

SUFFERHEADS

Ayodeji Rotinwa on Emeka Ogboh



Emeka Ogboh, *Àlà*, 2014, two-channel video, color, sound, 4 minutes.

ONE EVENING THIS PAST FEBRUARY, within the walls of DaDa, an exhibition space on the edge of Jemaa el-Fna, Marrakech’s historic market square, I heard a nostalgic cacophony.

Nostalgic to me, at least.

The noise instantly returned me to Lagos, home to twenty-one million people (myself included) who are always on the move, negotiating, thriving, and suffering in a city the size of which seems insufficient to contain all the life there. I could hear the familiar sounds of chart-topping music blasting from mobile speakers; the radio jingles for wonder drugs that cure cancer and AIDS; the voice of a vendor soliciting customers to buy her dried fish. Most of all, I heard the distinct growls of the city’s famous yellow-and-black buses—the *danfos*—and their conductors shouting out destinations.

This experience was part of *Àlà*, 2014, a video installation by the artist Emeka Ogboh in which the same sets of images are split across a wide screen, cascading into and reflecting one another. For Ogboh, Lagos is an orchestra and he its conductor. The core elements of *Àlà*’s audio track are taken from his ongoing *Lagos Soundscapes*, 2008–, for which he records what he identifies as aural landmarks of the living, shifting history of the city, distilling its sonic architecture into something that can be experienced intimately through headphones in installations or listening booths at galleries, or at some distance through loudspeakers. No matter the method of presentation, the result is the same: immersion.

Ogboh is now based in Berlin, but Lagos is his adopted home. Born in 1977, he moved to the capital after attending the University of Nigeria, Nsukka, in the state of Enugu, located in the country’s southeastern

region. There, he studied fine and applied arts, graduating in 2001. Seven years later, after a media class at the 2008 Winter Academy at the Fayoum Art Center in Tunis, Egypt, with Austrian multimedia artist Harald Scherz, he became interested in sound art, a novel medium at the time (and largely today) in Nigeria. After returning to Lagos, he began to record and curate the city’s sounds.

His career took off around the same time that Lagos’s art scene was starting to build institutional muscle and shape its identity abroad. Two not-for-profit art spaces, where he showed his work early on, were established: the Centre for Contemporary Art, run by the late, great Bisi Silva, and African Artists’ Foundation, founded and helmed by Azu Nwagbogu, who continues to serve as its director. Both institutions, which grew to become pillars of the art world, encouraged artists to create outside the firmly set traditions of sculpture and painting.

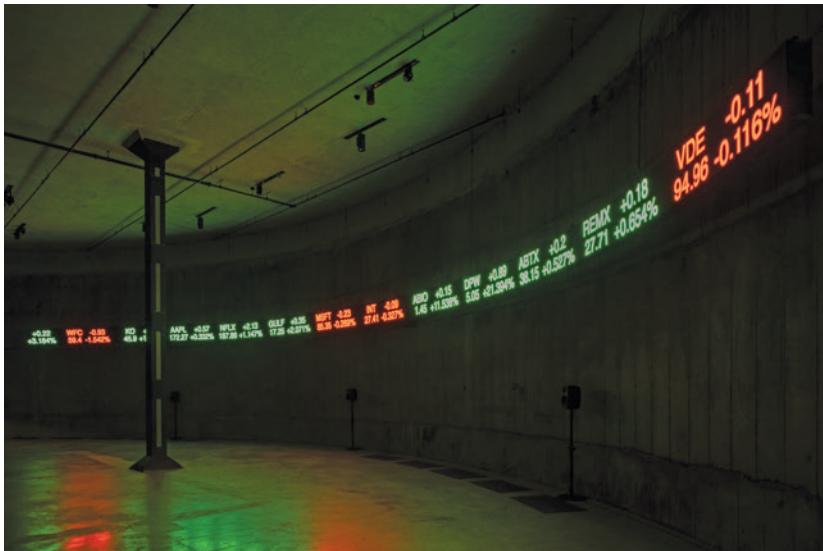
In 2014, Ogboh exhibited at Dak’Art in Dakar, Senegal; at the 2015 Venice Biennale, his work was featured as part of “All the World’s Futures,” curated by the late Okwui Enwezor. Thereafter, he had solo exhibitions at the Smithsonian National Museum of African Art in Washington, DC, and at Tate Modern in London. He also exhibited at Documenta 14, Athens, and was short-listed for the Hugo Boss Prize. What is striking about his achievements is that he accomplished most of them without gallery representation, though he now works with Galerie Imane Farès in Paris.

As critic Massa Lemu has pointed out in his essay “*Danfo, Molue* and the Afropolitan Experience in Emeka Ogboh’s *Soundscapes*,” the artist’s *Lagos Soundscapes* is significant to the history of art by African artists, expanding the legacies of, for example, South Africa’s James

Webb, who manipulates and incorporates sound—the beating of hands on doors, birdsong, heartbeats—into installations that explore the dynamics of communication; and Egypt’s Magdi Mostafa, who probes the relationships among sound, space, and technology, often using “instruments” such as washing machines or industrial bread mixers to create acoustic experiences in site-specific installations that evoke what Mostafa calls the “phenomenological experience of the individual in the city.”

But Ogboh’s work goes further, participating in current debates about sustainable cities and archiving urban space in a time of painful, breakneck flux. For instance, the markets Ogboh has recorded—sounds from which he included in *Market Symphony*, 2015, exhibited in 2016 at the Smithsonian—may soon be no more. They could easily be reduced to rubble by a government hungry to build a megacity and replaced by shiny shopping complexes catering to a privileged few rather than to the masses who depend on the traditional tomato traders, shoe shiners, and fabric sellers. To underscore this point, Ogboh installed the work’s speakers inside the enamel trays used to store food at home, and on which goods are sold in the markets or streets.

Ogboh does little to manipulate the sounds he records, preserving them as they are in the field. This is key to the power of his pieces. In “Afropolis: City, Media, Art,” an exhibition hosted by Cologne’s Rautenstrauch-Joest-Museum in 2010–11, he presented another ongoing series “Lagos by Bus,” 2010–, for which he recorded the sounds passengers might hear as they’re being ferried to their destinations. He makes the experience clear, palpable: One might hear conversations between candy sellers and cigarette sellers, and advertisements for bus



Left: Emeka Ogboh, *The Way Earthly Things Are Going*, 2017, LED display feed of live world stock indexes, sound. Installation view, Tate Modern, London. Photo: Andrew Dunkley. Above: Emeka Ogboh, *Market Symphony* (detail), 2015, speakers, enamelware trays, sound, dimensions variable.

routes booming through bullhorns. In *Verbal Mapping II*, shown in Africa Centre's Infecting the City Public Arts Festival in Cape Town in 2013, we hear a bus driver calling for passengers on one of Lagos's most famous routes. Lemu also notes that the artist recognizes that even urban sounds—"rumbling production machines," "supermarket muzak"—are not neutral but are products of capitalism, and compares Ogboh to the Beninian artist Romuald Hazoumè and the Ghanaian artist El Anatsui, arguing that what Ogboh does to sound is like what the other two do to the "found products of African modernity such as jelly cans and bottle tops."

Ogboh creates installations from other sounds as well. For *The Song of the Germans*, 2015, which he exhibited at the Venice Biennale, he recorded a choir of African immigrants singing the German national anthem in their own languages, including Bamoun, Duala, Ewondo, Igbo, Kikongo, Lingala, More, Sango, Twi, and Yoruba. With that piece, the Berlin resident asks questions about globalization, belonging, and migration. His 2017 installation at Tate Modern, *The Way Earthly Things Are Going*, featured a Greek lamentation song played over an LED display of stock-market indexes, evoking the precariousness of the global economy. Ultimately—and most especially in his plotless, wayward *Soundscape*s—there is no clear composition to comfort a listener, no audible progression, no narrative arc. To a Lagosian, Ogboh's work is charged with familiarity. To an outsider, it's an aural adventure. In "The Progress of Love," 2012–13, a three-venue exhibition that took place concurrently at the Menil Collection in Houston, the Centre for Contemporary Art in Lagos, and the Pulitzer Foundation for the Arts in Saint Louis, he installed an actual danfo at the Menil. "It shifted viewers' experience from the sonic to a more physical interaction with Lagos through its most iconic symbol," he said in an interview with Ugochukwu-Smooth C. Nzewi, a longtime Ogboh collaborator and incoming curator in the Department of Painting and Sculpture at New York's Museum of Modern Art. "I

think it created a more realistic experience of the city."

Although he has not shied away from being overtly political, with the *Soundscape*s, he passes up the opportunity for critique, directly perpetuating the empty, touristic appeal of the danfos as a signifier of Lagos without addressing the dysfunction they represent as a symbol of the government's failure to provide its teeming population with safe and dignified public transportation. Danfos are usually unkempt and barely regulated; they tend to arrive at their destinations only with the assistance of prayer and German efficiency, which helps the buses perform even when they're not particularly well maintained. Furthermore, this informal transit system feeds a violent, state-approved tax system, run by an organized syndicate of Lagosians that collects money from danfo drivers. Surprisingly, it was recently announced that Ogboh had collaborated with Horizn Studios, a premium-travel-luggage-and-accessories company, to create a "limited edition series of luggage and travel essentials inspired by Lagos and its yellow danfo bus." The collection includes suitcases, shirts, and stickers in the bus's signature yellow-and-black: another instance of Ogboh engaging with his subject matter on a merely aesthetic level rather than seizing the moment to say something more.

But in 2017, for Documenta 14 in Kassel, he collaborated with craftBee, a German brewery, to create a special beer, "Sufferhead," inspired by the experiences of migrants in Germany. *Sufferhead* is Nigerian slang and pidgin English for someone who endures negative experiences. Lagosians, by virtue of living in such a crowded city, are natural sufferheads; so are migrants who are made to jump through endless hoops to live and be integrated into a new country. Ogboh subverted the meaning of the word in this work, focusing on the strength and resilience of African migrants: By drinking the beer, a Lagosian would get a taste of home.

In "The City and the Artist's Archival Impulse: A Conversation," Nzewi suggested that even "gifted" painters or photographers might find their work inferior

to Ogboh's: "In all these attempts to capture Lagos, however, none of the artists are really able to evoke the city's intensity or mirror its fluctuations. Lagos's dynamism cannot be captured in one frozen camera shot or in a single painting." Ogboh agrees with Nzewi. He also criticizes painting for being too limiting, for presenting "a singular view of Lagos, shorn of the city's legendary complexity." Arguably, however, representing the city exclusively through its danfos and open-air markets isn't terribly different; in fact, it is the easiest way to describe the place from the outside looking in, as it appears in Western media. Ogboh's chosen medium is certainly more evocative of its people and energies, but the city does have other markers—concerns that might be more complicated to capture. For example, Lagos is a sinking metropolis, alarmingly edging below sea level, facing a very present danger. This subject isn't as splashy as a market, but it raises the question of how an artist like Ogboh might represent it.

Beginning in August, Ogboh will show *Àmà: The Gathering Place*, an immersive installation that weaves together sound, textiles, and sculpture, at the Cleveland Museum of Art. The work will explore the social role of the museum's atrium in relation to the village squares in the Igbo region of southeast Nigeria, where people gather to listen to music and important news or to tell one another stories. Ogboh's *Soundscape*s carry cities to new environments—and audiences to a place that may or may not be familiar. I imagine visitors to the Cleveland Museum are in for an experience that will transport them, as it did me when I stood in that dusty building in Marrakech with my eyes closed—hearing the conversations, honks, and pitter-patter of feet—and quite suddenly found myself at home, though I was thousands of miles away. □

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