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Angola's Biennale

MEGAN EARDLEY | JUNE 26TH, 2013



On June 1st, a Sub-Saharan African country won a top prize Leone d'Or/Golden Lion at the Venice Biennale the first time in 118 years. In all the excitement surrounding "Africa's triumph" and the way Venice is "Going Global" it has been harder to find critics asking what Edson Chagas's winning work does, the context through which it was produced, or the social conditions it draws attention to.

The Venice Biennale is where the crème-de-la-crème of the art world goes to be on display. The competition is so ambitiously global and complex that lesser beings have described it as "the Art Olympics". Plus both events were established in the spirit of a little national competition that struck Europe in the later part of the nineteenth century. Every two years since 1895, competing countries have sent artists to display their work in national pavilions that are either hosted in a central park, or tucked into other pockets of the city, depending on when the country started competing. As you may have suspected, European pavilions are the most tightly clustered and have bagged the most Golden Lions awards.

This year, the Biennale's organizers asked artists to consider their origins in all the madness of the Enlightenment. The main exhibition, "Encyclopedic Palace," curated by Massimiliano Gioni, reflects the last century's jouissance, all-consuming desire to know and see everything. The compulsive piling and filing efforts of psychologists and taxidermists have been culled from the twentieth-century archive, while new contributions have been commissioned from 150 artists representing 38 countries. Pressed against this history, Gioni asks, "What room is left for internal images — for dreams, hallucinations and visions — in an era besieged by external ones?"

Enter Africa, the expert in European fantasies. At the Angolan pavilion, Edson Chagas has crafted an elegant response to the encyclopedic project, which begins with the title of his photographic series. "Found Not Taken," thumbs its nose at the Europeans who cannot stop carting off the world's knowledge to its curio shops, laboratories, and museums.



Chagas has roamed the streets of Luanda (as well as London and Newport) finding discarded chairs, pipes, and other artifacts of everyday life. Sometimes he records chance encounters with objects that are already well framed by the color or texture of a wall, sometimes he carries these things with him until he sees the right background, then sets them up again. In this slow and



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An advertisement for Lifebuoy hand soap. It features a large bottle of Lifebuoy hand soap on the right, a stainless steel Le Creuset pot on the left, and a splash of water in the background. The text reads: "You Could Win An Amazing LeCreuset Gift" in large, bold, red letters. Below it, in smaller red letters, it says "CLICK HERE TO FIND OUT HOW".

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The logo for "CHRONIC" in large, bold, purple letters. Below it, in smaller text, it says "Who no know go know? now-own, a spawtly pan African guide". At the bottom, it says "OUT NOW! AVAILABLE AT YOUR LOCAL DEALER www.chimurengachronic.co.zw".

The logo for "GROOVALIZACION RADIO" in bold, black letters. Below it, the word "RADIO" is written in white inside a red, stylized radio wave graphic.

Nelson Mandela



Nelson Mandela is around like never before 9 Jul 2013 at 3:00 am

quiet way of documenting what has been abandoned Chagas invites the viewer to imagine the way a city moves.

As he explains:

While growing up in Luanda, everything was reutilised and it was special to me to see how the habits of consumerism were changing. I could find sofas and washing machines but also chairs, those were the most common, but also other objects. It was always about the object and how it interacted with the space around it. Also what I feel when I look at it. It's a learning process of the city, its people and rhythm.

But there is the imaginary visit, and there is cultural diplomacy, and they begin to blur in the easy way that nation and pavilion represent each other. **As one visitor told BBC Africa**, "After they won the Venice Biennale everyone wanted to see Angola, and it was very much worth the wait."



The Venice Biennale reinforces particular notions of the nation: the nomination system reaffirms the government's authority to choose what the nation looks like, both to the international viewing public and within the country (especially through mass media coverage, which is increasingly condensed and as it reaches a larger audience). In Venice, and in Luanda, the institutions that govern the production of art capitalize on their own myopic vision.

"Luanda, Encyclopedic City" was commissioned by the Angolan Ministry of Culture.

Following the announcement of the pavilion's award, Angola's state new agency (Angop) **published a press release** from the Minister of Culture, affirming the government's interest in sharing "its deeds and achievements with other countries." It ends with this statement:

Para a governante neste momento muito particular que o país está a viver de renovação, de criação, de edificação de um país novo, é muito gratificante receber este reconhecimento do trabalho do executivo angolano.

[For the minister, in this very special moment in which the country is experiencing renewal, creation, building a new country, it is very gratifying to receive this recognition of the work of the Angolan executive government.]

In the same week that the government was accepting praise with its artists, it demolished close to five thousand houses in downtown Luanda, **using military vehicles and violence to expel its residents**. In the midst of this change, it is unsurprising that government representatives are sensitive about the way their city looks in pictures. Anyone who uses a camera on the streets of Luanda may be stopped and questioned by the police.

It can be difficult and risky for Angolan artists to be critical in public. The artists that gain access to these large platforms (i.e., Chagas's peer group) mostly have connections to the MPLA, the ruling political party which has kept President **José Eduardo Dos Santos** in power for over 30 years. Some avow their connections, a few renounce them (**Nástio Mosquito**, and **Luaty Beirão** are well-known activists) but many try to work around them.

Chagas's work, which claims to represent Luanda through the things it has rejected, exploits the tension between art and politics. His tight studio frames defer documentation of the city's homes and the people who have lived there.

Of course, the aesthetic act is not contained within these images. Posters of the photographs have been stacked around the Angolan pavilion, which is decorated in the style of Portugal's imperial halls. "Luanda, Encyclopedic City" was built as a provocation to the main exhibition; it reminds us that the world's knowledge cannot just be collected:

The Encyclopedic Palace has been given an impossible task: no building can contain a universal multiplicity of spaces, possibilities, and objects. When a building tends towards the encyclopedic, it becomes a city.



The photographer who showed Nelson Mandela to the world 9 Dec 2013 at 9:00 am



Mandela had an Ethiopian passport under the name David Motsomayi. Where did he go? 7 Dec 2013 at 3:00 am



Happy Birthday Nelson Mandela 18 Jul 2011 at 6:50 am



The meaning of February 11, 1990 11 Feb 2012 at 6:00 am



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