



SYSTEMS TO EMPTINESS  
16 MARCH - 14 APRIL 2022

Shabu Mwangi

Ngugi Waweru

Freshia Njeri

Josephat Kimathi Kaaria

Front cover:

*Wakija Kwetu Watatujua* (When You Come to Our Place, They Will Know Us),  
2022



The Wajukuu Collective has been invited to participate in the 15th edition of documenta (June - Sep 2022). Founded in 1955, documenta is an exhibition of contemporary art which takes place every five years in Kassel, Germany. Curated by ruangrupa, a Jakarta-based artistic collective, documenta 15 is built around the core values and ideas of a lumbung (Indonesian term for a collective rice barn). As an artistic model, the lumbung is rooted in principles of collectivity, communal resource sharing, and equal allocation.

In preparation for Wajukuu's participation in documenta 15, Shabu Mwangi (Kenyan, born 1985) and Ngugi Waweru (Kenyan, born 1987) are presenting an installation that combines structural and architectural elements, considering the tension between indigenous and foreign systems of education, and the eradication of the former in favour of the latter. This eradication results in a traumatised contemporary society, rootless and without an understanding of who we are and where we come from. Cultural heritage, knowledge and identity are important for the wellbeing of all people; it connects us to our land and our ancestral knowledge. The artists believe that it is always possible to learn from the foreign whilst retaining our authenticity.







## NGUGI WAWERU (Kenyan, b. 1987)

Lives and works in Nairobi, Kenya

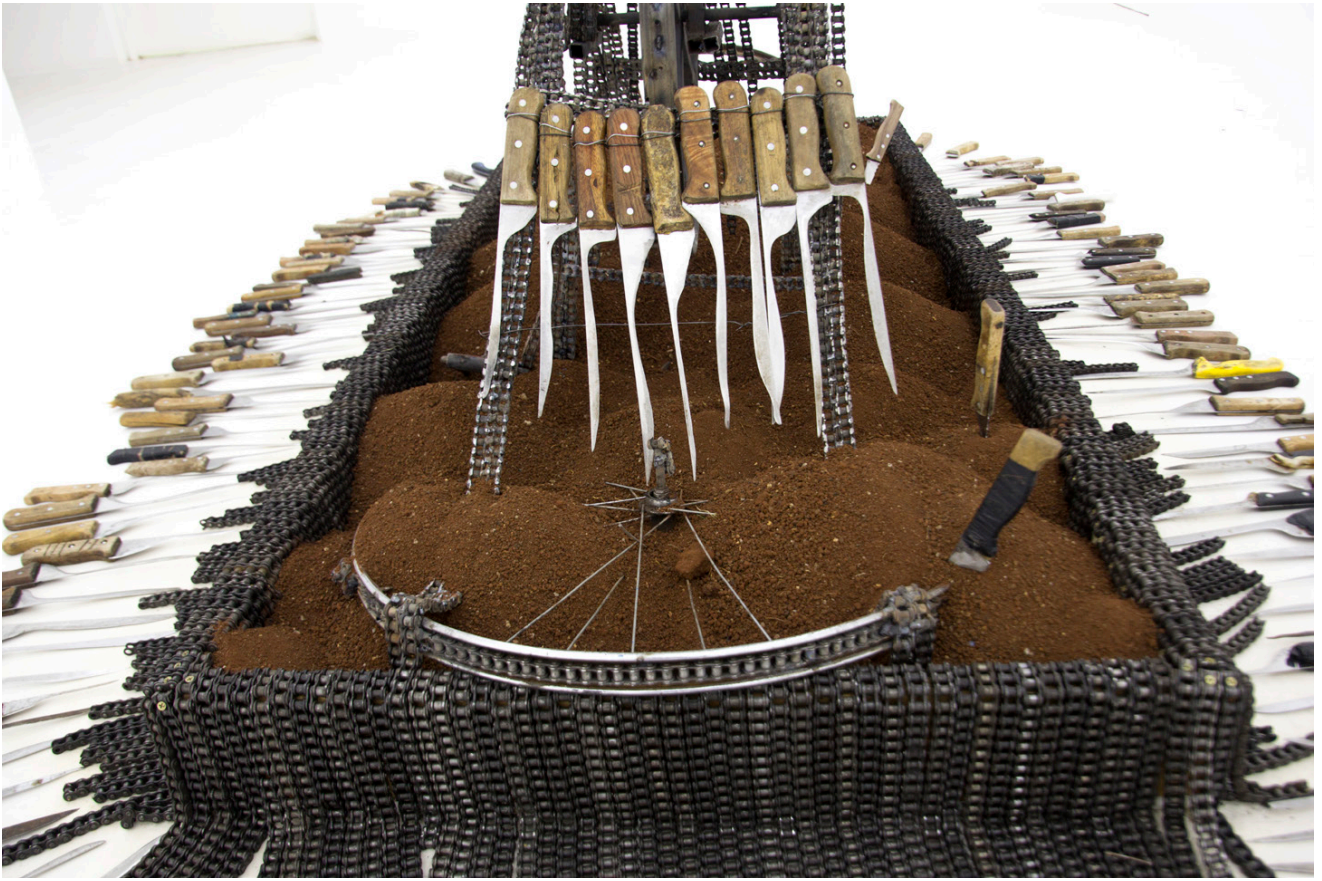
### *Kahiu Kogi Gatemaga O Mwene (A sharp knife only cuts its owner), 2022*

*The title of the sculpture derives from a Kikuyu proverb, 'kahiu kugi gatemaga o mwene' (a sharp knife only cuts the owner) which warns against the possibility of being harmed by one's own actions and decisions. The human quest for advancement in various spheres – technology, education, religion, economy, etc. is also marked by a growing distance between people and the qualities that make us human – our capacity for love, care, kindness, understanding, community. Just as a knife is eroded as it is sharpened repeatedly so that it can better perform its function, so are we, as people made less and less human by the actions we take to adapt and survive within our present society.*

“My work is about the struggles I have experienced and understand, but it also attempts to sew together the everyday truths we all have in common. In digging deep into the well of my own life, I can connect to an underground current of the shared human experience.”

Ngugi Waweru is a multimedia artist born in Nakuru and brought up in Nairobi. Unlike many artists who discover their aptitude for the arts in their primary school years, Ngugi is a self-taught artist. He began experimenting with art after observing his friends practicing art who had already graduated from an art college. His work is comprised predominantly of woodcut prints and mixed-media paintings on canvas.

Having already cultivated a passion and skill in art he resolved to embrace it and become a full-time artist. For Ngugi, art provided an alternative to drugs, crime and unemployment, vices quite common in one of the largest informal settlements in Nairobi, where he grew up. After emerging the winner in the printing category in a community talent search, he was motivated him to attend more art workshops and exhibitions to gain a deeper and wider understanding of art. It was around this time that he and his friends set up the artistic collective, Wajukuu Arts. He teaches children and youths in order to help them foster the same enthusiasm for art that he has. In 2015, Ngugi emerged 2nd runners up in Manjano art competition. Ngugi exhibits regularly both locally and internationally. In 2022, Ngugi Waweru and fellow members of the Wajukuu Art Project will participate in Documenta 15, curated by ruangrupa.



Ngugi Waweru, *Kahiu Kogi Gatemaga O Mwene (A sharp knife only cuts its owner)*, 2022,  
Used knives, motorcycle chains, grinding stone, soil, wooden soil bed,  
230 x 214 x 125.5 cm (L x W x H)



Shabu Mwangi, *Wrapped Reality/Self*, 2022  
Wood, steel support, barbed wire, sisal, dimensions variable



## SHABU MWANGI (Kenyan, b. 1985)

Lives and works in Nairobi, Kenya

### *Wrapped Reality/Self, 2022*

*In this sculpture, a single figure stands in a cage, with barbed wire running down through their body and spilling outwards around their feet. As we make our way through the world, our capacity to act is limited by internal and external factors. Ideas about who we are, learned and received from our families and communities, through education, imposed on us by virtue of where/when we are born combined with socio-economic and political conditions to constrain the way we can be in the world, and how we see ourselves. This work speaks to the individual's struggle to maneuver these entanglements.*

Shabu Mwangi's work follows an ongoing examination of the self. Interested in the effects of structural and historical violence, and different forms of marginalisation on the individual and collective psyche, Shabu's paintings are considerations of societal and cultural fissures. His works look inward, tracing an ongoing personal journey of striving to understand the balance between the two things that guide our actions - love and pain.

Shabu has participated in workshops and residency programs both locally and internationally. His work was most recently featured in *The Sources of Our Seas*, a solo show at Circle Art Gallery in 2021; *East African Encounters*, a Circle Art Gallery group exhibition at Cromwell Place in London in 2021, and *Self Addressed*, an exhibition of self-portraiture by artists from Africa and its diaspora curated by Kehinde Wiley for Deitch Projects LA. Other shows include: *The Man with Two Shadows* (2020), an online exhibition with Circle Art Gallery; *Yawning for Power*, 2019, a solo exhibition with Tilleard Projects; *The Stateless*, solo exhibition at Circle Art Gallery (2018); *Freedom, Flight, Refuge*, Circle Art Gallery 2017; *Art Transposition Nairobi-Kampala-Hamburg*, LKB Gallery, Hamburg; *Pop-Up Africa*, GAFRA, London (2017); *Out of the Slum* (2012), Essen, Germany; He has also participated in residencies in Kenya, Germany, and Italy. In 2022, Shabu Mwangi and fellow members of the *Wajukuu Art Project* will participate in *Documenta 15*, curated by ruangrupa.

## FRESHIA NJERI & JOSEPHAT KIMATHI KAARIA

*Wakija Kwetu Watatujua (When You Come to Our Place, They Will Know Us), 2022*

Metal structure, makuti (palm fronds), black fabric, and sound

Dimensions variable

*This immersive installation makes use of sound to offer a snapshot of what it is like to walk through Mukuru. The visitor is forced to enter the gallery space through a dark tunnel, intended to disorientate and demonstrate the many pathways in Mukuru that are confusing especially unlit at night. The sounds offer a contrast to the outside world, and a transitional moment between the outside world and the gallery space. Walking through the tunnel, the listener receives audio information about a specific place and time before entering the gallery space in which they encounter works that address issues that affect all of us in society in various ways.*

### **Freshia Njeri (Kenyan b. 1988)**

Lives and works in Nairobi, Kenya

Freshia is an artist with the Wajukuu art project. She was taught by the Wajukuu founders and various art workshops held there. With the support, love and discipline that she gained there, she has been using her art making as a tool to express her world and find strength during the process. Working mainly in mixed media, this artwork, *Wakija Kwetu Watatujua* (when they come to our place, they will know us), she found a new way to express her home.

### **Kimathi Kaaria, (Kenyan b. 1992)**

Lives and works in Nairobi, Kenya

Kimathi was the first Kid's club member of Wajukuu and was taught by the founders. He grew up in Lungalunga in Mukuru where life wasn't easy but is slowly changing for the better. He is a painter and a printmaker, making semi-abstract works that reflect his life, relationships with people and how we all have different perceptions of each other. His motivation is the hope that 'tomorrow will be better', he is proud to have come this far and works hard to give back to a new generation of kids by teaching at Wajukuu. He says, 'Wajukuu is a family, we support each other and believe that art can impact people's lives in this community and beyond'.

## Wajukuu Collective (est. 2004)

A registered community-based organisation, Wajukuu's origins go back to 2004, where it began as a group of young artists sharing a common goal: to make Mukuru a place for children to thrive and to use art as a means of empowerment. In Mukuru, their neighbourhood in Lungalunga, Nairobi, the Wajukuu Art Centre has been running a range of art education programmes for local youth that include art classes, mural projects, providing a space for children to develop their talents and express their experiences. Members of the collective have also contributed to this exhibition by constructing the site-specific installations.



Freshia Njeri & Josephat Kimathi Kaaria

Wakija Kwetu Watatujua (When You Come to Our Place, They Will Know Us), 2022

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Dimensions variable

circle art gallery



Wajukuu Art Project is part  
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