
Jennifer Bajorek

FLAT GAZES,

UNEVEN GEOGRAPHIES:

GUY TILLIM'S JO'BURG

BIOGRAPHY

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→ In this essay I look at some of Guy Tillim's photographs in Jo'burg. I ask about their efforts to displace or get beyond a definition or conception of the city as a smooth or continuous geographic space and explore the particularly dense articulation in Tillim's work, of the photographic image with journalism and reportage. I go on to trace the consequences of this articulation for our understanding of the ethical violence that structures all photography. In my larger project, which is concerned principally with this violence, I ask to what extent we can speak about new tactics or techniques for imaging certain kinds of bodies: those left off the map of the neoliberal world order, or those that fail to register in the perceptual or epistemological regimes of global capital. Here, I examine the claim that Tillim employs certain tactics and techniques that allow him to attribute or restore agency to his subjects, and suggest that the photographs offer less the image of a given body or collection of bodies than a commentary on their co-location in photographic space.

One emphasis in definitions of photography for a long time has been its power to give new spatial and temporal co-ordinates to the image. Photography opens the image to new investment and deployments as a material support of memory and, simultaneously, as a thing in the world. These two possibilities are always twinned: that the photograph will go out in the world and faithfully document or remember what we want it to, and that it will take a sudden turn, crossing over into spaces not yet imagined or expected. Like all things in the world, a photograph is only ever available to a partial appropriation. What distinguishes it from other things is that, once it is in circulation – made available for further inscription and for the accumulation of more memory – it gives rise to an infinite concatenation of memory regimes.

It may be that a photograph will always retain the trace of what it 'first' recorded. But just as photographic memory has no end, no final destination, neither does photographic forgetting. This loss or forgetting has been given less critical attention. Traces may fade or wear away, become illegible or invisible to those who weren't there, who don't know how to look, or who have simply forgotten – not just the event but this mode of access to it. This is why it makes no sense to pit memory against forgetting in photography's name. Even if it were possible to imagine a photograph that had achieved a 'maximum' of memory, nothing could guarantee this maximum, which can always become nothing – or, stranger still, someone else's memory – the very next day. Perhaps we should learn to speak, instead, of different

ratios or shifts in the ratio of memory to forgetting, which photography makes the object of our looking. These shifts can take place in a single photograph. But more often they take place among several photographs, extending into a complex space.

In *Jo'burg*, (pages 237-239) Guy Tillim's photographs taken of the inner city and its residents between April and August 2004, work with and through certain shifts in the ratio of memory to forgetting.¹ This work is done in a social and political space – Johannesburg ten years out (ten years after the first free and truly democratic election on 27 April 1994, after the end of apartheid) marked by changes that are historically and culturally specific. At the same time, these changes have ethical and political repercussions that register in multiple planes and on multiple scales at once. These people are living in a 'modern' city, or what appears to have been one, in glass and concrete buildings, without water and electricity. They are living in close quarters in dangerous conditions. They are being evicted.

Several details suggest that Tillim locates, and wants us, his viewers, to locate, the space of these events – both the photographs and the conditions that produce them – in the geographic, economic, and political space of Johannesburg as a city. I am thinking not only of the project's title, but the photograph of the map of central Johannesburg in the City Regeneration Project office, printed as a frontispiece to the monograph (Tillim 2005). We know from the captions given in the monograph's appendix that there have been policy decisions



fig 1 Guy Tillim, Mathews Ngweni (right) and a friend sleep in the winter sun, on the roof of Sherwood Heights, Smit street, 2004 Archival pigment ink on cotton rag paper 42 x 59 cm Courtesy the artist and Michael Stevenson, Cape Town



fig 2 Guy Tillim,
*Mathews Ngwenya at
 his place in Sherwood
 Heights, Smit street,
 2004*
 Archival pigment ink on
 cotton rag paper
 42 x 59 cm
 Courtesy of the artist
 and Michael Stevenson,
 Cape Town

leading to these evictions, and, long before the evictions, policy decisions regarding owners' responsibilities and tenants' rights, and the management of accumulated water, electricity, and service debts. These problems and decisions are all in some sense local; they are located in Johannesburg, and they are problems to be dealt with by local politicians and city planners. But they cannot enter into the photographs without getting displaced there. This is part of what I find so intriguing about Tillim's *Jo'burg* photographs. They depend on a certain definition and delimitation of the city, but they also displace it.

For one thing, these photographs require us to attend to a more complex and troubling rhythm in the interplay of time and space, decision and consequence, memory and forgetting, than anything that could ever be understood to take place in a smooth or continuous geographic space. They play within an uneven geography. The rhythm of this geography is troubling, and it is part of what implicates us, as spectators 'outside' the scene, perhaps implicating white South Africans, who fled urban Johannesburg after the repeal of the Group Areas Act in 1991, or indeed any South Africans who don't live in these places, as well as foreign consumers in an international art market. (Tillim's work has long appealed to an international audience). But these photographs also implicate us in a way that points to something larger: about what has been going on in Johannesburg, about the historical fate of a specific kind of decision – these are not only policy decisions – and, in a skewed relationship to it, a responsibility. How old, after all, are these buildings? They should belong either to another century or to a war zone. Either this is a lost city or it is

a bombed and shell-shocked one. The latter would fit with much of Tillim's recent work: the photographs of child soldiers and refugees from war-torn places. Our usual response to this kind of disrepair and precariousness is to imagine that there has been an event of monumental violence, which had only accidentally escaped our notice until now, and whose omission from our consciousness and our map of the world the photographs now correct. But the event has been a transition to democracy. We are still unprepared to accept that democracy may bring its own violence, or to believe that a future reduction or mitigation of its violence will be limited by its history.

It is a little easier not to notice the effects of a bad urban planning policy, or a bad or unethical business practice, than that presented by a bomb – at least for those who are not living in the slum. Ironically, and in indirect proportion to their differing regimes of visibility, the bad policy can have longer-term effects. This is not exactly the theme of Tillim's *Jo'burg* photographs. But their treatment of, and careful reckoning with, these disparate regimes of visibility allows them to frame their themes more starkly: displacement, fear and uncertainty, the angles, textures, and light appropriate to these experiences and emotions; quotidian joys, including laughter, sociality, and hope; whatever name one gives the opposite autonomy.

Take the example of displacement. The photograph of Mathews Ngwenya (Figure 2) jams the familiar channels when we attempt to interpret the space depicted here as a domestic one. A man is sitting in a chair just off the centre of the image. His body, long and folded, and his chair, a battered rolling desk chair in a generic 1980s style,



fig 3 Guy Tillim, *Mateus Chitangenda, Fernando Chitala and Enoke Chisingi*, 2002
From the *Kunhinga Portraits* series
Archival pigment ink on cotton rag paper
60 x 76 cm
Courtesy of the artist and Michael Stevenson, Cape Town

repaired with what appears to be a coathanger, are close to the wall. The camera is at a greater distance, but not so great as to shake the sense that there is a wall behind us, thus placing us in the room. On the floor are a cooking pot and a container of some sort. A stainless switchplate in the lower left-hand corner, reminds us of the recent date of construction. Absent signs of commerce or other professional activity – other photos in the series show us a barbershop and a bar run in similar spaces – the spectator understands that this closeness to a wall means home. Only later, once we have left the gallery, do we read in the caption in the monograph that this is indeed a photograph of Mathews Ngwenya ‘in his place.’ At least as much as the photographs that show residents of Hillbrow, Yeoville, and Berea being evicted from their homes by the Red Ants, this photograph of Ngenwya ‘in his place’ is an image of displacement where we least expect it. The image, as much as it is a picture of a man, is a picture of a room in tightly controlled chiaroscuro in a city suffused – thanks to Anthony Meintjes’s virtuosic pigment printing – with the most extreme possibilities of colour. And yet the photograph does not present itself as anomalous when compared with photographs in the series of greater saturation and brighter hue. It is closer to their zero point. From reading the captions, we also later learn that Ngwenya is Zimbabwean and unemployed: as close as it comes to a textbook case of the new migrants who constitute a majority of residents in these neighbourhoods. This quiet light illuminates the ‘soft’ violence

of displacement, which the photograph precisely locates as not other than, not foreign to, domestic space. In a similar way to the panoramic opening and closing shots of Hillbrow taken from a hotel roof, this photograph is a starting point for so many others in the series. It is no wonder that, despite the near total saturation of the visual field of *Jo’burg* with local effects, the whole series seems only provisionally located, in this or in some other city.

Another distinctive feature of the *Jo’burg* photographs can be seen in evolution in Tillim’s other projects of the last decade but comes into its own in these most recent photographs. This is the gesture that Tillim copes with, and often successfully counters, the charges of voyeurism or exploitation that are inevitably brought against photographers who take pictures of people in situations of extreme vulnerability and distress. In this discourse, such photographs always betray or risk betraying the bonds of trust and intimacy, real or imagined, between the photographer and his subject. This kind of charge can never be rigorously evaluated, for structural reasons internal to photography, whose historical articulation with photojournalism and reportage, particularly from the war zone or scene of disaster, walks the same fine line. But neither can it ever be entirely dismissed. Indeed, at least since Susan Sontag published her famous essays on photography in the 1970s, some of the most celebrated polemics in socially and politically inflected photo criticism have revolved



fig 4 Guy Tillim, *Brothers Bernado Sayovo and Horacio Chikambe*, 2002
From the *Kunhinga Portraits* series
Archival pigment ink on cotton rag paper
60 x 76 cm
Courtesy of the artist and Michael Stevenson, Cape Town

around claims that photography is itself extremely vulnerable to a kind of ever-present corruption of its best intentions, prone to taking a bad ethical turn.

The photographer's highly visible 2002 portraits of Angolan refugees, the *Kunhinga Portraits*, cast his defensive manoeuvres against this kind of accusation in an interesting light. The photographs were taken of refugees, many but not all of them children, outside the city of Kuito in the Bie region of Angola, notorious for high rates of civilian casualties and excessive brutality of government-backed militias during the country's protracted civil war. The portraits are astonishing in several respects, and it comes as no surprise that they have garnered great critical acclaim.² One aspect of the images in particular interests me. This is Tillim's use of a tripod while shooting, which has been interpreted as allowing him to attribute a quality of agency to his subjects (Enwezor 2006:371). While it cannot be divorced from other, less technical procedures (for example, spending time with his subjects before shooting, not bringing a camera on the first visit, and so on, the tripod allows Tillim's subjects to position themselves or their bodies in front of the camera, rather than being 'posed' by the photographer. Other techniques – of composition, lighting, cropping – are combined with the tripod to open the images' frame. Taken together, these techniques produce a sense of a radically partial visual field that is, nonetheless, frequently, internally dispersed.

They also enhance the frankness of a frequently frontal and head-on angle (or just below it), producing affective qualities that remain highly unstable. For reasons connected with the potential for infinite circulation and re-inscription, and therefore for forgetting, of the photographic event, there is an ineradicable violence bound up with every photograph. The *Kunhinga Portraits* remind us that this violence expresses itself in a special way when the photographic image is an image of the human body. It is inherent in the full spectrum of photographic images, from the portrait to reportage. This already suggests we must take the long view. If in the mid-18th-century it became possible to speak, proto-photographically, in certain sites, of republican or democratic forms of portraiture, then today it is necessary to ask, both extending and interrupting this understanding, about new tactics or techniques for imaging certain kinds of bodies: those left off the map of the neoliberal world order, or those that fail to register in the perceptual and epistemological regimes of global capital. Is it possible to photograph these bodies and produce photographic images of them that will circulate as photographs, and therefore as things in the world, without risking something much worse than voyeurism? One thing is certain: the kinds of violence risked or dictated by the photograph of another can be lovingly handled or skillfully manipulated, but it cannot be eradicated.

Michael Godby has argued that there is a more general trend in the



fig 6 Guy Tillim
*Mbulelo's bar, Joel Road,
 Berea, 2004*
 Archival pigment ink on
 cotton rag paper
 42 x 59 cm
 Courtesy of the artist
 and Michael Stevenson,
 Cape Town

work of post-struggle photographers, including Tillim (who was a member of the Afrapix collective from 1986 to 1990), to complicate the ethical disposition of the photographic image. Godby (2004:2) states that

where struggle photography had tended to be urgent and declamatory, dictating specific readings of the image, photographers emerging from this maelstrom wanted to create a more resonant, complex image of their subjects. In terms of subject matter, photographers now sought out less immediate, less obvious activity. In terms of style, they tended to refuse centralized, unitary compositions ... in favor of complex compositions involving competing subjects or the distribution of interest over the visual field. In this way, photographers seemed to express a changed relationship to time, both in the suggestion of a greater familiarity between photographer and subject and in the sense that it should take the viewer time to discover layers or nuances of meaning in the image.

Tillim's tripod and the whole complex of techniques that combine with it in the *Kunhinga* series may or may not ultimately attribute or 'give back' agency to his photographs' subjects. But they are a provocative commentary on the ethical violence that structures all photography.

This same kind of care, the defensive or protective measure, resonates on another level in the *Jo'burg* photos. We may at the very least wonder how they suggest a concern, not simply with the ethical violence of all photography (in the same way that all of Tillim's work is concerned with it), but with the lability and dynamism of violence, and therefore with photography's power to tackle all the different

kinds of violence there are, and give them the complex temporality that is their due. For who really knows which is worse in the end: to traffic in the photographs of others while preserving their liminal integrity, thus leaving them stuck in it, frozen or captured in such a way that the spectator continues to feel, and/or be, entirely too complacent? Or, alternatively, to bust them out of it – setting the subjects free, in effect, from liminality, while at the same time losing any possible fidelity to this history?

I am not prepared to answer this question, but neither are Tillim's photos – at least not a single answer, and surely every photograph must argue its case. It may be that not all of his photographs escape the Afro-pessimism to which they clearly seek to respond. But who could stack the deck with any certainty? Tillim's work suggests that we might counter those who would carry out a prophylactic project with regard to ethical violence in photography thus: how much distress is too much? And who among us is competent to judge? Instead of focusing our energies on prophylaxis, I am interested in the power of photographs such as these to carry out a kind of co-location of bodies (and they are not necessarily visible or even physical bodies) in time and space. In other research, I am interested in the way photography can produce a larger and rigorously composite body, to which the bodies and experiences of individuals are only subsequently referred. Read in resonance with this kind of thinking, Tillim's true genius in the *Jo'burg* photographs consists less of some attribution of agency to a subject - an agency that may always be fleeting, distorted, fictional in the first instance – than in these photographs' sensitivity



fig 5 Guy Tillim, *View of Hillbrow looking north from the roof of the Mariston Hotel*, 2004
Archival pigment ink on cotton rag paper
42 x 59 cm
Courtesy of the artist and Michael Stevenson, Cape Town

to the way the body of the individual fits into a building or, more obliquely, into architectural space. There may be an ineradicable violence in the photographic image of a human body. However, to fit that body in an essential but not necessarily (or simply) visible relationship to other human bodies, within a photograph, may be the most provocative commentary on that violence there is.

Aubrey Tearle, the bitter protagonist of *The Restless Supermarket*, Ivan Vladislavić's novel chronicling the transition of Hillbrow, in the early 1990s, from rich (or at least climbing) to poor, does not want the view of the skyline or of a single architectural landmark that the estate agents are always pushing. He would adamantly prefer not to see his own inscription in relationship to his many anonymous neighbours. In Tillim's view of those same landmarks, there is an otherworldly quality, or perhaps rather an earthly one, giving the impression that a Unidentified Flying object is about to land, the implied movement in the sky and on the ground ambivalent enough to rival the opening sequence of a crop-circle sci-fi horror film. But the impression does not last, and once we go 'in' deeper, into the rooms on the ground, and enter this relentless catalogue of spaces interior to the city, we, too, become less concerned with agency in any sense that can be visualised and become preoccupied instead with something like this fit, committing it to memory for the time being.

Endnotes

1. The series was published as a monograph in 2005 (Tillim 2005) and it continues to be exhibited widely, both in South Africa and abroad. I saw selected photographs from the series in the *Cities in Crisis: Photographs of the South African Urban Landscape* exhibition, curated by Michael Godby and Dave Southwood, in the FADA Gallery of the University of Johannesburg, at the opening event on 10 April 2008. I subsequently saw the photographs in London, in the *Home Lands – Land Marks* exhibition, curated by Tamar Garb, at Haunch of Venison Gallery, on 31 May 2008. Earlier, some of the Jo'burg photographs were included in Okwui Enwezor's *Snap Judgments: New Positions in Contemporary African Photography*, a high-profile exhibition that garnered significant critical attention at the International Center of Photography, in New York, 10 March–28 May 2006.
2. For a detailed account of Tillim's projects in Angola, as well as a list of recent awards, I refer the reader to the *Kunhinga Portraits* exhibition description published on the Michael Stevenson Gallery website (Michael Stevenson Gallery 2005).

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