

REVIEWS

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Filip De Boeck and Sammy Baloji, *Suturing the City: Living Together in Congo's Urban Worlds*, Autograph ABP, London, 2016, 330 pages, hardback, ISBN 9781899282197, £30.00.

In *Suturing the City: Living Together in Congo's Urban Worlds*, Belgian anthropologist Filip De Boeck and Congolese photographer Sammy Baloji generate an analysis that expands and complicates our thinking about living – and living together – in Kinshasa, the capital of the Democratic Republic of Congo.

Their collaboration suggests a change in the city. Previously, De Boeck worked with the Belgian photographer Marie-François Plissart to create the book *Kinshasa: Tales of the Invisible City* (2006). This earlier study of the city emerged from the country's tumultuous 1990s and early 2000s, a period that saw the First Congo War, the overthrow of President Mobutu Sese Seko by rebel leader Laurent Kabila, the Second Congo War and the assassination of Kabila. De Boeck accordingly explored the omnipresence of death in Kinshasa. He claimed that the citizens of Congo were 'more dead than alive'.¹ However, in *Suturing the City*, De Boeck turns to the generative capacity of the space and its inhabitants. This shift in perspective is seemingly echoed across anthropology, where scholars such as Nancy Rose Hunt have recently sought to

escape from alleged catastrophe as Congo's sole explanatory structure.²

Indeed, Baloji's photographs counter claims of death. Throughout *Suturing the City*, we see photographs of everyday life, of sociality. There are crowds, a group of men sitting together in the shade and energetic streets astir. Mute in colour and earthbound, the photographs capture the city as a living organism while simultaneously conveying a sense of ordinariness.

Suturing the City, moreover, expands sites of knowledge production beyond a series of select Western centres and their values. De Boeck's envisioning of the city starts with the concept of the hole, or *libulu* in Lingala (Kinshasa's vernacular language), which expresses for many of its citizens the wretched space of the city. This could take shape on the city's surfaces, from 'potholes as generic urban infrastructure', 'postcolonial mining holes' to 'giant holes and ravines' created by soil erosion after storms, or through its 'informal economy' and 'all the impromptu movements into often uncharted spatial, social and mental territory that the city obliges' (pp. 13–14).

While it might be viewed solely as a manifestation of decay, De Boeck argues that 'the hole itself also offers an aperture, an opening, a possibility, at least for those who know how to read an alternative meaning into its blackness' (p. 14). For example,

the potholes or pools of water underneath the Cielux OCPT building in Kinshasa, in fact, open up a site of social and economic activity. Due to the excessive water and mud, people walk to the side of the street where a series of stalls are strategically set up to attract customers while cars are left behind for policemen to watch over in exchange for a small 'gift'. The potholes create, perhaps unexpectedly, a commercially viable space.

Baloji's photographs appear to confirm De Boeck's text, showing the stalls, water and meandering customers. They are documentary in style and vary from candid shots of the city to composed photographs of sitters. However, the photographs can also be seen to engage in an escape from the writing. They refuse to be mere illustrations. One of the photographs that opens *Suturing the City* is taken from a visit to Kinshasa's ethnographic museum: Institut des Musées Nationaux du Congo (IMNC). In the photograph, we see a leopard skin throne once owned by Mobutu and two glass vitrines exhibiting a collection of ancestral objects; one is labelled '14. Protection, Diagnostics et Thérapies' ['14. Protection, Diagnostics and Therapies']. The vitrines seem to exemplify a traditional, static, anthropological style of display challenged by the photographs. For Baloji concentrates on the action of the city's inhabitants and its various types of transport against stilled backgrounds. Men and women alone and in couples walk through the photographs. Fabrics slide across their surface. Legs are softened and obscured in the passerby's advance. Wheels spin. The photographs allude to a city that exceeds our vision, one that the text is constantly trying to secure. In a subsequent chapter, Kinshasa's land chiefs are photographed with the same kind of ancestral objects and animal skins that are

seen in IMNC. Mobility is central to our comprehension of the photographs, as the circulation and continuity of objects escape conceptions of culture as static. Instead, they are embedded in constant adaptation and change, coming to express the city as a whole.

Throughout the text, De Boeck sets up an opposition between the colonial mountain or tower and the postcolonial hole. The vertical *topos* of the mountain is the physical site of domination, control and subject considered central to colonialism's geography. Colonial modernist architecture subsequently incorporated and translated this idea of the mountain into a series of high-rise buildings, which gradually emerged across Congo in the 1940s and 1950s. De Boeck therefore asks, 'how can holes be "illuminated" and become towers again?' (p. 224). His enquiry at this point is embedded in colonialism's very structures of oppression that associate towers with a kind of panopticon power. There is thus a tension between the text and photographs, as the claims of vertical topography are disrupted and deformed through Baloji's scenes of sociality that exist on the ground, of shifting figures that escape capture and of land chiefs who gaze towards the camera. Life in its various expressions continues amid and through Kinshasa's *libulu*.

Despite these tensions, the significance of *Suturing the City* lies in its turn to the generative capacity of a space commonly conceived of through conceptions of absence and depletion. Together, the text and photographs offer the opportunity to change the way in which Kinshasa is constructed. Congo's urban worlds engender their own terms of existence.

1 Filip De Boeck and Marie-Francoise Plissart, *Kinshasa: Tales of the Invisible City*, Leuven, 2006, p. 133.

- 2 Nancy Rose Hunt, *A Nervous State: Violence, Remedies and Reverie in Colonial Congo*, Durham, 2016.

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‘Simon Fujiwara: Joanne’, The Photographers’ Gallery, London, 7 October 2016 – 29 January 2017.

As of January 2017, there are 2,850 people following @joannesalley on Instagram. Little suggests her account might be part of an artwork. It is populated with edited pictures, each in a digital white frame, mainly of herself and her friends, with the occasional shot of attractively styled food photographed directly from above: all familiar clichés associated with the medium. The first entry on her profile, dating back to August 2016, is an enigmatic teaser clip advertising *Joanne* (2016). Unsettling audio in the form of pulsating dubstep is juxtaposed with a photograph of Joanne Salley herself, which is not just staged but quite obviously so; lying in bed (naturally, her bedding is the crispest shade of white), the heroine smiles as she scrolls through a smartphone. While the focus shifts from her face to the wall behind, an animation of the kind one expects from a PowerPoint presentation announces: ‘Good morning Joanne’. A date appears in two parts: ‘October 7’. Pause. ‘2016’.

There thus exist several Joannes, one being Simon Fujiwara’s show at The Photographers’ Gallery. Seemingly his installation could not be more different from the ‘Feminist Avant-Garde of the 1970s’ exhibition running concurrently in the galleries below. 40 years along the timeline of art history, what we

encounter is hardly the deconstruction of womanhood exemplified by the work of Martha Rosler or Ewa Partum. Instead, we are greeted with a series of photographs resembling stock images rather than artworks, larger-than-life pictures of the sort we might find a short walk away from the gallery, in the windows of fashion stores on Oxford Street. This association with retail continues in the second part of the exhibition, a film projection at the back of the room. Utilising the conventions of personalised marketing in the age of Dove’s ‘Real Beauty’ advertising campaign, Fujiwara’s portrayal of Joanne begins with a confessional outpouring. Even though the former beauty queen expresses the irreducibility of her persona to a single category (model/teacher/artist/boxer), it is precisely a persona, not a person, speaking to us. Joanne fails to convince her audience to suspend disbelief: ‘I feel like I’m nothing, even though I am all of that . . . and more’, she says, her declaration seeming far from meaningful in its formulaic banality, not unlike the dubious empowerment offered by T-shirts with feminist slogans now readily available on the high street. Eventually, we are told about the event that precipitated the making of the film: the tabloid scandal which erupted when Joanne’s topless images were discovered by a student at the all-boys London public school Harrow, where she had been teaching art. It is solely through this façade, as she calls it, that Joanne is now represented: ‘[i]t wouldn’t matter how many images I pump into the press, I think they’d still go back and use this photo [. . .] I don’t have control of that image’. What follows is a controversial strategy to treat Joanne like a product, embracing and exploiting the media’s very voyeurism to create a different picture. Numerous