Into the Valleys: Schneidermann \& James Guy Tillim's Museum of the Revolution

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## STREET VIEW

## INDEPENDENCE STREET

Guy Tillim reflects on recent African history, as seen through
its post-colonial architecture. Words by Izabela Radwanska Zhang



In Mozambique's capital city of Maputo, you will find the Museum of the Revolution. It lies on Avenida de 24 Julho - Avenue of 24th July - notable as on this day in 1875, the conflict between the British and Portuguese came to an end, with Portugal victorious. The date is also significant in modern history, as it marks the first day of the country's independence from colonial rule a century later, in 1975, when it became the People's Republic of Mozambique, under the new leadership of the socialist president, Samora Machel. After 11 years in power, Machel died in 1986, the same year that South African photographer Guy Tillim started taking pictures professionally. In fact, a photograph taken by him on the day of Machel's funeral, depicting Mozambican soldiers, waving national flags as they march past what looks like a parliamentary building graced by a portrait of the deceased president, opens his new photobook. Titled Museum of the Revolution, it looks to the urban landscape of Mozambique and cities over Africa, reflecting on the colonial infrastructure assembled on the continent pre-independence, and that still stands and shapes societies today.

Born in Johannesburg in 1962, Tillim cut his teeth at Reuters and later joined Agence Vu in France. While working as a reporter, he became increasingly interested by what was going on in the background of the action that he was commissioned to capture. "I was fascinated by the landscape, but didn't photograph it, I was photographing events," he recalls. "But it was the landscape that stuck with me, so 20 years later I came back to photograph the landscape, and not the events."

I meet Tillim in a cafe near the Serpentine, in the middle of Hyde Park, on a mild late-November morning. Tillim is already there, working on his laptop at a window seat, blending in with the London crowds. But he is only in the city for few days, visiting Michael Mack to work on the publishing of his new monograph. He is heading to Mack Books in south London shortly after our meeting, and a breakfast of salmon and scrambled eggs on brown toast.

We speak of the premise of Museum of the Revolution, and the complexity of the history of colonial architecture. The infrastructure imposed by European settlers arriving on new lands and building new towns was, unsurprisingly, influenced by that of back home, constructed according to familiar aesthetic and logic, instilling a new narrative and identity. But the urban planning, particularly the arrangement of the streets, was also founded on principles of discipline and control - tying in with preserving economical and political order, and divisions that projected racial and social divides. These were only emphasised in the following decades. "These buildings stood this whole time as mute witnesses; they've become a museum of themselves," says Tillim. "With colonialism, there was a tragedy of social engineering that subverted destinies of people and that are yet to be untangled. These colonial structures and buildings were really being built over a period of my lifetime. They've undergone changes, where the society moves from colonial state to post-colonial state, often accompanied by years of catastrophe and war, to truce and election, and then from socialist states to shifting into capitalist regimes."


Tillim spent around two weeks in each city between 2014 and 2018, his images the result of taking long walks. "I don't know what compels me to take a photo of something. It's hard to dissect that impulse," he says. "One carries a lot of influences and baggage, which all come into play when you're in the street. You first have to overcome the conviction that you can't make a photograph at all. Try not to put too many of your projections onto it. You have to let the elements in the frame speak for themselves and have equal weight. Just let it be." I ask whether in today's climate of suspicion and awareness of privacy he ever ran into trouble. "What I've learned is that by some paradox, the more noticeable you are the more invisible you become," he explains. "So I become very visible on the street - stand right in the middle with the camera. People see me from a certain distance they see that I'm alone, a known entity in front of them, so they either ignore it or they move away. The minute you try to conceal yourself, they notice. Even in this room," he adds, looking around the cafe, "you're aware of so many things, slight movements. No one can come and take a picture without us noticing."

The book uses diptychs - a familiar technique Tillim utilised in his previous project, Edit Beijing, placing two images of the same scene taken from the same angle, but at different moments, so that there is an illusion of one continuous image broken up into parts. "In the last week I'd find I wouldn't see anything, and after a while a single frame is a certain frame of mind," he says. "I just started experimenting, for no greater reason than to amuse myself and to keep my interest going."

He adds, "because there's no obvious drama, people going about their daily business can seem at times banal, and you feel like you're not getting anywhere. Sometimes just to play and experiment and to go down an avenue you haven't gone down before is interesting."

Tillim was the winner of the 2017 HCB Award - a prize of $€ 35,000$ presented by the Fondation Henri Cartier-Bresson, intended to allow a photographer to further an existing work. "This new project is in perfect continuity with what he did before, with a very modern colour form," says Agnès Sire, artistic director of the foundation. "The constitution of it, with large-format diptychs or triptychs, gives an amazing rhythm. He is questioning, in a kind of deambulation, the paradoxes and contradictions of colonial and post-colonial periods in various African capitals." Between a jury of seven, including Clément Chéroux, senior curator of photography at SFMOMA, Florian Ebner, chief of photography at the Centre Pompidou, and Sire, among others, the decision was unanimous.

The Museum of the Revolution exhibition will be on show at the Fondation HCB until 02 June, and includes images from Johannesburg, Maputo, Luanda, Harare, Libreville, Addis Ababa, Nairobi, Abuja, and Dakar. The accompanying Mack photobook is out now, where "the pictures can live and have a life," says Tillim. "They carry the full burden of whatever you do, whatever the investigation. Websites don't have that gravitas and that tangibility. The book is an object, something beautiful, a place for reflection and meditation." bjp
agencevu.com







Page 69: Dakar, Senegal, 2017
Pages 70-71: Biccard Street, Johannesburg. South Africa, 2014
Pages 72-73: Harare, Zimbabwe, 2016
Pages 74.75: Boulevard du Général de Gaulle, Dakar, Senegal, 2017.
Pages 76-77: Dar es Salaam. Tanzanua, 2017.
All images (c) Guy Tillim.

## Further viewing

published by Mack Books, priced $£ 30$. The exhibition is on show at the Fondation Henri Cartier-Bresson in Poris, until 02 June.
mackbooks.co.uk
henricartierbresson.org

