Kiluanji Kia Henda

Post-colonial Angola; photography as both ‘pliable fiction’ and ‘weapon of intervention and denunciation’

by Sean O'Toole

Kiluanji Kia Henda lives and works in Luanda, Angola, and Lisbon, Portugal. This year, his work has been included in the group shows: ‘Tomorrow Was Already Here’, Museo Tamayo, Mexico City; ‘Les Ateliers de Reuves – Biennale of Contemporary Art’, Les Prairies, Rennes, France; ‘African in Science Fiction’, Arnowski, Bristol, UK; ‘You Are Now Entering...’, CCA Derry-Londonderry, UK; ‘Doublebound Economies’, Halle 14, Leipzig, Germany; and ‘Experimental Station’, Centro de Arte y Creación Industrial LABoral, Gijón, Spain. In 2013, his work will be included in ‘shows at the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation, Lisbon, the Centre Culturel Gulbenkian, Paris, France, and the Sharjah Art Museum, UAE.

Luanda, the rehabilitated African port city where artist Kiluanji Kia Henda was born four years after Angola gained its independence from Portugal in 1975, is a place of ever-accelerating rhythms. Perhaps it is not so much a case of omission as incompletion that marks life in this increasingly gridlocked capital city on Africa’s oil-rich western coastline. At one intersection where some of Luanda’s tree-lined avenues meet, a pedestal that once elevated the statue of Pedro Alexandrino da Cunha, a 19th-century colonial governor-general, stands empty. Outside the National Assembly it is the same: the white Deco-style plinth is also empty, the statue of its former occupant, Afonso I, Portugal’s first king, stored in a military stockyard alongside effigies of colonial adventurers and grandees of empire.

Shortly after independence, in an attempt to establish a new public narrative for its citizens, Angola’s Marxist leadership installed an armoured car used by the Benguela railway’s adoptive brother, Cassiano Bamba, who died soldiers in the civil war, later by the photojournalists Carlos Louzada and John Liebenberg, Kia Henda’s photography is marked by its increasing refusal to simply show. His lens-based practice oscillates between an interest in what he calls the ‘verité’ style of documentary, and a more playful engagement with the photographs as pliable fictions, and also as artefacts of the ephemeral, performance in particular. A year after finding the toppled statues, Kia Henda collaborated with Miguel Principe and urban dandy Shunmi Fiel to produce the series ‘Redefining the Power’ (2011). Luanda’s much-touted pedestals became the site for stylized performances, which Kia Henda photographed from the same vantage points used in a series of archival tourist postcards he had found. He juxtaposed the new and old photographs to distinguish the colonial ‘then’ from the independent ‘now’.

Self-awareness is vital to his practice. ‘I grew up in an experimental period in a country that is as young as I am, where there has always been, political options aside, a great and accessible cultural and even religious freedom,’ remarked Kia Henda in an interview with Ligia Afonso published last year. He has directed this freedom towards interpreting Angola, which stands at the ‘epicentre’ of his investigative projects, not because of an exaggerated nationalism, but because through the particular he hopes to find certain common factors, between various points on the planet, in order to shorten distances and improve dialogue’. The idealistic nature of his project largely owes to Kia Henda’s discovery, while living in Johannesburg in the late 1990s, of photography as ‘a weapon of intervention and denunciation’. This near-militant faith in photography’s activist capabilities is tempered by a rival impulse: photography, as he has acknowledged, is capable of ‘sensationalism omission or disorientation’, traits that he has recognized as useful. His photographic installation Icarus 13 (2008) – which stemmed from an invitation to contribute to a book by Cape Town artists – is instructive. The work, which describes an Angolan scientific mission to the sun, comprises a glass-domed architectural model and eight supporting photographs, one showing the needle-shaped solar spaceship, another the green iridescence from its launch, and an exterior view of the astronomical observatory.

Of course, the purported mission never happened. Icarus 13 is an elaborate hoax: the green cast across the sky came from fireworks launched in a Luanda football stadium, the observatory is an unfinished provincial cinema theatre, and the spaceship is Neto’s incomplete Russian-built mausoleum in Luanda. Reflecting on the work’s sci-fi qualities – which recall Jean-Luc Godard’s conceit with Alphaville (1965) in the way it proposes the ordinary (and in Angola incomplete) as fantastical and speculative – Kia Henda offered what could be construed as a defining motivation for his practice: ‘There are two questions which are vital to the African context: the ability to write and know one’s own history, and the ability to plan one’s own future.’
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