

The broken mirror of the Lagos biennale

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The capital of Nigeria, the largest city on the African continent, Lagos is a megalopolis with a frantic development, having grown in 50 years from 1 million inhabitants to 20, receiving every day some 900 new residents. A population and urban boom, largely taken over vast expanses of water, and leading to an ever more significant gap between an extremely wealthy class – found in its luxurious islands or exponential business districts, including the astronomical Eko Atlantic, the largest development in Africa – and a population living well below the level of the greatest level of poverty.

In October 2017, the city of Afrobeat and Nollywood, the chaotic window of a new economic and cultural miracle, gets ready to receive the first contemporary art biennale of its history. Entitled *Living on the Edge*, the event is looking at bearing witness to this paroxysmic situation, by finding inspiration in shantytowns born out of the shortage of housing occurring in the city.

The organizers of the biennale chose to set up the event in a vast disused railway shed, partly squatted by Nigerian families. Artists and squatters thus work with a common purpose on the transformation of the shed into an ambitious exhibition site. But, on the day of the inauguration, the Nigerian Railway Corporation, a national railroad company, starts a round of evictions aiming at the families occupying the premises. Thus ends the utopia of the contemporary art biennale of Lagos like a sinister *mise-en-abîme*, real estate speculation that has property prices soar leaving the organizers of the artistic event attend, powerless, the evacuation, sometimes violent, of the occupiers, the artists and the works of art.

The management of space has become a major stake in Lagos, the overcrowded capital, where several dozens of thousands of people were moved in 2016, chased to the outskirts for lack of means. The shantytowns are razed to give space for luxurious properties intended for the new elite of the country. Far from art and humanity.