



## WORLD SYSTEM PHOTOGRAPHY

**Guy Tillim's** *Leopold and Mobutu* and **Roy Villevoye's** *Propellor* are on show at the Photographer's Gallery, 12th August - 25th September

Guy Tillim's *Leopold and Mobutu* and Roy Villevoye's *Propellor*, showing concurrently at the Photographers' Gallery, benefit from each others' presence. Their parallels and disjunctures are mutually illuminating.

Both are concerned with the resonance of the past. In the case of Tillim's arresting and impassioned photo-documentation of the Democratic Republic of Congo, the late nineteenth-century crimes of King Leopold II are didactically counterposed with the twentieth-century excesses of Mobutu Sese Seko. In Villevoye's much more opaque investigation of historical narratives and icons in the Asmat region (Irian Jaya) there is a parallel concern with place as a nexus of different times, politics and cultural practices.

But their formal structures are quite different. Tillim's remarkable images work towards a kind of closure: Villevoye's wait at an almost impenetrable crossroads. Uncertain of which direction to follow

they invite viewers to create narratives for them. Tillim's have already been given direction by the photographer and the viewer's task is simply to observe their trajectory.

Tillim's pedagogical intention is clear in several of his captions and in the deliberate juxtaposition of images within single frames. Two images captioned 'Henry Morton Stanley's terrace at Matadi, at the remains of his house which overlooked the Congo River compared to the view of Mobutu Sese Seko's marble terrace at his palace at Gbadolite, which extended out from his bedroom overlooking a wide valley, 2003' (italics added) make absolutely clear – both pictorially and linguistically – Tillim's desire to teach through juxtaposition.

There are a few images which do not share their frame with others (for instance one depicting residents of Goma saluting Laurent Kabila's army in 1997). All the rest are either in diptychs, triptychs or a generic class (documenting the child soldiers

of the Mai Mai militia) which construct what Umberto Eco once described as 'syntagmatic concatenation'. In what could serve as illustrations for a new edition of Eisenstein's *Film Sense*, Tillim composes arguments formed of lexical photographic units.

A mannequin of a colonial era soldier photographed in the Military Museum, Brussels stands at the centre of a triptych on either side of which are images of suffering in twenty-first century central Africa. A statue of a miner in Leopold's Turvuren Central African Museum is (as the caption declares) 'contrasted' with an image of gold miners in Bunia, DRC, and in one of the more memorable pairings in the show, the frayed spines of an early edition of Stanley's *Through Darkest Africa* and other decayed volumes in a mission station library are aligned with the incised and graffiti'd trunk of the baobab tree at Boma where Stanley camped. Through a process of historical

**Above left:** *Bos en Lommer*, 2000  
**Right:** *Near Bayun II*, 1994  
Roy Villevoye



**Above:** First edition of Henry Morton Stanley's *Darkest Africa* on the shelves of the Aequatoria Library, Bamanya Mission Station, near Mbandaka, and the baobab, an African tree, in Boma where Stanley camped, 2003  
Guy Tillim

decrepitude both images reach towards each other: the books acquire the physicality of peeling tree trunks and the baobab becomes layered with a fragile language.

Tillim has a thesis and it is one which is so compelling and illuminating that I for one was happy to surrender myself to his guidance. Villevoeye's work (comprising twelve photographs and two video pieces) at number 5, leaves one flailing, trying to rediscover the creative extemporisation that Tillim asked us to leave at the door. It is a symptom of its opaqueness that the only observation commentators seem able to offer on Villevoeye's work is that it destroys romantic illusions. Writing in *Artforum* (and cited by the Photographers Gallery in their publicity) Sven Lütticken praised its shattering of 'the illusion of Papua as an untainted innocent Eden'. Papua has never laboured under this sort of romanticism,

and whatever Villevoeye's images do do, isn't this.

It is true that, like Tillim, Villevoeye is a practitioner of what might be termed 'world system photography' (after Immanuel Wallerstein's argument that the world economy – and hence modern history – should be understood as single system). Both Tillim and Villevoeye transcend tired debates about colonialism and representation and through arduous fieldwork engage with a complex world in which there is no longer a 'periphery'. Villevoeye's photographs play with dislocation and aspiration: we see one Asmat man apparently asleep ('dreaming' claims the caption) on a bed in a Dutch apartment on the wall of which hangs a modern Papuan painting. Next to this, a scene shot in Asmat: a local man wearing a Jimi Hendrix tee shirt clammers down a wooden ramp. These images suspend the other in a duality of exotic longing.

Osama Bin Laden also figures in many tee shirts worn by Villevoeye's interlocutors and the fact that we have no idea (and no elucidation is offered) as to what (if anything) Osama and Jimi signify can stand as a mark of their resonant complexity, or a cause of frustration depending on the viewer's expectation. However, the apparent indifference of the photographic images contrasts starkly with the video playing at one end of the gallery. Here different narratives of the origin of the eponymous propeller are offered. The propeller is just that: a propeller lying in undergrowth by the banks of a river which Villevoeye is taken to see by his Asmat collaborators. Its almost mystical form draws to it divergent histories and experiences. Villevoeye's Asmat, like Tillim's Democratic Republic of Congo, becomes a location in a world system where different times collide.