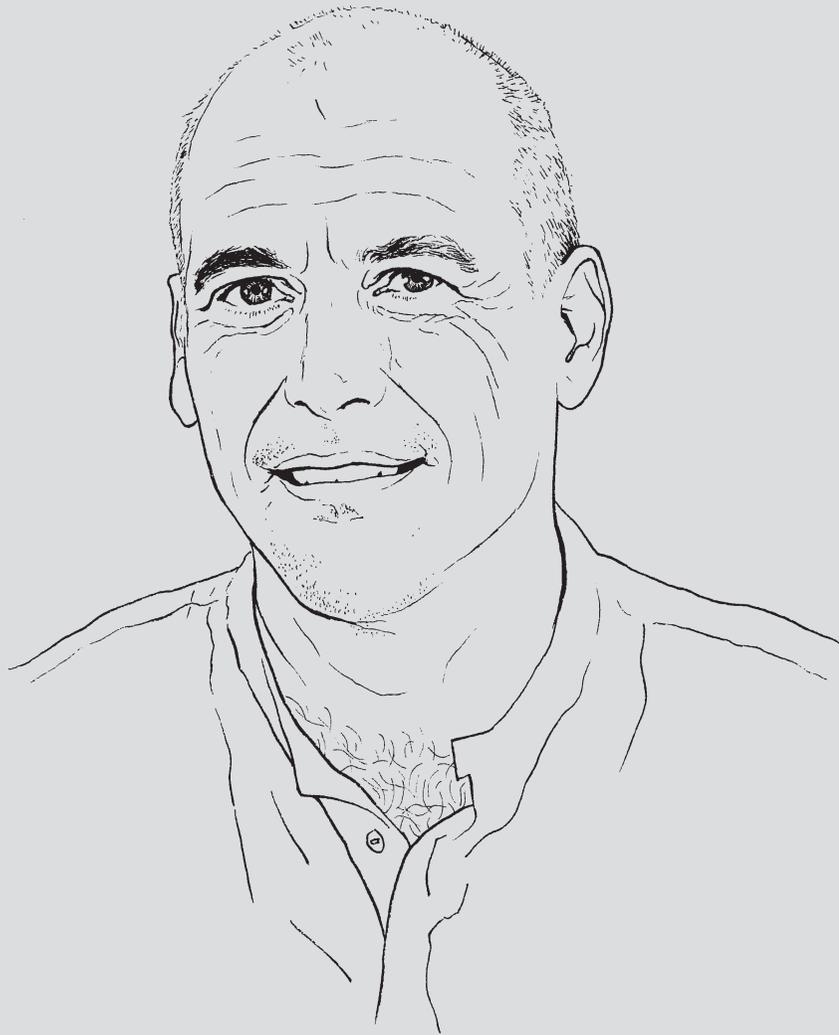


5.

Guy Tillim



Window onto what is

In 1978, the Museum of Modern Art in New York presented an exhibition titled *Mirrors and Windows: American Photography since 1960*. In the accompanying essay, curator John Szarkowski posits, 'there is a fundamental dichotomy in contemporary photography between those who think of photography as a means of self-expression and those who think of it as a method of exploration'. He continues, 'the distance between them is to be measured not in terms of the relative force or originality of their work, but in terms of their conceptions of what a photograph is: is it a mirror, reflecting a portrait of the artist who made it, or a window, through which one might better know the world?'

Forty years later, South African photographer Guy Tillim responds, 'I try not to navigate anything really apart from putting myself on the streets. How the structures manifest in people's lives speaks for itself. I try to make a window. One that will be investigated by the most even and neutral gaze, quietly and completely.'

This conversation is an exchange of emails that follows *Museum of the Revolution*, the artist's most recent exhibition at Stevenson. It is for this new body of work that he received the 2017 HCB Award presented by the Fondation Henri Cartier-Bresson. The images are taken across cities in Zimbabwe, Angola, Ghana, Senegal, South Africa, Uganda, Kenya, Gabon, Rwanda, Ethiopia, Mozambique, Tanzania and other countries. The completed series will be seen for the first time in Paris in 2019. At the time of this exchange, Tillim has just returned from shooting the last of the images in Morocco. He states that he takes photographs in the middle of the day, when the light is harshest. This choice is attributed to his

disquiet with the contrived drama of dawn and dusk and their shadows and soft light.

In *Museum of the Revolution*, Tillim intends opening some windows onto the ‘new sets of aspirations’ taking root across the continent. Improbable connections surface over the course of this discussion. There’s an uncertain distance between romance and realism, choice and circumstance, self-awareness and self-indulgence, the impulse towards playfulness and the gravity of intention towards truth. The ‘window’ perspective on image-making is revealed as both transtemporal and enduring as 40-year-old observations continue to apply to a medium expanding at a rate of well over 65972.2 images per minute (as the latest Instagram stats would have it). Okwui Enwezor describes this moment as an embattlement. In an interview for *Recent Histories: Contemporary African Photography*, published in 2017, Enwezor says: ‘I think that right now photography, whether it’s in Africa or Europe or elsewhere, is at a turning point – photography is embattled. It’s embattled because it’s overtaken, as a medium; it’s being overtaken by technology and different forms of distribution.’

When asked about this profusion, Tillim responds, ‘Photography is a language after all, and its primitive vocabulary (compared to the literary form) has exploded exponentially, allowing nuances of intention to be divined.’ Whether the proverbial window is tethered to an edifice, a bullet train or some other colossus, Tillim suggests that the pane is still holding, that the act of looking supersedes our available means of sophistry; that confusion is vitality. ‘When you’re not thinking about it,’ he states, ‘you get it for a moment.’

Sinazo Chiya:

First, congratulations on winning the HCB Award for *Museum of the Revolution*. The prize states that it is intended for a photographer who has completed a significant body of work ‘close to the documentary approach’. What are your thoughts on realism?

Guy Tillim:

The so-called documentary approach, which I embraced when I started working as a photographer in the 1980s, could be said to reject romanticism in favour of a more truthful side of life. This is a view that would embrace untidy elements, say, in a scene, elements not necessarily conforming to pictorial ideals, and focus on social and political injustice. I suppose this form could be termed social realism. However, my experience is that unquestioning social realism often fades into a kind of romanticism that undermines its own professed truth.

An interesting point. Is this to say that that form of social realism would unintentionally be a position or narrative dressed as something objective?

Yes. What was convenient and practical to serve the market for news images, say, were clichés, and hot currency for being so.

How would you describe your work now if you feel terms like ‘documentary’ and ‘social realism’ are inaccurate or flawed?

Atoning for past sins! I suppose I’m doing the same thing I’ve always done, only differently. The grand idea now is to allow some scene/someone to speak for itself/herself and not through some triangulation of drama and imposed narrative. It’s all

unknowable ultimately, so why create a simple projection?
It's a life quest as much as an image quest.

I recall that in your exhibition walkabout you emphasised that you prefer to shoot at midday or when the sun is at its peak. In previous series like *Leopold and Mobutu* and *Petros Village* there's more dramatic lighting, a different kind of feeling. What is the root of this shift?

This relates to the previous question in that in my earlier years as a photographer, I was trying to emulate American and European photojournalists working for big colour magazines, such as *National Geographic* and *Time*. I thought that successful colour images were made in the drama of the late or early light, and their black and white counterparts under dark and brooding skies. Very beautiful, but truthful? Later on I began to think not. My disquiet grew because I ended up looking in the same light at disparate situations. Always seeking the same drama that satisfied only these banal notions of beauty in the fluid interplay of light and shadow. It began to seem to me callous, and sometimes even obscene, and I had a reaction to that modus operandi from which I've never quite recovered.

That's amazing. In this series of conversations I've also been talking to artists like Dada Khanyisa. He terms his work 'social commentary' but he also feels that even when he tells stories that aren't beautiful, he is compelled to maintain a relationship to beauty, or to have the object be compelling to the eye in some way. As a photographer, making images from existing life, it would seem that this would inevitably be different. What is your relationship with beauty now? How are you processing the 'disquiet'?

I strive for beauty. Ideas of what represents or embodies beauty change over time. When you're not thinking about it, you get it for a moment.

What has struck you as beautiful most recently?

Sunrise this morning

Someone pointed out that there's always someone looking at the camera in *Museum of the Revolution*. You've also mentioned that you prefer to be in plain sight. Why is this?

I have found that in the street, in plain sight and not surprising passers-by, people tend to ignore you even though they may cast a neutral eye in your direction.

Your practice oscillates between portraits, landscapes and city scenes. How do you determine what holds your interest? Do those different genres within photography hold different things for you?

They hold the same thing for me, namely, a kind of introspection, and quest to know, to some extent, the world and one's place in it. The experience of portraiture, because of pursuing this quest under the gaze of another, has the possibility, for me, to be more intense, and is perhaps the greatest challenge.

Can you tell me more about what you mean regarding portraiture? That introspective yet collaborative kind of personal interaction does sound like a tricky balance to pursue.

Yes, it's tricky. To enter into an unstated contract with someone by your gaze alone is extraordinarily powerful. It implies a self-awareness that can be communicated without words and evoke the child or the unmediated in the subject.

Can you explain this a little further? Does it evoke the child or the unmediated in the subject? Is that to say that that kind of evocative self-awareness exists?

To look at someone without prejudice, that is to say, without self-judgment and hence without judgment of them, is a power to which a subject readily acquiesces. They are held, give of themselves. This makes for an interesting portrait.

You came from a journalism background. Do theories and writing by people like Walter Benjamin and Roland Barthes around photography and images affect or inform your practice?

Barthes interests me enormously. I love particularly his suggestion of how photography is deeply implicated in the advent of modernism and modernist architecture. I'm sorry to say I have not yet read Walter Benjamin, but you've inspired me to do so.

Haha, I'm glad. With this talk of interests and influences, which photographers do you continue to look up to or are you influenced by currently?

David Goldblatt is never far from my waking thoughts.

The *Museum of the Revolution* series offers a unique way of looking at time on the African continent. It's almost

a way of physically witnessing ideological shifts, seeing how ideology manifests socially. Do you feel as if it's given you some insight into the social constructs on the continent?

Museum of the Revolution is so-called because the colonial cities, laid out in grids, and with such grandeur in many parts of Africa, have been a stage for two revolutions. Firstly, the abolition of colonialism itself, and secondly, the transformation of socialist, African nationalist societies into capitalist regimes. These events have taken place more or less in my lifetime and it has been fascinating to photograph their effects and transitions.

You mentioned that your work has something of an introspective turn, that it's part of trying to locate oneself in this space. With this series you engage with these big, bureaucratic or hegemonic structures and how these manifest in people's lives on the ground. How do you navigate these things which can be seen to be at odds?

I try not to navigate anything really apart from putting myself on the streets. How the structures manifest in people's lives speaks for itself. I try to make a window. One that will be investigated by the most even and neutral gaze, quietly and completely.

A window – that's a lovely way of looking at it ... You've been making multi-image works for quite a while. *Leopold and Mobutu* had diptychs and triptychs juxtaposing historical and contemporary scenes. From *Second Nature* onwards, and in this series quite vividly, you do this in a different way; there's a different kind of seamlessness in the works. What informed this change and how do you make the selections?

In the current series the instinct to explore the diptychs, triptychs etc, was playful. I enjoyed suggesting a continuous scene when it was not. The juxtaposition is neither necessarily more nor less truthful than a single image or anything else.

When is an image truthful? You said some images have been ‘hot currency’.

I mentioned currency in the context of the news images I used to make. It may sound obtuse but I find images to be most truthful when I’m not sure what is photographed: there’s an absence of hierarchy of elements in the frame. We’ve come back to my window analogy.

In what other ways does playfulness show in your photographs?

I’m not sure that it shows. Sometimes I look at them and find pretentiousness and banality. On good days I notice the little things. I’m in the window.

Are you familiar with Teju Cole and his work? In a recent book he says, ‘It has become hard to stand still, wrapped in the glory of a single image, as the original viewers of old paintings used to do. The flood of images has increased our access to wonders and at the same time lessened our sense of wonder. We live in inescapable surfeit.’ As a photographer in an age of content-farming and Instagram, what do you think of this statement?

There is something in what he says, and yet sometimes I feel we’ve only just begun to experience the wonder. Photography is a language after all, and its primitive vocabulary (compared to

the literary form) has exploded exponentially, allowing nuances of intention to be divined.

You’ve repeated the word ‘quest’ in the course of this conversation. I found a quote where you said, ‘The frame cannot escape the question about what it can’t see and can’t know, but perhaps there’s a place where the question simply ceases to arise’. Is this what is informing your quest?

Yes it is. If, when looking at a photograph, I find myself wondering what lies outside its particular frame, as I often do, I am less than compelled. The same applies to the making of a photograph.

In the same text mentioned above, you said, ‘I couldn’t see everything and be everywhere. I realised that to suggest some kind of truth, it wouldn’t matter particularly where I was, but I’d have to let the place speak through me rather than trying to assign co-ordinates to a piece of puzzle’. Does that mean you consider yourself a conduit?

I hope to get there one day.