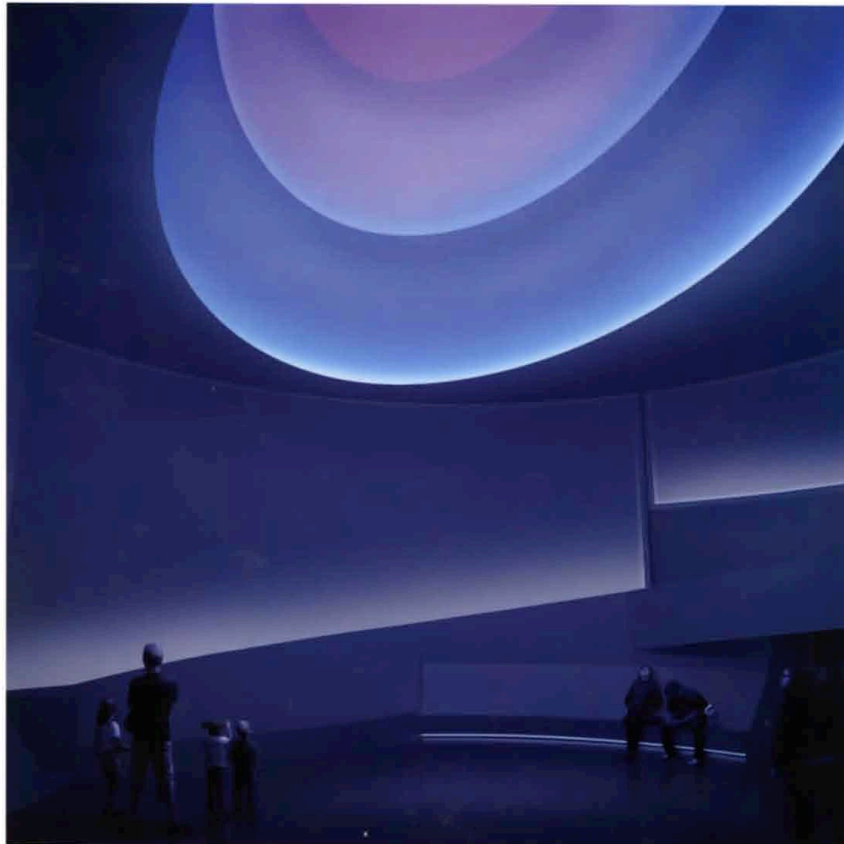


whitewall

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THE DESIGN ISSUE

BJARKE INGELS - LORIS GRÉAUD - JAMES TURRELL - BHARTI KHER

Donoghue, Katy. "Evans Wadongo," *Whitewall*. Summer 2013.

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TO WATCH

EVANS WADONGO

BY KATY DONOGHUE

Last April, Friedman Benda Gallery in New York held a charitable exhibition of solar lamps designed by Evans Wadongo. One thousand lamps lined the walls of the gallery, all available to collect. If everything sold, 20,000 lamps would be donated to rural communities in Africa, providing invaluable aid to people who would have very little access to electricity otherwise. These simply designed, locally made solar lamps dramatically affect communities in terms of economics (saving them from spending money on kerosene), education, and environment.

Wadongo grew up in rural Kenya. To study at night he had to compete with his brothers to work around the one family kerosene lamp. At university he came up with the idea of creating an LED lamp powered by solar energy.

He went on to found Sustainable Development for All-Kenya, which has helped local groups learn how to create more than 27,000 lamps throughout Kenya and Malawi, and is continuing to expand. It is an important example of sustainable design (just good plain design, really) at its best.

WHITEWALL: Can you tell us about making the first lamp?

EVANS WADONGO: I was trying to come up with something that was very simple to make, something where you could find local materials and something that looks encouraging for people to use so it's easy for them to adopt it.

WW: What materials do you use?

EW: We use things like scrap metals, solar panels, and LEDs.

WW: Has the design of the lamp changed since you first created it?

EW: Yes, it keeps on changing because one of the things we do is try to customize the fittings based on the needs of the community. We use communities as our quality control. They can easily tell if this is what they want or this is what they don't like.

WW: Have you seen a clean transition of adopting the lamps?

EW: Yes, basically it's because of the economic factor. For the people who live at the bottom of the pyramid in terms of poverty, anything that makes economic sense to them they adopt. All other benefits in terms of environment, education come second. The most important thing that we talk to them about is that we can lower the amount of money they spend daily on kerosene. That's something you can feel immediately; they can feel the impact immediately because whatever they are spending daily on kerosene they are able to eliminate that expense. And then the other benefits — education, helping their kids to study, even health and environment — come after.

WW: How long do you typically work with a community for?

EW: Basically, we are constantly engaging with

the community, but it takes about six months. And then they are able to lead the projects in their own community. The whole idea is we are able to train people to make them that didn't go to college for design. The simplicity in the design encourages people to come up with their own design.

WW: How have you seen the lamps affect school performance?

EW: We've seen tremendous improvement. We find that kids are able now to perform much better, becoming among the top students in their classes. Enrollment from primary school to high school, we see that the transition rates have gone up in all the regions, which means that there is a direct connection between the lamps and education.

WW: What do you think of displaying the lamps in the gallery?

EW: It makes sense in the unique way in which we make them, the sense that they are handcrafted. It becomes an authentic piece of art — we thought about it that way. The point is that people can feel like the donation is going to help a lot of people, but they have that thing in their house which keeps them constantly reminded that with this lamp, we were able to create an impact for a large number of people. We wanted to keep that connection.

Photography by Andrew Dosvenko, courtesy of Friedman Benda and Evans Wadongo.

WHITEWALL 53

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