning to take place in the Kenyan media which is positive in its own right. The fact that increasing numbers of Kenyan journalists are writing about the visual arts at all is a major shift. I can say this from experience since I wrote about the visual arts in Kenya since the late 1970s, and for years was one of the few local journalists to report on the contemporary art scene. Today that is no longer the case.

Table 19: African Art Patron/Collectors by Nationality

Patrick Adoyo	Kenyan
Anthony Athaide	Kenyan
Born Free Foundation Sponsors	Kenyan
Mary Collis	British-Kenyan
Sien Daniels-Joseph	British-Kenyan
El Tayeb Dawalbait	Sudanese
Jony Waite	American-Kenyan
Robin Anderson	British-Kenyan
Adama Diawara	Ivory Coast
Dana Seidenberg Gacheru	American-Kenyan
Lydia Galavu	Kenyan

Muthoni Garland	Kenyan
Gakunju Kaigwa	Kenyan
Mumbi Kaigwa	Kenyan
Geoffrey G. Karanja	Kenyan
Morris Keyonzo	Kenyan
Rose Kimotho	Kenyan
Osei Kofi	Ghanaian
Jeff Koinange	Kenyan
Justus Kyalo	Kenyan
Carol Lees	British-Kenyan
Joy Mboya	Kenyan
Mohammed of Village Market	Kenyan-Iranian
'Giko Hosea' Muchugu	Kenyan
Nzisa Muli	Kenyan
Joseph Murumbi	Kenyan
Harlon Muturi	Kenyan
Ann Mwiti	Kenyan
Kioko Mwitiki	Kenyan
Group Nation Media	Kenyan
National Museums Of Kenya	Kenyan
Elimo Njau	Tanzanian
Andrew Njoroge	Kenyan
Pheroze Nowrojee	Kenyan
Opiyo Okech	Kenyan
Gad Okello	Kenyan
Elkana Ong'esa	Kenyan
Elizabeth Orchardson-Mazrui	Kenyan
Maggie Otieno	Kenyan
RaMoMA Museum	Kenyan
Raj Ranganath	Kenyan
Rahab Njambi Shine	Kenyan
Shine Tani	Kenyan
Tony Wainaina	Kenyan
Njuguna Wakonyote	Kenyan
Camille Wekesa	Kenyan
Zarina Patel	Kenyan

One reason more local writers are reviewing the visual arts scene is because there is increasing interest among Kenyan patrons, many of whom appreciate that a cultural renaissance is taking place across Africa, including Kenya, right now. Table 19 above gives a snowball sample listing of some of the Kenyan and African patrons and collectors of Kenyan contemporary art.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

### KENYAN WOMEN AND THE CULTURAL RENAISSANCE

Perhaps there is no clearer, more potent or poignant sign of the cultural renaissance underway in Kenya today than the emergence of women artists and women artists groups. Women sculptors, painters, muralists, collage artists, glass artists, filmmakers, photographers, digital artists, textile designers, jewelry makers and ceramicists—Kenyan women currently occupy every one of

these roles. It hasn't always been this way however. Indeed, it has only been in the last decade or so that Kenyan women have begun to make waves first in local and then in global art networks and art worlds. For instance, the art of



**Figure 65.** *The Musician* by Maggie Otieno

Beatrice Njoroge, Larisa Hoops and Maggie Otieno featured largely in the 2008 World Bank-backed *Africa Now!* exhibition that went to Washington, DC. Tabitha wa Thuku's artwork went to the Athens Olympics in 2004, the only Kenyan artist to be represented in Greece; and most recently, Wangechi Mutu,



**Figure 64.** *Passion*, a painting by Beatrice Wanjiku Njoroge



**Figure 66.** *Work in Progress*, an oil painting by Tabitha wa Thuku

who got her initial art training at Nairobi's Loreto Convent Msongari before proceeding to Cooper Union, the New School, and then Yale University, received the 2010 Deutsche Bank 'Artist of the year' award for her mixed media collage art. But as these 'emergent practices' have only transpired in the last decade or so, I believe it is important to see the development of Kenyan women artists within an historical context. As such, I will in this chapter examine the transformation of women's role in contemporary Kenyan art since the 1950s. I will try to delineate and analyze some of the factors that kept African women out and expatriate women in the Nairobi art world over the years. I will also try to understand what variables have contributed to Kenyan women artists coming to the fore in the 21<sup>st</sup> century and led to their spearheading Kenya's cultural renaissance.

#### *The Dawn of Contemporary East African Art*

In one sense, it should be no surprise that Kenyan women are spearheading Kenya's cultural renaissance in the visual arts since the 'mother' of East African contemporary art, Margaret Trowell established the first professional fine art college at Makerere University in Uganda in the 1930s and also trained the first Kenyan woman artist, Rosemary Karuga, in the 1950s. Karuga returned to Kenya in the Sixties and was exhibiting at Paa ya Paa until an unfortunate marriage drove her into penury and obscurity for decades. She only resurfaced in the early 1990s, bringing with her brilliant *bricolage* art that she produced using *bricoles* or "left over bits" of colored paper packaging (originally used to cover hand soap and cooking flour) to create her collage art. Having no money or art supplies, Karuga like every ingenious *jua kali* artist 'made do' using 'odds and ends' from everyday life to create bricolage featuring images of



Kenyan rural life. It would take more than 30 years from the time Karuga graduated from Makerere in 1959 before another Kenyan woman Elizabeth Orchardson-Mazrui would



**Figure 67. *Woman with Umbrella*, a painting by Rahab Njambi**

Among those who did, such as Rahab Njambi and Eunice Wadu, were wives of *jua kali* artists. Shine Tani and

Sane Wadu were both open to sharing their skills with

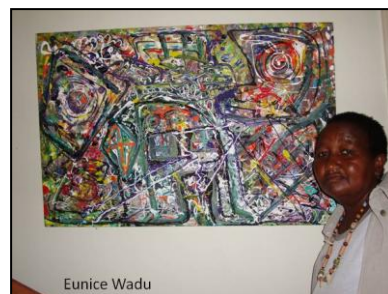
their wives. But up until the mid-1990s, most *jua kali* artists were men, the reasons being manifold. But the one that stands out most obviously is that the division of labor in Kenya's art world was highly gendered until quite recently, which is why education has proved to be such a critical factor in Kenyan women's coming to play such a dynamic role in the African renaissance, a point I will elaborate on below.

#### *African Women Artists and Artisans*

Nkiru Nzegwu writing in "O Africa! Gender Imperialism in Academia" in Oyeronke Oyewumi's book on *African Women and Feminism*, finds Western women, especially "white professional women" (2003: 99) highly suspect when it comes to their writing about African women. She finds white women academics particularly "patronizing," "unconscious" and "ethnocentric." And she is especially opposed to "white women curators, scholars, theorists, and researchers" engaging in African art

receive her doctorate in fine art from the University of London's School of Oriental and African Studies. In the interim, very few African women were contemplating a career in contemporary visual art.

Among those who did, such



**Figure 68. *Contemplation*, a painting by Eunice Wadu**

studies because she believes they only “uphold the America-oriented paradigms of knowledge that invidiously erase African realities” (2003: 138). Be that as it may, I will proceed since I am not writing about the “social category” of “Third World Women” that Chandra Talpade Mohanty complains is too stereotypic and only locates African and other women of color in terms of “underdevelopment, oppressive traditions, high illiteracy, rural and urban poverty, religious fanaticism and ‘overpopulation...’” (2004: 47). Certainly these are factors that help explain why indigenous African women didn’t start sooner to make their presence felt in local art networks and the wider Nairobi art world. But what is important to appreciate is that there were women artists in pre-Independence Kenya. This we know first hand from contemporary artists like sculptor Edward Njenga and painter Jak Katarikawe who both told me of the inspiration their mothers gave them as they grew up in rural East Africa. Njenga described how his mother, a ceramicist made and sold clay pots that earned her son’s school fees. Katarikawe says his mother, his father’s fifth wife, would decorate the exterior of her mud and wattle hut with beautiful designs that not only attracted the old man to spend his last days with his youngest wife; they inspired Jak to take up drawing and painting himself. In addition, we know that historically, women were architects in Maasai land; they were the ones who made the tube-shaped *manyattas* or homes out of mud, dung and wattle. Rural women like Njenga’s mother made all sizes and shapes of pots, which makes the UK-based Kenyan ceramicist Magdalene Odundo, OBE, part of a long tradition of unsung women potters. Women were also the weavers of mats, made with grasses, reeds and banana leaves, which were used both as bedding and other forms of

home furnishing. But until Kenyan women like Odundo consciously claimed to be creating contemporary art, their skills were seen as artisanal and their art simply functional expressions of material culture.

*Speaking for and of Women*

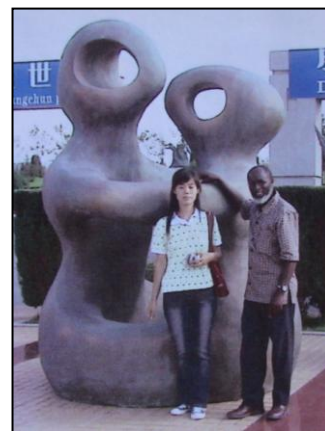
In *Daughters of the Goddess, Daughters of Imperialism: African Women, Culture, Power and Democracy* (2000), the Nigerian feminist scholar Ifi Amadiume writes about the way men have historically spoken on women's behalf. In Kenya this has clearly been the case both at the level of national politics and within the visual arts. Under President Kenyatta, Kenya's first post-colonial president, his daughter Margaret was made Mayor of the capital city, Nairobi; but unfortunately, Margaret was a mere figurehead and the "front stage" surrogate for her father and his back stage band of corrupt political elites. By the time of the 1985 United Nations End of the Decade for Women Conference, which was held in Nairobi, Kenya was credited for being the only country to send a man, Kenneth Matiba, who was then Minister of Culture, to Vienna for all the pre-conference planning work. The struggle for multi-party democracy in Kenya in the early 1990s that followed the end of the Cold War witnessed the emergence of women's political power. A National Commission on the Status of Women was formed in 1991 by Kenya's first woman banker Mary Okello (who was also the first regional coordinator of Women's World Banking/Africa and first woman board member at the African Development Bank) and Kenya's first woman political science doctorate Dr. Mary Nzomo. NCSW organized Kenya's first Women's National Political Conference which led to the election of the country's first crop of elected, rather than appointed, women members of parliament in

1992. NCSW even nominated Professor Wangari Maathai to run for president but she refused. Subsequently, Dr. Maathai would win the Nobel Prize for Peace in 2004.

Currently, the Kenya Parliament has less than a dozen women MPs, including the former Minister of Justice and Constitutional Affairs, Martha Karua, who along with at least one other woman MP, Charity Ngilu, have already voiced their intention to run for President of Kenya in 2012.

### *Women in African Art*

Artistically, Kenyan men have consistently drawn upon women-related themes, particularly that of the mother and child. The mother has often been portrayed sympathetically, as in the paintings of Wanyu Brush, Francis Kahuri and Jak Katarikawe as well as in the batiks of former refugee artists like Nuwa Wamala Nnyanzi of Uganda and Charles Sekano of South Africa, both of whom survived during their days of exile living in Nairobi as “self-taught artists.” One of the most poignant expressions of woman in recent times is a sculpture carved by Elkana Ong’esa called *Blindfolded*, which he says was



**Figure 69. *Our Mother*, a granite stone sculpture by Elkana Ong'esa in Shenzhen, China**

inspired by the agony women went through during the 2007-2008 post-election violence when women were raped and murdered by rampaging mobs as well as by well-organized hit men trained similarly to the *Interahamwe* Hutus in Rwanda to kill their Tutsi enemies, even women and children, mercilessly. Ong’esa’s most monumental sculpture dedicated

to women is a twelve foot tall granite stone piece called *Our mother*, which stands in the an exhibition hall at China's Shenzhen University.

### *Expatriate Women*

The Kenyan landscape, wildlife and people have inspired a number of European women artists, the two most renowned of whom are Joy Adamson, whose book *Born Free* (1960) was made into an award-winning movie and popular television series, and Karen Blixen (a.k.a. Isak Dineson) whose book, *Out of Africa* (1937), was also made into an Academy award winning film. But Blixen has elicited loud complaints from post-colonial scholars such as Mojubaolu Olufunke Okome and Ngugi wa Thiong'o who see her writing as racist and condescending, and her portrayal of Africans demeaning and patronizing as she writes of them as being animal-like and sub-human. In his essay "Her Cook, Her Dog: Karen Blixen's Africa," which Ngugi presented in Copenhagen, her hometown in 1980, he describes *Out of Africa* as "one of the most dangerous books ever written" about the region, for its condescension, "masquerading as love." Ngugi said he knew the West considered her "a literary saint," but from his perspective, "She embodies the great racist myth at the heart of the Western bourgeois civilization" (Wa Thiong'o 1993: 135) meaning she bore the "white (wo)man's burden" to civilize the uncivilized and heathen. The Nigerian feminist Okome shares his sentiment:

For Ngugi, Blixen's work is grounded in racist ideology which presumes that the African is a perpetual child, an irresponsible, sometimes charming and innocent child who must be led by the hand and guided into developing good work habits, truth telling, responsible social behavior. The African is presented as the quintessence of savagery, the human being in the proverbial state of nature (Okome 2003:72).

Be that as it may, both Blixen and Adamson were not only writers; they were also painters whose portraits of African people are figurative and naturalistic, including the kinds of cultural accoutrement that missionaries insisted were satanic and undesirable, so at least their art has left a record of indigenous fashions and cultural forms that are no longer in evidence in Kenyan society, except possibly in ethnographic or natural history museums as dead relics from a supposedly “primitive” past.

The two other expatriate women who made their mark on Kenyan contemporary culture, apart from Margaret Trowell, are Jony Waite and Robin Anderson, the two out of three who founded Gallery Watatu in 1969: Robin painted wildlife on silk and Jony, who changed her name to Yoni in the 1990s, created massive charcoal and oil murals of the African bush. Both businesswomen as well as artists who wanted a venue in which to display and sell their art, Jony and Robin became the first among many expatriate women (after Sherry Hunt, an American art dealer who started the short-lived Studio 68) to contribute to contemporary art not only as artists but as ‘networkers’ or women generating links between local and global art markets and audiences. The list of Western women that occupy that category in Kenya is extensive. It not only goes back to the 1920s when British women members of the East African Women’s League established the Kenya Art Society, which was for Europeans only until the mid-1970s when Francis Kahuri obtained a scholarship to attend. It also includes art instructors such as Dora Betts, Geraldine Robarts, Liza MacKay and Mandy Bonnell, transnational art dealers like Ruth Schaffner and Nani Croze, curators like the late Johanna Agthe, Carol Lees and Wendy Karmali, collectors like Dana Seidenberg Gacheru, Mary Collis, and Caroline Block, and

gallery/art center managers like Danda Jaroljmek, Robin Harragin and Rhodia Mann. The list below includes most but not all of the expatriate women who have been involved in networking on the contemporary Kenyan art scene. For instance, it does not include all the embassy women or the donor representatives who come to Kenya, stay a while and then depart unceremoniously. Nor does it include groups like the American Women's Association which was instrumental in establishing the Gallery of Contemporary East African Art at the Nairobi National Museum. Suffice it to say, the global flow of expatriate women through Kenya's art networks and art world is more than one can easily count. Figure 73 below offers a listing of most but not all the expatriate women artists and cultural activists.

**Figure 70. List of Expatriate Women Artists and Cultural Activists**

Agthe, Johanna. Curator and Collector, Frankfurt Folk Art Museum
Anderson, Robin. Artist and Co-Founder, Gallery Watatu
Banisford, Susan. Co-Founder, GoDown Art Center; Manager, Ford Foundation
Beckwith, Carol. Photographer and Designer, African Heritage
Betts, Dora. Principal and Art Teacher, Kenya Art Society
Bonnell, Mandy. Artist and Art Instructor, RaMoMA Museum
Bristow, Anne. Founder, Elementita Weavers
Collis, Mary. Artists and Co-Founder, RaMoMA Museum.
Court, Elsbeth. Researcher and Lecturer, University of London
Croze, Nani. Founder, Instructor and Manager, Kitengela Glass
Daniels-Joseph, Sien. Collector and Founder, SafariCom Gallery

East African Women's League. Founder of Kenya Art Society

Fisher, Angela. Photographer and Author, *Africa Adorned*

Gallmann, Kuki. Collector and Sponsor, RaMoMA Museum

Geets, Gonda. Art Consultant and Curator, SafariCom Gallery

Godlund, Brigit. Artist and Art Instructor, French Cultural Center

Harragin, Robin. Instructor and Manager, Gallery Watatu

Hunt, Sherry. Founder and Manager, Studio 68

Jaroljmek, Danda. Artist and Manager, Kuona Trust

Karmali, Wendy. Curator and Manager, Nairobi Museum Contemporary Art Gallery

Lee, Jane. Curator and Manager, African Heritage

Lees, Carol. Founder and Curator. OneOff Gallery and RaMoMA Museum

Linnae, Susan. Art Editor, RaMoMA magazine *Msanii*

MacKay, Liza. Artist and Art Instructor, International School of Kenya

Mann, Rhodia. Artist and former owner, Gallery Watatu

Mason, Max. Artist and Film maker, Kuona Trust

Murumbi, Sheila. Co-Founder and Collector, African Heritage

Reich, Barbara. Collector and Manager, Goethe Institute

Robarts, Geraldine. Artist and Instructor, Kenyatta University

Saitoti, Sherry. Former owner, Gallery Watatu

Schaffner, Ruth. Collector, Curator and Owner, Gallery Watatu

Seidenberg-Gacheru, Dana. Collector

Sjoerds, Larisa. Artist and Founder, Nairobi Art Center



Trowell, Margaret. Artist and Founder, Makerere University Margaret Trowell School of Fine Art

Waite, Jony. Artist and Co-Founder, Gallery Watatu

Wildenstein, Joslin. Collector and Patron of Kenyan Art

### *Indigenous Women Artists*

The cultural renaissance taking place in Kenya currently is not so much about expatriate women, as it is about the progressive involvement of indigenous African and Asian women artists who have been making serious headway in the contemporary Kenyan art world, particularly since the dawn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. There are undoubtedly numerous factors that have contributed to Kenyan women's coming forth to take their place in numerous art networks, including Banana Hill Art Studio, Kuona Trust, African Colours, and the GoDown. The main one would seem to be that more educational opportunities have opened up for women both locally and globally in the last two and half decades. The United Nations Global Women's Conference of 1985, which was held in Nairobi, could be cited as a turning point for Kenyan women, since it was at that moment that the whole society, including the Kenya government and countless non-governmental organizations got behind the issue of raising women and girls' social status at all levels, from the legal and political to the educational, artistic, economic and cultural. It was also at that point that all the constraints holding women back were brought out into the light of day and discussed in open forums, organized both at the official UN Women's End of Decade Conference and at the NGO Women's Forum. Women's education was a major topic of discussion, and while Nigerian feminists like

Nkiru Nzegwu may scoff at the slogan “sisterhood is global” (2003: 103), for many ordinary Kenyan women, 1985 was the first time that they could see their problems in a transnational context and they derived strength from that broadened perspective. Table 21 below offers a listing of most but not all the indigenous African women artists whose works may be found in Nairobi currently.

Table 20. Kenyan Women Artists and Cultural Activists

<b>Kenyan Women</b>	<b>Artist</b>	<b>Work Began</b>	<b>Education</b>	<b>Art Network</b>
Margaretta Akinyi	Painter	2000s	BA, U. Nbi	Hawa Women
Irene Asaya	Painter	1990s	CAC	Chemi Chemi
Christine Atula	Painter	2000s	Secondary	Maasai 2
Melissa Binyavanga	Networker	2000s	BA, US	Art Canvas
Lydia Galavu	Sculptor	2000s	MA, U. Nbi	Hawa Women
Muthoni Garland	Writer	2000s	BA, US	Story Moja
Gladys Gatheru	Director	2000s	BA, U. Nbi	Ministry Culture
Susan Gatheru	Writer	2000s	BA, USIU	Gallery Watatu
Sylvia Gichae	Jeweler	2000s	BA, US	Kuona Trust
Joy Gregory	Photographer	2009	MFA, UK	Kuona Trust
Waters Harsita	Administrator	1990s	Polytech	French Center
Asha Hassan	Painter	1990s	CAC	Chemi Chemi
Wahuri Kahiu	Filmmaker	2000s	BA, UCLA	Goethe Institute
Bella Kaigwa	Designer	2000s	BFA, U.Nbi	Jacana
Mumbi Kaigwa	Actor	2000s	BA, U. Nbi	Art Canvas
Rose Kanini	Painter	2000s	Secondary	Nuru Arts
Rosemary Karuga	Painter	1960s	BFA, Mak.	Paa Ya Paa
Vijaya Khalyn	Painter	1990s	CAC	Nat'l Museum
Eva Kiiru	Administrator	2000s	BA, UK	British Council
Ciru Kimani	Painter	2000s	BA, UK	Kuona Trust
Mary Kimonye	Marketing	2000s	MA, U.Nbi	U. Nairobi
Rose Kimotho	Collector	1990s	BA, U.Nbi	Kameme
Beth Kimwele	Painter	2000s	BIFA	Kuona Trust
Wanjiru Kinyanjui	Filmmaker	1990s	BA,Germany	KIMC
Miriam S. Kyambi	Artist	2000s	BFA, US	RaMoMA

Rosetta Makali	Painter	2000s	BA, U. Nbi	Hawa Women
Ato Malinda	Painter	2000s	BA, US	Kuona Trust
Caroline Mbirua	Painter	2000s	CAC	GoDown
Mutheu Mbondo	Advocate	2000s	MA, US	Changamto
Joy Mboya	Administrator	2000s	BA, BFA	GoDown
Anne McCreath	Fashion	2000s	BA, UK	Kiko Romeo
Catherine Mujomba	Actor	2000s	BA, U.Nbi	GoDown
Esther Mukuhi	Jewelry	2000s	Secondary	GoDown
Jacquie Munene	Designer	2000s	BA, UK	Kuona Trust
Anne Mungai	Filmmaker	1990s	PhD, UK	Min.Information
Theresa Musoke	Painter	1970s	MFA, US	RaMoMA
Mary Ann Muthoni	Painter	2000s	BIFA	Kuona Trust
Wangechi Mutu	Collage Art	2000s	MFA, Yale	Deutsche Bank
Ingrid Mwangi	Video Art	2000s	BA,Germany	Goethe Institute
Mshai Mwangola	Storyteller	2000s	PhD, US	Kenya Center
Suki Mwendwa	Dancer	2000s	PhD, US	U. Nairobi
Makena Mwiraria	Designer	2000s	BA, US	African Heritage
Ann Mwiti	Painter	2000s	MA, KU	Kenyatta U
Agnes Ndambuki	Acrobat	2000s	BA, U.Nbi	Dept. Culture
Rahab Nderu	Administrator	2000s	BA, US	RaMoMA
Beatrice Nduma	Sculptor	2000s	BFA, U.Nbi	Hawa Woman
Philda Njau	Photographer	1970s	BA, US	Paa Ya Paa
Rebeka Njau	Textile	1970s	BA, U.Nbi	Paa Ya Paa
Patricia Njeri	Sculptor	2000s	BA, U.Nbi	Kilele Arts
Beatrice Njoroge	Painter	2000s	BIFA	Nbi Art Center
Wanjiku Nyachae	Curator	1990s	BA, UK	<i>Jua Kali</i> UK
Joyce Nyairo	Writer	2000s	PhD, SAfrica	Ford Foundation
Ruth Nyakundi	Painter	1980s	Secondary	Gallery Watatu
Magdalene Odundo	Ceramicist	1980s	MFA, UK	UK
Judy Ogana	Administrator	1990s	BFA, KU	GoDown
Mary Ogembo	Painter	1990s	CAC	GoDown
Olunyo Oluoch	Garnette	2000s	MA, U.Nbi	Twa Weza
Dorcias Omari	Jewelry	2000s	BA, U.Nbi	Hawa Women
Elizabeth Orchardson-Mazrui	Digital Artist, Writer	1990s	PhD, UK	Kenyatta U
Lucy Oriang	Writer	1980s	BA, U. Nbi	Nation News
Faith Oseya	Writer	2000s	BA, U.Nbi	Kenya Imagine

Maggie Otieno	Sculptor	1990s	CAC	African Colours
Alice Owen	Administrator	2009	Polytech	Born Free Fdn.
Yvonne Owuor	Writer	1990s	BA, U. Nbi	Aga Khan U.
Ruba Rahaman	Coordinator	2000s	Polytech	Art Lovers Club
ChelengeV Rampelberg	Sculptor	1990s	Secondary	Gallery Watatu
Dahir Sahari	Coordinator	2000s	BA, U.Nbi	Nat'l Museum
Purity Senewa	Curator	1990s	BA, SAfrica	Nat'l Museum
Rajin Sharma	Painter	2000s	Secondary	Village Market
Rahab Shine Njambi	Painter	1980s	Secondary	Banana Hill Art
Anne Muthoni Turugah	Painter	2000s	Secondary	Ngecha Art Ctr
Tabitha Wa Thuku	Painter	1990s	Polytech	RaMoMA
Eunice Wadu	Painter	1980s	Secondary	Gallery Watatu
Esther Wakabi	Sculptor	2000s	Secondary	Hawa Women
Nancy Wangari	Painter	2000s	BA, U.Nbi	Hawa Women
Njeri Wangari	Poetess	2000s	Polytech	Kenyan poet
Rachel Wangari	Painter	2000s	Secondary	Nuru Art
Beatrice Wangechi	Dealer	1990s	Secondary	Nat'l Museum
Annabelle Wanjiku	Painter	1990s	Secondary	Gallery Watatu

*Education is Key*

In fact, it has only been since the UN Women's Conference that Kenyan women artists (following in the footsteps of Dr. Wangari Maathai, East Africa's first female PhD) have seized upon education as the key to their success. For instance, since the late Eighties/early Nineties, more women have gone to university to study liberal and fine art than ever before, not only in Kenya, UK and the US, but also in Germany, Italy, Canada, and even South Africa. There are also more educational centers in Kenya that offer art as a formal subject now than ever before, despite the fact that Art was removed from the national syllabus in 2008. For instance, while the Creative Art Center started up in 1965, the Mwangaza Art Center was established in the late Eighties in Kisumu and the Buru

Buru Institute of Fine Art opened its doors in Nairobi in 1993. And while Kuona Trust has not offered formal training in the arts, it has provided comprehensive workshops which women like Maggie Otieno, Mary Ogembo, Lydia Galavu and Irene Wanjiru started attending soon after Kuona opened in the mid-1990s.

The table above reflects my snowball sampling of Kenyan women artists and cultural workers associated directly with local and transnational art worlds. Hopefully, what I learned from them will provide the clearest evidence that a seismic shift had taken place in women's involvement in the visual arts by the 21<sup>st</sup> century. For of the 80 African and Asian Kenyan women that are listed above in Table 20, I only found one Kenyan woman, Rosemary Karuga, who had joined the ranks of contemporary African art in the 1960s. By the Seventies, I found just four, namely, Magdalene Odundo, the award winning ceramicist based in the UK, Theresa Musoke the Ugandan painter exiled in Kenya since the 1970s, Rebeka Njau the textile designer, and Phillda Ragland Njau, the African American photographer who came and stayed on at Paa ya Paa.

Table 21. Indigenous Women Artists enter Kenyan Art World by Decade

<i>By Decade</i>	<i>1960s</i>	<i>1970s</i>	<i>1980s</i>	<i>1990s</i>	<i>2000s</i>
No. Women	1	4	5	17	52

By the Eighties, there were at least five, three of whom were brought up in the *jua kali* tradition since they followed their *jua kali* spouses into the visual arts. It wasn't easy for either Rahab Njambi at Banana Hill Art Studio or Eunice Wadu at the Ngecha Artists Association or Ruth Nyakundi whose husband worked at Gallery Watatu as Ruth Schaffner's archivist. But in lieu of their having less access to education than the generations of Kenyan women artists who followed, their struggle to acquire *jua kali*

skills is laudable and each one has emerged in her own right, separate from their men, Shine Tani, Sane Wadu and Christopher Owyecha respectively. Annabelle Wanjiku is another *jua kali* artist inspired by Ruth Schaffner to take herself seriously as an artist in the Eighties. Wanjiku was one of Kenya's first transnational artists after Ruth exhibited and sold her work in Europe. She was also one of Kenya's first transnational *women* artists, after Rebeka Njau exhibited in New York in 1972 and Magdalene Odundo exhibited in London from 1977. In contrast, Elizabeth Orchardson-Mazrui also went transnational in the 1980s, only her global connections were based on her academic training in the UK and teaching in the US.

By the Nineties, Elizabeth was spearheading the shift since the trend was already changing and increasing numbers of women were getting formal training, both in Kenya and overseas. But the most remarkable change in numbers came at the turn of the new millennium: I found more than fifty women having studied fine art or liberal arts at advanced levels of learning during this decade. Four out the five doctorates were earned since Y2K took place. And even the majority of masters, bachelors and diplomas were earned during this past decade. This is one reason why I believe Kenyan women artists are the harbingers of Kenya's cultural renaissance.

Table 22. Kenyan Women Artists and Higher Education

Education	PhDs	MA/MFA	BA/BFA	CAC/BIFA	Polytechnic	2ndary
No.women	5	1	8	5	6	15

Take Maggie Otieno, for instance. Trained as a painter at the Creative Arts Center in Nairobi in the early 1990s, Maggie joined Kuona Trust soon after it began and took one of its first sculpture workshops led by one of Kenya's leading *jua kali* sculptors

Elijah Ogira. She says she was spellbound by the new skills she learned and has committed herself to sculpture ever since. But more than being one of Kenya's first important women sculptors, Maggie is also the project manager for the Nairobi-based online Pan African art gallery, [www.africancolours.com](http://www.africancolours.com), which means she is helping construct a transnational art network, building on a regional basis and also taking little-known local African artists and putting them on a global platform that is quickly transforming public perception about what really constitutes contemporary African art. For up until very recently, contemporary African art was mostly defined either in New York at The Center for African Art, founded in 1984 by Susan Vogel, or by West Africans like Okwui Enwezor whose 2009 text *Contemporary African Art Since 1980* did not include a fraction of what is happening in the Kenya art world today. His book, co-authored with Chika Okeke-Agulu, only acknowledges Mutu, Odundo, Katarikawe and the RaMoMA-based photographer James Muriuki. But otherwise, both camps leave one believing there is virtually no contemporary African art in Kenya. But through the online initiatives of Maggie and African Colours, African art from all around the region is gaining visibility and compelling the public to rethink the meaning of African contemporary art.

Table 23. Kenyan Women with National and Transnational University Degrees

Country	Kenya	US	UK	S.Africa	Italy	Germany	Uganda
No. Degrees	26	15	9	2	1	1	1

One other point I wish to draw from the data set that I assembled through my research among Kenyan women artists is that nearly all the university degrees were garnered in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, including four of the five doctoral degrees, earned by Mshai

Mwangola, Suki Mwendwa, Joyce Nyairo, and Anne Mungai who all brought their knowledge and advanced degrees back to Kenya to inspire their fellow Kenyans. Only Elizabeth Orchardson-Mazrui earned her doctorate earlier, but she too is an inspiration to many female visual artists.

Elaborating further on the issue of Kenyan women attending university, my data also suggests that women artists and cultural workers who support relevant art networks attended Kenyan and international universities in almost equal numbers. Women associated with my snowball sampling obtained 26 Kenyan university degrees –from either University of Nairobi, Kenyatta University or the United States International University, Nairobi; and 28 university degrees from overseas universities, 15 from the US, 9 from the UK, two from South Africa, and one each from Italy, Germany and Uganda respectively. What this suggests to me is that Kenyan women are not only taking the creative economy very seriously and appreciating its potential to grow the wider Kenyan economy in the future just as is being forecast by various United Nations studies and John Howkins who wrote *The Creative Economy: How People Make Money from Ideas*. These enlightened creative women are also taking themselves seriously by contributing artistically to Kenya's current cultural renaissance.

#### *Women Artists Doing Things Together*

Up until now, I have been analyzing Kenyan women's contribution to the current cultural renaissance as individual women who have been chiefly influenced by the quality of education which has allowed them to not only acquire skills but also overcome many of the obstacles that traditionally have disempowered African women. But Kenyan



women like Maggie Otieno have also been building art networks with other like - minded women artists in groups such as Chemi Chemi and Hawa, two of the leading women visual artists groups.

### Chemi Chemi Women

Chemi Chemi (not to be confused with *Chemchemi*, the short-lived cultural organization launched by the South African writer Ezekiel Mphahlele at the dawn of



**Figure 71. Caroline Mbirua, a co-founder of Chemi Chemi Women Group**

Kenya's Independence and funded, according to Anthony Kwame Appiah, by David Rockefeller) was started by a group of women artists associated with Kuona Trust in 1999.

Dissatisfied with the way they believed the Kuona management was discriminating

against women and favoring only a few male artists who got all the opportunities Kuona

advertised as "available to all," the core members of Chemi Chemi women decided to band together to look for opportunities of their

own. "We joined Kuona because we were promised so many

things, including art materials, which we never received," said Caroline Mbirua, who

started up Chemi Chemi together with five other Kuona women, namely Maggie Otieno,

Mary Ogembo, Beatrice Njoroge, Asha Hassan, and Veronica Mwonge. Caroline

elaborated:

We didn't like the favoring of only a few guys who were always the ones picked when there was a workshop or residency that any Kuona member could have gone on. But we were stunned to discover how unwelcome our organizing efforts were when we presented Kuona with a proposal for our running women's art projects



**Figure 72. Beatrice Njoroge is also a co-founder of Chemi Chemi Women**

in Kajaido (rural Kenya) and Dandora (a Nairobi slum). We didn't know we'd be perceived as a threat, but Rob (Burnet) rejected our ideas outright. So we went ahead on our own. We got money from the Ministry of Culture and our members held a successful workshop and an art exhibition of rural women's art in 2001. (Mbirua 2010)

Maggie Otieno said Chemi Chemi was also meant to help women artists to help themselves.

We also came together to spur each other on to apply for the workshops we weren't getting access to through Kuona. We also were helping each other to build up our CVs since we realized no one was going to help us but ourselves. (Otieno 2009)

And while Chemi Chemi is no longer active, Maggie says she still feels that the incentive she got from the group helped her to get where she is today. She has been to workshops in the US and all over the region, to West, South and North Africa. "It was our group that gave me the courage to apply for all of these opportunities," she said. The other members also said they benefited from the mutual support they received through Chemi Chemi. "The problem was that in 2001, three of our members got pregnant and another two left the country, so when I got back from maternity leave, I found the group had effectively dissolved," said Caroline Mbirua. Nonetheless, the experience of creating that women's network has stuck with all the women, all of whom have subsequently participated in women's workshops both in Kenya and overseas.

Since the 1990s, workshops organized exclusively for women have been organized at Paa ya Paa in 1987 by Phillda Njau, at the Nairobi National Museum in 1995 by Wendy Karmali, and at Kuona Trust led by Irene Wanjiru in 1998. The 2001 Bush Glass women's workshop run at Kitengela Glass Works and led by Nani Croze was so successful it resulted in all the participants joining hands to construct a 12 foot tall

bricolage woman made out of recycled glass, scrap metal, spare car parts and cement. The sculpture stands today at the front of Nairobi's oldest public hospital, Kenyatta Hospital. The group that made it included Nani Croze, Mary Ogembo, Tabitha wa Thuku, Maggie Otieno, Danda Jaroljmek and Preema Shah. "It's a wonderful statement about what women artists can do when they work together," said Nani Croze who founded Kitengela Glass in 1979 and has been recycling broken glass bottles into works of art ever since. One of the last artists workshops that Kuona managed to hold prior to donor funding running out was a women's workshop organized by Danda and held in 2006, attended by Mbirua, Ogembo, and Otieno as well as by MaryAnn Muthoni, Rachel Wangari and Esther Mukuhi. Several women from outside Kenya also attended including Egyptian artist Reem Hassan. "We got very close to Reem so she invited Mary (Ogembo) and me to a women artists "atelier" that she organized in 2008 in Alexandria, Cairo. We went and found 42 women artists coming from all over the world," said Mbirua who noted that almost half the women artists who attended the 'Ateliers' were Egyptian. The rest came from Russia, Turkey, U.K., Pakistan and Bangladesh. And from Africa, they came from South Africa, Ethiopia, Tanzania, Ghana and Kenya.

Talking about the value of women's networking, Caroline Mbirua said that beyond the women's workshop of 2008, the connection between herself and Reem has already proved beneficial to a whole range of Kenyan artists, not just women, who are looking for new venues for exhibiting and selling their art.

Reem contacted me early in 2010 and told me an Italian curator, Antonio Manfredi, was coming to Kenya wanting to buy Kenyan art, which he did. We were able to contact lots of local artists who met him at the GoDown. Now their

art is in a Naples museum either in the permanent collection or on commission. (Mbirua 2010)

### Hawa Women

According to Lydia Galavu, the founder mother of the Hawa Women group, when



**Figure 73. Hawa Women, Nancy Wangari, Dorcas Omari, Lydia Galavu and Roseta Makali**

Hawa, meaning ‘Eve’ in Kiswahili, was first formed, the women who started it felt they were at an advantage over Chemi Chemi since none of them were members of Kuona Trust. “We could see what a

struggle those women were up against, working inside Kuona, and we didn’t want any part of it,” said Galavu

who had just completed a masters degree in Gender Studies when she started Hawa together with Margaretta Akinyi and Dorcas Omari in 2000. In a sense, Hawa women had the luxury of learning from Chemi Chemi’s challenges. However, both women groups came head to head with Rob Burnet who they both claim obstructed their plans and apparently saw their groups as a threat to his power base. Hawa women’s experience was especially poignant. According to Hawa co-founder Lydia Galavu, who was promoted to chief curator at the Nairobi National Museum in August 2010:

Rob had moved to the Ford Foundation by the time we wrote our funding proposal for a fully-equipped women’s studio, which the head office of Ford in New York approved for \$800,000. How Rob had the power to veto our proposal and refuse to give us our funding, we will never know. Rob told us we had to organized small scale women’s workshops rather than established a complete women’s studio. We opposed his plan, but in the end, we ran a series of rural women workshops with funding from the German foundation Heinrich Boll, which were tremendously successful. (Galavu 2010)

Hawa was able to squeeze a few thousand from Burnet from the Nairobi office of Ford; however even those funds came to an abrupt halt after *The Daily Nation* ran the story in 2004 that quoted Lydia and her colleagues, explaining how Burnet had impeded their Hawa women's project. "He wanted a public apology from us, but we refused to give it," said Dorcas Omari. Lydia added:

There's no doubt that he found us a threat, but we don't believe it was an issue of gender; we believe it had to do with money, funding and power. He saw us as being in competition for funds that he wanted. At the same time, we believe he stole our ideas when he established the GoDown since most of the ideas in our funding proposal for the Women's studio are included in the GoDown design. (Galavu 2010)

Today, both Hawa and Chemi Chemi women are in a state of suspended animation although members of both groups claim their networks are not dead. Indeed, the groups they got going in 1999 and 2000 respectively have inspired many younger Kenyan women and fueled Kenyan art networks with not just qualified women artists but the courage to stand up to male-dominated power structures and refuse to comply with corrupt institutions that they believe do not have the interests of Kenyan artists at heart.

#### *Transnational Women Artists*

One of the big benefits that women groups like Hawa and Chemi Chemi have offered other women artists is knowledge about how to plug into global networks, be they art networks such as the Triangle Arts Trust or donor networks such as those that have funded sites like Kuona Trust and the National Museums of Kenya. As such, Kenyan women have learned lessons how not to simply complain about not getting opportunities, but more positively, how to assert themselves constructively and create new opportunities for themselves. One of the most significant lessons that women artists have learned is

how to find ways to attend workshops, residencies and conferences outside the country.

“People claim that Kenyans are more cosmopolitan than a lot of other Africans, and some feel this is an insult, but we don’t,” said Tabitha wa Thuku who organized her own one woman exhibition in Milan in 2009, which she says was very successful. Tabitha has also exhibited in Greece, Hong Kong and Tanzania. Other women artists who have plugged into transnational art networks and art worlds include the following:

Table 24. Transnational Kenyan Women Artists

<b>Artists</b>	<b>Where To?</b>
Joy Mboya	US, Australia
Margaretta Akinyi	USA, UK
Asha Hassan	France
Rosemary Karuga	Uganda, US
Vijaya Khalyn	UK, India
Ciru Kimani	UK
Beth Kimwele	UK
Miriam Kyambi	US, Mexico
Ato Malinda	Denmark, US, Cameroon
Caroline Mbirua	Egypt, Tanzania
Jacque Munene	US, UK
Theresa Musoke	US, UK
Wangechi Mutu	US, Germany
Mshai Mwangola	US, UK, Pakistan
Rahab Njambi	Uganda
Rebeka Njau	US, UK, Tanzania, Uganda
Beatrice Njoroge	US, Zambia
Judy Ogana	US, Sweden
Mary Ogembo	Ghana, UK, Egypt
Elizabeth Orchardson Mazrui	UK, US
Purity Serewa Kinaiyia	SA, UK
Anne Muthoni Turugah	Tanzania
Tabitha Wa Thuku	Italy, Greece, Hong Kong
Annabelle Wanjiku	Germany
Camille Wekesa	Italy, UK, Qatar, Indonesia
Lydia Galavu	UK

Rosemary Karuga	Uganda, US
Patricia Njeri	US, UK, Tanzania, Uganda
Magdalene Odundo	UK, US.
Maggie Otieno	SA, Nigeria, Algeria, UK
Chelenge Van Rampelberg	Belgium, Uganda
Irene Wanjiru	India, UK

*Kenyan Renaissance Women Artists*

Finally, I stated at the outset of this chapter that I would try to place the Kenyan women artists within an historical context, trace their transformation since the 1950s up to the present, and attempt to identify specific factors that I felt were instrumental in the shift in the Kenyan cultural scene, from women artists' invisibility to their dynamic presence. Clearly, advanced education has played a critical role in empowering women artists to emerge and take her place in the current stage of cultural renaissance. Women organizing into pro-active groups like Hawa and Chemi Chemi has also been an effective means for some women artists to move forward into art networks that have tended to be male-dominated and insensitive to women's needs to be taken seriously and treated equitably. I have not detailed all the constraints that African women have historically faced, primarily because those obstacles are often enumerated, and in this chapter I preferred examining the factors that have empowered women artists and enabling them to work together with other women cultural workers in constructing art networks that are both local and transnational. In conclusion, I can only reiterate that I see contemporary Kenyan women artists as both harbingers of the African renaissance and healers who are helping Kenyans to restore their sense of identity and dignity which Western colonialism worked so hard to remove.

## CHAPTER NINE

### CONCLUSION

Formerly marginal to the mainstream, African art has gone through a career trajectory in which it is no longer relegated to ethnography (or natural history) museums, but is assigned domicile in art museums instead... Indeed, African art works have become...prized possessions. Zolberg (1997:64, 53)

This study started from the premise that there is an African Renaissance underway, and it is most visible in Kenya in the cultural resurgence of the visual arts which has unfolded since Independence and accelerated in the last decade. There has been much discussion about an African renaissance in South Africa; and West African arts are increasingly being recognized as the space from which modern artists like Picasso and Giacometti drew their inspiration to develop first the Fauvist, then the Cubist, and finally, the full blown modern art movement. But East Africa has not been widely recognized for its cultural productivity, either by Western or African art scholars and historians.

This study has sought not only to defend the perspective that indeed there is a renaissance underway in Kenya as evidenced by the outpouring of artistic activity, especially in the Nairobi art world; but also that this renaissance or cultural resurgence has been largely fueled by the emergent cultural practice known as *jua kali*. Up until now *jua kali* has mainly referred to artisanal and informal sector labor and laborers, such as



metal workers and auto mechanics. But by broadening the definition of this elastic term (which according to economist Kenneth King, has been evolving in meaning since the 1970s) to include artists not only artisans, I have argued that *jua kali* artists display qualities similar to those seen among itinerate artisans that sociologists like Harper and anthropologists like Levi Strauss write about: they are adaptive, innovative, imaginative and entrepreneurial. They ‘make do’ with the few material resources at their disposal, and they have been ingeniously creating new contemporary forms of Kenyan art since the 1950s when two different strains of *jua kali* artists went to work: One graduated from Makerere University’s Margaret Trowell School of Fine Art, such as Rosemary Karuga, Gregory Maloba and Louis Mwaniki; the other got started sculpting in the forests straddling Mount Kenya during the Mau Mau war of resistance against British colonialism. Samwel Wanjau is the chief proponent of this latter form of “makeshift creativity” that *jua kali* artists practice much of the time.

I defended my position on the basis of more than 200 one-on-one interviews with Kenyan artists, curators, patrons and supporters of Kenyan art networks. Participant observation of artists at work in their networks, studios, exhibitions and various *jua kali* sites out of which they work was supplemented with archival research that led me increasingly to appreciate how essential it was to amplify the work of Kenyan contemporary artists in order to set records straight historically, culturally and even politically. First hand interviews with early cultural workers such as Elimo Njau and Samwel Wanjau needed to be collected before these living treasure troves of information and experience passed from our midst. Their eye witness accounts of the early years of

post-Independent cultural activities needed to be collected in order to ensure that the truth be told, or at least their version of the truth, given that many points of Kenyan contemporary art are already being contested. Several published accounts of contemporary Kenyan art history offer partial or inaccurate interpretations of what has transpired in the years before, during and after Kenya's Independence. For instance, there was a bee hive of cultural activities at Paa ya Paa Art Center in the late 1960s when artists like Wanjau and Mwaniki, Rosemary Karuga and Theresa Musoke were exhibiting regularly in Nairobi's city center. Yet today, Gallery Watatu which opened three years after Paa ya Paa is often identified as Kenya's first commercial art gallery, which it is not. Neither is Paa ya Paa, since there were galleries established earlier than PYP, such as The Sorsbie, The New Stanley Gallery and even the Njau Art Studio. Thus, I felt compelled to include an introductory chapter on Kenyan art history to not only satisfy my 'sociological imagination' by putting this art into an historical context, but also to respond to a request I heard frequently from young Kenyan artists who wished they had a better grasp of what came before 21<sup>st</sup> century Kenyan art.

Then because my argument is that *jua kali* is the emergent cultural practice that has had a catalytic influence on Kenyan contemporary art, I chose to show how that practice operates: By devising a '*jua kali* cultural diamond', I defined four explicit areas, serving as points of the diamond, that historically have posed problems for *jua kali* artists: finding affordable space, art materials, skills training, and exhibition sites wherein to market their art. Each of these four points has posed major challenges to local artists but I have argued that it is their ability to devise ingenious *jua kali* strategies for

overcoming these hurdles or challenges that has proved just how resourceful and resilient the Kenyan contemporary art scene is today.

Working within their respective art networks has invariably proved to be a central strategy for success among *jua kali* artists, which is why I utilized the *jua kali* cultural diamond to ‘dissect’ eight separate Nairobi-based art networks and examine how each one handles the four issues or diamond points that I identify. My choice of the eight was based on my desire to interrogate two sets of art networks, the first four founded by indigenous African artists, the second four founded by expatriates.

Some may find this classification problematic, but given Kenya’s colonial history I found it useful. For while the term ‘cultural wars’ might not seem directly relevant to the Kenyan context, certainly the dominant narrative related to Kenyan art has historically been controlled and defined by expatriates. This has been true throughout the colonial period when Africans were rarely exposed to art education and their indigenous cultural practices were largely deemed heathen or primitive or both. Since Independence, art education only became an integral part of the national schools curriculum in 1985. Before that, it was available at the university level from 1969 and in select primary schools, but if one didn’t make it to university, obtaining skills training in the arts was an ad hoc opportunity that aspiring Kenyan artists often had to struggle to obtain. At the same time, as increasing opportunities opened up for Africans to study abroad, that transnational experience became a decisive factor as the skills obtained were frequently transmitted to others through various art networks. The case of Shine Tani, the seventh grade dropout is an excellent case in point: After he won a German arts award which took

him to five European countries to galleries, museums and universities, he came straight home and shared much of what he had learned with members of his Banana Hill Art Studio, a network of young unemployed men and women whose life careers were transformed by what they learned from Shine.

Meanwhile, the fourth point of the cultural diamond, the exhibiting and marketing of Kenyans' artworks has proved to be the most challenging issue of all, since Kenyan artists have never created "art for art's sake". The vast majority of *jua kali* artists have gone into the field of fine art with an entrepreneurial ambition in mind. For instance, an artist like Wanjohi Nyamu read about Kuona Trust providing free skills - training to aspiring artists in the local press, and that was why he came down from his rural home to the capital city, explicitly to get the training he hoped would earn him a livelihood. He had an artistic inclination, but like the majority of *jua kali* artists, he did not have the financial means to attend an art college or university. Kuona Trust enabled Wanjohi and other Kenyans to attend artists' workshops run by both fellow Kenyans and visiting expatriate artists, which were quite beneficial.

But art networks like Kuona Trust have not been aggressive marketers of contemporary Kenyan art, which has compelled the artists to get out and market their own art work. Finding new venues wherein to exhibit their art has proved challenging, particularly when artists prefer spending their time being creative rather than scouting out new sites to exhibit and market their art. But this practice has been one more dynamic dimension of *jua kali* ingenuity that has allowed the Nairobi art world to come alive as artists insist their work be seen in banks, malls, churches and hospitals as well as in up

market restaurants and hotels, on public service vehicles (*matatus*) and on multi-story walls-both inside and out. Marketing of Kenyan art has increasingly become transnational, not just local, as *jua kali* art networks have found that one of the best ways to break out of the neocolonial bind that still lingers locally among middlemen who would like to retain control of the Kenyan art scene, is to go global!

Going global is a practice in which Kenyans have been involved well before 1960 when the father of President Barack Obama together with the Nobel laureate Wangari Maathai and others joined the John F. Kennedy/Tom Mboya Airlift to attend universities in the United States. Artists like Gregory Maloba were actually traveling to the UK as early as the 1950s, but as I explain in this study, the vast majority of Kenyan artists who have traveled and studied abroad have mostly done so in the last decade or two. The timing is such that I have argued transnational travel and education are factors that have contributed to the current Kenyan renaissance. In this regard, the Internet has also played a critical role in accelerating Kenyan artists' involvement in global flows, with their joining what Appadurai calls the *ethnoscape* to transit around the world, contributing to the global *mediascape* as their art receives wider recognition both locally and transnationally, and it becomes part of the *ideoscape* that embodies the concept of renaissance within the African context. Kenyans' participation in the global *technoscape* just recently received a remarkable boost when, in June 2009, fiber optic cables finally reached the country, thus speeding up locals' involvement in marketing and exhibiting their work online, either through social networking sites, such as Facebook or through their own blogs or websites.

But even before the speed of online communication was accelerated with the introduction of fiber optics cables to Kenya, *jua kali* artists were exploring the potential of the Internet to market their work. Until quite recently however, they were still depending on outsiders to serve as the webmasters controlling the exposure of their art online. This is changing gradually, leading to *jua kali* artists also joining in the *financescape* as well.

One of the most remarkable dimensions of Kenya's own *financescape* is *Mpesa*, the mobile money system that was first invented by a Kenyan to enable cell phone users to transmit cash all over the countryside through their mobile phones. It is an innovation that is currently being experimented with elsewhere in the world, often without reference to Kenya. But the creation of *Mpesa* (the word means 'money' in Kiswahili) is one more *jua kali* invention that reveals the entrepreneurial acumen of Kenyans. I know many *jua kali* artists hope that one day *Mpesa* or mobile money will 'go global in order to facilitate their participation in the global art marketplace. They anticipate a time when they will be able to control the flow, exposure and sale of Kenyan art without interference of middle men.

Within this study, I have sought to test the utility of my *jua kali* cultural diamond to understand which art networks have been most effective in supporting Kenyan artists in their quest to not only create and exhibit their work, but also to generate a dynamic art world wherein artists can thrive. What I found was that the art networks that were most effective in helping artists meet their most basic needs were also seen the most successful commercially. And what the data clearly showed is that the indigenous art networks are

more effective in meeting artists' needs than the expatriate established networks. The most obvious reason for this is because the African artists themselves created their social networks *jua kali* style, such that those networks were and still are rooted and grounded in the artists' expressed needs. In contrast the expatriate established networks might provide for one or two of artists' needs, but because the agenda of those networks relates not so much to the artists' needs as to the expatriates', these networks have remained flawed and only minimally successful.

For instance, out of the four expatriate established art networks, only two provide space for *jua kali* artists to work, and even that space is limited and relatively costly. In contrast, space is something that is shared freely among the four indigenous art networks. By definition, *jua kali* refers to working in the open air under the hot sun, and historically it also referred to working free from formal licensing practices or rents.

As far as art materials are concerned, none of the expatriate networks provide materials for the artists with a few exceptions. For instance, Ruth Schaffner handed out materials to promising *jua kali* artists at Gallery Watatu, but her giving was sporadic, not systematic; and Kuona Trust claimed at the beginning that it would provide art materials, which artists who were present at the outset said was a practice that lasted approximately two weeks. After that, artists were told to bring their own supplies. The other caveat is when Kuona, GoDown or RaMoMA would occasionally run an 'international workshop' which was donor funded; then artists might get materials. Otherwise, indigenous art networks, such as Maasai Mbili and Banana Hill Art Studio, practice a policy of sharing what few materials they have. Paa ya Paa practices a similar policy only there was a more

self conscious focus from the outset (as a result of Njau's art education training) to encourage artists' usage of local materials, thus enabling them to be self sufficient from the start. And *matatu* artists tended to have their materials supplied by the lead artist on a daily basis until a vehicle was completely made over, both inside and out.

Skills - training is again an area in which expatriate –established art networks provided only when they obtained foreign donor funding. The one exception to this rule relates to Ruth Schaffner who mentored *jua kali* artists on an ongoing basis at Gallery Watatu, and towards the end of her life she began running regular training workshops for artists out of her own pocket. In contrast, indigenous art networks tend to provide ongoing training and mentoring to fellow artists on a 24/7 basis. Elimo Njau continues to do it whenever young aspiring artists show up at his front door. The same is true at Banana Hill and at Maasai Mbili where artists are ever assisting one another. And at the *matatu* art sites, a slightly more business-like atmosphere prevails since the chief artist is professionally responsible; but aspiring *matatu* artists are still welcome to come and apprentice until they can prove their worth.

Finally, the most successful marketing networks among the expatriate sites will always be Gallery Watatu under the leadership of Ruth Schaffner. Her knowledge and experience in the transnational art world has never been matched, although RaMoMA was coming close to it under Carol Lees, who left the Museum at the end of 2009 to reactivate her own One Off Gallery, which is currently doing well marketing contemporary Kenyan art online and transnationally. What is unfortunate is that once Ford Foundation funding was terminated and Lees also left, RaMoMA no longer could



sustain itself. The Museum closed down December 1, 2010 after more than a year of struggling to stay afloat. Meanwhile, The GoDown has a brilliant fundraiser in the Kenyan woman Joy Mboya who continues to attract donor support for the concept of assisting Kenyan *jua kali* artists. Unfortunately, the artists claim that few of those funds trickle down to serve their interests or meet their needs. The one expatriate established art network that does a relatively good job assisting the artists is Kuona Trust, although artists still complain the Trust falls down as far as marketing is concerned. When the resident artists were surveyed by the Dutch donor Hivos in February 2010, artists said the best thing about Kuona was the companionship shared among artists that worked on site. Otherwise, they paid hefty rents to remain at Kuona and no more than 25 to 30 artists can find space at the site. Nonetheless, Kuona also has an excellent fundraiser director in Danda Jaroljmek who, with Carol Lees, has attracted a British patron, the co-founder of Virgin Airlines, Robert Devereux who in July 2010 announced he was committing four million British pounds to an African Art Trust to assist artists from all across the region, including Kenya.

Meanwhile, the indigenous art networks seem to feel keenly about being self sufficient and not getting trapped into relying for survival on foreign donor funds. They display a heightened sense of self reliance, and are conscious that neocolonialism is not a path they care to travel ever again. Paa ya Paa has had the hardest time in this regard since it was the earliest African-owned art gallery and in some respects, it was “ahead of its time” in so far as local patrons of the arts were relatively few in the early post-Independent period. The only indigenous art network that does not have a problem with

marketing is the *matatu* art network, since their ‘mobile galleries on wheels’ are promoting their art works on a daily and hourly basis. Kenyans are cultivating a taste for visual arts through their appreciation of *matatu* art.

The fact that RaMoMA Museum shut down December 1<sup>st</sup>, 2010 might suggest that the renaissance spirit in Kenya is weakening; however I believe that would be the wrong way to read the Museum’s demise; particularly as the very same month, the Nairobi National Museum announced an exhibition of more than 200 works by indigenous *jua kali* artists curated by the Kenyan sculptor-painter and founder of the Hawa Women Group, Lydia Galavu. Just a few months before that, the GoDown embarked on an ambitious cultural project to map all the Kenyan visual artists in Nairobi, which ironically is one of the aims of this study as well. And for the first time, a group of local artists assembled the first *Kenya Art Diary*, combining the utility of a 2011 calendar with a catalogue of leading contemporary Kenyan visual artists. The reality is that RaMoMA and the other expatriate – established art networks, which have historically been dependent on donor funding, have been most affected by the global recession due to dramatic reductions in foreign assistance programs. Fortunately, the local Kenyan economy has been relatively unaffected by the global recession in so far as few Kenyans had bought ‘credit default swaps’ or sub-prime mortgages or Wall Street-designed derivatives. The Kenyan economy that depends on donor funding has been affected; but the Nairobi Stock Market continues to be one of the strongest in Africa today. Kenya is increasingly being recognized as one of the economic powerhouses in Africa, and seen as the ‘economic anchor’ of East Africa. One of the clearest signs of investor confidence in

Kenya in 2010 was the establishment of the African Art Trust. Whether *jua kali* artists benefit from that fund or not remains to be seen, but its establishment is a clear sign that there is increasing recognition of the value and investment potential of contemporary Kenyan art.

So while Kenya continues to have the challenges cited at the outset of this study, such as poverty, disease (HIV-AIDS), corruption and a degree of political instability, it is still the case that an exuberant spirit of renaissance exists in Kenya today, not only manifest in the visual arts but also in other areas of the arts and culture as well. For instance, the Kenyan filmmaker Wahu Kanini won a First Prize for her science fiction short film at the Cannes Film festival in 2010; BBC just completed making the film about a Kenyan called “The First Grader” based on a true story and using a nearly all-Kenyan cast and crew. And the Kenyan photographer Boniface Mwangi won a TED Award (Technology, Education and Development) as did the French artist JR who came to Kenya and in effect emulated *matatu* art (by painting on metal sheets) on rooftops of slum dwellings in Kibera where Maasai Mbili is based. Other Kenyans who are based outside the country are also excelling. For instance, the New York-based Kenyan collage artist Wangechi Mutu won the 2010 Deutsch Bank ‘Artist of the Year’ award and the UK-based ceramicist Magdalene Odundo received a prestigious Order of the British Empire (OBE) in 2008 from Queen Elizabeth II. Meanwhile, Kenyan artists have been on the move throughout 2010, exhibiting everywhere from London and Amsterdam to Johannesburg and Yaoundé, Cameroon, to Shanghai and Copenhagen. So while the cultural productivity of Kenyan artists may not yet be widely recognized in many

transnational art markets yet, it was British-Kenyan art collector Anthony Athaide who observed that Kenyan artists' time is coming: "It may take the rest of the world another decade to fully appreciate what's going on here, but once they do, it's going to be a life changer for the global art world." Hopefully, this study confirms that sentiment.

**APPENDIX A:**

**MAPS**

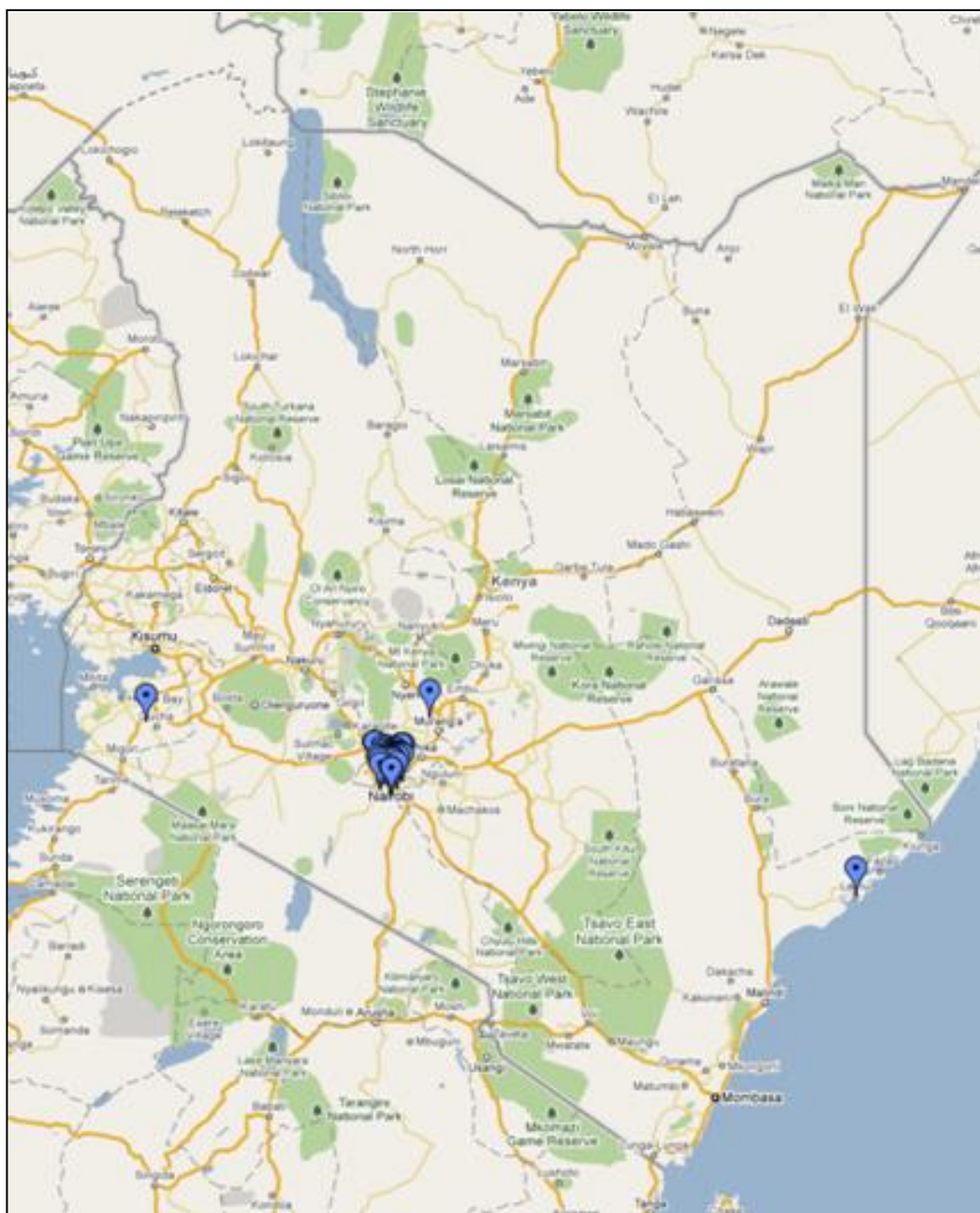


Figure 74. Map 2: Kenya with Jua Kali Art Venue Markers

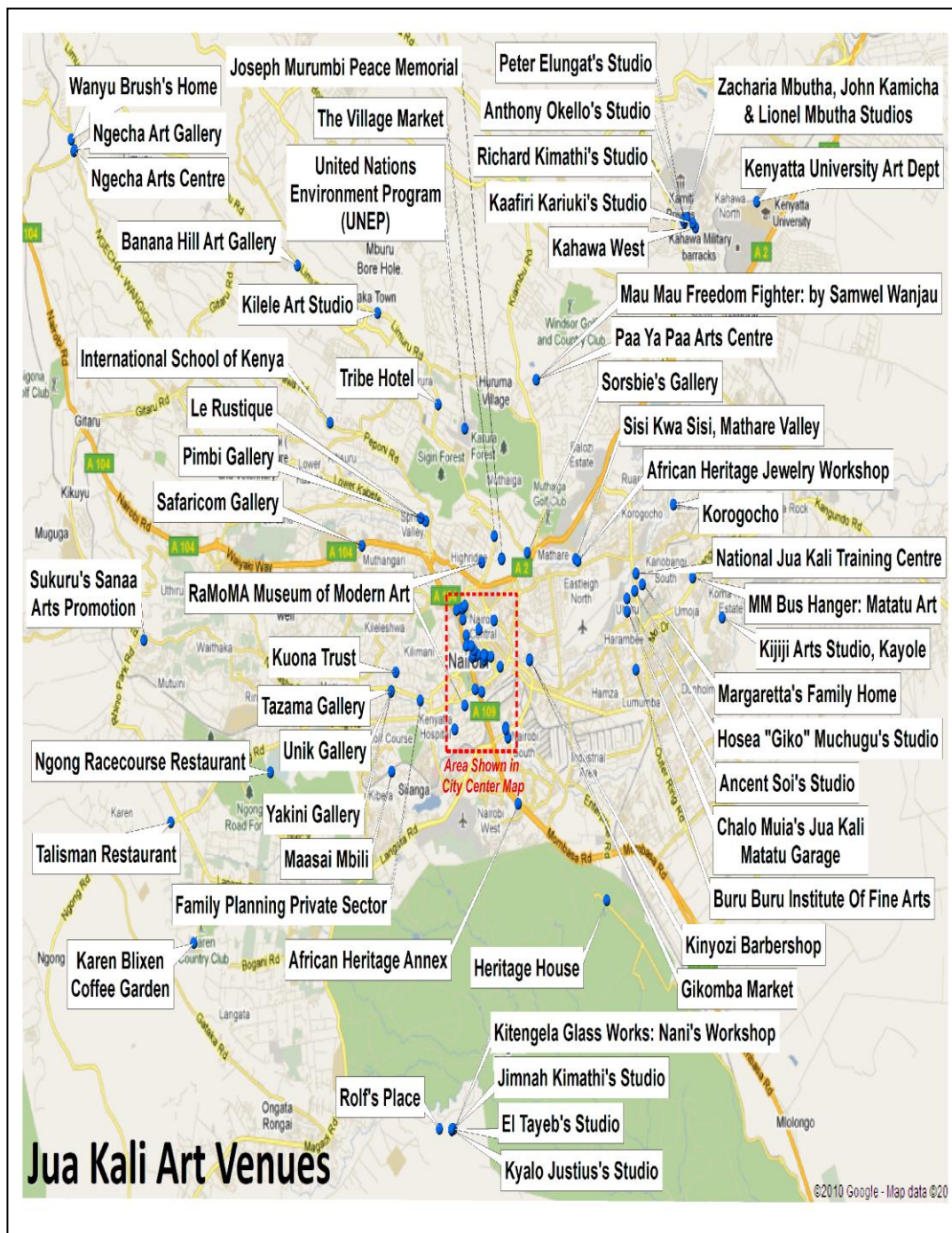


Figure 75. Map 3: Nairobi including Jua Kali Art Venues except those in City Center





Figure 76. Map 4: Nairobi City Center Art Venues



**APPENDIX B:**  
**KISWAHILI TERMS TRANSLATED**

Kiswahili words that are occasionally used in this study include the following:

*Boda Boda*: Commercial motorcycle taxi; the *boda boda* was originally a bicycle ‘taxi’ found operating in the liminal space between Kenya and Uganda, and used to take mostly African passengers across the “no man’s land” between the two countries. The *boda boda* bicycle came to Kenya and became a motorcycle “taxi” around 2003 after a Chinese trader discovered there was a market for cheap easily-assembled motor-bikes and began importing them. Since then, *boda boda* taxis have proliferated all across Kenya, providing employment to hundreds, and possibly thousands of Kenyans who operate at the rural village level, finding their biggest market among fellow African peasants.

*Chemchemi*: The art center started by South African writer Ezekiel Mphahlele at the dawn of Kenyan Independence where Elimo Njau served briefly as Visual Arts coordinator. Chemchemi is short for *chemchemi ya maji*, which literally translated means “fountain of spring water or fresh water” and was used as a metaphor for fresh and original cultural expressions in art, poetry, music, etc.

*Chemi Chemi*: The women artists groups started by women associated with Kuona Trust, who felt women were not getting their do at the Trust and sought to branch out on their own. Group started by Maggie Otieno, Mary Ogembo, Caroline Mbirua, and Beatrice Njoroge among others.

*Chokora*: Street urchin, also referred to as a “parking boy;” homeless child beggars who lived in and around Nairobi’s city center until the Kenya Government cleared them from city as they were seen as an impediment to tourism, the country’s main foreign exchange earner.

*Harambee*: It means “Let us all pull together,” alluding to communal self-help; people working together to achieve a goal that could not be achieved without community participation; e.g. *Harambee* fund raisers are held to raise tuition so a child from the village can attend university; *harambees* are also held if someone is sick and requires expensive mental treatment. In recent times, *harambees* have been corrupted by politicians who conduct *harambees* and then keep the money. *Harambees* were conducted for Elimo and Phillda Njau in 1998 after Paa ya Paa was practically burned to the ground to help reconstruct the historic art center.

*Hawa*: means Eve, the Old Testament reference to woman; the name of the Women Artists group founded by Lydia Galavu, Margaretta Akinyi, Dorcas Omari, Rosetta Makali and Nancy Wangari Ndungu that took part in the 2005 Kenyan Art exhibition in the United Kingdom.

*Jua Kali*: “Hot sun” is the literal Kiswahili translation referring to informal sector economy or to informal sector workers who historically (and even now) labored

outside the formal economy, often without a legal, licensed work site. Originally used to refer to unlicensed auto mechanics and metal workers, the term has gradually been applied to all sectors of the informal economy. When a colonial refers to something or someone as *jua kali*, the term has a derogatory connotation largely because it is an African whose work is being described; in this study *jua kali* has had the exact opposite connotation since our appreciation is of the innovative, improvisational, ingenious and entrepreneurial style of the worker and the workmanship.

*Kanga*: A colorful cotton rectangular cloth used mainly by women as everything from a skirt, shawl or scarf to a baby carrier, curtain or table cloth. Since 2008, many *kangas* (also known as a *kitambaa*) have carried the stamp of Barack Obama, a man who Kenyans proudly claim as their own.

*Kijiji*: Village; part of the name, *Kijiji* Art Studio, of a new art network situated in the Nairobi slum of Kayole, started in 2009 by artist Michael Wafula to assist unemployed youth cultivate creative skills that they can use to become economically self sufficient. Wafula teaches screen printing (among other artistic techniques), a talent essential in making tee-shirts like those now sold at Kijiji Art Studio.

*Kibarua*: Day laborer, one who works gets hired to work on a day by day basis without benefits or job security. For instance, Wanyu Brush worked for a time as a *kibarua*. The difference between *kibarua* and *jua kali* is that *kibarua* are usually hired collectively to work for an employer on a project such as construction or crop harvesting.

*Kilele*: It means noisy: part of the title of another new art network started by Patricia Njeri Ndungu: *Kilele* Art Studio in Ruaka, on the Limuru Road between UNEP, Village Market and Banana Hill Art Studio. Other *jua kali* artists who joined Kilele when it opened in 2010 were Irene Wanjiru, Robert Njoroge, Samuel Njuguna, John Ndungu and Alex Wainaina.

*Kuona*: To see: Artist Simon Muriithi says he suggested the term to Rob Burnet who was looking for a name for the art center he founded in 1995, Kuona Trust.

*Mabati*: Corrugated iron used in temporary housing construction, used either for roofing or as walls or partitions; *mabati* is also used in construction of junk art.

*Manyanga*: A larger version of *matatu*, a 25-seat public service vehicle; the metal “canvas” on which *matatu* art gets painted, stenciled and stickered with iconic and colorful images by graffiti artists like Chalo Muia, Ndegwa Wambugu and others

*Manyatta*: Maasai homes made by Maasai women out of mud, wattle and cow dung.

*Matatu*: Popular 14-seat mini-bus used for public transportation, often covered in colorful iconic pop images relevant to urban everyday life, and especially popular among Kenyan youth as they tend to be equipped with electronic music, colorful lights and/or video systems.

*Mau Mau*: The name given to the Land and Freedom Army that waged an anti-colonial war against British settlement in Kenya from 1952-56, and which is often credited for compelling the British to finally grant Kenya independence in 1963.

*Mbili*: It means two. The art network Maasai Mbili was originally a dyad of two sign writers but has since grown to ten, but M2 attracts friends and aspiring *jua kali* artists

*Mitumba*: Second hand goods, shipped in from all over the world and sold for pennies or prices that poor people can afford.

*Mpesa*: The Kiswahili term for money now is a brand name referring to “Mobile Money” meaning the cell phone system pioneered in Kenya which allows cell phone users to send cash through their mobile phones anywhere in Kenya.

*Mungiki*: Controversial gang of youth who are associated both with extortion and beheading of fellow Kenyans as well as with social welfare and job creation for unemployed school leavers; *Mungiki* youth were involved in the 2007/8 post-election violence and nearly caused a civil war as they went to battle against gangs armed with bows and arrows hired by Kanu politicians to wreck havoc on peasant farmers living in the Rift Valley. Leaders of both *Mungiki* and the Kanu-backed youth are currently under investigation by the International Criminal Court, being charged with “crimes against humanity.”

*Mzungu*: White person, European.

*Nairobi*: The capital and largest city of Kenya. The name "Nairobi" comes from the Maasai phrase *Enkare Nyirobi*, which translates to "the place of cool waters." However, it is popularly known as the "Green City in the Sun."

*Paa ya paa*: “The antelope is rising” in Kiswahili, and the name suggested by co-founder James Kangwana to serve as a metaphor for what he called "serious art that rises to the level of self-expression.”

*Piki piki*: Motorcycle; when used as a commercial taxi is renamed *boda boda*.

*Shangilia mtoto wa Africa*: It means “Rejoice, Child of Africa,” and it is the name of an organization started by Kenyan filmmaker Anne Mungai to help impoverished street children in Nairobi. One *Shangilia* street boy, Charles Ngatia, found his way into the

Nairobi visual art world and currently has shares studio space with six other *jua kali* artists at The GoDown Art Center.

*Sheng*: Kiswahili slang used by urban youth in Kenya, a mixture of Kiswahili, English and bits of indigenous language terms.

*Shujaaz*: It means “heroes” in Sheng; the name for a comic book started by Rob Burnet, with British Council funds, to educate Kenyan youth on social issues.

*Ugali*: A staple food of Kenyan people made with finely ground corn meal known by its brand name *Unga*.

*Watatu*: *Tatu* means three; *watatu* refers to three people; Gallery Watatu was founded by three people, Robin Anderson, David Hart and Jony Waite.

*Wananchi*: The public at large, ordinary working people.

*Wazungu*: More than one white person; plural form of the singular *mzungu*.

**APPENDIX C:**  
**QUESTIONNAIRE**

In relation to the artists interviewed, I asked them a wide range of questions related to their work, their background, their relationships with the Nairobi art world and local art networks, and countless other issues that cropped up in the course of our open-ended conversations. I was able to meet many of the interviewees on several occasions, such as at art exhibitions and workshops as well as in their studios and over coffee, tea or lunch. I interviewed them one-on-one and occasionally in group contexts, as for instance when I was asked to lead a group discussion at Kuona Trust on Kenyan sculpture with a room full of local sculptors from whom I was able to learn as much or more than I could share with them. Among the most consistent questions I asked artists are the following:

What is your favorite art form?

What media do you use?

Where do you get it?

Do you pay for it and if so, how much?

Who taught you to create, starting from early years up to the present?

Did you have formal training or was it mostly mentoring and apprenticeship?

For how long have you studied and practiced your art?

Where do you create, meaning in a private or home studio or in a communal studio space, and if the latter, with whom do you work?

Do you now or have you ever worked out in the hot sun, in the open air? Describe the context and the circumstances of that *jua kali* experience.

What art networks do you work with, if any?

Where do you exhibit your art?

Do you go to exhibitions at RaMoMA, Kuona Trust, Paa ya Paa, the National Museum or any other the other venues where your fellow artists exhibit?

How often do you attend?

Where else do you meet up with fellow artists?

Have you exhibited outside of Kenya?

Have you studied, visited, been awarded an artist residency outside of Kenya?

If so, why did you decide to return to Kenya?

Do you feel there is a lot or a little going on in the visual arts currently?

What evidence do you have to confirm, a little or a lot?

Have you seen a change in the way the Kenyan art world operates since you first started producing art yourself?

Who are your best patrons?

Do local Kenyans buy your work?

Is it true that only tourists and foreigners buy contemporary Kenyan art?

Who are the artists that you work most closely with?

And which ones do you admire most?

How would you like to see the Kenyan art world improve and do more for Kenyan artists?

Unfortunately, the richness of my conversations with the artists could not be fully explored in this study. But what I do hope has been revealed in this study is just how ingenious, inventive and energetic are the current crop of Kenyan artists. Most of them would not claim to be “renaissance men and women;” however through this study of the



role *jua kali* has played in developing art worlds in Kenya over decades, I have tried to show how vividly the spirit of renaissance can be seen in the *bricolage*, the works of contemporary art produced by Kenyans.

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