Guy Tillim: Avenue Patrice Lumumba

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ARTIST(S) Guy Tillim

In his project Avenue Patrice Lumumba (2007–08), South African artist Guy Tillim (b. 1962) records the architecture and infrastructure of colonial and postcolonial Africa. Patrice Lumumba (1925–61) was one of the first elected African leaders in modern times. In 1960 he became the first prime minister of the Democratic Republic of the Congo after his country won independence from Belgium. Only ten weeks after his speech at the independence celebrations, in which he listed various injustices and human rights violations implemented by the Belgians, Lumumba's government was deposed in a coup. He was imprisoned, beaten, and murdered in circumstances suggesting the complicity of the governments of Belgium and the United States. Lumumba became revered as a liberator of independent Africa and his legacy has made a lasting impression in many cities throughout Africa. The streets and plazas that bear his name in western and southern Africa have come to represent both the idealism and decay of an African dream for unity.

Originally a photojournalist, Guy Tillim has spent a large part of his career documenting social conflict in Africa. In Avenue Patrice Lumumba, he avoids heavy action entirely, and instead focuses on the architecture, landscape, and people in African countries where the legacy of colonialism forms a backdrop but does not capture the essence of individual lives unfolding. His pictures portray the crumbling institutional buildings—post offices, schools, hotels, and offices—that were built by colonial governments in Angola, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Madagascar, and Mozambique. As Tillim explains, "There's a ten-year period in the late modernist world where there was this grand colonial architecture built in Francophone Africa and Lusophone Africa. It was this strange contemporary mythological time. These buildings are impressive, for all their inappropriateness they nonetheless form part of a contemporary African stage. If you look at them in a certain way, they're just kind of floating worlds."