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Q&A: What the LagosPhoto Festival is doing for photography in Nigeria



Generations © Maja Flink.

As the LagosPhoto Festival partners with World Press Photo to bring the contest's exhibition to Nigeria, Olivier Laurent talks with Joseph Gergel of African Artists' Foundation about the festival's future

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LagosPhoto, an international arts festival of photography in Nigeria, has signed a three-year partnership with World Press Photo that will see the photojournalism competition's exhibition to Lagos. *BJP*'s Olivier Laurent speaks with curator Joseph Gergel about LagosPhoto's place in the photographic community.



Olivier Laurent: How and why was the LagosPhoto Festival created in the first place?

Joseph Gergel: LagosPhoto was established in 2010 in Lagos, Nigeria as a platform for the development of photography on the African continent, with a particular focus on Nigeria, where the annual festival takes place. Initially a project of the African Artists' Foundation, a non-profit organisation dedicated to the promotion of contemporary African art, LagosPhoto has since expanded to a separate foundation and entity in its own right. LagosPhoto was founded and developed by Azu Nwagbogu, director of African Artists' Foundation, who saw the rich and vibrant photography community that was beginning to develop in Nigeria. With the general lack of an arts infrastructure in Nigeria, and the absence of rigorous photography education programs or focus in arts university departments, LagosPhoto was created to give a voice to this burgeoning photographic community in Nigeria, and it aimed to expand the opportunities available to photographers to execute and exhibit their projects. From its outset, LagosPhoto did not focus solely on African photographers but photographers that represent "African sensibilities". By expanding the criteria for participating artists outside of African heritage, LagosPhoto opened up dialogue and collaboration between African and international photographers working on the continent.

As much of photojournalism and documentary photography on the African continent has unfortunately reverted to a kind of Afro-pessimistic portrayal of life, plagued by poverty, disease, and conflict, LagosPhoto seeks to combat such a stereotypical portrayal by showing a more nuanced perspective. While of course these issues exist and should not be ignored, LagosPhoto also seeks to equally highlight the positive, the culture and vibrancy that makes the city of Lagos and Nigeria so dynamic and unique. LagosPhoto is the first and only international arts festival of photography in Nigeria, and so holds a central place in the arts community here.

Olivier Laurent: What were the challenges when setting up this kind of festival in Lagos?

Joseph Gergel: While LagosPhoto takes place annually in October, organising a festival on the scale that LagosPhoto has become is a full time job throughout the year for an immensely dedicated team. Of course, with logistical issues in Nigeria including daily electricity outages, internet connectivity problems, and the traffic that Lagos is so notoriously known for, these all present challenges on a daily basis that would not be an issue in many other countries. Another challenge for any non-profit organisation is the continuous search for sponsorship and funding to be able to implement the festival on a bigger and better scale each year. Fortunately, LagosPhoto has been sponsored from its beginning by dedicated corporate entities in Nigeria and foundations abroad. A further initial challenge, and something that we see as gradually changing with opportunities such as LagosPhoto, is elevating photography to the field of fine art on par with other mediums in Nigeria. With the art market in Nigeria, for example, photography is still not seen as a viable medium for

collecting, and there are few photography exhibitions in arts institutions here. But the arts community in Nigeria is now beginning to see that photography holds a coveted position in contemporary art.





Outdoor exhibitions in Lagos, Nigeria.

Olivier Laurent: How were the previous editions of the festival? What kind of photography do you show?

Joseph Gergel: In 2010, LagosPhoto held its inaugural edition with a month long exhibition entitled *No Judgment: Africa Under the Prism*, with over one thousand guests in attendance on the opening night. Large scale images were also displayed in public spaces around the city, allowing for communal viewing outside of the formal venue and realising one of LagosPhoto's central missions in reclaiming public space, a project that has continued with each edition. In 2011, LagosPhoto featured forty-two local and international photographers with the theme *What's Next: Africa's Hidden Stories*. Other events included an amateur photography competition, a creative design fair, an exhibition of photographs from the Noorderlicht Festival showcasing archival works by Malick Sidibé and JD 'Okhai Ojeikere, a family day and picnic, and photographic development workshops for young children.

LagosPhoto 2012 was organised under the theme *Seven Days in the Life of Lagos*, where nominated photographers documented aspects of life in the city with an extended photographic project. Internationally renowned photographer Stanley Greene served as Artistic Director for this edition. LagosPhoto 2012 expanded its scope to seven simultaneous exhibition venues throughout the city of Lagos. As in every year of LagosPhoto, the 2012 edition included workshops and public programming initiatives, providing free portfolio reviews by leading international and local photographers, artist presentations, image screenings, and courses for beginning and advanced photographers. With each edition, LagosPhoto showcases the diverse fields of photographic practice, including documentary, photojournalism, fashion photography, fine art and conceptual practices, and historical and vernacular images.

Olivier Laurent: How is the attendance?

Joseph Gergel: For any challenge that putting together such a festival might pose, we are rewarded each year by an amazing show of attendance that makes our efforts clearly worthwhile. Each year's opening night brings in hundreds (many times over a thousand) guests. In addition, each satellite venue has its own opening and programs that draw crowds after the reception of the official exhibition. In 2012, we organised a Gallery Hop to three different exhibition venues in Ikoyi, which is quickly becoming the arts epicentre of Lagos. Attendees were able to travel by foot to three different exhibitions in the same neighbourhood, all part of LagosPhoto.

Olivier Laurent: What impact has had LagosPhoto on the photographic community in the country and in Africa?

Joseph Gergel: LagosPhoto has filled the gap in the arts community for showcasing and developing photographic talent in Nigeria, where previously few opportunities were made available for photographers here. We have also been able to bring in leading international photographers, including Stanley Greene, Vivianne Sassen, Jodi Bieber, Hans Wilschut, Benedicte Kurzen, and Andrea Stultiens, among others, who have been able to show their work in Nigeria for the first time. LagosPhoto joins the ranks of only a handful of photographic initiatives in Africa that allow for a truly international arts festival on a grand scale. As we continue to grow, LagosPhoto's impact on photography in Nigeria and the African continent will expand even more, with more opportunities for photographers to gain knowledge, produce projects, and exhibit their works.



Photographer Olayinka Sangotoye speaks to photographers Stanley Greene and Benedicte Kurzen during a portfolio review. Image courtesy of LagosPhoto.

Olivier Laurent: How important is this partnership with World Press Photo? How do you think it will help LagosPhoto?

Joseph Gergel: LagosPhoto 2013 will mark the beginning of a three year partnership with [World Press Photo](#), where their annual exhibition will be shown alongside the official LagosPhoto exhibitions. We are truly

honoured to be able to bring World Press Photo to Lagos, which will add immensely to our annual exhibition program. Having the World Press Photo exhibition in tandem with LagosPhoto will bring a new international focus to the festival, where the photographic debate expands to not only topical stories within Africa, but of the international photography community at large. As planning for LagosPhoto 2013 is currently underway, we are excited about the projects that will unfold in October, and World Press Photo is on the top of our list.

For more information, [visit the festival's website](#).

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