

**FILM**  
The director Alex Garland's vision of one nation, divisible.

**TELEVISION**  
¡Vámonos! Dora is back, now with more Latin culture.



**MUSIC**  
A festival evokes the Weimar Republic, but can stretch the era's boundaries.

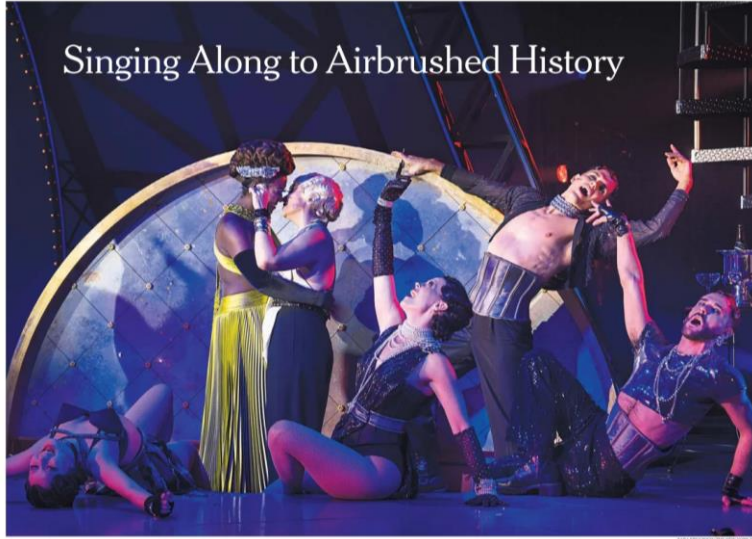
NEWS | CRITICISM

# Arts

The New York Times

MONDAY, APRIL 15, 2024 C1

JESSE GREEN | THEATER REVIEW



A musical about a groundbreaking Art Deco painter is vocally thrilling but not too committed to the facts.

HAVING DISMISSED HER WORK as merely decorative, a fierce Italian gives harsh advice to an ambitious young painter: "You need to be a monster," he brays. "Or a machine."

The painter, Tamara de Lempicka, didn't take the advice in real life because it was never given. But "Lempicka," the new Broadway musical about her, which opened on Sunday at the Longacre Theater, cer-

tainly did, and then some. It's a monster and a machine.

A machine because it argues, with streamlined efficiency, that in her groundbreaking portraits of the 1920s and '30s, Lempicka forever changed the representation of women in art, and thus changed women themselves. The volumetric flesh, aerodynamic curves and warhead breasts that so titillated Jazz Age Paris became, the show suggests, today's template for glama-

zonian feminism.

As for "monster," well, efficiency is not always pretty. Among the values compromised in the grinding of the musical's gears are subtlety, complexity and historical precision. Yes, that fierce Italian existed; he was Filippo Marinetti, the founder of Futurism, and later a fascist. But the scene in which Lempicka studies art with him is, like many others, made up.

[CONTINUED ON PAGE C2](#)

Amber Iman, standing left, as Rafaela and Eden Espinosa as Tamara de Lempicka in the musical "Lempicka."

**Lempicka**  
Longacre Theater

## Nigerian Ambitions at the Biennale

Criticism meets optimism as the African nation's pavilion readies for the Venice event.

By SIDDHARTHA MITTER

LAGOS, NIGERIA — People here in this country's largest city are hardly shy. The stereotype runs toward boisterousness, worn as a point of pride. But when the artist and poet Precious Okoyomon recorded interviews with some 60 city residents in January for an art project, the unusual questions — like "Who was responsible for the suffering of your mother?" — proved disarming.

Okoyomon is based in Brooklyn, but lived in Lagos as a child and still visits frequently. The artist was collecting material for a sonic and sculptural installation that will be presented in the Nigeria Pavilion at this year's Venice Biennale. The event, one of the art world's most important, opens to the public on Saturday.

Okoyomon's steel-framed structure, erected in a courtyard, imagines a kind of radio tower, decked with bells and colonized by creeping vines. Motion sensors on the tower activate a soundtrack: It will play in the courtyard and also online for anyone to tune in. It mixes poems by Okoyomon with music and passages from those interviews, whose respondents range from fellow artists to "strangers, someone's cook, someone's auntie," Okoyomon said.

After some wary first reactions to the intimate 12-question protocol (adapted from another poet, Bhanu Kapil), the conversa-

[CONTINUED ON PAGE C3](#)



Andrea Emelife is the curator of the "Nigeria Imaginary" pavilion at this year's Venice Biennale.

## He Spread The Joy Of Opera In Chicago

Anthony Freud, who is leaving Lyric Opera, 'pushed the boundaries, but respectfully.'

By ZACHARY WOOLFE

CHICAGO — In 1975, Anthony Freud went to a performance that changed his life.

Still in his teens, he waited in line for hours to see a concert version of Benjamin Britten's opera "Peter Grimes" at the BBC Proms in London. For the Proms, seats are removed from the Royal Albert Hall to create a vast standing room, and Freud found himself pressed against the stage, just a few feet from the tenor Jon Vickers, who sang a crushingly intense Grimes.

"This is what I want to spend my life doing," he realized, recalling the show with relish in a recent interview. "I want to be a missionary for opera."

On April 7, Freud, now 66, was once again as close as he could be to the opera stage. At a matinee of Verdi's "Aida," the final full performance of his 13-year tenure as the general director of Lyric Opera of Chicago, Freud was front row, left aisle.

He usually sat there — in the theater's [CONTINUED ON PAGE C4](#)



The Nigeria pavilion at the Venice Biennale fills a semi-restored palazzo with projects that cast an oblique but pointed look at history.



"Congregation" (2023) by Toyin Ojih Odutola. Her charcoal and pastel works on linen stage free-spirited characters in traditional settings.



"Celestial Gathering," by Tunji Adeniyi-Jones, on a palazzo ceiling, was influenced by Nigerian Modernist artists and Italian ornamental tradition.

# Nigerian Ambitions at the Venice Biennale

CONTINUED FROM PAGE C

climbs grew vulnerable and real, Okoyomon said. The resulting sound piece was "a kind of speaking in tongues," as if tapping the unconscious of the city, Okoyomon added.

Okoyomon is a Venice veteran: In 2022, the artist presented a major installation in the Biennale's main exhibition. But this year Okoyomon is one of the eight lauded artists to represent Nigeria in the country's second-ever Venice pavilion — one of still relatively few African presentations at the Biennale, and one of the most ambitious in concept and scale.

Titled "Nigeria Imaginary," the pavilion fills a semi-restored palazzo in the Dorsoduro district with projects that cast an oblique but pointed look at history: One is Yinka Shonibare's exacting clay replicas of 150 of the Benin Bronzes that a British expeditionary force plundered in 1897; they accompany a bust of the raid's British commander painted in batik patterns and placed in a vitrine, a kind of symbolic restitution awaiting the real thing.

In the most contemporary reference, a sculpture by Nddi Dike made of 700 police-grade batons, together with photographs from mass protests against Nigerian police violence in 2020 — and their bloody repression — link popular struggles in the country to the Black Lives Matter movement in the United States, Britain and Brazil.

Other projects — by Tunji Adeniyi-Jones, Onyeka Igwe, Abraham Oghobase, Toyin Ojih Odutola and Fatimah Tuggar — span drawing and painting, video and photography even A.I. and augmented reality. They suggest fresh ways for Nigerians, and also the world, to think of the country — a behemoth of some 220 million people that is often dismissed as a place of crisis or corruption.

Thus Ojih Odutola's charcoal and pastel works on linen stage free-spirited, gender-flexible characters in a setting inspired by Mbari Club, which gathered Nigerian artists and writers in the 1960s. "I wanted the space to exist very open and free," said Ojih Odutola, who is based in New York and Alabama, of the suite of drawings. In her imagined Nigeria, she added, creativity "is safe; it has room to roam; it has the right to change, to be mercurial."

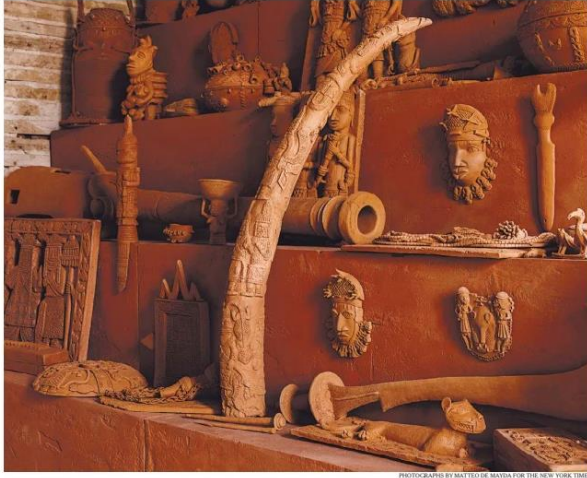
Adeniyi-Jones, who was raised in Britain and now lives in Brooklyn, has produced an overhead painting influenced by Nigerian Modernist artists and Italian ornamental tradition that will hang below the palazzo ceiling.

Oghobase, who works in photography and installations and is newly living in Canada, examines resource extraction in northern Nigeria through original and archival images and through diagrams from a vintage mining treatise.

Tuggar, who teaches at the University of Florida, considers the humble calabash gourd — a fruit with myriad traditional uses in West Africa, from drinking vessel to musical instrument to fishing float — in an installation that uses augmented reality to visualize alternatives to plastics and other consumer products.

And Onyeka Igwe, who lives in Britain, researched the Nigerian Film Unit, which produced films during the colonial period. Its archive in Lagos became neglected, and when Igwe visited, she said, "there were lots of stopped clocks; it was full of rotting reels." Igwe's film "No Archive Can Restore You" studies this derelict space; a sound installation of speeches, poems and choral music then fills the room differently — hinting that colonial archives may be more burden than resource, crowding out other ways to connect with history.

To organize a national pavilion at the Biennale is itself a kind of history intervention. The pavilion system dates to the early 20th century and maps a hierarchy. There are permanent pavilions owned by around 20 mostly wealthy countries in the gardens where much of the Biennale takes place, many with distinguished architecture. Other countries present their pavilion in one-off spaces, some wedged into the Ben-



PHOTOGRAPH BY MATTEO DE MAJIA FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES



Clockwise from above left: Precious Okoyomon's steel-framed structure has motion sensors on the tower that will activate a soundtrack of poems, music and interviews; "Monument to the Restitution of the Mind and Soul" (2023), by Yinka Shonibare, features exacting clay replicas of the Benin Bronzes; the curator Andrea Emelife borrowed two artifacts for Nigeria's Biennale pavilion.



ni's other major exhibition complex in the Arsenal, others scattered around town.

The African presence has been slender and uneven. (Stories abound of slapdash pavilions underfunded by governments or handed to dubious foreign impresarios.) But recently, it has grown in numbers and rigor. In 2013, Angola won the Golden Lion for best pavilion. Nigeria's first and only prior pavilion — a sold but smaller affair than this year's — came in 2017. In 2019, Ghana presented a star-studded show including El Anatsui and Lynette Yiadom-Boakye.

This year 13 African countries are

**'People are always leaving, and that's important to articulate with presenting Nigeria as a place.'**

ANDREA EMELEFE  
CURATOR, NIGERIA PAVILION

presenting pavilions, up from nine in 2022. The paucity is understandable given more urgent economic development priorities, said Phillip Ihenacho, the director of the Museum of West African Art, known as MOWAA, now under construction in Benin City, Nigeria. "The decision to do anything in Venice is a difficult one," Ihenacho said. "You have to ask yourself, 'Why spend money on something which could be regarded as a vanity project?'"

But a strong pavilion sends a message, whether from a government signaling cultural investment or, in Nigeria's case this

year, from private backers. Although commissioned by the Nigerian government, as Venice rules require, the pavilion has been organized by MOWAA. The pavilion's top funder is Qatar Museums; other supporters include galleries representing the artists, and Nigerian and foreign companies and collectors.

For MOWAA, whose inception was linked to the fraught prospect of many Benin Bronzes returning to Africa, the pavilion conveys a commitment to contemporary art, Ihenacho said. With the first building due for completion late this year, the plan is to bring the Venice show to Benin City — possibly after one or two international stops — as the inaugural exhibition, he said.

On a hot, dusty Thursday in February, Andrea Emelife, the pavilion's curator, who will also lead MOWAA's modern and contemporary department, was crisscrossing Lagos, finalizing things. She met with Dike, the only pavilion artist living full time in Nigeria. Though they all have Nigerian roots, the others either grew up overseas or left the country at some point.

Emelife herself grew up in Britain. Though she anticipates criticism that the show favors overseas-based artists, migration — and sometimes return — are part of the Nigerian experience, she said. "People are always leaving, and that's important to articulate with presenting Nigeria as a place."

Besides, she added: "I don't think you can remove yourself intrinsically from Nigeria." Indeed, if anything, pavilion artists are deepening their ties. Shonibare, for instance, opened a Nigerian foundation in 2019 that operates two residency centers and a sustainable farm.

Emelife's next stop was the home of a local collector to borrow some letters by Ben Enwonwu, an important Nigerian Modernist painter, for a vitrine presentation of documents from the 1960s and '70s in the pavilion. Many artists in that period were invested in connecting the Western canon with local aesthetics, culture and history.

"It's important that this is not presented in isolation as a new moment," Emelife said of the contemporary work in the pavilion. "I've met people who had no idea there was a Modernist period in Nigeria." (Her concern dovetails, as it happens, with the Biennale's main exhibition this year, which the curator Adriano Pedrosa has loaded with 20th-century Modernists of the global south.)

With "Nigeria Imaginary" as the pavilion theme, Emelife makes a scholarly reference — to sociological theories of nationhood, or to the "imaginary" in the work of the psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan, or the stories and illusions we tell ourselves to find structure in our surroundings. In Nigeria, where considerable dysfunction has become normalized — for instance, the widespread use of home generators and inverters to cope with the incessant power outages — that concept seems apt.

But the different projects in the show also make visitors privy, if indirectly, to a national pastime: diagnosing the country's problems. "The trouble with Nigeria," Chinua Achebe wrote in a 1983 essay by that title, "has become the subject of our small talk in much the same way as the weather is for the English." (His analysis in a nutshell: bad leadership.)

That habit remains. "Everyone's the minister of something!" Emelife said. "There's so much discussion about what Nigeria needs, or Nigeria should be like." Her wish for the exhibition, she said, was to prompt more expansive dreaming. "It will hopefully be energizing by being honest, but also energizing by being utopic," she said. After all, she added, "Even when we're critical, we're critical because we're optimistic about what a great place it could be."

Dike, the Lagos lifer and detractor of police violence, agreed. "There's always these not-so-positive discussions about Nigeria," she said. "But this is a very dynamic cultural catalyst and hub for the continent — and the world. It's about time we give Nigeria its due."

## Eight Artists Representing Themselves, a Country and a Continent



Yinka Shonibare



Onyeka Igwe



Abraham Oghobase



Precious Okoyomon



Nddi Dike



Tunji Adeniyi-Jones



Toyin Ojih Odutola



Fatimah Tuggar