

GUY TILLIM AND ARTUR WALTHER
IN CONVERSATION
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ARTUR WALTHER *Let's start with today. You've just returned from a trip to Vancouver, where you participated in a panel discussion on 'Photography and the City,' and your work is part of the exhibition Constructing Worlds: Photography and Architecture in the Modern Age at the Barbican Centre in London. Architecture and landscapes are subjects you have dealt with extensively throughout your career.*

GUY TILLIM *Over the past several years, I've been photographing landscapes. A general definition of landscape implies depiction of natural scenery, but my ideas have led me to photograph cityscapes as well, where people inhabit the frame as equal elements of the landscape, where they can be seen in relation to architecture and the environment. Growing up as a photojournalist, I had tended to isolate the human drama from the landscape, and I wanted to change that, incorporate it, convey the physical context in some way.*

From today's perspective, thirty years after you began to take photographs, how did this concept of landscape in your work develop?

My only reason for taking photographs, at the beginning, was to look at and understand my own country; initially I had no interest in the photographs themselves. It took me a while to comprehend or at least have an idea of the power of photographs and their beauty. In the last few years, in photographs of landscape, I have tried to avoid compositional drama and the picturesque, because it seems to me this detracts from seeing what is photographed; the overarching aesthetic becomes too prescriptive. A political position in this regard, as one might call it, would be to include the 'ugly' elements in a so-called beautiful scene in order to disrupt any inclination toward myth making, but this approach becomes prescriptive, too. I hoped that a viewer could travel within an image, and not remain outside it.

You're describing a broader idea, a reflection on what you have been doing.

I'm reacting to a set of personal circumstances that came from working in South Africa and central Africa as a photojournalist in the 1980s and '90s. I became aware of an absence of context in images that were made in South Africa, contributing to an unnuanced portrayal of news events. It was always difficult to convey the context in which those events happened, and I think my later approach to photographing landscape was really an attempt to try to learn my trade, or relearn it in another way. I felt keenly this absence of context in my own early pictures. In my efforts to imitate American and European photojournalists, I found I was looking for the same thing in different situations: the situations were described no longer by me, but by the exigencies of drama. An event didn't speak through me; I spoke at it with conventionally received notions that served only to reinforce the prejudices of the viewer. There is a certain point where imitation perpetuates a kind of falsehood.

You seem very self-critical. I feel this in your writing, too.

Well, that may be a product of working in South Africa, where one's imaginary realm is made up of daily schisms that are difficult to reconcile. One can tend toward extreme and contrary positions. For example, can I, as I desire, become this neutral vessel? Can I be a reliable witness to an event, instead of putting a kind of spin on it, affecting it with my projections? I thought this would be the ultimate achievement for me in photography, to look for this critical indifference but passionate engagement. I felt that I should start with landscape, possibly because of landscape's indifference to me.

There are different kinds of landscapes. When we talk about Johannesburg, it's a completely constructed and deconstructed landscape. To me, when you ask questions about framing a landscape or a cityscape, you're asking who you are as an artist, as a citizen. Isn't this one of your continuing themes or preoccupations?

Being born where I was born and growing up where I grew up inevitably led to these kinds of questions.

BEGINNINGS

Let's talk about that. Where were you born and how did you grow up?

I was born in Johannesburg, and I grew up during apartheid times. I went to a white school and a white university. My father was an entrepreneur and had a number of small businesses in his life. One was selling dress fabrics and carpets. My mother was a nurse, working in a hospital. I attended boarding school most of my childhood.

Was that a lonely experience?

It was what it was. I really didn't understand anything else. But I do remember that bleak feeling of getting ready for school on a Sunday evening. A 1970s boarding school in South Africa was a bit primitive, but they were good schools; our parents made sacrifices to send us there. The senior school was scary to begin with because one was a thirteen-year-old boy thrown in together with seventeen- and eighteen-year-olds, almost men, and their perversities. The teachers were good, albeit disciplinarian, according to the philosophies of the time. Some had come out of Oxford or Cambridge, and they mostly had what I now know to be a certain breadth of perspective. I immersed myself in sport and got used to the feeling I came to expect when I entered the gates—a kind of dull melancholy, a sensation of being locked up, cut off from the world. Occasionally, during the holidays, I would end up somewhere where people were friendly and had discussions—and that seemed to me like another world, a beautiful world where one could be oneself. I couldn't put it into words then. But one should be careful about looking back, because it might fit into an idea you want to have.

What did you study at university?

My father expected me to enter his business. So, coming out of school, I did an undergraduate degree in business and economics, in Cape Town. At that point, in the early 1980s, we were living in a time of conscription, or draft. If I'd continued studying, I could have avoided the army for a while. If I'd objected on political grounds, I would have faced jail for five years, so there were serious consequences. After finishing my Bachelor of Commerce degree, which I increasingly realized I had little interest in, I wanted to study architecture.

What kind of support did you have from your father and your family?

There was a distance that began with the architecture thing—this was not what he had in mind. He meant well, no question about that. It's just that it precipitated a kind of schism, an argument. Furthermore, I believed that the problems in South Africa could be instantly sorted out when there was democracy for all. He was a liberal but didn't necessarily subscribe to these ideas, or at least not to the urgency and simplicity with which I described them. In the three years I was at university, I met people studying architecture, and I admired their engagement with the world. They were passionate about the built environment and how it affected their way of life. I put together an application for the University of Cape Town, but never submitted it. In the end, I went into the army for two years.

Your passion or your interest wasn't strong enough?

I knew I wasn't going to work in my father's business, and he was, reasonably, unenthusiastic about paying for six years of further study. I had to make choices quite quickly. I'd finished my commerce degree in November. By January I had to come up with a plan or be in the position of avoiding conscription, which carried a jail sentence. So I kind of gave in.

What did you do in the army? What was it like?

I didn't want to be there. I went because I wanted to stay in the country, and I didn't see any way of being outside without resources. My service ended up being a game of not being there, leading to extended periods of absence without leave. I learned that in the army if you can manage to get your name off of a list you can practically disappear, and I justified all this by my opposition to South African military activities in general. Toward the end of the two years, I joined a protest in Cape Town—ironically a protest against detention without trial—and I was arrested and thrown into jail without trial for two weeks. So, I completed my national service in Pollsmoor Prison. That was the end of 1985.

EARLY WORK: PHOTOJOURNALISM/AFRAPIX

After you got out of the army, why did you take up photography? How did that happen?

I had been posted to the Western Province Command in Cape Town. Because they didn't have enough places for conscripts to stay in barracks, I could sleep out. I was living with some journalists, and I thought: that's it, that's what I'm going to do. Finishing my service, I started working with a TV crew, assisting a friend I'd met those last months in the army who was a cameraman. When that ended, I just grabbed a camera and started taking pictures.

Were you entirely self-taught? How did you learn and improve your skills taking photographs? Whose work were you looking at? What magazines and newspapers were you reading?

It was a time of heightened civil strife in South Africa and the push against the last phase of apartheid. The world was interested in reading daily dispatches, so there was plenty of work for young photographers. Within a few months of picking up the camera, I had a post with Reuters. There was a lot going on then, in 1986, and I was filing pictures almost daily. I also had my first foreign assignment, in Mozambique, to cover the funeral of Samora Machel. With Reuters, I was known as a stringer, and I had a guarantee of ten days of work a month. Local photographers were supportive. David Hartman, a stringer for Agence France Presse, took me under his wing, taught me how to file for the agencies, and, perhaps more importantly, showed me his photographic books. I remember being entranced by Susan Meiselas's work from Nicaragua and El Salvador; I'd spend hours with those books.

Early in your career you became a member of Afrapix. How did this happen?

David introduced me to Afrapix, a politically engaged South African photographers' collective. The founders, Paul Weinberg and Omar Badsha, were generous and inclusive—they wanted young photographers to join, and if they thought someone showed promise, they nurtured the new talent and suggested ways forward. There were maybe twenty of us in Afrapix toward the end, but Paul was the only one who was consistently working for international magazines, and his output was the backbone of the archive. We all made decisions together about how the agency worked and we contributed equally to the agency in proportion to our income. But Paul's contribution was what kept Afrapix above water. Without his personal financial input, that wouldn't have been possible; his commitment was extraordinary.

Tell me more about it—the assignments, the working conditions, the pressures.

The assignments for Reuters usually took the form of covering the 'unrest' in the townships around Cape Town. I made a darkroom at

home, printed and captioned the photos, and sent them by telephone with a machine that Reuters provided. At the same time, I sent these images to Afrapix by post and courier, which supplied mostly the local press and foreign NGOs.

Why did Afrapix close?

We were getting older, it was now around 1990, and Paul wanted to take the agency to a new level, whereby we would be affiliated with a foreign agency, one of the independent agencies in the United Kingdom or United States, for example, which would mean a restructuring of Afrapix into a more professional outfit. This created tensions, uncertainty of direction, and eventual disbandment.

How do you see the legacy of Afrapix today? In the world of South African visual culture, what is the ongoing importance of that agency and that group of photographers?

South Africa has had a strong tradition of photography. *Drum* magazine in the 1950s was staffed by photographers like Jürgen Schadeberg, Bob Gosani, and Peter Magubane. David Goldblatt was, and still is, enormously influential and was supportive of young photographers, as well as founding the Market Photo Workshop, which has turned out a number of fine photographers. Afrapix fitted into this tradition politically and aesthetically, and contributed to a significant photo archive of that time, now managed by Paul Weinberg out of the University of Cape Town.

Within Afrapix, it's just you and Santu Mofokeng who have moved toward showing work in exhibitions and publications all around the globe?

You could say that Santu and I have moved into an art-world environment, though it can be a misleading term that suggests things it's not. One continues with one's projects. I think Santu, in the same way as David Goldblatt, speaks about his place; the work that they've made is a valuable document of our country and it speaks eloquently of its time and beyond. Their work is unusual, and, to my mind, they're truth-tellers.

Are you close with Santu?

I've known Santu ever since I started making photographs. We were both part of Afrapix and we shared a lot. When Afrapix closed in 1990, became something else, Santu and I stayed in touch and we've become closer friends over the years. I've always found his photographs and his writing moving; he's a great storyteller. He has a way of describing his practice that's disarming and entertaining. I remember seeing his photographs from Bloemhof, which is when I first really looked at his pictures, and I'd never seen anything like them. In that way, he was one of my influences.

The first time I saw your early pictures, from that period in the 1980s, was in the curator Okwui Enwezor's recent exhibition Rise and Fall of Apartheid. I'd never

seen them before. I felt like you were trying to hide them. Or were they something you didn't want to review again?

Those photos were taken two months after I started my career, in 1986. They had a political agenda, in that I photographed from the point of view of those opposing certain police action in the townships. This fitted conveniently into the anti-apartheid stance espoused by the world press in general, who employed me. In fact, the photos you refer to ended up being evidence in the Supreme Court in Cape Town in cases against illegal police action brought by residents of affected areas, assisted by anti-apartheid lawyers, who helped many victims find redress of some description. I'm glad to review them, but in later years they came to represent for me what was, in general, this uncritical reporting from South Africa. Apartheid was disastrous social engineering, but it didn't suddenly occur when Afrikaner Nationalists took power in 1948. Racial segregation was written into law with British help way back in 1910 in the Act of Union. That act didn't embody and embolden white supremacist ideas as it would in apartheid legislation, but dilemmas and difficulties that existed at the time of Union existed in the time of apartheid too. In the 1960s, for example, states were becoming independent in Africa and simultaneously there erupted civil wars of catastrophic proportions that, in some cases, lasted for over twenty-five years. On our borders, in Angola and Mozambique, ruinous conflicts were in progress. South African apartheid interests and Cold War politics were influential in perpetuating those conflicts, but if South Africa had had majority rule, which is what it was called in those days, perhaps we too would have been a failed state for thirty-five years. So, I'm saying that those photographs represented to me the unnuanced view, in contrast to photographs taken by someone like Ernest Cole.

When I saw Ernest Cole's photographs at the Apartheid Museum in Johannesburg, I thought, there is somebody who was in there. And there's something of that in Santu Mofokeng's images. In Santu's work in the townships, in the 1980s, it's not the pictures of the strife; it's the pictures of people dancing within their houses.

I feel that, too. Cole's work is transcendent, and it also carries ambiguity. When I look at his pictures, I don't feel a righteous indignation in the way that news images from that time often prescribe. Like Santu and David, he was kind of a truth-teller; he had that gift. In general, the way of portraying events for the news in the 1980s reinforced comfortable perceptions of what was happening in South Africa. By comfortable perceptions, I mean that if you were a citizen of the UK or the US reading about the situation in South Africa, you could say, these people are good and these people are bad. What you couldn't easily say was, well, here is the good in the bad and there is the bad in the good. The reporting of that time didn't carry that ambiguity.

But wasn't the point of this reportage to delegitimize the apartheid state and win the struggle against oppression? How would a nuanced view have helped that political motivation? What outlets would have published such images?

Yes, it was all of that, but often the coverage of the situation anointed the future rulers-to-be with a sainthood they've shown emphatically that they are not worthy of—and I feel I was sometimes a useful idiot in that regard. Perhaps, had the reporting been more reflective, the current sense of entitlement to govern without criticism would not be so rife.

When you think about it now, what would you have done differently? As a twenty-three-year-old photographer, just getting started, just coming out of the military, clearly your reporting was different than what you would do today.

What I thought was worthy of photographing then was uprisings in the townships. I didn't see my own generation and social sphere as significant in any way. I thought then that I was being subversive by taking a stance against the government, but what may have turned out to be truly subversive was to have photographed my own environment; that would come to challenge orthodoxies now in place.

While you were trying to make a living, were you already conscious of this lack of nuance?

At a certain point I became conscious of it, and I wanted to try and change it. I went back to the places where I'd photographed events in southern Africa and started to photograph the landscape, to look for context and to investigate my own way of seeing things. So, my work became a kind of reaction to having photographed for years in a certain way and not, in my opinion, questioning it enough. Had I made these pictures at that earlier time, they might have contributed to a more nuanced reading of recent history, and that would have been interesting. That's what Santu and David did, and that's why their work will live for as long as it can live.

During this first phase of your photojournalism career, in the late 1980s, were you travelling frequently?

At Afrapix, Paul and Omar were mentors and strong advocates of a documentary tradition, as one could call it, as opposed to only news gathering. There was a belief that these kinds of images, those in the W. Eugene Smith tradition, say, could change things for the good, and this made sense to me, influenced the way I worked. For example, after two years with Reuters, I bought an old camper van and went to live and work in the Transkei, and then Namibia, for two years. I harboured an idea that I would live in the countryside, always dreaming that I would make it out there.

Your daughter was born around this time?

In 1989, my girlfriend at the time, Hilary Venables, was pregnant with our daughter, Hannah. She was working as a journalist for the BBC in London and moved back to Cape Town, where we lived together and

had Hannah in July 1990. In early '91, I took a stringing job with Agence France Presse, which guaranteed me ten days of work a month.

What were your assignments?

With AFP, from 1992 to 1994, I was covering news in the build-up to the election in '94. I travelled in South Africa, and occasionally I'd get an assignment in Namibia or Mozambique covering news; it's what paid the rent.

Do the negatives from these pictures survive?

Part of the deal with AFP was that they owned all the negatives, and they have them in their archive in Paris. I remember going to Paris one time, and on a visit to their head office at La Bourse I sneakily repatriated an image of an electioneering Nelson Mandela. They were really good to me, AFP. They were a kind, generous employer, and nice people. Reuters, too.

What did you do then, after the election?

Hilary and I were sharing parenting duties, apart. I was restless: the ten years in boarding school, university, obtaining a degree that I didn't really want to do, then the army for two years. There was this moment when I went on a two-year errance. And then Hannah arrived, and with that the joys and responsibilities of parenting. I'd been working in news, but I felt I needed the freedom to make documentary work, as it were. I could've taken a job at a newspaper. The *Mail & Guardian* (*The Weekly Mail* at that time) offered me a position that would've meant a salary and certain security. But I had to do my own thing, satisfy a yearning I'd had for years to travel. So, in mid-1994, I went to live in Hong Kong.

What did you find there?

Apart from working in China and freelancing for magazines based in Hong Kong, I travelled to Afghanistan to cover the war in Kabul. But I felt I was in limbo, and I missed Hannah, so I moved back to Cape Town in '97. There followed quite a bleak time. And I thought, okay, I'm not making it. Ironically, though, when I tried doing something else, it only served to confirm that I wanted to make photographs. For instance, I met someone who moved hashish from Morocco to Spain, and he asked me to partner him on his next assignment. We were going to move a tonne of hashish, or something like that, across the Mediterranean. He had this favourite expression whenever I expressed minor misgivings like, for example, about the Spanish coastguard: 'kindergarten', he would say. He was cutting me into a deal, and I thought, that's it, no more photography. But eventually, I backed out for various reasons. I saw him a few months later and I asked how it went: 'kindergarten'. He was about two million rand richer, and I was still poor, but at that moment I realized that I really did want to take photographs. It was a renewed commitment, a more serious one. That was in 1999.

What happened then?

A journey. I had an assignment for *Der Spiegel* in Zimbabwe, to cover the elections in late 1999. On the way back, I met a journalist who had a tiny *appartement* in Paris, and she offered to rent it to me for five hundred francs a month. Five hundred francs was very cheap, something like fifty euros. I went to Paris with a suitcase and my cameras, on a whim, really. Paris is one of the capitals of photojournalism, and I fancied the idea of being in those surroundings. I ended up staying for three years. At this stage, Hilary had taken a job in Bahrain and Hannah was there with her.

Did you find work in Paris?

The first year was hard. I didn't get much work. Then, Omar Badsha, whom I'd worked with at Afrapix over the years, contacted me. He was working on a book project called *Amulets and Dreams*, and he wanted me to go to various places in Africa to work. This led to a significant body of work, including the Sierra Leone pictures. These assignments and some self-assigned work took me to places such as Eritrea, Sierra Leone, Angola, Congo, and Mozambique.

DEPARTURE

Are these the earliest pictures that are part of this book?

Yes, some photographs from this time are included, particularly the black-and-white work. I would take quite long trips to these places, staying up to a month or six weeks, because access to what I wanted to photograph was difficult and time-consuming. In Congo, for example, I was working in the east and spent two weeks tracking down the Mai Mai militia, a group of young soldiers. I photographed them in the field as they were doing their exercises. I made two series in the same hour: one group in the landscape and the other against the ruined wall of an aerodrome. The Mai Mai were a significant force in the war in eastern Congo. They had come out of the jungle villages, 'Mai Mai' meaning 'water'—they believed bullets turned to water when fired at them.

Why did you choose to make these portraits and in such a formally consistent and methodical manner?

My first thought at the time was not to make a series of portraits, particularly, but simply to record. The easiest way to do this was to ask them to stand for me. I made one image of each; my time with them was short.

I was so moved reading your diaries from Sierra Leone, which we've reproduced here. How did you operate under such uncertain and dangerous circumstances?

Well, this was more or less how it was for photojournalists working in conflict areas in Africa. It was what one came to expect, no different for me than for many others; in fact, I was probably more of a tourist

compared to some of my colleagues. I was intensely interested in the places I was travelling in, and on occasions there was danger. The alarm I felt was moderated by my curiosity, my will to be there.

Did you always keep a diary during this period of your life? Or only for that trip?

I kept a diary erratically. In Sierra Leone I was more conscientious.

Where else did you travel during this time?

I went to Angola and photographed Kuito, a town destroyed under siege in 1994. I had been there shortly after the siege was lifted and had beheld extreme devastation, but I could only stay a few hours. I had always wanted to go back, finally making the trip in 2001. In 2002 I had an assignment for a book called *Day in the Life of Africa*, published in the US. They engaged fifty-three photographers from many countries. We were assembled in Paris, assigned a country in Africa, supplied with an Olympus digital camera (which was my first digital camera), and sent forth. My country was Angola. We were meant to shoot for a day, but I stayed for two weeks.

Was it on this trip that you made the Kunhinga portraits?

Yes. Making those portraits in Kunhinga was something of a revelation to me. Faced with the refugees, I realized I understood very little of their reality, which, arguably, I had some kind of responsibility to show. I felt I had to find a way to photograph that was more neutral—and not wait for them to conform to my idea of a displaced person. They had arrived in an abandoned storage facility of some kind, and I just asked them to pose for me. The impulse behind this thought was, I can't try to create what I think is the reality of these people's lives. They've been walking away from home for two weeks with little food and have had a very rough time. I wanted to record them in as neutral a way as possible.

I was taken by this series. You used colour for the first time.

It wasn't the first time I'd used colour. I had worked for years with transparency and colour negative for magazines and AFP. It was, however, the first time I'd used digital, and I had control of the colour palette on the computer. And, of course, I could see the photographs as I made them.

What happened to the Angola work?

When I came back to Paris after the first Kuito trip, I submitted the work for a photographic prize called Prix SCAM Roger Pic and was lucky enough to win it. Unexpectedly, I had a little money for the first time in my life, and I felt relief more than anything else. This was shortly after I'd met Michael Stevenson through a mutual friend. At the time, Michael was collecting and dealing in nineteenth-century African photography, beadwork, and weapons, as well as South African painting. He was becoming interested in showing contemporary African art and wanted to look at my work. He and I put together a book called *Departure*, a collection of my photographs up to that point. There was

an exhibition, and that's when I started selling prints through the Stevenson gallery, which he had established in Cape Town.

LEOPOLD AND MOBUTU

When did you begin work on Leopold and Mobutu, and how did it come about?

In three phases. First, covering the war in eastern Congo in 2003, an extended trip. Second, working on a film adaption of Adam Hochschild's book *King Leopold's Ghost*. A filmmaker friend, Craig Matthew, who had received the brief from a US production company, called me up to ask advice about travelling in Congo, and I ended up going as crew, with various duties, one of which was to photograph. Third, a visit to Belgium and the Royal Museum for Central Africa at Tervuren, just outside Brussels.

Do you consider Leopold and Mobutu the beginning of a more nuanced approach, the beginning of your intense focus on landscape and history?

Yes. For the first time, I started photographing the landscape not relying on obvious compositional drama, and I found this to my liking, releasing myself from having to make precious aesthetic decisions that would signify nothing, really. I became free to appreciate the thing for what it was—the remains of Stanley's outpost above the Congo River, for example.

You did much more. You traced the colonial history of the Congo from King Leopold II to Mobutu Sese Seko. Is this the first time you went beyond the constraints of pure reportage?

All at once, it seemed to me possible to make these connections, lacking in duration, of course, but the images detailed a part of history that was painted with very broad brushstrokes, showed sites and artefacts of historical import that have rarely been photographed.

What became of that work?

I had an exhibition with Stevenson, and I published a book called *Leopold and Mobutu* with the publisher Filigranes in Paris. For the first time, I used diptychs to display the work, linking narrative aspects rather than compositional ones.

JO'BURG

What was the impulse to begin the Jo'burg project?

At the end of 2003, I was nominated for the Mercedes Benz Award for South African Arts and Culture, given in South Africa to different genres over the years; jazz or fashion, for example. That year it was photography. Among the judges were the photojournalists Alf Kumalo and Jürgen Schadeberg. There followed an exhibition and a publication. After three years in Paris, I wanted to come back and work in South

Africa, and the DaimlerChrysler prize money gave me the freedom to explore the Johannesburg project. At the same time, Renate Wiehager, curator of the prize, and head of the Daimler Art Collection, organized a show in Berlin, exposing my work to a much broader audience for the first time.

You had financial security. What then attracted you to move downtown and focus on urban decay as a subject?

Financial security is perhaps a strong way of putting it. Really, I had the resources to do a long-term project without having to look for work from magazines and newspapers. The Jo'burg of my youth, white Jo'burg, had changed dramatically, and I wanted to witness what I thought was the bloom of an African city. The Group Areas Act, which under apartheid times had established where people of different races could live, had recently been abolished, and, for the first time in a very long time, black people in general could have access to spaces close to the economic opportunities afforded by the city centre. This prompted a white flight to decentralized economic zones. I moved into an apartment downtown and started working.

Not only South Africans flocked to the city centre, but others, too.

People were coming in from Congo, Cameroon, Mozambique, Zimbabwe. The re-peopling of the city centre was chaotic. The owners of apartment blocks had in some cases absconded as the value of their properties fell dramatically due to the unregulated habitation. Central Johannesburg was falling into disrepair and it was an exceptionally difficult time. Slumlords, for example, moved into areas on the fringes of the Central Business District and divided warehouses into small apartments, providing little or no services. Their profits were outrageous, and they started buying the discounted buildings in the centre of town and treating them the same way.

Was your interest primarily in the architecture and the environment?

No, not really. I thought I would be able to document some of the changes the city was undergoing, but it was a watershed for me because I changed my way of working. Initially, I'd approached it from a photojournalistic perspective, looking at separate elements of the city, different groups—the traders, the entrepreneurs, the last white residents, the police on the streets, the crime problem, and other things—thinking that I would put them together like pieces of a puzzle to create a full picture or portrait of the city. But at some point I felt that this approach was absurd, because the impulses of the city were next to infinite and couldn't be contained in such a way. From that moment, I just allowed myself to be in a particular place without looking for any particular thing. I went from building to building, I met residents, I talked to them for days on end, and I just photographed what was happening in front of me.

In the series, it seems you have two modes of framing: the outside view of the downtown area and the inside, intimate view of personal spaces.

Primarily, I photographed interiors, but on many occasions, on the roofs of the buildings, I had opportunities to show the layout of the city. This seemed like the right thing to do.

I first saw these images in an exhibition at the Johannesburg Art Gallery.

It was a memorable afternoon. You arrived with Okwui Enwezor. I had made this foldout book, *Jo'burg*, with Filigranes, which you and Okwui immediately pulled out across the gallery floor to view in its entirety. Then you purchased twenty-four prints, which changed my perspective on things somewhat, changed my life really, in the sense that it consolidated that freedom to work without having to look for assignments. That was the beginning of 2005.

What was the difference between Jo'burg and your previous work?

Jo'burg was the first body of work that I really followed through as a cycle. I lived there for four or five months. The moment was a relief, a release. Very often in that time I wouldn't make photographs, but on the other hand many things that I wouldn't previously have regarded as being worthy of making into an image became significant. I started working with a tripod and just let things happen, I wasn't running around with a camera. I would sit in a particular place, and people would pass by or gather in front of the camera in some haphazard way. Often I didn't move for hours, allowing myself to be in a space.

You were born in Johannesburg and went on many journeys. What did the return give you?

I was born in Johannesburg, but I came from a different socioeconomic sphere from that which I was then photographing. I felt this question strongly: who was I in this landscape? I couldn't find the answer to that. But I found something else: a confidence in my way of working. Paradoxically, the more conspicuous I was with my tripod and being white and so on, the more invisible I seemed to become. I learned that there's something about a kind of visibility that, tied to a sureness of what you're doing, communicates a confidence, and people trust you, leave you alone to go about your work. At a certain point, working in Johannesburg in 2004, I found that in myself, that way of being—something I was able to translate into working in Petros Village later.

PETROS VILLAGE

Was Petros Village your own project or was it an assignment?

It was an openly worded assignment that came through the Rome Festival of Photography under Marco Delogu's direction, from an Italian NGO. I went to Malawi, chose a village, and stayed there for two weeks. Marco published my book *Petros Village* under his imprint, Punctum.

And, in fact, he went on to publish two more of my books: *Roma, Città di Mezzo*, which originated in an annual assignment he inaugurated as part of the Rome Photo Festival, and *Joburg: Points of View*.

Was it in Petros Village that you began thinking about the aspect of the horizon and the sky?

I was concerned about my perception of the village in this African environment ravaged by drought. I saw all these textures, and I wanted to avoid the kind of dynamic that comes with breaking the horizon with someone's torso and the triangulation of drama one can create using a big sky and movement against the horizon. I wanted to avoid this device, which is so prevalent in images of Africa. I made a kind of political decision not to show the sky. I also had to ask, though: what is my responsibility here? The NGO is doing important work with supplying medicine and care, alleviating the consequences of famine, and I'm arriving with my ideas of an aesthetic. But it seems to me that if you're going to use images to convey an extremity of the human condition, you'd do well to understand your own projections of the situation and not repeat ways of seeing these things, or what people expect to see.

What was the NGO's response?

When people at the NGO saw the work, they asked how they were supposed to use it for their advocacy. I couldn't show simply a wasteland and undernourished children, because the trials the Petros villagers were facing were more insidious than that. In any case, Marco encouraged me to go back to add to the series, so the second time I photographed a clinic the NGO was running. And in the end, there were two versions of the book: one that was 'mine', and another for the NGO campaign, which carried the pictures of the clinic in the front.

There's a different focus in this series. With regard to the portraits, I feel there is a connection, an acceptance. These people are right there for you. They show themselves to you.

After a few days, everyone knew that I was in the village. I made portraits for them and gave the portraits to them. I stayed with the chief in his place. I would go out in the morning and start talking to people and see where the day took me.

To me, this is very much an extension of Jo'burg, but in a completely different way. It might be your most playful series. How did you develop that tone?

I couldn't have made *Petros Village* without having made *Jo'burg*. It comes down to that political decision. I think it is the strength of the *Petros Village* series. I learned of that possibility in *Jo'burg*. I found that confidence to overcome my preconceptions of how such and such a place or situation is expected to be photographed, and I respected my own sensibilities and reactions.



Guy Tillim, JO'

CONGO DEMOCRATIC

You made Congo Democratic the same year. When does a series such as Congo Democratic, for example, begin to exist beyond the imperatives of reportage?

I'd been to Kinshasa a number of times. I was interested in the place, and there was a national election in 2007. I knew who the protagonists were; I'd been photographing the war in the east. Now there was this big UN-sponsored election, and I wondered how it was going to go down and how the rivalries might be transformed into constitutional debate. I spent three weeks in the city in the build-up to the elections, taking with me a Congolese friend from Cape Town. He'd often end up negotiating on my behalf in tense situations, because photographing in Kinshasa is always difficult, and furthermore there was a fair amount of street violence and protests. For example, I remember at one point a youth trying to rob me of my cameras, but some protesters grabbed him and threw him into a river. I went to political meetings, photographed inside and outside, with the idea of putting the photos together to create some sort of context. I suppose the work begins to exist beyond the imperatives of reportage if it questions the imperatives, which I do, but whether successfully or in depth enough is hard for me to say.

This series got quite some attention.

Congo Democratic was shown at the Bienal de São Paulo and at Documenta 12. At the same time, it was published in a Kinshasa newspaper, a project supported by Corinne Diserens, in her capacity then as director of the Museion in Bolzano, Italy. So, it would seem the realms of high art and journalism are not mutually exclusive. I guess photojournalism or photo image making is at the forefront of a new vocabulary, and if it examines itself to some degree, looks at itself looking, it'll find its way into the art environment.

Do you mean that in the art world, artists are using the visual language of photojournalism self-consciously? And if so, is it purely for an aesthetic purpose, or is this kind of photography meant to convey social/political messages at a different angle from straight news photography?

In my case, I think I can say that it followed naturally from questions I had about my way of working. With the vocabulary of visual language increasing at such a rate, because everyone is making photographs, it follows that new ways of describing the world are evolving rapidly. In the past, the iconography of photographs was easily copied and a photograph was deemed successful if it had a certain drama and a level of technical accomplishment, over and above its intention, which was often hazy. This is changing fast, and more and more we read into images the intention, the level of engagement with the world, and the virtuosity of describing it. It's an extraordinary moment; the art world will be interested in this language, whether it is used self-consciously or not.

AVENUE PATRICE LUMUMBA

Let's go back to this idea of the cityscape as landscape, which you explored intensely in Avenue Patrice Lumumba.

In 2007, I received a fellowship from Harvard's Peabody Museum, offered in the name of the anthropological filmmaker Robert Gardner. They asked for a proposal, and I submitted an intention to photograph African power relationships and the protagonists, people who control African society and politics. I went to Somalia first, but after a promising start it didn't go well. I flew into Mogadishu with the prime minister, then in exile in Kenya, but fighting soon broke out in the city. It was terrifying, and I convinced myself that there was no point being in the streets with those various militias. I didn't feel the need to photograph in the way that I did before, so I went home and considered the situation. One of the things I'd thought about for some time was photographing the environments I had been working in as a journalist, the landscapes in which I had photographed news events in central and southern Africa. That was the beginning of the *Avenue Patrice Lumumba* work.

How did you choose the various cities to photograph?

After Mogadishu, before I gave up the idea of 'African power', I went to Benin, and I started photographing voodoo priests in Porto-Novo. But there I changed the direction of the project. I made enquiries, spoke with an architectural foundation, and made the first photographs that were part of the *Avenue Patrice Lumumba* series. Then I went to Congo, Mozambique, Madagascar, Angola, and Ghana, mostly the bigger cities, and photographed the cityscape or the landscape, particularly late-modernist-style buildings constructed in the colonial period.

And the unifying structure or name is 'Avenue Patrice Lumumba'.

In most African cities, there is an Avenue Patrice Lumumba. Lumumba was the first elected African leader of modern times. After his assassination in 1961, he was practically deified by nascent African democracies as liberator-in-chief. However, the people in postcolonial states had a complex relationship with the colonial landscape. On the one hand, they admired its so-called progress and its development of infrastructure; but on the other, it was the symbol of their repression. Take the bureaucrats I photographed in Lubumbashi, for example. They refer to the time of the colonials as *l'époque*, 'the era'. Their jobs, in a colonial time, would have assured them a secure and respected place in society. So, they look back on it as a time when things worked.

What does this landscape mean to you?

Those landscapes encapsulated some of the idealism and the catastrophes of the past fifty years. If you look at the liberation tableau by local artists of Mozambique, you'll see Samora Machel walking down the avenue with all these high-colonial buildings. There was

this awkward and complex embrace of the symbols of colonial power. However, in photographing these places, there was a danger of being some sort of connoisseur of decay, creating what could be perceived as a metaphor for the African condition. I tried to overcome that by immersing myself in my notions of what it would be like to live there, a fantastical place carrying so obviously the marks of history and where the future can be reinvented, a place of possibilities.

How did you choose this theme of modernity?

It was such a strange and alluring environment to work in as a photojournalist, particularly working there as a young man, covering Machel's funeral in Maputo in 1986, for example. There were these big department stores and late-colonial modernist-era buildings, but nothing in the shops. The environment seemed so inappropriate, and yet it had an indisputable African identity. It spoke to me of the hybridity of identity, as opposed to fundamentalist notions of who we are.

In the book, you said, 'These photographs are not collapsed histories of post-colonial African states or a meditation on aspects of late-modernist-era colonial buildings, but a walk through avenues of dreams.' What do you mean by that?

I should have written, 'an attempt at collapsed histories ...', a reference to Barthes's idea of how photographs describe history: a pack of photo cards, moments unlinked by what he called 'duration'. So, no, it wasn't an attempt at a history book, but the buildings and the avenues, the naming of the avenues, the vestiges of the dreams, and the aspirations of the generations before, whether colonial or postcolonial, are written there and are fascinating to photograph.

Avenue Patrice Lumumba established your career and gave you wide visibility.

I was fortunate enough to have not only the fellowship, but also an exhibition at Harvard, in 2009, a book publication, and a traveling show supported by the Lannan Foundation in Santa Fe. So the work was shown widely and the exhibition, or part of it, is travelling to this day.

SECOND NATURE

In January 2010, you went on a major trip. You sailed to Tahiti.

A few years ago, as I was about to go and photograph landscapes in Angola, I came across the diaries of Captain Cook, who explored the South Pacific in the eighteenth century. With him on board were painters who were commissioned to describe scenes for European audiences. They had discussions about how to do this that are very similar to the discussions we're having today. On the one hand, what they saw was so spectacular and exotic they wanted to convey the emotion of the scene, how it made them feel. On the other hand, they wanted to show things more dispassionately. The question then arose: who were they in this landscape? Our notions of the sublime have some

roots in the South Pacific. So, I wanted to go and look at the natural, so-called exotic beauty, and see whether I could avoid the clichés.

Is that why you wanted to sail? You could have easily flown or gone on a commercial ship.

Over the years working in Africa, I often felt as though I was parachuting into a place, and the feeling of dislocation was always strong. In the case of French Polynesia, I wanted to get there slowly. I thought that if I flew there, found a guesthouse or a hotel, and walked out into the day, my familiar feelings of dislocation would be just too immense or even insurmountable. I wanted to get there as naturally as possible, and the idea snowballed: I ended up buying a boat and sailing it there. It was exhilarating to see these islands come out of the sea.

Did you take pictures when you were on the boat?

I did, but they were mostly destroyed when I left my computer under an open hatch in a rainstorm.

What did you find there on the islands?

At first, when I was looking at the photographs I made in Polynesia, I felt I wasn't succeeding. In fact, I decided to return home, more or less gave up. But back home, I saw something in the pictures, the texture of something, hard to describe, and I went back and just started walking. Then one day, all at once, I felt capable of making those images I'd imagined, and it was a beautiful sensation. I looked around and felt I could photograph anything. It was a real freedom. I was walking down a road and at a certain moment the road was not a road any more, the tree was not a tree on the side of the road, everything became an equal element of the landscape. I stopped seeing lines and perpendiculars that create tension. The elements had a much more interesting relationship than that. Everything seemed to have its place. My work and what I strived for in my life became in those moments inseparable.

So, that's why this was another watershed for you?

That quality, the equitability of things, yes. I never felt capable of describing the landscape like that before. One carries one's baggage, one is who one is, but in Polynesia I found a way of looking at or describing something that did not, I feel, prescribe how it should be looked at, and I could make a window onto a world, and that is a desirable state of being for me. The camera's verisimilitude is unassailable; it shows what is there. And yet it tends toward oft-repeated visual metaphors that completely dull meaning and perception. How to avoid that is a real challenge.

What were your influences here?

I'd been reading about Russian photographers of the 1920s, like Rodchenko and Lissitzky, and their talk of photographs describing a synthetic or second nature. You could argue that they were working at a time before photographic vocabulary had congealed around clichés. When I arrived in Polynesia, I bought a lot of postcards, and I put them

up in the boat. And it was clear to me that all the beautiful landscapes had been photographed, albeit in a conventional way. It had been done; how could I do it better? The answer was far from obvious. The currency of photography is stereotype; each successful image is in part a resistance to that impulse alone.

SÃO PAULO AND JOBURG: POINTS OF VIEW

You and I had a long conversation over email about your first trip to Polynesia. And then I saw your photographs from Second Nature for the first time in the 2012 Paris Triennale. For me, this was something completely different than the work you made before. I could see a dramatic shift in your way of seeing. How did São Paulo become the second part of the series?

I wanted to continue this work, to take what I'd learned into the built environment and explore the same ideas. I chose São Paulo on a whim, really. It was a modernist-inspired city, I was interested in architecture, and I felt that photography was deeply implicated in the advent of modernism. In *Camera Lucida*, Barthes says that there is, in our minds, an anthropological idea of death that used to reside in the built environment, from tombstones to bas-reliefs on buildings to monuments and cathedrals. With the advent of photography, this responsibility, this idea, increasingly began to reside in the photographic image. Modernism embodied a shift away from this monument and the past and looked toward the future and nature. I could have chosen another place. I thought of Berlin, but there was something much newer and bigger about São Paulo that appealed to me.

Let's go from São Paulo to the latest series, Joburg: Points of View. It's clear that you wanted to go back to Jo'burg. What did you experience?

I wanted to take home what I'd learned in Polynesia and Brazil. Here was a city I'd lived in as a young boy; my grandmother had lived in Hillbrow in the city centre. I felt, for once, after my experiences in Polynesia and São Paulo, capable of simply showing the place. I made the photographs in November 2013.

Was it difficult to get into it?

Not really, no. I think the difficulty was that I felt I had done it already. I knew exactly how I wanted to make the images, and it seemed to come too easily. I felt something lacking. I couldn't quite put my finger on it and work out how or where I should go with it, and I still haven't, really. But I'm starting to think about how I can take the idea further in South Africa, where in my eye the layers of history written into the landscape are so distinct from one another. I would like to work out how to photograph people in that landscape while maintaining the tracteries, where they are not obscured by the actions of people.

Which you have done before, in Jo'burg and Petros Village.

To some extent, maybe, but I want to take it to another level, where photographs of things so loaded avoid that alienating question of context. In photojournalism, the way that I grew up, part of the doctrine was to shock people out of their complacency and say, 'Look how different this is from your world.' This had the effect of alienating people, but that's another story.

I see a difference between you being in São Paulo and you being in Jo'burg. For you, Jo'burg will always be a place of investigation.

This is where I will always come back to.

And it will be fascinating over the years to see this Jo'burg you have seen, experienced, felt. It tells a lot about you, too. Where you are.

That's it.

How has your perception of the landscape and the urban environment changed across your studies of Johannesburg, Rome, São Paulo, and the various cities you have photographed over the last two decades?

In each one I felt that I was progressing a little, taking a small step to where I want to be. Ironical, because I have no idea where that is exactly. *You said you have been thinking about making portraiture again in the future? I assume that a lot of the pictures you made early on were of people.*

My first published photograph was a portrait in *The Weekly Mail* in Johannesburg. I feel quite excited about coming to portraiture again after my experience photographing landscape. To strive for a presence, not an emphatic declaration, a character held by the power of my ability to look. For the past fifteen years I've been trying to figure that out, and why not? I'm a slow learner. This is what I love about photography and my perception. As it evolves, I have the possibility of seeing something for the first time. It keeps me engaged.