

THE KUONA TRUST'S ACTIVITIES

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Background

The Kuona Trust is a not-for-profit organisation set up to promote, support, innovate and research contemporary visual art in Kenya and East Africa, by nurturing local talent through international exchange, workshops, residency programmes, exhibitions and innovative outreach projects.

Kuona's mission is to provide skills and opportunities to artists and to make art a valued and integral part of the society.

Kuona is the only Trust of its kind in Kenya and has worked with over 900 artists in the ten years of its existence. It offers visual artists much needed services and opportunities to improve their artistic practice. Kuona Trust is housed within the GoDown Arts Centre, a multi-arts space that brings together various art forms, from the visual arts to dance, acrobatics and music recording.

Overview of the Kenyan Art Scene

The artist

Most artists in Kenya are self-taught and, for many, the only form of training that they have received is through the Kuona Trust's technical workshops programme, which runs skills-based workshops through which artists learn various artistic techniques from well established artists and art teachers. The majority of artists in Kenya are painters and sculptors, but there are also some printmakers. Conceptual artists, or artists working with new media such as video or installation, are rare.

Places for artists to display their work are quite limited especially for contemporary artists. There is a strong crafts and tourist-driven market, and there are many spaces that cater for this. However, for contemporary visual artists, creating original artworks, the spaces are few and far between.

The galleries

Gallery Watatu is one of the oldest of the galleries devoted to contemporary visual arts. It was a highly successful space for painters, sculptors and printmakers in the 1980s and most of the older generation of artists owes much of their exposure to this space. However, in recent years it has lost something of its prominence, though it still attracts art buyers and collectors. The founder, Ruth Shaffner, used to finance the artists she showed in the gallery, enabling them to purchase materials and make work, which she would then buy and put up for sale in the gallery or show internationally.

The Rahimtulla Museum of Modern Art (RaMoMA), is currently the leading art gallery in Nairobi and Kenya, as a whole. It is donor-funded (Contemporary visual art in Kenya is very concentrated in the capital city, Nairobi, and one of Kuona's goals is trying to reach the provinces outside Nairobi to tap the creativity and art there. To date, Kuona has run workshops, with public open days, in most of the eight provinces in Kenya). RaMoMA is an active space, with a regular exhibitions calendar that is often booked a year in advance, and shows a variety of painters, sculptors and printmakers.

However, in the five years of its existence, no purely conceptual or installation art has been shown there.

The Gallery of Contemporary East African Art, based at the National Museums of Kenya, Nairobi, has also been a significant space until its closure for renovations, late in 2005. Numerous artists have exhibited in this space, which hosts both group and solo shows. The museum has converted an old colonial building in downtown Nairobi, as an additional exhibition space, but we have yet to see what kinds of exhibition are planned for this space.

Paa ya Paa Gallery, owned by Elimo Njau, a senior Kenyan artist, and one of the older art spaces, used to be a vibrant international art centre in the '60s and '70s, but it burnt down ten years ago and still remains a shadow of its former self. Banana Artist Studios and Ngecha Studios, which are artist-run spaces in the rural outback of Kenya, serve as both working spaces and exhibition galleries. A couple of foreign cultural centres have also been instrumental in showing work, namely, the Alliance Française and the Goethe Institut.

The main difficulty in Kenya is the lack of an informed art audience; the majority of buyers are expatriates, and local Kenyans and Asians are in a small minority. Young Kenyans with disposable income are beginning to buy art, but there are still very few of them. At RaMoMA, for example, Kenyans buy an average of ten works a year, in total.

Kuona's Role: Alternative Exhibitions

The three main spaces, RaMoMA, Gallery Watatu and the Gallery of Contemporary EA Art are all profit-making institutions, with an emphasis on sales. The Kuona Trust, on the other hand, with its non-profit structure, can dare to do exhibitions that do not have a selling focus. This has allowed Kuona to show works that are not necessarily sellable, such as installations and video art.

An alternative approach to exhibiting work that Kuona uses is the "Open Day" format. Open Day usually take place at the end of workshops, and the public is invited in, to view the work in progress and meet, and talk to, the artists. Open days emphasise the process, rather than the product. Artists who take part in the workshops show their completed works and works in progress during this day.

The International Artists Residency, run by the Kuona Trust, also encourages cultural exchange and alternative types of exhibition, by artists working in different media from those to which the public are accustomed. The residencies take place twice a year for three or four artists at a time. Last year, all seven artists in residence worked in installation and video. The goal in inviting these artists was to encourage different approaches to making art and to introduce new media.

The exhibitions organised at the end of the residencies were particularly successful and featured only installation pieces and video art. These exhibitions were particularly well received and drew large and increasingly diverse crowds, who were fascinated by the artwork and turned the opening into a performance, rather than the traditional kind of art event.

Kuona's Role: Alternative Spaces

Knowing that gallery spaces are limited in Kenya and are often alienating to the audience, we have been working with other organisations to hold art shows in alternative, public spaces. These spaces include restaurants, cafés, banks and embassies.

For five years now, the Kuona Trust has displayed work at various branches of the Commercial Bank of Africa. The bank has large glass windows facing the street, and so artworks shown there are visible to the passing public, on some of the busiest streets of the city. Exhibitions at the Royal Netherlands Embassy and the UN building have also been useful for attracting a wealthier audience.

In the last two years, RaMoMA, working with an independent curator, Xavier Verhoest, has begun to display work at a popular chain of coffee houses, 'Java Coffee House' and at a restaurant,

'Le Rustique'. The exhibitions run on a regular schedule and change every month. This has served to place art amongst the general public who would not otherwise attend art openings and exhibitions.

Conclusion: Pushing the Edges of Art in Kenya

Through these programmes and activities, Kuona Trust seeks to educate Kenyan artists, by helping them to improve their practice through training and international exchange and by giving them exposure through exhibitions, alternative art events such as art demonstrations in public spaces, open days and publicity, both in Nairobi and in the provinces.

Kuona also seeks to expand the existing art audience through educational and outreach programmes, placing art in public spaces and collaborating with other art organisations, in visual art, live arts and music.

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