

COLLISION

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Art and the City

A new genre of speculative writing created by the Editors of *Evental Aesthetics*, the Collision is a concise but pointed essay that introduces philosophical questions raised by a specific aesthetic experience. A Collision is not an entire, expository journey; not a full-fledged argument but the potential of an argument. A Collision is an encounter that is also a point of departure: the impact of a striking confrontation between experience, thought, and writing may propel later inquiries into being.



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ABSTRACT

This essay offers distance and stillness as means by which to access and understand the dynamism of cities. I reflect on stillness as an unexpected aesthetic within artistic projects that represent urban environments, and as a vital approach to engaging with such artworks. Focusing on Lagos, Nigeria, I consider one photographic series by Abraham Oghobase and one sound work by Emeka Ogboh. I read their work in light of philosopher Jeff Malpas's conceptualization of place as "existential ground." In considering this relational aspect of place, I ruminate on the way distance facilitates the careful looking and listening that connects artist, object, and viewer/listener through stillness.

KEYWORDS

stillness, photography, cities, soundscapes, Emeka Ogboh, Abraham Oghobase

Experiencing Lagos Through Dis-distanced Stillness

Carol Magee



Thinking about place in unexpected ways has been on my mind quite a bit, because my work explores photographic cityscapes by contemporary African artists who investigate emotional, physical, psychological, or philosophical experiences of place. In almost every instance, I engage with this work in a location that is not represented in the pieces at which I am looking. At the photography biennial in Bamako, Mali, for instance, I see photographs of Lagos, Cairo, Sfax, Johannesburg. This distance affords me a possibility for thinking about these places differently than I would if I were immersed in the hustle and bustle of their streets, with myriad sounds and smells surrounding me, the grit of the city on my skin. My distanced reflection on these artistic projects brings me to an unexpected way of thinking about the cities they represent: it brings me to stillness as a concept, aesthetic, and experience vital to a sense of these places.

Stillness is probably not the first thing that comes to mind when thinking about or experiencing cities, for it is in many ways the antithesis of urban environments; stillness is a lack of motion, a lack of noise, a lack of tumult, which cities have in abundance.¹ Nonetheless, a photograph of a city transforms its movements into stillness. The artist chooses a

meaningful spot amidst the dynamism and stands still to take a photo. And the camera inserts a momentary, often unconscious distance between the artist and his subject. Such distance comes from and enables stillness. I realized this when I looked at photographs of Lagos, Nigeria by several different artists, including Abraham Oghobase. In this essay, written from Chapel Hill, North Carolina, I reflect on how I experience Lagos through Oghobase's photographic series *Jam* (2007) and Emeka Ogboh's sound work *Lagos Soundscapes* (2008–present).



Abraham Onoriode Oghobase. *Jam* (Series Installation View). 2007 C-print. Used by permission.

By focusing on objects that seem to ask their audiences to isolate particular senses, visual and aural, I distance myself from the overstimulation of the multisensorial experiences a city offers. This allows

a more refined focus that further textures my understanding of Lagos. Such distanced consideration allows me to perceive an aesthetic of stillness in representations where stillness might seem unexpected. Lagos is, after all, a megacity that has been described with notions of chaos, nervousness, anxiety, suffering, invention, and ingenuity, none of which immediately bring stillness to the fore.²

I come to understand Lagos through stillness because of the relationship I have with these artistic representations of the city. As Jeff Malpas argues, we experience and articulate our existence through place.³ To understand place as an “existential ground” is to understand its relational character, for it is from the place in which we “are” that we relate to the world around us and give meaning to a locale. Indeed, it is the act of relating that is critical here for my consideration of distance, stillness, and the making-present of Lagos. Malpas, exploring the spatial qualities in Heidegger’s conceptualizations of being-in-the-world, notes:

“Dis-tance” [*sic.*] refers to the way in which specific things take on a certain relation to us from out of the larger structure in which they are situated – finding a word I need to check in my reading, I glance over at the bookshelf to find the dictionary, but discover I cannot quite reach it from my chair, so it is brought close even before I take it from the shelf, in a specific way that also allows its distance from me to be apparent.⁴

Malpas follows Hubert Dreyfus, who explains that Heidegger’s use of the hyphen in dis-stance (*Ent-fernung*) emphasizes the “negative sense of *ent*...literally...the *abolishing* of distance.”⁵ Dreyfus elaborates, noting that this abolition in fact brings an object “within the range of...concern.”⁶ At the heart of dis-stance, then, is a reorientation. In abolishing a stance (negating a certain type of relationship we have with something), we open up space to enter into a new or different relationship with it through awareness of both the distance and the relationship.⁷ In this bringing-close, this overcoming of distance, a thing can come into presence, become present.⁸ Place, then, as “existential ground” is significant because it is where “things are gathered and disclosed [presenced].”⁹ Thus, although I am geographically far from Lagos, a distance that might hinder my knowing the city, the city is brought near to me as I relate to it through photographs and sounds of it. Distance is abolished. It is made present, and in that presence I become aware of stillness.

When I first viewed the photographs of *Jam* (see p.43), their subject seemed to be the various people depicted between the jambs of a doorway. Yet, the more time I spent with the photographs, the more the location itself stood out. Each photograph depicts the same doorway. The people change, but there is always the same pock-marked wall, blue light, and assertion "This house is not for sale" scrawled above the door. It is the jam of Lagos's "face me I face you" housing, and the jam of people that inhabit it, that are the subject of this series.¹⁰ By subtly emphasizing Lagos's ongoing problems of inadequate housing and congested urban space, these photos make present this place and the continuous flow of people throughout the city.

Yet the stillness within the photos, the calm of the people depicted in them, elides the chaos that can be Lagos. The overcrowded city is not visible here; the close proximity with one another that marks people's lives is absent. The bodies in the doorway block our access to the interior of this home, maintaining it as a place of refuge in and from the commotion of the city. Here, home offers a place of stillness away from the movement of the city. At the same time, the depiction of different people in the same doorway underscores the movement of people through this place, a place Oghobase himself once inhabited.¹¹ These photographs personalize a broad phenomenon, and reveal how Oghobase *is* in this city. In photographing this place, and in viewing the photographs of it, Oghobase brings Lagos into a "range of concern."

In contrast to the photographic project, the overwhelming aesthetic of Oghob's [*Lagos Soundscapes*](#) is one of movement: people coming and going, vehicles in transit, engines revving, horns honking.¹² Because sound orients us within and to our surroundings, recognizable urban sounds in the multiple pieces that comprise this ongoing work, render Lagos familiar. The duration for which I hear a vehicle or the loudness with which I hear voices opens or closes the space for me, creates a here and a there. But, at other times, Lagos's sounds are not recognizable, and the city seems foreign, yet those sounds still orient me to the city. The sounds, as were Oghobase's visual presentations of the "face me I face you" housing, are linked to specific locations.¹³ Understanding "sound as *situated*" is vital, for listening to these sounds enacts a dis-stancing.¹⁴

In several of Oghob's soundscapes, we are privy to conversations that took place on a bus or in the street. Or, as may happen on a bus, we are subjected to the orations of an individual from whom we cannot

escape. One piece offers for consideration the cacophonous noise of the traffic jams for which Lagos is so famous. Throughout the four minutes of "Monday morning in Lagos" (2010), a child sings – or at least that's what I imagine I am hearing. Not knowing exactly what I am hearing emphasizes my distance from the subject; but at the same time, my prior experiences in African cities allow me to relate to them in *some* way, diminishing my sense of distance from them. In other words, the sounds of Lagos are distanced.¹⁵ They bring the city near to me, it becomes present, even though it is far away. Throughout this piece, the child sings, then stops, several times. In the stillness between her vocalizations, other voices come to the fore. These voices are layered, some further away, others closer. The child starts again, and the layering thickens, making the pauses, the stillness between the verses of her song, all the more poignant. The pause in her animated voice creates stillness in the sounds of the city, even as other sounds continue, denying silence.

I listen to the sounds of the city. I am part of it, situated in it, yet removed from it for there is no interaction. I do not, cannot, speak with the people whose voices I hear; the little girl cannot see the smile her voice puts on my face. Moreover, as Joanna Demers observes, soundscapes encourage listeners to interrogate their listening.¹⁶ I focus on the act of listening, attuning myself to what I am hearing and *how* I am hearing it. Each of Ogboh's pieces conjures a bustling environment that seems to deny stillness; yet, my careful listening suggests that to make each piece, the artist positioned a microphone in one spot, with movement going on around it.¹⁷ Ogboh chose stillness. I become aware of this central stillness as I listen. It becomes part of the aesthetic experience of the soundscape. I hear the non-movement around which all other sounds flow, and I know this stillness, not just as a technical aspect of the making of the piece, but as a vital component in disclosing the presence of Lagos. Indeed, it is from this central stillness that I develop my dis-stanced relation with the place.

My distant engagement with Ogboh's piece also becomes part of the aesthetic experience. I am still as I listen to these soundscapes on my computer, sitting on my screened porch, five thousand miles from Lagos. Despite, yet also because of, this distance I am immersed in that city. Such immersions underscore the experiential and relational aspects of place. Generally in sound art, it is believed that the listener "shar[es] time and space with the object or event under consideration."¹⁸ Languages I do not understand mingle with those I do, and these co-mingle with the sounds

of my immediate environment: wind blowing through the trees; birds chirping. The noises of vehicles in Chapel Hill intermingle with those in Lagos. This place merges with that place, offering just one more instance of the ever–entwining local and global. And I arrive at this intersection through stillness.

Moreover, whereas in the preceding paragraphs I characterized stillness as an absence when juxtaposing it with movement, here I must acknowledge that stillness is more complex than that. It is, by any measure, an intervention and interruption. Stillness can interrupt movement, much as the stasis of the people in *Jam* inserts stillness into the movements of Lagos, or as Ogboh’s stationary microphone inserts stillness into the moving soundscapes of the city. In addition, the movement of these artists throughout Lagos is suspended as they stand still to record, visually or aurally, a location. And each project results in discrete, unchanging objects (photographs, sound clips), which bear their own stillness. Stillness is also a way of being present. Being still, pausing in our activity, allows us to be in a moment fully. Stillness thereby heightens our senses and focuses our attention. It is, in fact, this active quality that makes stillness such a vital component in understanding cities. Careful looking and listening attune us to the many elements of the objects with which we engage. We hear noises we might otherwise tune out, see details we may have missed with more cursory glances. The city is made present. Stillness facilitates this perception, offering a productive means for engaging the complexities of urban environments.

The immersive qualities of sound art suggest a lack of the distance that has so long been seen as integral to the aesthetic experience of visual arts. And yet both forms offer dis–stanced relationships. While I have arrived at these insights through engaging particular works of art, this dis–stanced experience is not exclusive to them. Indeed, what I want to highlight is the potential this analysis offers for broader approaches to thinking about place in general. Through dis–stance, I am made aware of stillness, and in this stillness Lagos is made present in Oghobase’s and Ogboh’s work. From Chapel Hill, I experience Lagos through stillness. In stillness I gain perspective on the dynamics of a city that focusing on that city’s stirrings alone cannot provide. It is this potential of this interplay between distance and stillness that can help us to understand place through art.

• Notes •

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¹ The work of Jonathan Friday, Debbie Lisle, Yve Lomaz, Andrew Murphie, and Girard Perez offer insightful considerations of stillness both as it relates to photography and as a concept in and of itself. They have been particularly useful for my thinking about the productive nature of these artistic projects, about how they engender a sense of place: so too has the generative nature of movements within a city articulated by de Certeau.

² See the essays on Lagos in Enwezor, Basualdo, Bauer et al., eds. as just one example of this.

³ Malpas, "New Media," 205.

⁴ Malpas, *Heidegger's Topology*, 91; Malpas develops his theorization of place in dialogue with Heidegger's philosophy of being, *Dasein* (being-there), arguing for the centrality of place to all philosophical thinking (7).

⁵ Dreyfus, *Being-in-the-World*, 130.

⁶ Dreyfus, *Being-in-the-World*, 131, 132.

⁷ Prior to Malpas's need for the dictionary, his stance in relation to it is physical; the dictionary is simply one of many books on a shelf. Once the dictionary is needed, he has a mental relationship to it that marks its difference from the other books on the shelf, a relationship that has abolished his former stance to it. Similarly, when I am in Chapel Hill, I may be relating to Lagos as a city that is located on a different continent, as something having physical distance from me. Yet, when the stance that is grounded solely in geography is conceptually and experientially negated (dis-stanced), Lagos is brought close mentally or emotionally.

⁸ Malpas, *Heidegger's Topology*, 15-16; Dreyfus, *Being-in-the-World*, 131.

⁹ Malpas, *Heidegger's Topology*, 31.

¹⁰ Abraham Oghobase, personal communication, January 13, 2011. As people move into the city, they need to find places to live, to remake their homes and lives. But Lagos's infrastructure cannot keep up with the ever increasing demand for housing and jobs. Unsuspecting individuals purchase properties from seller's who have no legal right to the property. To prevent this scam, owners mark their buildings as "not for sale" (Amanda Carlson, personal communication, February 18, 2011).

¹¹ Abraham Oghobase, personal communication, January 13, 2011.

¹² See [http://soundcloud.com/search?q\[fulltext\]=lagos+soundscapes](http://soundcloud.com/search?q[fulltext]=lagos+soundscapes). Accessed August 27, 2012. Hyperlink is courtesy of Emeka Ogbob, and used by permission.

¹³ Demers, *Listening through the Noise*, 120.

¹⁴ Demers, *Listening through the Noise*, 114, emphasis original.

¹⁵ Space does not allow me to elaborate on the complexities of this as articulated by Dreyfus, Heidegger, or Malpas, and therefore this reading necessarily elides the larger implications of distance for the way an individual relates personally to the world, and relating to the world in a more ontological sense.

¹⁶ Demers, *Listening through the Noise*, 119.

¹⁷ This placement was confirmed by Emeka Ogbob, personal communication, July 22, 2012.

¹⁸ Voegelin, *Listening to Noise*, xii.

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