



Review

Public Intimacy: Art and Other Ordinary Acts in South Africa, Ponte City

By Larissa Archer April 29, 2014

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*“It was a place where the wave crashed inwards upon itself, with the seething violence of delayed hope. It was Africa coming back, but with nowhere yet to go.... It was 54 floors of people in between other places.”—Denis Hirson, *Perec/Ponte**

In the late '60s, designers Mannie Feldman, Manfred Hermer, and Rodney Grosskopf began work on what was to be the tallest residential building in the Southern Hemisphere. The massive Brutalist structure was intended for the white well-heeled

to live closer to the center of Johannesburg, rather than their suburban retreats. But in 1976, as the building neared completion, the Soweto uprisings brought violence and opprobrium to the region and its recalcitrant apartheid-era laws and mores. The property market tanked and the developers' dream of affluent white South Africans living in a tower of luxury flats and duplexes vanished. Throughout the late '70s and '80s, Ponte City's population went from low-income and racially mixed, to predominantly black foreigners (Nigerians, Zimbabweans, and the Congolese), while the already troubled building fell further into disrepair.¹ In 2007 a new pair of developers envisioned a rebirth of the iconic building as, again, housing for the affluent. Many tenants found themselves evicted, and apartments were redesigned with décor themes like "Old Money" and "Glam Rock." When the 2008 economic crisis hit, the banks pulled their money and the remaining tenants continued to live among the empty apartments and crumbling concrete.²



Mikhael Subotzky and Patrick Waterhouse, *Lift Portrait, 13, Ponte City, Johannesburg*, 2008; Collection, Pier 24 Photography; Courtesy of the Artists and Goodman Gallery, Johannesburg.

Out of context, they are typical amateur snapshots, but plucked from the rubbish and set against writings that detail the unwantedness of the subjects, the pictures are haunting.

Many “voices” speak for the structure. As a provocative part of Yerba Buena Center for the Arts’ vast *Public Intimacy*, a survey of work coming out of and centered on South Africa, photographers Mikhael Subotzky and Patrick Waterhouse have devised an impressionistic epic about the beleaguered monolith. This includes large-scale portraits, video projections, zines, and a book dummy (forthcoming from Steidl) alongside new and found photographs, essays, and newspaper articles from various stages in Ponte’s history. Articles written in tones ranging from sangfroid to near gleeful describe the more salacious or vicious events from Ponte City’s history.³ There are photographs, found in the vacated apartments: gangly boys sitting on twin beds, living-room dance parties, abandoned ID documents. Out of context, they are typical amateur snapshots, but plucked from the rubbish and set against writings that detail the unwantedness of the subjects, the pictures are haunting. Anticipatory advertising sketches of white men in smart suits lounging in the envisioned swanky lobby appear opposite of photographs of actual tenants, large black families playing in cramped rooms as the TV blares. These and Subotzky’s elevator portraits are some of the few elements of the project wherein the black populace of Ponte’s past and present is given a “voice.” Printed large, the elevator portraits add something more than human to the subjects. They appear more solid, monumental even, than the building they occupy, which this project has in turn humanized by explicating its vulnerabilities.



Mikhael Subotzky and Patrick Waterhouse, *Lift Portrait, 24, Ponte City, Johannesburg*, 2008; Collection, Pier 24 Photography. Courtesy of the Artists and Goodman Gallery, Johannesburg.

Subotzky and Waterhouse stylistically nail the contradictions in such a structure. Out of the imposed uniformity and repetitiveness of the design (emphasized by pages sequenced to bear proliferating numbers of images of a single layout, replicated hundreds of times) and despite the generalization inherent to the racism reflected in Ponte's intended demographic, endless human eccentricities are revealed. Photographs taken of the tenants' front doors and the views from their identically constructed living rooms nevertheless proclaim the individuality of each occupant. No two are the same; some are *Better Homes*—immaculate and others look like squats.

Translucent curtains of varying fanciness and condition block the views in some, while in others the curtains are pulled away to reveal the Johannesburg skyline and the harsh light at that height above the city. There is evidence of the tenants' work: dress outlines, X-rays, and in some windows, laundry hung like celebratory bunting. Some tenants pose flamboyantly, and others stand to the side as if uncomfortable within the frame. One holds the bars of the security gate at his front door and peers out solemnly like a prisoner.

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Photographs of the parkland beyond Ponte suggest its uneasy position within both its urban and natural surroundings. In one, three men in pristine white robes kneel in the dirt, clench their eyes and pray, sing, or chant beneath a lowering sky on a wind- and litter-swept patch of grass. Their backs are turned, both literally and, it seems, figuratively, from the concrete cityscape behind them; Ponte dwarfs all around it. The giant Vodacom sign on its pinnacle stares out, but the men appear determined to ignore the beckoning of commerce and urbanity. It is a captured moment of human striving, eyes shut against the grim here and now, an intoned wish for something the concrete-and-glass modernity cannot give them. That one holds a walking staff fashioned after a shepherd's cane completes the metaphorical distance between the threesome and the metropolis looming in the distance.



Mikhael Subotzky and Patrick Waterhouse, *Ponte City*, 2008-ongoing; installation view, Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, San Francisco. Courtesy of Yerba Buena Center for the Arts and San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. Photo: Ian Reeves.

A massive edifice, then, a monument to hubris, envisioned and built as if its salient characteristic is its spectacular hugeness rather than the fact that people have to live inside it. Nearly from the moment of its completion, a litany of human-sized foibles diminished it both physically and symbolically. With litter, neglect, malfunctioning utilities, broken windows, accumulated tales of crime and danger, and vulnerability to the capriciousness of the market, the building's physical and mythological grandeur wanes with every year. The stubborn, intrepid people therein take on some of that grandeur, living where it is said to be unlivable, flaunting their humanity in dehumanizing conditions. This is perhaps the great strength of the project: In their books, zines, photographs, and installation, Subotzky and Waterhouse show both the epic and human scale straining against and blending into each other. It is simultaneously an allegory of both the limitations of human endeavor and the hardiness of human nature.

Public Intimacy: Art and Other Ordinary Acts in South Africa is on view at [Yerba Buena Center for the Arts](#), in San Francisco, through June 29, 2014.

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