

Corruptible Kodak

Julian Stallabrass

Mark Twain, in his satirical pamphlet condemning Leopold II's rule over the Congo, put these words into the mouth of the troubled emperor, ruminating on the extent and success of his propaganda operations in print:

Then all of a sudden came the crash! That is to say, the incorruptible *Kodak*—and all the harmony went to hell! The only witness I have encountered in my long experience that I couldn't bribe. Every Yankee missionary and every interrupted trader sent home and got one; and now—oh, well, the pictures get sneaked around everywhere, in spite of all we can do to ferret them out and suppress them. Ten thousand pulpits and ten thousand presses are saying the good word for me all the time and placidly and convincingly denying the mutilations. Then that trivial little kodak, that a child can carry in its pocket, gets up, uttering never a word, and knocks them dumb!¹

It did, and Twain accompanies this passage with a grid of portraits showing victims of the regime, which in its customary fashion had punished them by the amputating their hands. Amid fierce competition, Leopold's reign over the Congo was one of the most vicious episodes in colonial history, and the recent history of the place, cursed by its natural riches, particularly diamonds, has been little less troubled. The long rule of the rapacious tyrant Mobutu was ended by a rebellion that began years of civil war in which millions perished. The war is officially over but armed groups continue to terrorise the country. Photography played some part in creating the public outrage that eventually forced Leopold to surrender his claim on the Congo. Guy Tillim, in his exhibition at the Photographers' Gallery, and his book *Leopold and Mobutu* reflects on this history and on the current state of the Congo through juxtapositions of photographs. In his essay for the book, Adam Hochschild refers to this passage by Twain, setting a high standard for contemporary documentary photography to live up to.²

The much-trumpeted death of ideology produced a dearth of politically engaged art, at least in the mainstream art world. More recently, there has been a good deal of work of serious political import being shown in galleries, and this is the result of a confluence of factors. Following the end of the Cold War, once the powerful myths about the end of history had been overturned by events, the globalisation of the art market produced a politicised art, as artists realised that they could market their nationalities through the image of politics; this tendency has become allied, naturally enough, to well-established art-world reflection on documentary in both photography and video; and finally, both have been brought to a more urgent point by the reaction against the newly forthright imperialism of the US. These developments have opened new arenas for documentary photographers to work both for the press and the gallery. Such photographers have not held back from producing gallery work

¹ Mark Twain, *King Leopold's Soliloquy: A Defense of his Congo Rule*, The P.R. Warren Company, Boston 1905, p. 68.

² Guy Tillim, *Leopold and Mobutu*, Filigranes Éditions, Trézélan 2004.

about the worst atrocities. Gilles Peress has documented attempts at genocide in Rwanda and Bosnia. In episodes reminiscent of the imperial exploration of North America, Luc Delahaye, Simon Norfolk and Paul Seawright have followed in the wake of the armies with their view cameras. Tillim, in taking on the subject of the Congo, explores a subject of the most extreme and grotesque character.



Tillim is a press photographer as much as an art photographer, and has worked for Afrapix, a collective of South African photographers, Reuters and Agence France Presse. His work has also been widely exhibited and commissioned by arts bodies. The work on show at the Photographers' Gallery is a telling mix of these two worlds. Photographs are displayed singly and in twos and threes in wide frames. Within the diptychs and triptychs, there is a mix of colour and black-and-white—a deliberate decision, since Tillim's book reproduces some of the black-and-white prints in their original colour. There are plenty of self-reflexive intimations of photography and occasionally of the photographer, in blur caused by the movement of subjects or the camera, of much play with pictures taken through screens allowing reflections and other obstructions of vision, and pictures tilted so the horizon line falls across the frame. Tillim and his camera appear clearly reflected in one picture of a display case in the Military Museum in Brussels that contains a portrait of Leopold. So while some of these photographs are clear, professional press portrayals of a political and social situation—the child soldiers of the Mai Mai militia, refugees fleeing the fighting, insane folk chained to engine blocks in an institution run by some loony 'prophet'—much of the rest is a reflection on the limits of photographic depiction. Kodak is far from secure in its incorruptibility.



The two and three prints per frame allow direct comparisons to be drawn, and Tillim repeatedly does this across historical time to show continuities between the Congo's colonial past and its current state. Often the colonial artefacts are printed in colour, the documentary pictures of the present day in black-and-white, another way of showing the reversal of time frames, as the colonial era becomes newly and garishly alive, while the conditions of apparently decolonised subjects remain as much a matter for traditional documentary pity as ever. One frame shows the ruined and overgrown terraces of a house owned by the renowned explorer Stanley and a palace built by Mobutu. This is to implicate Stanley as much as Mobutu in the prolonged history of the area's looting. Other juxtapose colonial artefacts from museums in Brussels with current soldiers and their victims. For example, a colour picture of a display case at the Military Museum in Brussels showing a mannequin

dressed in a uniform from Leopold's regime is flanked by black-and-white photographs of the Mai Mai militia posing with their arms. In the book too the picture of the mannequin is set alongside a Mai Mai soldier wreathed in fronds, and these set up a visual analogy with the spears reflected in the museum display case.

The effect is to put forward an argument through the juxtaposition of images that is familiar in liberal circles: that the present degradation of the region is a direct legacy of colonial times, that Mobutu was merely a black emperor, well-schooled in the corruption and authoritarianism of Empire, and that the boy soldiers who now serve in the various militias are little different from those who fought for Leopold. The danger in such views, though they undoubtedly contain a large measure of truth, is that they tend to play down black agency, and this allows another set of received ideas to swing into place, and which Tillim's pictures also seem to play to: of a land of importunate nature, vast rivers, storms and volcanic eruptions, a jungle that swamps the palaces and vanities of Man, overwhelming all attempts at civilisation with an exuberant growth of heat and corruption. So the colonial ruins of Stanley's house and his statuary lie dumped in various junkyards but the anti-colonial statuary of Mobutu's regime is similarly neglected and unregarded. Stanley's books lie mouldering in a mission library. A boy pisses against the rusting hull of a colonial steamboat on which stiffly reclines Stanley's effigy.

In Tillim's pictures, it is not as if the subjects are idle. The Congo's inhabitants labour in the mines, flee warfare and the weather, pose with weapons, loot and vandalise (implicitly, at least, we see the results of this activity); but again all this could be seen as an unchanging condition, the mark of the place or of race. There is a large picture of people welcoming Kabila's forces, the rebels who ousted Mobutu, and in it Tillim captures a swirling crowd, their movements blurring across the photograph, and above them standing on a truck a crepuscular figure, erect and saluting, both ridiculous and sinister. Individual agency in this picture remains shadowy and collective agency indeterminate. Tillim was right, of course, to harbour doubts about Kabila and his forces, who proved to be no better than what they replaced. Yet it is a curiously muted and sepulchral picture to represent the overthrow of a tyrant, supported by the US and the IMF, after thirty-two years of harsh repression and kleptocracy.

Such photography contains a dialectic between political cliché and the strange specificity of the picture; the Mai Mai militia soldiers are wrapped in foliage, part camouflage, part magical protection, that partially conceals their faces and sometimes seems to obstruct their line of sight. The beauty of one boy, reproduced in the publicity material, set against the raggedness of his uniform and the crude pole that he carries as a substitute for a rifle. What do we, Western viewers, look at such pictures for? The frisson of apparent innocence and the prospect of its ruin? The proximity of physical beauty and moral depravity (the Mai Mai are notorious for rape and mutilation)?

Martha Rosler, in a well-known attack on documentary photography, claimed that it usually served a liberal world-view, in which people's misfortunes were considered acts of nature, and thus blame was never assigned.³ Many documentary photographers were of course

³ Martha Rosler, 'In Around, and Afterthoughts (On Documentary Photography)', in Richard Bolton, ed., *The Contest of Meaning: Critical Histories of Photography*, Cambridge, Mass., 1989.

aware of these difficulties, and sought to make specific statements that did assign blame, and to reflect on documentary's condition and limits, through the juxtaposition of pictures and the use of captions. Tillim's work makes many of the same moves: the captions are extensive, the juxtapositions pointed, and photography itself is a subject in some of the pictures. Yet it is unclear how these elements gel into a developed world view, and the danger is that the interstices are filled, not with conventional, consoling art-world ambiguity, but with all the old beliefs (as comforting in their way as a confirmation of the viewer's morality and civilisation) about the heart of darkness.

Guy Tillim: Leopold and Mobutu is on show at the Photographers' Gallery until 25th September.