
THOUGHTS ON THE EXHIBITION *CITIES IN CRISIS - PHOTOGRAPHS OF THE SOUTH AFRICAN URBAN LANDSCAPE*

→ Anthea Buys

The exhibition *Cities in Crisis – Photographs of the South African Urban Landscape* is, according to curator Michael Godby, an attempt to characterise and define the contemporary South African city through the medium of photography. As the controversial title indicates, this project of definition finds that the city is in a state of crisis – although precisely what kind of crisis, even after careful examination, is unclear. In this review, I suggest that the narrative of the socio-economic crisis that seems to dominate the selection of works for the exhibition needs to be interrogated, its philosophical and historical framing carefully examined, before we can justifiably say how the notion of the ‘crisis’ may be ascribed to the South African city. I conclude by turning the curatorial agenda against itself, proposing that the ‘crisis’ in which the South African city is found is a crisis of signification.

Michael Godby, David Southwood's collaborating curator of the group photography exhibition *Cities in Crisis – Photographs of the South African Urban Landscape* recently shown at the University of Johannesburg's FADA Gallery, suggests in an essay about the exhibition that it is the starting point of a project of defining the South African city, of attempting to identify it as a coherent phenomenon. This will be effected, Godby (2008) suggests, by building an archive of photographic and textual essays that, while inevitably representing the heterogeneity of our experiences of the city (and thus apparently undermining the project of finding the ultimate 'name' for it), will enable us to begin to appreciate the singularity of the South African city, the features that distinguish it from other global cities – or, as Godby (2008) puts it, the South African city as a local "sociological phenomenon".

While the dream of tracking the quintessence of an urban space may amount to little more than a utopian fantasy, Godby and Southwood's thesis for *Cities in Crisis* seems to proceed after having glimpsed its own impossibility. The archiving of heterogeneous narratives of the city would be a potentially endless process before a unifying essence could be distilled from them. The purpose of this observation would not be to rule out any such attempts, however, but rather to point to the difficulty they must confront and in the context of which they should be read. To create an archive in a sociological and philosophical context

in which heterogeneity is acknowledged is to begin an expansive process of exchange that could not promise an endpoint.

It is in view of this foundational bind that the exhibition's forbidding title is most interesting; the South African city appears to be caught in a crisis of definition. However, a variety of questions or interpretations have been provoked by that title, some of them more immediately accessible than this. Visitors to the exhibition have asked what exactly constitutes a crisis in an urban context (or if it exists at all), whether it is reasonable to declare South African cities unilaterally 'in crisis', and whether or not the crisis has a foreseeable end. The last two questions are perhaps all the more urgent in the context of the recent attacks in South Africa against Africans from neighbouring states.

This type of crisis, the type that makes news headlines, is typically a state of temporary disruption in a governing system, whether economic, environmental or political, which invariably has social ramifications. The possibility of its end, although it may not be immediately foreseeable, is conceivable, and those who are outside the crisis take steps to calculate how it might be mitigated. The discourse of the urban socio-economic crisis that would seem to dominate the selection of works featured in *Cities in Crisis* is a teleological one, and its philosophical and historical framing must be examined before we concede that the word 'crisis' (in

a socio-economic sense) may be straightforwardly applied to the South African city.

Many works included in *Cities in Crisis* construct a narrative of this species of crisis through representations of poverty and squalor in South African cities. Five photographs from Guy Tillim's 2004 *Joburg Series* (pages 237-239), depict the decrepitude of Hillbrow's rooftop habitats. Each image places a human subject, or some evidence of a subject, at a high vantage point over the city, where views which might have been sublime are marred by imposing towers of grey flats. In one image, two men sleep on the concrete floor of a roof courtyard. Another depicts a threadbare bed pressed against a wall streaked with water stains and mildew, clearly in want of refurbishment. In one sense, Tillim's didactic idiom of pseudo-documentary seems to have ethical value because it is, in part, an awareness project which condemns the inaccessibility of basic necessities to a significant part of South Africa's urban population.

However, this idiom is problematic when framed, as it is in this exhibition, as an indicator of crisis. This is partly because of the long-term nature of these, and other worse conditions in many third-world contexts and also because this framing does not account for the possibility of a relative improvement of living conditions in parts of South African cities. We might ask: can the fairly permanent existence of difficult living conditions in certain locations accurately be called a 'crisis'?

It is also difficult because to identify a particular community as a site of crisis is to mark it as other to an ordered, self-sustaining system. The site of crisis introduces the threat of entropy to that system and must be done away with, either by improvement or by obliteration. Tillim's full *Joburg Series* documents that obliteration by eviction which was the short-term solution to the 'crisis' of illegally occupied buildings in Hillbrow, while recognising that this social phenomenon had its origins in civil legislation and economic policy (in South African and neighbouring states) decades before.

One of David Goldblatt's contributions to the show, *Johannesburg from the Southwest* (12 July 2003) (pages 220-221) succinctly illustrates this disparity between the city's fantasy of unity, efficiency and fortification, and its points of weakness and otherness. Four corrugated-iron dwellings in the foreground of the picture are dwarfed by two massive pylons and a mine-dump receding into the Johannesburg cityscape in the distance. This image highlights the incongruity between the implicit lifestyle

of those living in the shacks, with no access to basic amenities such as proper sanitation and electricity, with the resource-driven daily existence of the affluent, signalled by the looming pylons. The scale in the picture plane suggests an absurd economic and social dislocation of the poor from the urban environment in which they live and to which they frequently contribute as unskilled labour.

Goldblatt's image is particularly interesting, as it literally locates its particular 'crisis' in relation to the master narrative it deviates from. While the metropolis has neglected and marginalised the poor, the poor still aspire to benefit from its economy and to participate as full citizens in its order. A viewer looks at this image and may be inclined to hope that the master narrative will be resolved; that the marginalised subjects will become integrated into the whole.

This dream of the whole, the aspiration of the subject in the city, or the city as subject, to close the circle and eliminate its chaotic elements, or resolve them according to a utopian master narrative, presents itself as a fundamentally western Modernist ambition. What Jacques Derrida, in an anonymous interview recorded in *Negotiations* (2002:71), calls the "theatre" and "rhetoric" of the type of crisis outlined by both Tillim and Goldblatt takes place on the stage of an urban topography that models itself on the western metropolis and an economic order that still bears the residues of South Africa's colonial past. What is at risk in *Cities in Crisis* is that the complex and often on-going daily struggles of many living in South Africa's cities are misconstrued, even if indirectly, as "an accident of the West: what is happening to it, to its subject" (Derrida 2002:72).

While there are many other works in the show that appear to reiterate this narrow notion of the urban crisis – David Lurie's series of photographs circling Table Mountain (2002) (pages 224-225) and Sabelo Mlangeni's images of Hillbrow apartment blocks in the *City Details* series (2004) (pages 228-229), for examples – there are some that deviate from it, expanding the scope of the concept of the crisis. These works, perhaps inadvertently, redeem the exhibition's thesis that the South African city is in a state of crisis by problematising the possibility of the human subject perceiving and acting in relation to his or her urban environment in any straightforward way. Jean Brundrit's series, *A Walk around the Block with Goliath* (2003) (pages 218-219), presents a suburban environment as it might be experienced by a dog walking through it. In this series of

black-and-white images we see Goliath the ridgeback dog bound to his owner by a leash, as well as the reactions of neighbourhood dogs to his presence. These other dogs are all behind fences and respond to Goliath with a mixture of hostility and excitement. Brundrit's series, through attempting to image a perceptual encounter in an urban space from the perspective of the dog, ascribes an agency to animals that at once personifies them and jeopardises the humanist assumption that people enjoy a privileged psychological access to spatial and self-other relationships. If there is a 'crisis' suggested in this work, it seems to be an existential one: is the figure of the dog a metaphor for the human subject, or is it its own subject, sufficiently sentient to reflect on the (sub)urban environment in its own way? This provocation suggests a motif also widely explored in much Modernist art and literature - that the city space alienates the human subject, causing her to fear for the significance of her own presence in it.

The crisis as defamiliarisation is also suggested in Jane Alexander's 2000 photomontage titled *Adventure Centre* (pages 216-217), in which masked or animal-like creatures are superimposed onto fairly non-specific cityscapes. These figures appear distinctly alien and are menacing in the urban environment, particularly because they go unnoticed by the human subjects that inhabit the same environment on the periphery. While each image foregrounds these strange presences, they remain oddly marginal and inconspicuous within their surrounds. In turn, the strangeness of these foreign, non-human elements destabilises the identity of the familiar environment they inhabit. What might have been an ordinary street corner somewhere in downtown Johannesburg is now a setting made ethereal and unfamiliar by the alien creatures it plays host to. While Alexander's photomontages raise the pertinent question of what constitutes foreignness and who can be said to 'belong' in the city, they also question the very possibility of the subject's lucid engagement with the city space: we are unable to situate Alexander's strange subjects in the urban space because we cannot quite situate them as subjects. It

seems that without being able to conceptualise the subject of the city – the one for whom the city is – it is difficult to situate or identify that space as it is in itself. Once the relationship between the subject and its urban environment disintegrates, there can be no phenomenology of the city. In Derrida's (2002:70) words,

There would thus be no more 'world' and still less a 'present world', whose common horizon would be able to delimit a *determinable* experience and, as a result, an assured competence (philosophical, scientific, economic-political) ... In its turn in crisis, the concept of crisis would be the signature of a last symptom, the convulsive effort to save a 'world' we no longer inhabit.

To return to the first project of this exhibition, a project of definition, it would not be untrue to say that it has defined very little. We are no closer to being able to itemise the qualities of the South African city. We lack a refined and unproblematic concept of the urban crisis, or of 'crisis' itself. We have a collection of photographic images that suggest alarming disparities and unsettling existential displacements, but *Cities in Crisis's* heterogeneous survey, rather than constituting a substantive step towards achieving the goals of identification and compensation, exposes a conceptual impasse that may, paradoxically, characterise contemporary South African urbanity. There is no 'city *qua* city' and even more so, no 'crisis *qua* crisis', yet we want to speak meaningfully of both. It may be that the most cogent crisis *Cities in Crisis* has happened upon is a crisis of signification.

Biography

Anthea Buys is an independent journalist and art writer for the *Mail & Guardian*. She has contributed to various other local publications including *Art South Africa*, *The Weekender*, *ArtThrob* and *Business Day Art*. She holds a Bachelor's degree in History of Art and Bachelor of Arts with Honours in English Literature from the University of the Witwatersrand. She is a Research Fellow in the University of Johannesburg's Research Centre, *Visual Identities in Art and Design*.

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